

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Toan Tri Dung Ngo for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in International Studies in Anthropology presented on May 22, 2008. Title: The Culture of Names – A Comparison between Vietnam and Denmark.

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This project discusses the topic of personal names and the cultures of different peoples and their particularities, specifically in Vietnam and Denmark. The first part of this paper gives a brief history of naming traditions (mostly relating to Western European traditions). The second part of the paper compares two families of different ancestries (the Trính and the Albertsons) and their naming strategies as they immigrated to the United States. By looking at the names given to each child in the Trính family in different generations, it is possible to describe the merging process taking place between the Vietnamese and American cultures. Likewise, with the Albertson family, it is possible to describe their family history by looking at their surnames over the generations as they immigrated to America from Denmark. Materials cited in this research include personal interviews, books on culture and language (in English and Vietnamese), as well as various data records (in English and Danish).

Key Words: Onomastics, Vietnam, and Denmark

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The Culture of Names – A Comparison between Vietnam and Denmark

by

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

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Toan Tri Dung Ngo, Author

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to take this opportunity to give my thanks to Joan Gross, my mentor, who was patient with me through all my periods of procrastinations and creativity. I would also like to thank Eric Hill, who gave me the spark that I needed to start on a more intriguing topic than I had originally envisioned. Additionally, this thesis could not have been done without help from the Albertson and the Trinh families. Lastly, I wish to acknowledge my appreciation for my parents, without whose support and encouragement I would not be where I am today.

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## **The Culture of Names – A Comparison between Vietnam and Denmark**

### **Methodology**

The idea for this project was born out of a conversation I had with one of our Honors College writing instructors, Eric Hill. The discussion started off with us talking about different languages around the world. Eventually, the conversation drifted to the topic of personal names and the cultures of different peoples and their particularities.

The first part of this project is comprised of two sections: forenames and surnames. Many of my analyses, aside from Vietnamese examples, focus on Western European traditions. Materials for these came primarily from books on the topic of onomastics (also known as onomatology, the study of names) as well as various news articles, wherever interesting facts about people's names around the world were mentioned.

Building on what I discuss in the first part, the second part of this project is comprised of case studies of two families of different ancestries, the Trịnhs and the Albertsons, and their naming strategies as they immigrated to the United States.

I came to know the Trịn family through my father. Sơn Trịn was the first of the Trịn family to immigrate to America. Since his arrival in the late 1970s, he has been joined by his younger brother, Tuấn Trịn. Sơn Trịn has two daughters and his five grandchildren are now of the same age as Tuấn's two children. These youngest are the first-generation Americans of the Trịn family. By looking at the names given to the children during each generation, I am able to describe the merging process taking place between the Vietnamese and American cultures. Before we get to learning about the

Trinh family, however, I will spend a little time introducing a brief historical and cultural lesson about the Vietnamese language.

As for the Albertsons, I first had the pleasure of making Bill and Carla's acquaintance this past summer, in June 2007. The OSU Anthropology Department held its first-ever field school in Southern Oregon and I was one of the ten undergraduates who went along. The Albertsons were one of several families that offered to house the young researchers.

During my stay, the project directors gave us several assignments; one of which was to produce a kinship chart of our respective host families. Luckily for me, Bill's family was one of the largest in town and, together with Carla's family, they had one of the most extensive birth records available, stretching back for generations.

The assignment eventually became a personal endeavor, as I rushed to finish the family tree before the field school ended. What resulted was a kinship chart that could cover a large dining table, extending ten generations, and spanning periods of Danish history that were reflected through the record of the family's surnames. The scope of this research, however, does not require an in-depth reproduction of the Albertsons' family tree. Therefore, only a small section of the kinship chart is reproduced, focusing specifically on those whose direct descendents eventually immigrated to America.

Even though the Albertsons' records allowed me to produce a much more extensive kinship chart than the brief interview with the Trinh family, I was able to do more thorough research on the topic of Vietnamese traditions simply because I could search through more original Vietnamese documents. On the other hand, I have to admit that not speaking Danish did hamper my research efforts on the topic of Danish

traditions. Sometimes, the only way to fully understand certain cultural practices is to be a part of that community. There are some particularities that can only be explained by using the local language and expressions.

On the topic of Vietnamese culture, one of the most useful authors was Nguyễn Đình-Hoà, former professor of several universities and “noted specialist of Vietnamese language, literature, and culture,” who wrote a great number of books and articles on the topic of Vietnamese and linguistics (Jamieson 1993:xii). Even though most of his publications are in English, I was able to comprehend his references and comparisons in Vietnamese, which made understanding his main points a relatively simple task.

The Vietnamese kinship charts, which show dialectical diversity within Vietnam, were composed with a great deal of help from my parents. My father’s family primarily speaks the southern dialect and my mother’s family speaks the northern dialect. Together, they were able to provide a much better overview of Vietnam’s kinship reference system than any book I was able to search through.

Raw data, on the other hand, was relatively easy to access regarding Danish demographics, language, and culture. Luckily, with my knowledge of German, and several months of perusing Danish websites, I was able to teach myself the most essential parts of the language in order to navigate the most useful online records. The Danish Ministry of Justice has, for example, a website that allows easy access to its lists of government-approved first and last names (Justitsministeriet Familiestyrelsen 2007). Looking up Danish laws on the topic names is also not difficult; there is a copy of its *Danish Act on Names* in English (Justitsministeriet Familiestyrelsen 2006). Finally, a free

list of national statistics is also available, of which I was able to make use of its name statistics section (Danmarks Statistik 2005a).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This particular website is one of many that show the usefulness of being able to navigate in the native language. Whereas the Danish version gave access to lists of name records going back to over a decade, the English version gave only access to names on an individual, search-by-search basis (Danmarks Statistik 2005b; Danmarks Statistik 2008b). Luckily for me, my limited knowledge of Danish allowed me to bypass any reliance on the English website.

## Introduction

*Sine Nomine, Homo non est* (Without a name, man is nothing)  
 – Erycius Puteanus (1574-1646), Belgian humanist and philologist  
 (Knight 2008; Lower 1849:vii; Smith 1950:61)

For many couples around the world, there is no moment more special than the birth of a new baby. Yet, with great joy comes great responsibility; the task of naming the child. In many cultures, a name can be the most abstract as well as the most permanent thing that one can possess (Smith 1950:61). A name is always given with a reason. For many, it is a chance to continue a great family tradition. For others, it is a chance to branch off and push one's boundaries of creativity. For many, the names of their children reflect their hopes and dreams for the future. For others, the names of their children reflect upon the past, perhaps revolving around a beloved ancestor, or a great historical event.

For much of human history, people have lived in small enough communities that a single name per person sufficed. As city-states evolved into national infrastructures, there came a need to organize the citizenry (Smith 1950:38). As villages became cities, which then became metropolises, it was necessary to develop surnames, as well as middle names, because a single given name is no longer sufficient to clarify whom it is that you are talking about (Smith 1961:61). Although happening at different places at different times, the need for surnames slowly became a global phenomenon (Smith 1950:56).<sup>2</sup> This paper will look at the many different methods people used when approaching how to

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<sup>2</sup> The standard of personal identification today for most nations requires a first name, middle name, and last name. This standardization probably came about as a result of globalization (a combination of mass global trading and immigration of peoples). I use "global" as opposed to "universal" because there still may be small enough isolated societies in the world that do not have a need for a system of hereditary surnames.

identify one another, specifically in America, Denmark, and Vietnam, with a slight focus on how immigration affects naming practices.

According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language is culture (Howard 1996:52). Names are, therefore, full of sociological information which represent all the nuances of the particular culture from which they come (Andersen 1977:13; Ashley 1989:31, 181). Is a rose, by any other name, still as sweet? Yes, “but [it] would not cost half as much during the winter months,” says George Ade (Ashley 1989:162). A name is, in fact, a story.<sup>3</sup> When referring to another by a name, two conversants are, in effect, recalling their entire collection of mutual memories of that individual.

So where do names come from? Through examples of individual struggles and successes, family traditions and movements, we will eventually come to learn that names are embedded identities, memories, and stories. With names, we are able to conjure up images that adjectives sometimes lack. Names are a dynamic part of language and culture. It is with this in mind that we dive into the topic of names.

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<sup>3</sup> Case in point, until 1949, in Van Alstyne, Texas, there lived a man whose name was *Daniel's Wisdom May I Know, Stephen's Faith and Spirit Choose, John's Divine Communion Seal, Moses' Meekness, Joshua's Zeal, Win the Day and Conquer All Murphy*. He went by the name Daniel Murphy (Smith 1950:112).

## Forename Traditions

In most cultures, forenames are not inherited, but rather chosen. While the majority of Christian names in America today are without discrete meanings in modern English (see Table 1), the earliest personal names among all peoples had definite meanings (Smith 1950:2).

Table 1. Most Common Forenames in the U.S.

