

CET Vietnam: Perspective Piece

Written by Anonymous Contributor, CET Vietnam | Fall 2016

One of my primary goals for studying abroad in Ho Chi Minh City this summer was to learn about Vietnamese culture and more specifically, how it relates to me as a Vietnamese American. Growing up, I was never taught to speak Vietnamese by my parents, as they thought learning English and Chinese were the main priorities. However, from time to time, I would be exposed to Vietnamese culture in the form of food, celebrations and traditions. My curiosity to learn more about all things Vietnamese was further inspired by my colleagues in the Vietnamese Student Association at my university – being around people that shared so many similarities with me with regards to upbringing and customs, I wanted to learn more about what exactly brought us together as Vietnamese Americans and sought to expand my limited understanding of how Vietnamese culture relates to me.

After spending two months studying public health and service in Ho Chi Minh City, it has become abundantly clear that part of my character has been undoubtedly shaped by Vietnam in one way or another. Through conversing with local university students, I learned about the Vietnamese education system and how greatly education is valued – I see this manifested in my own life as I reflect on how much effort my parents made in stressing the importance of studying and working hard. It was interesting that whenever we would walk around Ho Chi Minh City, locals would always begin speaking to me in Vietnamese, while they would assume that the others only speak English. It made me realize how much my physical characteristics contribute to how people perceived me and influence their assumptions of me – I hadn't considered that people would treat me differently because they thought that I spoke Vietnamese and that I may be from Vietnam. I found this especially common when we would visit markets. It was interesting because vendors would take a different, less abrasive/persistent approach when trying to sell me things compared to others. While it was embarrassing that I could not respond to them due to my lack of understanding for the language, as the semester went on my speaking abilities improved and I was eventually able to understand and even respond to those that would speak to me.

Learning the Vietnamese language helped me discover the importance of language with regards to learning about and immersing oneself in a culture. The Vietnamese language has different tones and grammatical rules, making translating some phrases from English to Vietnamese or vice versa with complete accuracy nearly impossible. For instance, disadvantaged street children living in Vietnam are referred to as “bụi đời”, which translates to “dust of life” in English. Understanding this translation reveals the stigma associated with street children and how society may view these children. In our public health course, we learned about the prevalent developmental and public health issues in contemporary Vietnam through engaging lectures, guest speakers, field trips and research. Learning about how interwoven the rapid development of Vietnam and public health crises (i.e. diabetes and the rising middle class) has stimulated by curiosity and has affirmed my desire to pursue a career in public health with an international focus.

I can undoubtedly characterize my experience this summer studying and interning in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam as an unforgettable one. I have made friends, both American and Vietnamese, which I have shared countless memories with, from traveling to the Mekong Delta to trying new foods and stepping outside of our comfort zones. I was given the opportunity to explore my identity as a Vietnamese American and understand the aspects of Vietnamese culture as they relate to my life.