VIETNAMESE FAMILY NAMES AND COMMON GIVEN NAMES

In the remote past, when the registrar’s office has not been introduced, naming a child underwent two stages. The first stage sees the name of a child to be something temporary, just like a Joe, a Jack or a Jill in English. This name stays with the child until s/he grows up or gets married. Until then the parents would officially name her/him with a real name. Due to no restrictions or legal obligations to maintaining one name or no prohibitions of having several different names, one person could have as many names as s/he wishes. This practice ceases when registrar’s office is well established and rules for ID registration strictly enforced, beginning in the 18th century. However, a person could adopt an alias, or a nickname as a pseudonym.

Naming a child in the past, however, is not always an easy task. Parents of the new-born has to be careful as to choose a name which has not been used by any other person, especially by one of the members in the royal family, exclusively, by the contemporary king. Names adopted by these members become taboo and ordinary people are supposed to avoid selecting them for their children. Addressing an elderly person by calling her/his name is also a taboo. In order to avoid calling directly the person’s name, it is best to find out the name of the first child in the family, and add a title to that name to address the elderly. For example: The elderly person’s name is Bách, and his son’s name is Trung. Visitors would find out the son’s name and address Trung’s father by calling him Mr. Trung.

Legend has it that the Vietnamese people are descendants of the Fairy named Âu Cơ, who married to the Dragon named Lạc Long Quân. The mother gave birth to one hundred children, who afterwards divided into two equal groups: fifty children accompanying their mother to the mountainous areas and the other half with their father to occupy the lowland. For this reason, the Vietnamese have approximately ONE HUNDRED LAST NAMES. And for this reason, the Vietnamese call one another “same womb” fellow countrymen.

During the course of history, Vietnam, in contact with her neighboring countries, has adopted some Chinese, Cambodian, Laotian, Champa last names, which eventually become Vietnamized.

A Vietnamese name usually has three parts: family name, middle name and given name. Most of the cases, a child’s family name take after its father’s. In some cases, the mother’s family name can be adopted. In a family that has no sons or heirs, one of the daughter’s sons would be given his mother’s family name. Or the child is fatherless.

Unlike English way of addressing people, a title is attached to the Vietnamese given name of the addressed, not to her/his family name. For instance: Mrs. Ba. Ba is a given name. Dr. Minh. Minh a is given name. Just like Uncle Tom or Uncle Sam in English.

Presently naming a child is an interesting topic to the Vietnamese. Generally, of the many trends in naming a new-born child, twelve categories are significant:

1) reflection of wishes, 2) reminiscences or memories,
3) dedication to classical literature/poetry, 4) names of flowers, fruits
5) much-prized quality, 6) noble animals,
7) beautiful birds, 8) Confucian doctrine appreciation
9) precious things or jewelry 10) mythical characters
11) vulgar terms 12) terms of occupations

Thus, names in Vietnamese definitely have meanings, and they must be meaningful to the parents who name their new-born.
About ugly names, using vulgar terms like Cú�t ‘feces’, Dái ‘urine’, Cu ‘dick’, and so on is fairly common in the countryside. Children are named after these terms because of a certain number of reasons, but two are significant:

a) due to lack of effective medicament the child is so weak or so ill that, if s/he has a beautiful name, the death will frequently visit her/him, or

b) “infertile” parents wishing to have children, would come to a temple or a pagoda to pray deities that would bestow upon them a child, called con cửu tự ‘deity-blessed child’.

Again, in daily conversation Vietnamese speakers use a title with the first name of the person to whom she or he is speaking. *Mrs. Phan or Miss Mai, for instance, are titles + given names.* If they use the title + last name of the addressed person – which is not common – they are influenced by the Chinese or European culture. The etiquette of Mr. and Mrs. + the husband’s first name is also used in both formal and informal occasions.

The Vietnamese highly appreciate the family value. A Vietnamese proverb has it that *Một người làm quan cả họ được nhờ.* (Lit.: One who becomes a mandarin brings in great fortune to his extended family.) Another one says *Một người làm xấu cả họ mang dơ.* (Lit.: One person’s bad deed defames his whole family.) These two proverbs prove how important the relationship among members in an extended family is. In other words, an individual always does her best to honor her extended family and enhance its reputation the more the possible. When talking about someone, people do not only look at the individual but the whole family behind him/her as well. In a quarrel, an antagonist intends to name name some or all of his/her opponent's family members.

For this reason, family name always occurs first, then middle name and lastly, given name in a Vietnamese name, regardless the gender. The middle name also plays an important role in glorifying an individual’s fame. There used to be many famous families whose last names and middle affirm their hi-born social status, like Nguyễn Phước, Thân Trọng, Hồ Ðắc, and so forth.

It is believed that the Vietnamese enjoyed a matriarchal social organization in the remote past – possibly prior to the Chinese domination (111BC to 938AD). Presently Vietnamese names are reckoned patriarchically. The Vietnamese women, however, are legitimately entitled to retain their maiden names after they get married.

Please find the links for family names of the Vietnamese lowlanders, highlanders and of other origins. Most of these names have English equivalents.

This list will be updated periodically until all given names are included.