<u>Rank</u>	<u>1950</u>		<u>1990</u>	
	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>
1	John	Mary	James	Mary
2	William	Elizabeth	John	Patricia
3	Charles	Barbara	Robert	Linda
4	James	Dorothy	Michael	Barbara
5	George	Helen	William	Elizabeth
6	Robert	Margaret	David	Jennifer
7	Thomas	Ruth	Richard	Maria
8	Henry	Virginia	Charles	Susan
9	Joseph	Jean	Joseph	Margaret
10	Edward	Frances	Thomas	Dorothy

(Smith 1950:23; U.S. Census Bureau 2005)<sup>4</sup>

English forenames, in the Middle Ages, consisted of a rather measly forty common names, just twenty for each gender. Immigration then, just as today, provided inspiration and infusion of new names (Smith 1950:7, 18). Before the Norman Conquest in 1066, English names were mainly of Anglo-Saxon descent. Today, however, almost all common English Christian names are derived from Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Celtic and Teutonic (Smith 1950:2). Publication of the Genevan Bible in 1560 for the common people was a great stimulation for the adoption of scriptural names (Smith 1950:3). This proved to be a common practice around the world as Christianity became more

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<sup>4</sup> The methods of name collecting between Smith and the U.S. Census Bureau may have differed. I can only guess that their respective findings were representative of that year's general population.

widespread (Smith 1950:9). Below, one can see how the names John and Mary have been translated and transliterated throughout a variety of countries:

Table 2. Translation and Transliteration of the Names "John" and "Mary"

Country	John	Mary	Country	John	Mary
Arabia	Yahya	Maryam	Italy	Giovanni	Maria
Belgium	Jehan	Marie	Lapland	Jofan	Marja
Czechoslovakia	Jan	Marie	Lithuania	Jōnas	Marijā
Denmark	Johan	Maria	Mexico	Juan	María
England	John	Mary	Norway	Johannes	Maria
Estonia	Johan	Marri	Poland	Jan	Marja
Finland	Jussi	Maria	Portugal	João	Maria
France	Jean	Marie	Russia	Ivan	Maryam
Germany	Johann(es) (Hans)	Maria	Scotland	Ian	Môr
Greece	Ioannes	Mariam	Spain	Juan	María
Hawaii	Ioane	Mele	Sweden	Johan	Maria
Holland	Jan	Maria	Switzerland	Johann(es) (Hans)	Marie
Hungary	Janos	Maria	Turkey	Iahaja	Meriem
Ireland	Sean	Maire	United States	John	Mary
Isle of Man	Juan	Moirrey	Wales	Evan	Mair

(Smith 1950:9)

In societies where the naming tradition is not so restrictive, names can be seen as the “habits and moods of the parents” (Smith 1950:11). Reflecting the mindsets of the namers, this can sometimes be a generational trend, as parents can name their children after a generational hero, a famous superstar, a recent historic event, or even a popular fictional character from literature (Smith 1950:10, 11, 31). In *The Story of Our Names*, Smith gives a list of how names are typically chosen for newborns:

1. To honor another person
2. In admiration of a famous personage
3. Because it is “pretty” or seems to be harmonious with the surname
4. From some event or circumstance of birth
5. From some hope or aspiration on the part of the parents



6. Descriptive of the child
7. From an object
8. Because of association or relation with the surname
9. From error or ignorance
10. From oddities
11. As a result of chance
12. From invention

(Smith 1950:20)

Of numbers 9, 10, and 11 from the above list, many odd, comical, and sometimes embarrassing names have resulted. In 2008, The New York Times ran “The Worst Bad Name Contest” in which the “winner” was Ms. Iona Knipl (pronounced as “I-own-a Nipple”) from Cleveland, Ohio (Tierney 2008a; Tierney 2008b).<sup>5</sup> Ms. Knipl’s mother, in this case, named her daughter out of a lack of foresight (Tierney 2008a). Other examples include the former Texas governor James Stephen Hogg’s daughter, Ima, and a Puerto Rican child named Usmail (Smith 1950:97; Ashley 1989:188).<sup>6</sup>

It must be said that in societies that use an alphabet as a written medium, new names are much easier to invent as the letters can be moved around to produce new words without much difficulty (Smith 1950:19). This, however, does not work as well with languages like Mandarin, which uses a semanto-phonetic writing system where each graph has its own sound and meaning, or Vietnamese which uses a Latin alphabet as a

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<sup>5</sup> The story also received some attention on National Public Radio (NPR)’s weekly news quiz show *Wait Wait... Don’t Tell Me!* which aired on Saturday, April 12th, 2008 (Sagal 2008).

<sup>6</sup> The author at first thought that Usmail was a Hispanic version of Ishmael. In fact, Usmail’s parents named him after the truck that often came by his village which bore the words US Mail (Ashley 1989:188).

modern adaptation for an older Siniform script (Omniglot 1998). Partially due to this lack of inventiveness, Asian forenames in general and Vietnamese forenames specifically often still have clear meanings in their respective colloquial environments (Ashley 1989:27).

All names have been, at some point, descriptive of their bearers (Lower 1849:2; Smith 1950:72). Names with literal meanings, throughout the world, still exist in abundance. Followers of the Sikh religion, for example, give names by opening to a random section of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, or *Adigranth*, and pointing to the first letter of the first word of the left-hand page (Ashley 1989:28). This is comparable to the early Puritan naming tradition of lifting words or whole phrases right out of the Bible. A few such common examples are the names *Through-much-tribulation-we-enter-into-the-kingdom-of-heaven Clapp* from Rhode Island and *If-Christ-had-not-died-for-thee-thou-would-have-been-damned Barebone* from London (Weekley 1940:118; Smith 1950:5; Ashley 1989:28).

Overall, more often than not, forenames are aspirations that parents have for their children. Discounting names arising out of lack of familiarity of language or various superstitions, names almost always signify beauty, grace, and everything that is desirable within that culture (Nguyễn 1980c:30). With hereditary surnames, as we will see, things are not always so nice and neat.

## Surname Traditions

The use of family names, especially in Western European societies, goes back at least as far as Roman times. By the end of the Republic, Romans were commonly employing three names, the *prænomen*, *nomen*, and *cognomen* to indicate their name, clan, and family (Yonge 1884:128; Smith 1950:130). A Roman male citizen, then, was able to put his name on his wife, children, as well as slaves, in order to claim ownership over them (Ashley 1989:66). To a certain extent, the surnames we inherit today also claim us for our families.

In England, it was not until a hundred years after the Norman Conquest that a significant number of surnames became hereditary. The first to employ surnames were the lords and knights who took the names of their estates and passed it onto their sons (Smith 1950:27). The reason given is because lords were the ones travelling the most, and had the most chances of running into their own names elsewhere. Thus, a need for a distinguishing surname arose for the different lords to let others know their differences (Smith 1950:36). However, these names, for the most part, were not yet hereditary. If a son had the same name, it was most likely because he inherited the land and therefore took the name of the estate (Smith 1950:47). Therefore, any similarity at this time was temporary at best and was only attached to the land the person owned and lived on. For a long time, the peasantry paid no attention to such a change, as a surname only reflected another “badge worn by his betters” (Smith 1950:36).

Nothing official came to pass, however, until 1413, when Henry V introduced *The Statute of Additions* which stated that alongside an individual’s name, his occupation and

dwelling must also be specified (Smith 1950:38).<sup>7</sup> Parish registers and civil registers, which were established in 1538 and 1837 respectively, helped to solidify the statute. Along a man's name, a clerk or bishop would have further specified him as *smith*, *stewart*, *baker*, *wood*, *hill*, etc. For a long time, these remained purely adjectival (ergo the lack of capitalization of the first letters) in form and changed as often as the clerk thought was necessary (Smith 1950:38, 40).

No one is quite sure how these descriptive words became hereditary. In *The Story of Our Names*, Smith suggests this process first started with the upper class who wanted to preserve their family names due to the prestige associated with them. Slowly, the practice came to be common among all the peoples of England. Over the next five or six centuries, surnames became common place among all Englishmen (Smith 1950:38-39; Ashley 1989:75). At this time, however, writing standards have yet to solidify and spellings were still at the mercy of the scribes (those who worked with civil and parish registers), as names could change even within the same sentence (Smith 1950:58)!<sup>8</sup> By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, surnames became solidified and individuals were no longer able to change them at every whim (Smith 1950:28). Additionally, with the recent arrival of mass education and widespread printing, names eventually, for the most part, stayed with their particular spellings (Smith 1950:57).

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<sup>7</sup> Other nations also experienced such law reforms. On January 1st, 1935, Turkey passed a law making it compulsory for all to adopt family names (Smith 1950:155). Denmark, similarly, passed a law on May 30th, 1828 that made family names mandatory for all baptized children (Smith 1950:142).

<sup>8</sup> Smith, for example, gives this sentence, which was found in an old record: "On April 23, 1470, Eliz. Blynkynesoppye, of Blynkynsoppe, widow of Thomas Blynkyensope, of Blynkkensope, received a general pardon" (Smith 1950:58). Within four instances, the name changed four times!

Today, all surnames may be classified into at least one of these categories:

- |                            |                 |
|----------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Local                   | 2. Occupational |
| 3. Patronymic <sup>9</sup> | 4. Descriptive  |

(Smith 1950:44; Reaney 1967:20)

In almost every culture around the world, these are how the majority of surnames may be categorized, albeit in varying proportions depending on that country's specific history (Smith 1950:45, 56). For example, whereas America's most common surnames are derived from patronyms, occupations, and descriptions, Denmark's most common surnames consist almost exclusively of patronymics (see Table 3 and Table 4) (Smith 1950:95; Ashley 1989:42; U.S. Census Bureau 2005; Danmarks Statistik 2008a; U.S. Census Bureau 2008). Under these classifications, a surname could have identified a man by answering the questions:

- |                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| 1. Where does he live? | 2. What does he do?                    |
| 3. Who is his father?  | 4. What is his most prominent feature? |

(Smith 1950:44)

More specific to the first class of surnames (i.e., local), town dwellers felt the need of a surname long before the villagers. As people from the countryside moved into the cities, they found it much easier to identify themselves as individuals from smaller more distinctive localities. On the other hand, someone moving from the city to the village would not necessarily have had to identify himself as being from the big town, as he was probably the only newcomer there, a first name then would probably have been

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<sup>9</sup> For this project, patronymic is defined as "an addition to a person's forename containing information about the name of the father of the person in question" (Sørensen 1984:209).

sufficient. This is why surnames like London and Paris are rare but names derived from average-sized communities are much more common (Smith 1950:41).

Local names can even be divided into two classes: place names and topographical features. Topographical features may include natural settings such as woods, hill, water, river, and so on (Smith 1950:47). A place name may be a village name as well as the name of his homestead (houses were often also places of business; in these cases, this would also denote his occupation). Many inns and taverns were designated by the pictures of objects or animals on the signs that are displayed in the front (Smith 1950:49). Along the same line, in large cities, where a variety of workers occupied the same jobs, nicknames helped with the identification process (Smith 1950:42).

Even today, occupational names are not uncommon. It is not at all unusual to find people being referred to as John *the mailman*, Casey *the electrician*, or Abby *the hairdresser* (Smith 1950:50). In Vietnam, in order to display one's respect, people are often referred to entirely by their profession and not their names. These may include teachers, bosses, and owners of certain establishments. The practice is not unlike the tradition of calling the American president "Mr. President."

In earlier times, when the family trade was passed down from father to son, it was also typical for a man to inherit his father's occupational surname. This is partly how occupational names eventually developed to be hereditary (Smith 1950:50). Ironically enough, since surnames have lost most of their original significance, we find it humorous today when people have the same name as their occupations as opposed to earlier, when such a phenomenon was almost expected.

Recall, however, that before these descriptive markers became actual names, what was used to describe the individual was absolutely up to the whim of the scribe. A man could have lived, throughout his life, under any amount of different “surnames” (Smith 1950:44). Surnames, therefore, did not become hereditary until they ceased to be descriptive of the bearer (Smith 1950:37, 38). Furthermore, over time, due to corruptions and change in the language, most surnames cannot be easily traced back to any one source with great certainty (Smith 1950:45). Smith gives an example with the name Bell:

Perhaps its most usual derivation is local, from residence near “THE BELL,” an inn sign; also it is local from Flemish, *Belle*. Next, many Bells originate from *the bel*, or handsome one, and is a nickname. As a patronymic it refers to the “son of Bell,” a hypocoristic form of Isabel. A few Bells represent a shortened form of *Bellringer* or *Bellmaker* and are thus occupative in origin. (Smith 1950:45)

Such possibilities for a single word make it relatively difficult to trace a name back to its correct origin. This, however, also meant that people of the same surnames were not necessarily descended from a common ancestor. Nevertheless, the English surnames that have descended to this day are all simply English words commonly used to describe the localities, jobs, and people’s characteristics. Simply put, they were all the “ordinary affairs of life” (Smith 1950:38).

It is interesting to note that, today, as cities have grown, even more specific forms of identification become necessities. No longer are a name and a surname enough (Smith 1961:61). I am speaking, of course, of all the various identification numbers that we carry around; social security number, debit card PIN, credit card number, driver’s license number, student ID number, and many other little identities that one needs to have before a full form of application for anything can be filled out.

Today, in America, one finds that the five most common surnames have stayed rather static within the last half-century. Only at the bottom of the list have more

Hispanic names such as Martinez, Rodriguez, and Garcia slowly begun to become more common (see Table 3):

Table 3. Most Common Surnames in the U.S.

<u>Rank</u>	<u>1950</u> <u>Name</u>	<u>1974</u> <u>Name</u>	<u>1990</u> <u>Name</u>	<u>2000</u> <u>Name</u>
1	Smith	Smith	Smith	Smith
2	Johnson	Johnson	Johnson	Johnson
3	Brown	Williams	Williams	Williams
4	Miller	Brown	Jones	Brown
5	Jones	Jones	Brown	Jones
6	Williams	Miller	Davis	Miller
7	Davis	Davis	Miller	Davis
8	Anderson	Martinez	Wilson	Garcia
9	Wilson	Anderson	Moore	Rodriguez
10	Taylor	Wilson	Taylor	Wilson

(Smith 1950:95; Ashley 1989:42; U.S. Census Bureau 2005; U.S. Census Bureau 2008)<sup>10</sup>

Immigration is the great exclamation mark in any family's story book. Much as how America has been referred to as the "big melting pot," so can the same be used to speak of the naming traditions it has absorbed (Lieberson 2000:172). Unfortunately, for many families, to become a part of the new culture also meant to alter their names in an English-speaking majority "New World." For most in the eighteenth century, this change was more often than not forced upon new immigrants (Smith 1950:93). To change a surname, one often had two options; translation, or transliteration.

At the time when Russians immigrated to America in great numbers, there was no standard method for transliterating the Russian language. The Russian suffix *-овский* could have been written as *-offsky*, *-ovsky*, or *-owsky*. That aside, the feminine forms, such as *-ова* (*-ova*), *-овна* (*-ovna*) and *-я* (*-ya*) also disappeared (Smith 1950:101).

<sup>10</sup> The methods of name collecting among Smith, Ashley, and the U.S. Census Bureau may have differed. I can only guess that their respective findings were representative of that year's general population.



Likewise, many German names were accidentally written down in the way they sounded (Weiss, Weidmann, Leitner, and Leithäuser became Wise, Whiteman, Lightner, and Lighthizer, respectively), with umlauts often neglected and dropped (Smith 1950:100; Jones 1990:53). Others chose, instead, to translate their names (Becker, Koch, Zimmermann, and Zwetschen became Baker, Cook, Carpenter, and Plum, respectively) (Jones 1990:53). Similarly were the names of Scandinavian immigrants altered (Smith 1950:104).

As we have pointed out, names are an intrinsic part of the cultures from which they spring. Name shifts therefore represent not just how a language can be rewritten in a different alphabet, they are a complete change of viewpoint, outlook, culture, and family history. At the very least, the alteration affects how the future generations will be able to look back at their ancestors.<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, we will now look at two case studies: the Albertsons (with Danish ancestry) and the Trịnhs (with Vietnamese ancestry).

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<sup>11</sup> Two German brothers who arrived at Castle Garden (a stop prior to Ellis Island) were standing in line when asked their names. The first transliterated his name from Zwetschen to Tsvetshen. The second simply translated it to Plum. The author jokingly says “it is not hard to guess which brother was more successful in business in America” (Jones 1990:53)

## Danish Naming Traditions

### A Brief History of Danish

Modern Danish has been in use since approximately 1550. The language currently shares the same language ancestor as Icelandic, Faroese, Norwegian, and Swedish (Haugen 1990:159). In many accounts, it has been noted that most Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians, when speaking their own respective languages, can understand each other relatively well.<sup>12</sup> This has caused some to debate whether they should be separate languages at all, or merely dialects of each other (Haugen 1990:157). However, one must understand that languages consist not merely of mutual intelligibility, but also political environment, cultural patterns, and historical traditions.

The earliest record of written Scandinavian goes back to approximately 200 C.E. when a set of 24 runic characters was found (the alphabet is also known as *older futhark*) (Haugen 1990:158). During this period, inscriptions were found totaling 400 persons' names. About 275 of these (approximately 68.7%) contain information as to whose sons (and daughters) these people were (Sørensen 1983:8).

At the end of the Viking Age (approximately 750-1050 C.E.), the Latin alphabet was introduced to the area by Christian missionaries (Haugen 1990:159). Today, due to “modern mobility and mass media,” the gap between dialects has been slowly closing with many rural dialects transforming to be more like their urban counterparts (Haugen 1990:162).

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<sup>12</sup> Generally speaking, Norwegian shares a common lexicon with Danish, while sharing a common phonology with Swedish. The three languages' mutual relationships can be summarized as: “Norwegian is Danish spoken in Swedish” (Haugen 1990:161).

## **Danish Naming Traditions**

Traditionally, children's forenames were often taken from deceased relatives (Statens Arkiver a; Statens Arkiver b). Although no longer common, this practice made adopting new names in the culture very difficult. This had a great impact on the future of Danish surnames because patronymics were entirely dependent on forenames.

Family names and patronymics came into use through the Danish noble class around the year 1300. Sørensen, in *Patronymics in Denmark and England*, argues that, at this point in time, patronymics were used less for identification and more for association with a prestigious family (i.e., to associate oneself with a “distinguished father”) (Sørensen 1983:13).

In 1526, King Frederik I decreed that all Danish noble families shall have family names. Some acquired the names of their estates. Some, on the other hand, chose to take the names derived from their coats of arms. Over the next two centuries, this custom spread into the lower ranks of the bourgeoisie and the clergy class, with the former class still adopting Danish names and the latter adopting Latinized ones (Rasmussen 2003).

Among the peasantry, traditional names using patronymics remained popular until the early nineteenth century (Rasmussen 2003). However, this practice proved chaotic for official purposes and, on May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1828, the government instituted a freeze of last names (Smith 1950:142). Patronymics, then the most popular form of naming one's children, officially became the most common family names. The peasantry, however, largely ignored this (mostly due to the fact that the patronymics made no sense linguistically if kept the same from generation to generation) and continued their traditions well into the 1870s (Rasmussen 2003).

A patronymic was traditionally composed of the father's first name and the suffix of either *-sen* or *-datter*, meaning "son of" or "daughter of," respectively (Statens Arkiver b). For example, a man named *Jens* with a boy and a girl could name them *Hans Jensen* and *Maren Jensdatter*. When *Hans* has children of his own, he could name them *Jens Hansen* and *Maren Hansdatter*. In small communities in rural Denmark, this system of naming was easy to follow.

This, however, proved very difficult to record for official purposes and the new law froze all patronymics, effectively turning them into hereditary family names (Rasmussen 2003). Initial rejection of this system mostly comes from the fact that a girl named *-sen* would mean that she's the son of someone. And a grandson with the same patronymic as the previous generation would indicate that he was born of his grandfather. In a small community where everyone knows one another intimately, these family names often made little sense.

Nevertheless, the freezing of patronymics made these the most common surnames in Denmark. By 1984, approximately 64.24% of surnames in Denmark were patronymics (Søndergaard 1984:19-20). Today, looking at the most common surnames in Denmark (see Table 4), it is easy to conclude that the most common type of surnames are patronymics. In 2006, with the population at 5,427,000, the top 20 surnames totaled 2,259,553 people (41.6%) and consisted entirely of patronymic surnames (Danmarks Statistik N.d.; Danmarks Statistik 2006).

Table 4. Most Common Surnames in Denmark

<b>Rank</b>	<b><u>1984</u> Name</b>	<b><u>1991</u> Name</b>	<b><u>2001</u> Name</b>	<b><u>2003-2006</u> Name</b>	<b><u>2007-2008</u> Name</b>
1	Jensen	Jensen	Jensen	Jensen	Jensen
2	Nielsen	Nielsen	Nielsen	Nielsen	Nielsen
3	Hansen	Hansen	Hansen	Hansen	Hansen
4	Pedersen	Pedersen	Pedersen	Pedersen	Pedersen
5	Andersen	Andersen	Andersen	Andersen	Andersen
6	Christensen	Christensen	Christensen	Christensen	Christensen
7	Larsen	Larsen	Larsen	Larsen	Larsen
8	Sørensen	Sørensen	Sørensen	Sørensen	Sørensen
9	Petersen	Petersen	Rasmussen	Rasmussen	Rasmussen
10	Rasmussen	Rasmussen	Jørgensen	Jørgensen	Jørgensen
11	Jørgensen	Jørgensen	Petersen	Petersen	Petersen
12	Madsen	Madsen	Madsen	Madsen	Madsen
13	Olsen	Olsen	Kristensen	Kristensen	Kristensen
14	Kristensen	Kristensen	Olsen	Olsen	Olsen
15	Christensen	Christensen	Christiansen	Thomsen	Thomsen
16	Thomsen	Thomsen	Thomsen	Christiansen	Christiansen
17	Poulsen	Poulsen	Poulsen	Poulsen	Poulsen
18	Johansen	Johansen	Johansen	Johansen	Johansen
19	Knudsen	Knudsen	Knudsen	Knudsen	Knudsen
20	Jacobsen	Jacobsen	Mortensen	Mortensen	Møller

(Søndergaard 1984:19-20; Søndergaard 1991:11; Danmarks Statistik 2005a)

According to data gathered from Danmarks Statistik, for at least six of the past seven years, the top fourteen surnames have remained unchanged among Denmark's top twenty. Only in 2007 and 2008 has Møller snuck into the twentieth position (Danmarks Statistik 2005a). Møller is the only occupational name, with all the rest being patronymic. Much like the most common American names, the top forenames in Denmark are names that have no direct meanings in the modern language (see Table 5).

Table 5. Most Common Forenames in Denmark

<u>Rank</u>	<u>1996</u>		<u>2001</u>		<u>2003</u>		<u>2004</u>	
	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>
1	Jens	Kirsten	Jens	Kirsten	Jens	Kirsten	Jens	Kirsten
2	Hans	Anne	Peter	Anne	Peter	Anne	Peter	Anne
3	Peter	Anna	Hans	Hanne	Lars	Hanne	Lars	Hanne
4	Niels	Hanne	Lars	Anna	Hans	Mette	Michael	Mette
5	Jørgen	Karen	Niels	Mette	Niels	Anna	Hans	Anna
6	Lars	Mette	Jørgen	Karen	Michael	Karen	Niels	Helle
7	Michael	Else	Michael	Helle	Jørgen	Helle	Jørgen	Karen
8	Søren	Inger	Søren	Inge	Søren	Susanne	Søren	Susanne
9	Henrik	Helle	Henrik	Inger	Henrik	Inge	Henrik	Lene
10	Erik	Inge	Thomas	Susanne	Thomas	Lene	Thomas	Inge

<u>Rank</u>	<u>2005</u>		<u>2006</u>		<u>2007</u>		<u>2008</u>	
	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>
1	Jens	Kirsten	Jens	Kirsten	Jens	Anne	Jens	Anne
2	Peter	Anne	Peter	Anne	Peter	Kirsten	Peter	Kirsten
3	Lars	Hanne	Lars	Hanne	Lars	Hanne	Lars	Hanne
4	Michael	Mette	Michael	Mette	Michael	Mette	Michael	Mette
5	Niels	Anna	Niels	Anna	Henrik	Anna	Henrik	Anna
6	Hans	Helle	Henrik	Helle	Søren	Helle	Søren	Helle
7	Søren	Karen	Søren	Karen	Niels	Susanne	Niels	Susanne
8	Henrik	Susanne	Hans	Susanne	Hans	Lene	Thomas	Lene
9	Jørgen	Lene	Jørgen	Lene	Jørgen	Karen	Hans	Karen
10	Thomas	Inge	Thomas	Inge	Thomas	Inge	Jørgen	Inge

(Danmarks Statistik 2005a)

Danish forenames, although seeing more movements regarding their rankings than surnames, have stayed more or less constant, with Jens being the only name that has stayed in the same place year after year (Danmarks Statistik 2005a). Remarkably, even when we see relatively few drastic changes in naming tendencies over the years, Denmark is still a great example of how modernity has affected its annual name turnover rate. In *A Matter of Taste*, Lieberman shows that compared to France, Scotland, England, Wales, California, and Iceland, Denmark sees the greatest change in names as it urbanizes (Lieberman 2000:43-44, 51, 58).

Similar to names in the past, names today can be a great source of influence. To control which names are allowed can be a powerful social tool for state. Denmark today

plays a very active role in regulating the names of its people.<sup>13</sup> Danish names today are strictly controlled by the Ministry of Justice's Family Affairs Board. Boys' names are restricted to 7,296 and girls' names restricted to 9,607. Another category also exists for surnames, of which there are 185 available (Justitsministeriet Familiestyrelsen 2007). According to *The Danish Acts on Names*, all other names have to be submitted and approved before being granted (Justitsministeriet Familiestyrelsen 2006).<sup>14</sup>

It is understandable that in a country of approximately 5.5 million people, it is difficult to keep up the system of patronymics that was prevalent in previous centuries. This was especially true when there were only about 20-25 names most often used (CIA – The World Factbook 2008; Statens Arkiver a).

### **Danish Immigration to America**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, America saw a great number of Danes (approximately 371,258 people) go through its Immigration Service. The majority of these came between 1850 and 1930, totaling around 242,544 people. Their reasons for coming were many, including: religious, political, as well as economical (Petersen 1987:22-23). In *A History of Denmark*, Jespersen notes that “[i]n the 1880s, no fewer than 77,000 Danes left the country, most headed for the mid-western agricultural regions of the United States” (Jespersen 2004:154). In 2000, Danish Americans numbered 1,430,897 persons; down

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<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Italy also actively regulates names. In 2007, Mara and Roberto Germano had trouble naming their son Venerdi (Italian for “Friday”). The judge forbade the name, citing the possibility that it may bring the child “shame and ridicule” because the name was that of the slave character in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. (Preve 2007; USA Today 2007)

<sup>14</sup> Greg Nagan and Trine Kammer in Denmark recently had trouble naming their daughter Molli. The reason cited was that it was a misspelling of Molly. In 2004, anywhere from 15-20% of names submitted by parents to be reviewed were rejected (Alvarez 2004).

from 1,634,648 in 1990, with the largest population percentile appearing in Utah at 6.5% (Brittingham and de la Cruz 2004:4, 6).

### **The Albertson Family**

The following kinship chart traces a family of Danish ancestry through ten generations (from 1709 to 2007). The chart is not displayed in the standard anthropological style. The things I have altered include the place of birth atop each symbol, names are presented underneath with forenames first and “surnames” last, numbers presented within the symbols are ages, and a cross means that individual is deceased. For example, the very first male as presented in this chart (see Figure 1) is Albert Rasmussen, born in Denmark, and lived until the age of 50.

Unfortunately, due to software and printing limitations, I am only able to display a very small part of the entire family tree. At the same time, I was only able to display one line of information above each individual. Of the important side facts, I have opted to show their birthplaces. This is simply to stress the generation when the family decided to come to America.





With the Albertsons, most notable is the ease in which one can trace events in history simply by looking at the recorded names.

**1<sup>st</sup> generation – Albert Rasmussen** (1709-1759, born in Denmark)

**2<sup>nd</sup> generation – Lauritz Albertsen** (1740-?, born in Denmark)

**3<sup>rd</sup> generation – Albert Lauritzen** (1775-1799, born in Denmark)

**4<sup>th</sup> generation – Lauritz Albertsen** (1799-1879, born in Denmark)

Up to this point, it is easy to see the patronymic system at work, as each son received his “surname” from adding *–sen* to his father’s forename.

**5<sup>th</sup> generation – Lauritz Albertsen** (1840-1896, born in Denmark, immigrated to America)

Here, one can see the new Danish order taking its effect. As the law was ordered in 1828, Lauritz (born 12 years later) was given Albertsen as his family name even though his father was not named Albert. At this point in the family history, surnames came to be inherited, instead of descriptive.

**6<sup>th</sup> generation – Henry Frazier Albertson** (1891-1968, born in America)

Here, most distinguished is Henry’s new family name. No longer is Albertsen written with *–sen*, but rather with *–son*. What could have happened between this generation and the last? Perhaps Lauritz changed his children’s last names so that they would look more American.

Another explanation could be that Henry simply inherited his father’s surname. It could be that Lauritz changed his own surname, which was simply not recorded into the family registry at the time of death. If so, why did Lauritz’s surname change? I can guess at two reasons of how this could have happened. Much like his fellow Russian and

German immigrants, his name might have been misheard and was transliterated as *-son* by mistake. In another case, Henry might have actually been active in his identity change; opting to translate his name, thinking that the *-son* was more “American” than *-sen*. Unfortunately, we will never really know. Whatever happened, we can only guess as its causes. Although interesting, this, among other details, is what makes doing genealogy so difficult.

**7<sup>th</sup> generation – Leo Henry Albertson** (1924–, born in America)

Here, one may ask if the middle name’s entrance is due to the fact that the family is now in America. This is a gray area. When one looks at the entire family tree, there are individuals several generations earlier who were given a total of three names. This discrepancy can be explained either by taste (that the parents gave some a middle name and not to others) or poor record keeping (that to whoever was writing names down, only the first name was really of interest).

**8<sup>th</sup> generation – William (Bill) Louis Albertson** (1950–, born in America)

**9<sup>th</sup> generation – June Anne Albertson** (1976–, born in America), **Jamie Leona Albertson** (1977–, born in America), and **Aimee Patricia Albertson** (1979–, born in America)

**10<sup>th</sup> generation – William Tate Lightle** (1997–, born in America), **Taylea Pearl Lightle** (1999–, born in America), **Gavin Michael Patterson** (2004–, born in America), **Owen James Patterson** (2006–, born in America), **Grady William Davidson** (2001–, born in America), and **Shelby Mae Davidson** (2002–, born in America)

Here, we see American culture and tradition taking place. As Bill Albertson’s children were all daughters, when they married, their surnames became that of their

respective husbands. Bill's grandchildren, in turn, received their surnames from their fathers. At this point, on this side of the family, the Albertson's family name has come to an end.

Regarding the women in the family tree, one may ask about the aforementioned *-datter* ending prior to the order of 1828. I can only attribute this to poor record keeping and not because of any discrepancy in Danish history particular to the women's families. Looking through the larger version of the family tree, I can guess at what happened. Most likely, only the daughters' first names were officially recorded. Later on, when it became necessary to know what her "surname" was, whoever was compiling records of the families must have assumed that the daughters simply had the same "last name" as her brothers. This would explain why women in the family had "surnames" that switched just like a patronymic, yet retained a *-sen* instead of *-datter* as its suffix. Unfortunately, much like Henry's switch to the name Albertson, we might never really know what happened.

## Vietnamese Naming Traditions

### A Brief History of Vietnamese

Vietnamese (*tiếng Việt*), as spoken today, has been used in conjunction with three different systems of writing throughout its history. Although not “genetically related” to Chinese, Vietnamese has been greatly affected by the Chinese language due to the sheer time frame (ten centuries) that Chinese traditions have dominated Vietnamese society (Nguyễn 1980b:9, 63; Nguyễn 1994:1; Alves 1999:235).

The first adaptation of a writing system was taken directly from the Chinese script. As a result, the people spoke Vietnamese, but the government wrote its works in classical Chinese, also known as *chữ Hán* or *chữ nho* (“Han script” or “scholars’ script,” respectively) (Nguyễn 1990:778, Nguyễn 1994:1). Around the 11<sup>th</sup> century, a new script was developed to reflect the spoken Vietnamese (Rogers 2005:74). Known as *chữ nôm* (“southern script”), this new writing system was based on the Chinese script but had Vietnamese elements inserted (Nguyễn 1990:778). As these two scripts coexisted, *nho* script was used more often for administrative purposes, and *nôm* script was used almost exclusively for Vietnamese literature. Unfortunately, in order to read *nôm* script, one had to have knowledge of *nho* script, which in turn, was not freely taught to the masses (Nguyễn 1980b:14; Nguyễn 1990:779).

By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as contact with Westerners grew, a new system of Vietnamese script was developed. The process began primitively with Portuguese traders and eventually culminated in the establishment of *quốc ngữ* (“national language”), with the credit traditionally given to the French Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes and his

Vietnamese-Latin-Portugese dictionary.<sup>15</sup> As France became the colonial power in Indochina, Chinese as the administrative language in Vietnam was removed and French was established (Nguyễn 1980a:63). *Nôm* script, at this point, was still in use, and continued to be taught in schools. However, as the new Latinized form of Vietnamese proved to be easier to learn and to propagate literacy, it was eventually adopted as the national writing system (Nguyễn 1980b:15; Nguyễn 1990:780).<sup>16</sup>

Although modern Vietnamese no longer looks anything like its Sinitic ancestors, colloquial Vietnamese still employs a great amount of Chinese lexicon (Alves 1999:223).<sup>17</sup> Also known as *chữ Hán* (“Han words”), these are words that, more or less, still have modern Chinese equivalents (e.g., many Vietnamese proverbs are made up entirely of Han words which can be translated directly to Chinese on a word-to-word basis).<sup>18</sup> Nguyễn Đình Hoà compares this Han-Vietnamese lexicon borrowing to the way English has borrowed Latin and Greek affixes such as *-logy*, *ambi-*, *circum-*, or *geo-* (Nguyễn 1980a:64). Nevertheless, even though Vietnamese has a great amount of borrowed Chinese vocabulary, the languages still maintain very different grammatical structures (Nguyễn 1990:794; Alves 1999:235).

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<sup>15</sup> An electronic copy of the original may be found online at: [http://purl.pt/961/3/l-2360-a\\_PDF/l-2360-a\\_PDF\\_24-C-R0072/l-2360-a\\_0000\\_rosto-31\\_t24-C-R0072.pdf](http://purl.pt/961/3/l-2360-a_PDF/l-2360-a_PDF_24-C-R0072/l-2360-a_0000_rosto-31_t24-C-R0072.pdf) (de Rhodes 1651).

<sup>16</sup> The entire system is comparable to that of Japanese and its use of kanji, hiragana/katakana, and romanji (Murray 2006:149).

<sup>17</sup> Colloquial spoken Vietnamese has significantly less Chinese lexicon than does literary Vietnamese. The latter has been estimated to be 60% Chinese in origin (Alves 1999:223).

<sup>18</sup> The term “Chinese” used in context refers to all the Chinese dialects. Because all spoken Chinese dialects use the same characters in writing, any Vietnamese equivalent through writing could, potentially be translated to any other Chinese dialect.

## Vietnamese Naming Traditions

Historically, the Vietnamese people have had forenames and surnames since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. (Lê 2002:18). In Vietnam today, a person's name can be separated into three categories. Similar to Americans, a Vietnamese person typically has a surname (*họ*, traditionally inherited from the father), one or two (rarely more) middle name(s) (*tên lót* – literally, a “cushion name”), and a forename (*tên*). The full name is commonly written and spoken in that specific order.

Aside from being very useful in expressing certain ideas, another reason why Han words are still very much in use is because the majority of Vietnamese names are still Han words. This stems from the tradition of the upper class naming their children using Han words (Lê 2002:95). Over time, this practice became common place.

Table 6. Most Common Forenames in Vietnam

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Northern Region</u>		<u>Southern Region</u>	
	<u>1988</u>		<u>1988</u>	
	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>
1	Hùng	Nga	Minh	Anh
2	Tuấn	Lan	Bình	Lan
3	Son	Vân	Dũng	Dung
4	Dũng	Tuyết	Hải	Hương
5	Bình	Thanh	Tuấn	Trang

(Lê 2002:111-112)

In *Vietnamese Names and Titles*, Nguyễn gives a list of classes that Vietnamese forenames often fall under:

1. Undesirable qualities (to ward off bad spirits; an antiquated practice not often seen in urban areas)
2. Highly regarded qualities (e.g., loyalty, bravery, strength, beauty)
3. Precious things (e.g., gold, jade)

3. Trees, flowers, and fruits (e.g., rose, peach)
  4. The four seasons (e.g., summer, spring)
  5. The four cardinal points (e.g., north, south)
  6. The ten celestial stems (part of the Vietnamese zodiac system)
  7. The twelve zodiacs (the Vietnamese zodiac system)
- (Nguyễn 1956:55-56; Nguyễn 1980c:30)

Table 7. Most Common Surnames in Vietnam

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Northern Region</u>	<u>Southern Region</u>
	<u>1975</u>	<u>1975</u>
1	Nguyễn	Nguyễn
2	Trần	Lê
3	Lê	Trần
4	Phan	Huỳnh/Hoàng
5	Phạm	Phạm
6	Hoàng	Võ
7	Võ	Phan
8	Đặng	Bùi
9	Bùi	Trương
10	Đinh	Ngô

(Lê 2002:58, 61)

Vietnamese forenames today, unlike English ones in America, still have real meanings to Vietnamese people. Inversely, whereas most English surnames have retained their meanings in America, most Vietnamese surnames have lost their literal significance. Both Vietnamese forenames and surnames however, still retain their equivalents in Chinese. In Vietnam today, most Vietnamese surnames are Chinese in origin (Lê 2002:29).



## Terms of Reference

Historically, in Vietnam, one showed reverence to an elder by not saying his or her name aloud. Words that were homophonous to these names also had to be avoided when those individuals were in the vicinity (Nguyễn 1956:57; Nguyễn 1980c:31).<sup>19</sup> Although this practice is no longer commonplace, this may have been the reason why Vietnamese has developed a relatively unique system of personal address and reference. Today, even though most Vietnamese forenames still have real, tangible meanings, a person's name (depending on his or her position in society) might be very seldomly spoken; in its place, a system of pronominal reference is used (Cooke 1968:v).

In Vietnamese culture, great importance is placed upon social status. Specifically, one has to be able to determine one's own status with respect to the person being spoken to. To determine this, a variety of components must be taken into account, including: age, gender, kinship tie, level of intimacy, as well as feelings involved.

This system of reference is, of course, difficult to compare to English, where a simple *you* and *I* relationship between singular pronouns is utilized. Going from Vietnamese to English, one may miss a lot of the nuances between two speakers that may reveal their mutual relationship (Ngô 2006). Inversely, going from English to Vietnamese is equally difficult when one has to determine what kind of pronouns would be appropriate for the respective *you*'s and *I*'s.

While pronouns such as *I*, *you*, *he*, *she*, and *it* do exist in Vietnamese, colloquially, it is much more common to replace these with respective forms of kinship

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<sup>19</sup> For example, my great-great-grandfather's name was Được. The word *được* in Vietnamese means "can" or "may" (a relatively common word). As a result, whenever his family had to use that word, they replaced with the synonym *đặng*.

terms. Although complicated with its many levels of politeness, there is a potential benefit to using this system reference – its ability to instantly reveal to other listeners the mutual relationship between the speakers.

Before continuing with the discussion about how a person might speak to non-kin, I will introduce a few diagrams (see Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4) that will put into perspective how kinship terms are normally used in a familial setting. On the next three pages are three fictional kinship charts that display all possible family connections a person could have within a time depth of three generations.<sup>20</sup> Respectively, these charts show *Ego* along with terms that individual would use to refer to his/her kin as can be expected in the northern, central, and southern region.

It should be noted that these differences only apply to kinship terms, and not to personal names. With universal education and communications technology today, common names have spread nationally (i.e., they are no longer common to just any one region). These regions are home to three traditionally recognized standards of Vietnamese: the northern, central, and southern dialects. Within each of these regions, one can find three of Vietnam's most important cities: Hanoi (*Hà Nội*) in the north, the current national capital; Hue (*Huế*), the ancient imperial capital; and Ho Chi Minh City (*thành phố Hồ Chí Minh*) in the south, the most populated city and current economic center of Vietnam.

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<sup>20</sup> “Most lineages have a time depth of about five generations: grandparents, parents, Ego, children, and grandchildren” (Lavenda and Schultz 2009:301).

Figure 2. Vietnamese Kinship Chart (Northern Dialect)

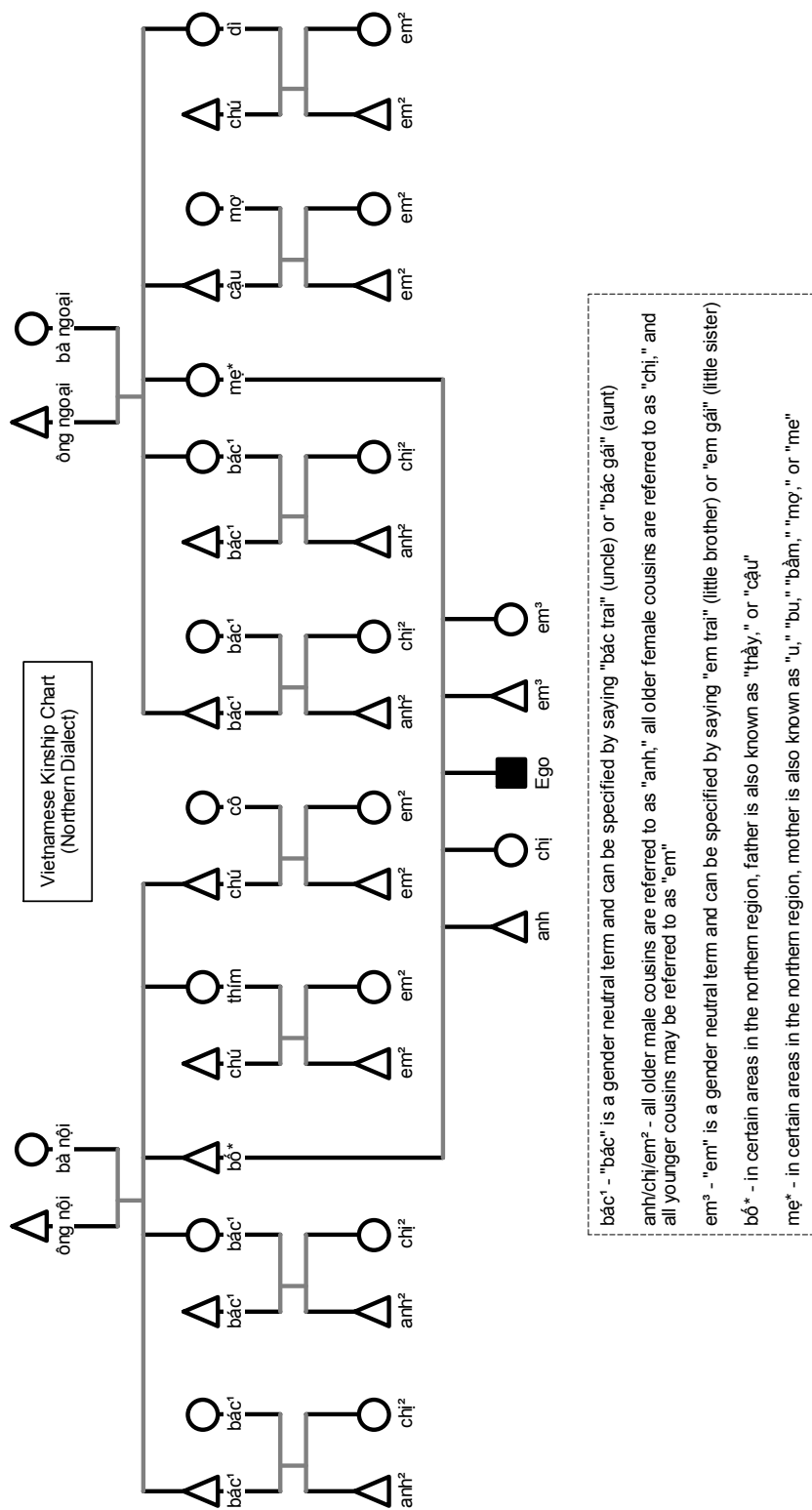
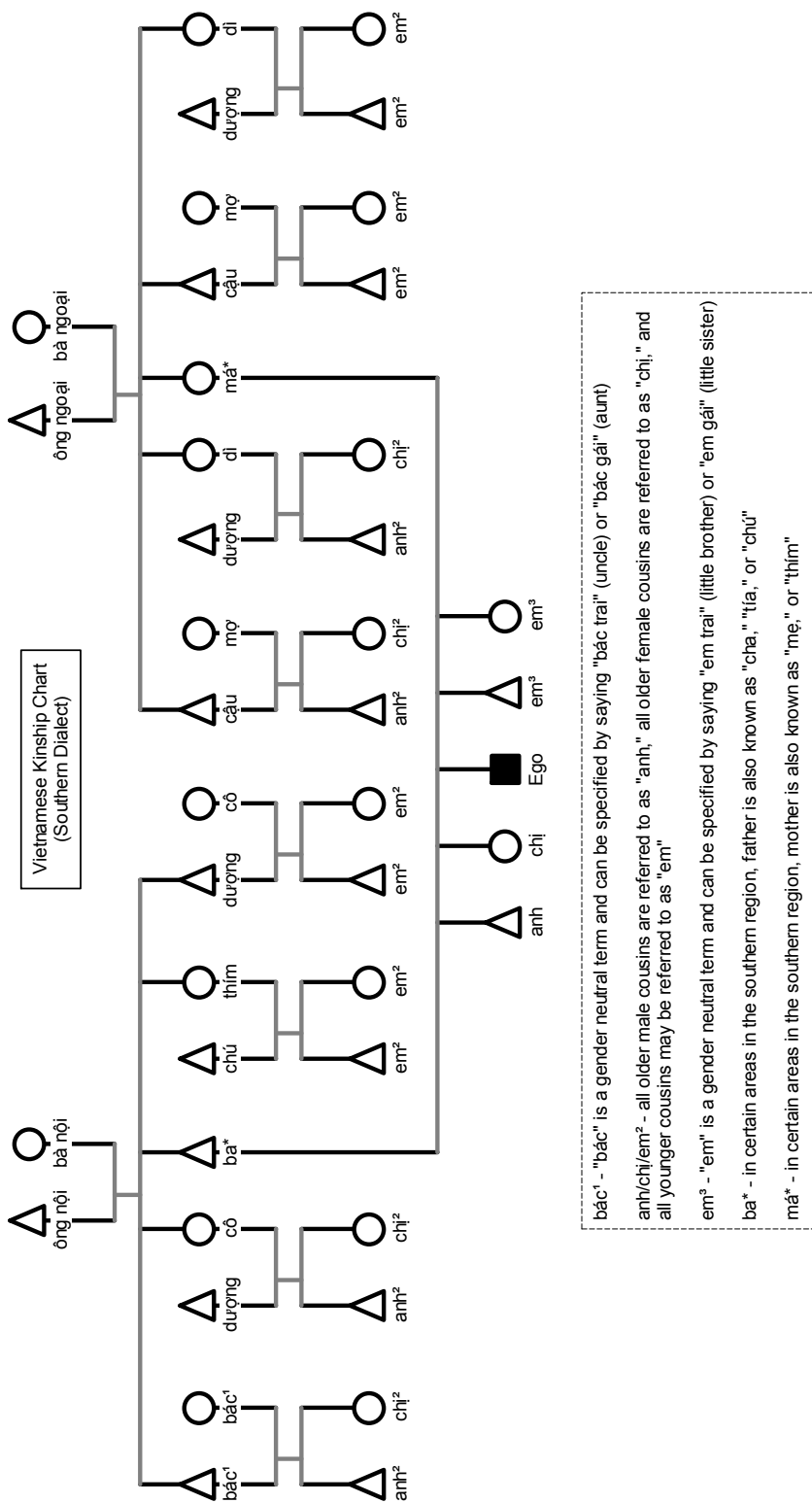




Figure 4. Vietnamese Kinship Chart (Southern Dialect)

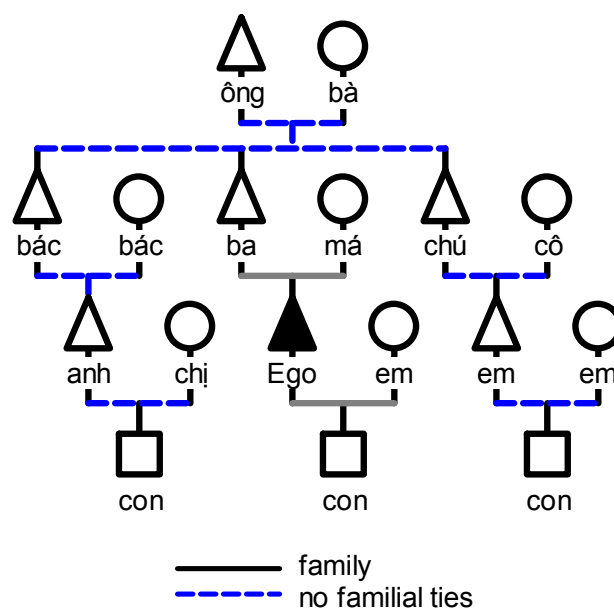


## Kinship Terms

In Vietnamese, kinship terms' usage is not limited to family members. In fact, it is socially expected to refer to each other using these expressions. This system of reference is, in fact, much easier to apply to non-family members than it is to the affinal and consanguinal relatives. Unlike kinship terms for true kins, where the exact relationships must be known, non-familial references can afford to be a little more vague.

When speaking to others outside the family, for example, one may choose to apply the following system of reference:

Figure 5. Vietnamese Non-Kinship Chart (Southern Dialect)



It must be noted that the above chart is partly non-familial. All solid lines serve as familial ties to Ego. Likewise, all dotted lines serve as non-familial ties to Ego. All lines are present to distinguish among the different generations. For example, *ông* and *bà* are not of Ego's family, but would be in the same age group as Ego's grandparents. *Bác*

(both male and female), for example, are also, in this case, not in Ego's family, but would represent all those older than those of Ego's parents' generation.

The terms appearing below the symbols act as personal pronouns. Depending on who you are and who you are talking about, the terms may mean *I, you, he, she, me, him, or her*. So, the pair “con, chú” can mean “I, you,” if spoken by the younger person, or it can mean “you, I”, if spoken by the older person (Nguyễn 1956:2). For example:

Table 8. Reference Terms Usage

English	Vietnamese	Usage Context
“How are you?”	“Bác khỏe không?”	when Ego speaks to a man/woman of his parents' generation, but is older in age
“How are you?”	“Chú khỏe không?”	when Ego speaks to a man of his parents' generation, but younger in age
“Where is he going?”	“Chú ấy đi đâu đó?”	when Ego speaks about a man of his parents' generation, but younger in age
“Where is he going?”	“Anh ấy đi đâu đó?”	when Ego speaks about a man of his own generation, but older in age
“I am eating.”	“Con đang ăn.”	when Ego speaks about himself to anyone of an older generation
“I am eating.”	“Anh đang ăn.”	when Ego speaks about himself to anyone of his generation, but younger in age

Simply put, these pronominal reference terms are used as pronouns. However, when speakers are related, these pronouns also serve to show exactly *how* the family members are related. When speaking to those outside the family, these are still understood as pronouns, but do not have any connotation of familial relationships. The examples above are, however, only what a person *could* say; as the pronominal reference terms do change as one goes from one region to another.

Spouses and couples, however, represent an interesting exception to the rule. The woman is always referred to by the man as *em* and she always refers to him as *anh*. The terms literally mean “little sister” and “older brother” but there is absolutely no connotation of an incestuous relationship. Furthermore, it does not matter what age the

two individuals are, the couple never refer to themselves as *em* and *chị* (“younger brother” and “older sister”). This system most likely developed under influence from the traditional system of patrilineality. Males were simply considered to be the more mature, the more responsible one in the relationship and therefore more deserving of the “higher ranking” pronoun.

Kinship terms as pronouns, however, can only be specific to a certain extent. To be more explicit, there are two common approaches: to add to the pronouns either a proper name or a number (Nguyễn Đình Hoà refers to this as the “kin numerative”) (Nguyễn 1956:58).

Kin numerative is when children are given numbers according to their relative birth orders. Using ordinal numbers, an uncle, for example, may be referred to as:

Table 9. Northern Vietnamese Dialect

Birth Order	English	Vietnamese	Literal Meaning
1 <sup>st</sup>	first uncle	bác cả	first uncle
2 <sup>nd</sup>	second uncle	bác hai	second uncle
3 <sup>rd</sup>	third uncle	bác ba	third uncle
4 <sup>th</sup>	fourth uncle	bác tư	fourth uncle
5 <sup>th</sup>	fifth uncle	bác năm	fifth uncle
6 <sup>th</sup>	sixth uncle	bác sáu	sixth uncle
7 <sup>th</sup>	seventh uncle	bác bảy	seventh uncle
8 <sup>th</sup>	eighth uncle	bác tám	eighth uncle
9 <sup>th</sup>	ninth uncle	bác chín	ninth uncle

Table 10. Southern Vietnamese Dialect

Birth Order	English	Vietnamese	Literal Meaning
1 <sup>st</sup>	first uncle	bác hai	second uncle
2 <sup>nd</sup>	second uncle	bác ba	third uncle
3 <sup>rd</sup>	third uncle	bác tư	fourth uncle
4 <sup>th</sup>	fourth uncle	bác năm	fifth uncle
5 <sup>th</sup>	fifth uncle	bác sáu	sixth uncle
6 <sup>th</sup>	sixth uncle	bác bảy	seventh uncle
7 <sup>th</sup>	seventh uncle	bác tám	eighth uncle
8 <sup>th</sup>	eighth uncle	bác chín	ninth uncle
9 <sup>th</sup>	ninth uncle	bác mười	tenth uncle

(Nguyễn 1956:58; Nguyễn 1980c:32)

To be clear, *hai* in Vietnamese means “two.” Oddly enough, however, in the south, *hai* is not used for the second eldest, but for the first. The counting, as is traditional in the south, always starts with two and counts up from there. Therefore, even though there are only nine uncles, the number actually goes up to ten (with the southern dialect). In the north, however, counting starts at *cả*, then goes on to *hai*. *Cả*, in this context, really



does mean “one/first,” and so *hai*, in this case, does really mean “two/second.” Nguyễn Đình Hoà speculates that in the south, *cả* could have once been reserved for the mother, who was the father’s first child (Nguyễn 1956:58).

It is interestingly to note that, when used often enough, these numbers will come to replace that person’s actual name. A reference such as *bác năm* (“fifth uncle”) will sometimes be used by everyone he knows for the rest of his life. In this case, his temporary reference could become his permanent name. And when everyone knows him by a certain number, it can sometimes be hard for the younger generations to find out what his actual name might have been. In fact, kin numeratives are often capitalized in writing because they are used as a name substitute, so *bác năm* is often written formally as *bác Năm*.

What is even more interesting is that women, after marriage, often do not take the husband’s surname. Nevertheless, even though she retains her surname, she will take her husband’s kin numerative (Nguyễn 1956:59). So, someone named Trần Thị Hồng (female), also known as *cô Ba*, can marry Nguyễn Văn Tâm (male), also known as *chú Năm*, and will thereafter still be known as Trần Thị Hồng, but may be known as *cô Năm*.

The second solution is to use the kinship pronouns in conjunction with that person’s forename. Compared to the first system above, this method is quite simple. All one has to do is combine the appropriate kinship pronoun with that person’s first name, for example: *cậu Tâm* (“uncle Tâm”), *chị Thủy* (“sister Thủy”), or *chú Thái* (“uncle Thái”). This second system has a benefit in that it allows for people to still remember each other’s names.

It is not at all surprising that Vietnamese children often take several years before mastering this system of kinship reference. Whenever a child meets a new family member, it is always the adults' responsibility to let the child know how to properly refer to that specific person. In fact, much like English, when two individuals are speaking and are referring to someone else, it is the older person's responsibility to use the correct kinship term from the viewpoint of the younger person. For example, an uncle would call his own father "grandpa," if he is speaking to his own nephew; likewise, a mother would call her husband "dad," if she is speaking to her child. It is not a new concept for those familiar with American culture, but when one considers how many Vietnamese kinship reference terms there are, one has to really pay attention to and about whom one speaks.

Nguyễn Đình Hoà's book on this topic, entitled *Verbal and Non-Verbal Patterns of Respect-Behavior in Vietnamese Society: Some Metalinguistic Data*, does a good job of describing the Vietnamese reference system. To get a feel of how complicated the Vietnamese system of reference can be, one may consider the fact that the book is 254 pages in length and is not even entirely similar to the Vietnamese that I have come to know while growing up in Vietnam. I attribute this to dialectical differences between linguistic regions as well as the generational differences between the author and me. Even though there is a great amount of movement between different regions today, most people will not know all the intimate details of how to properly address others in all social situations.

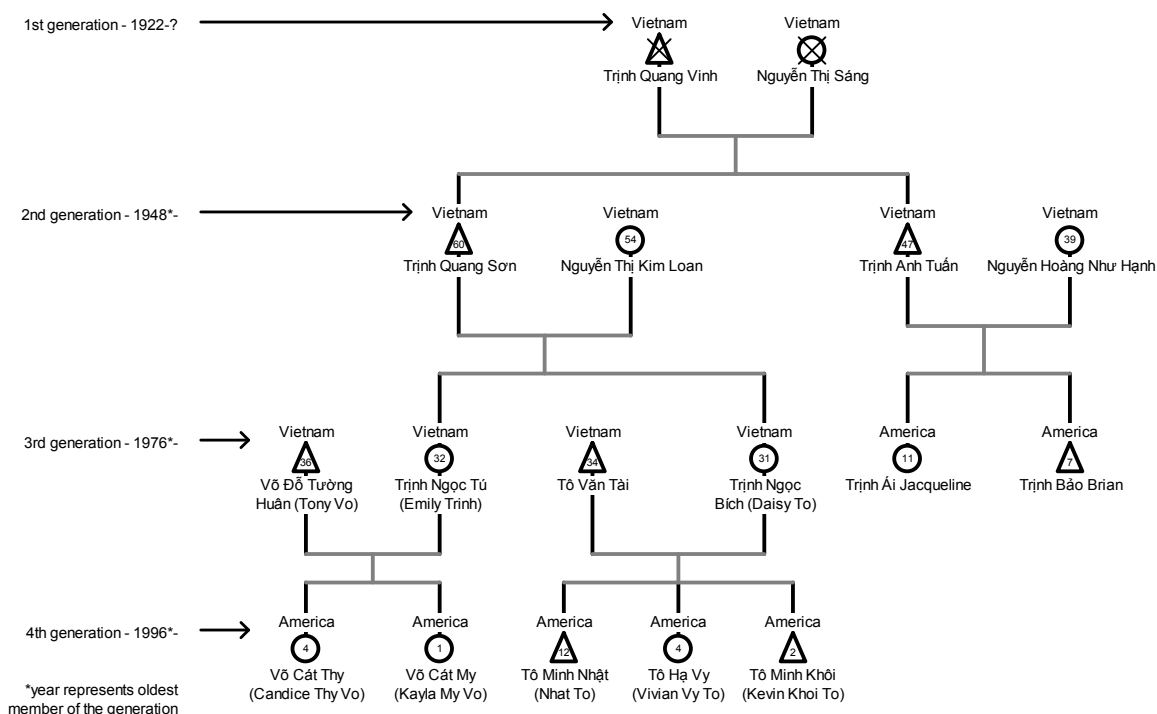
## **The Trĩnh Family**

Immigration of Vietnamese people to America began en masse starting in the late 1970s, following shortly after the end of the Vietnam War. By 1984, Vietnamese numbered around 700,000 in America (totaling approximately half of the worldwide total of 1.3 million) (Gwertzman 1984:822). In 1990, the Vietnamese community numbered 535,825 individuals. In 2000, that number was 1,029,420, reflecting a 92.1% increase within just ten years (Brittingham and Cruz 2004:5). The Trĩnh family is just one of many immigrants that arrived in America under these conditions. On the following chart (see Figure 6), I have compiled a small kinship diagram of this Vietnamese family. It has been over three decades since Son Trĩnh first came to this country. Today, with most of his family here, we can see how American culture has affected the youngest generation.

Like the Albertsons' family tree, this chart is not displayed in the standard anthropological style. The things I have altered include the place of birth atop each symbol. Also, like the Albertson's family tree, I have chosen not to draw the entire family tree. I have only included individuals that have immigrated to America.

The names immediately underneath the symbols are Vietnamese and are written in the order of surname, middle name(s), forename. Names in parentheses are the official, legal names and are written in the order of forename, middle name, surname. Numbers presented within the symbols are ages, and a cross means that individual is deceased.

Figure 6. The Trinh's Family Tree (Kinship Chart)



### 1<sup>st</sup> generation – **Trinh Quang Vinh** (1922, born in Vietnam)

Vietnamese surnames, most likely having been derived from other languages, have no real meanings in Vietnamese anymore. Even at this generation, they have long since ceased to be descriptive.

**2<sup>nd</sup> generation – Trinh Quang Son** (1948–, born in Vietnam, immigrated to America) and **Trinh Anh Tuấn** (1961–, born in Vietnam, immigrated to America)

**3<sup>rd</sup> generation – Trinh Ngọc Tú (Emily Trinh)** (1976–, born in Vietnam, immigrated to America), **Trinh Ngọc Bích (Daisy To)** (1977–, born in Vietnam, immigrated to America), **Trinh Ái Jacqueline** (1996–, born in America), and **Trinh Bảo Brian** (2000–, born in America)

This is an interesting generation. Even though these four individuals are of the same “generation,” Son’s daughters were born approximately 20 years earlier than

Tuấn's children. Tú and Bích immigrated to America, whereas Jacqueline and Brian were born in America. Both Tú and Bích saw it necessary to change their names to English to make their daily lives more convenient. Jacqueline and Brian's American names were given to them by their parents.

What is interesting is Tuấn's strategy in naming Jacqueline and Brian. As middle names, Tuấn gave Jacqueline and Brian Vietnamese names. In the family, where Vietnamese is spoken, both Jacqueline and Brian are referred to as Ái and Bảo, respectively. This idea of Americanization is not uncommon among newly immigrated families, where English names are given because "they should be English in the school," and the children are usually given traditional names for use within the family (Cameron 1983:40).

**4<sup>th</sup> generation – Võ Cát Thy (Candice Thy Vo) (2004–, born in America), Võ Cát My (Kayla My Vo) (2007–, born in America), Tô Minh Nhật (Nhat To) (1996–, born in America), Tô Hạ Vy (Vivian Vy To) (2004–, born in America), and Tô Minh Khôi (Kevin Khoi To) (2006–, born in America)**

Strictly speaking, these children are one generation younger than Jacqueline and Brian. Regarding ages, however, one can see that they are really at the same level. Aside from Nhật, who is an exception, all the children have English names at this point in time.

Both Tú and Bích have taken the same approach as Tuấn regarding Vietnamese names, that is, they have inserted Vietnamese into their legal names as middle names. At home, all these children are referred to by their Vietnamese names. What is even more interesting regarding Tú and Bích's children is that, unofficially, they have full Vietnamese names as well (the names not presented in parentheses). Even though these

will not appear very often anywhere in writing, they are there to make their Vietnamese names sound more pleasant. More pleasant, in this context, means that Võ Cát Thy, for example, sounds more “Vietnamese” because it has the three common elements often seen in full Vietnamese names, that is: a forename, a middle name, and a surname. On the other hand, if one removes Jacqueline’s American name, her Vietnamese full name consists only of Trịnh Ái, which sounds somewhat truncated.<sup>21</sup>

Also, regarding the children’s English names, one may notice an interesting strategy in phoneme selection. That is, most of the children’s English names have first letters that correspond with the first letters of their Vietnamese names, for example: Brian Bảo, Vivian Vy, and Kevin Khôi. However, this practice is by no means widespread. Nevertheless, they do reflect the parents’ artistic side in trying to choose a nice name for their children.

Regarding reference terms, the Trịnhs take the following strategy (see Table 11). Below is a table I have constructed to allow easier comprehension of how the reference system actually works in real life.

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<sup>21</sup> Writing about what sounds “pleasant” and what sounds “truncated” is, of course, very subjective. I have to admit that my preference of one parent’s technique over another plays a large part in this analysis.

Table 11. Use of Reference Terms within the Trinh's Family

Speaker	Listener									
	Son	Loan	Tuấn	Hạnh	Tú	Bích	Jacqueline Ái	Brian Bảo	Candice Thy	Kayla My
Son		em	Tuấn	Hạnh	Tú	Bích	Ái	Bảo	Thy	My
Loan	anh		Tuấn	Hạnh	Tú	Bích	Ái	Bảo	Thy	My
Tuấn	anh Son	chị Loan		em	Tú	Bích	Ái	Bảo	Thy	My
Hạnh	anh Son	chị Loan	anh		Tú	Bích	Ái	Bảo	Thy	My
Tú	ba	mẹ	chú Tuấn	thím Hạnh		Bích	Ái	Bảo	Thy	My
Bích	ba	mẹ	chú Tuấn	thím Hạnh	Tú		Ái	Bảo	Thy	My
Jacqueline Ái	bác ba	bác ba	ba	má	chị Tú	chị Bích		Bảo	Thy	My
Brian Bảo	bác ba	bác ba	ba	má	chị Tú	chị Bích	chị		Thy	My
Candice Thy	ông ngoại	bà ngoại	ông út	bà út	mẹ	đi Bích	chị Ái	anh Bảo		My
Kayla My	ông ngoại	bà ngoại	ông út	bà út	mẹ	đi Bích	chị Ái	anh Bảo	chị Thy	

The terms chosen by speakers above are both a mix Northern and Southern dialects, and at the same time, there are a lot of personal preferences between saying a person's name or not. What is a definite pattern, however (and this is true for all Vietnamese families), is that the younger the speaker is, the more reference terms they have to know. Inversely, the older the speaker is, the more he or she can refer to others simply by their names.

Vietnamese retention with the new generation in America, however, is difficult. As the children here grow up with not much exposure to the language outside the home, their level of Vietnamese fluency eventually suffer. The kinship reference system is a large part of the language, and as the children slowly lose their command of Vietnamese, I do not foresee the coming generations being able to retain this system. It is an unfortunate but common result when families adapt to a new culture.

## Conclusion

“The word stock of any language reflects the needs over time of its speakers and writers and the state of their culture”

– Einar Haugen, American linguist (Haugen 1990:175)

If there can be anything said about names, it is that they are an integral part of the cultures that we live in. In fact, names reflect very much the values of their respective societies. As much as cultures can affect the languages that we speak, they too can affect why names are what they have evolved to be. Any significant changes in a family’s naming traditions and one can usually guess that there was a great change in that family’s history. Over time, names may come to represent a mirror into our past.

One thing that can be gathered through our examples is that all names have meanings. Although, whether the meanings have been retained over the generations depends on that specific culture and language. This is clear in the case of Vietnamese, where forenames are Han words that are still used colloquially. In the case of the more common American and Danish forenames, although they no longer have meanings in English and Danish, it is not difficult to trace back to their original definitions. Surname meanings, as we found out, also vary when comparing Vietnam, Denmark, and America. In Vietnam, surnames have lost much of their original meanings. In Denmark and America, however, common surnames often still have very discrete definitions in Danish and English, respectively.

Much like how language evolves over time, so do names over generations, especially in societies that have greater instances of contact with other cultures. This change, which may be good or bad, is rather uniform in all societies. That is to say, societies never maintain the status quo indefinitely. What we have observed through our



case studies, specifically, is that change comes the quickest when families and family traditions are expected to conform to a new culture (i.e., a new way of living and thinking). Although one should not generalize, it is a common occurrence that immigrant parents often give their children local names (i.e., names in the local language) to help them assimilate more quickly with their peers.

In the case of the Trĩnh family, we can see the transformation process taking place. That is, all those who have immigrated were given full Vietnamese names. On the other hand, most of the children who were born in America received Vietnamese as well as American names. I predict that within as little as two generations' time, the new given names in this family will all be English. The surnames, of course, will stay Vietnamese; but that is only because they are hereditary.

From this, one may even hypothesize that names lose meanings most often when those bearing them cross into and begin to speak a language that falls under a different language family. Perhaps that is the most common reason why names around the world have lost their meanings over time. This may be a very good topic to explore in a future project, especially in regards to names in all cultures and their respective shifts in geography.

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