



September 13, 2012
by [Diana van Oort](#)

Cross-Cultural Couples: Sonia and Hung

By: **Diana van Oort**

Our family of mixed couples is growing bigger and bigger. The [Latitudes Cross-Cultural Couples series](#) is a testament to the intermingling of cultures that makes this world a more interesting and colorful place. Are you a mixed couple and would you like to be featured on Latitudes? Do you have an extraordinary tale of love that surpasses cultural boundaries and geographical borders? Then e-mail us at info@latitudes.nu!

Hung and Sonia in Paris

Sonia and Hung are an unlikely couple as not many Western women marry Vietnamese men. After they met, they had a whirl wind romance, married and had a cute son. They live in Saigon, Vietnam. When their son is grown up they want to travel the world. This is their story.

Please introduce yourselves, what are your names, where are you from and where do you live?

Sonia: 'My name is Sonia Nguyen – Delestree. I'm 29 years old, and I was born in Paris, France from a Scottish mother and a German father. I've been living in Vietnam since 2006. I came to Vietnam because I fell in love with the country when I was touring Asia as a backpacker.'

Hung: 'My name is Nguyen Le Viet Hung. I'm almost 29 years old and I'm from Saigon, where we also live.'

How did you meet and where?

Sonia: 'We met on the internet, through a group of people that my friend Gaetan started that lived in Vietnam and had common interests. We were chatting non-stop for weeks and weeks, and talking for hours on the phone. We would spend entire nights together on the internet. He was just getting over his



ex-girlfriend, so I wasn't quite sure what was going to happen there. I was single and not especially looking for a relationship. I was kind of lonely after two years of not really having many friends, so I just wanted someone to talk to and have fun with. Then we met in person a few weeks later for lunch at Pepperoni's on 24th April 2008.'



Tam, Hung and Sonia on their bike in front of Pepperoni's where they first met

How did your relationship evolve?

Hung: 'The first time we met, we fell in love. We had a lot in common, we liked a lot of the same things, we were interested in Vietnam, we liked to listen to rock, AC/DC and Metallica. It seems really quick, but we chatted online every night from 8 pm to 2 am. We didn't realize how late it was until we looked at the clock.'

Sonia: 'We had a great lunch and it really clicked. We both decided that we were going to be together, because it was working well and that was it. Then very, very quickly we decided to live together.'

Hung: 'When we met, she asked me why I lived with my family and not by myself. I told her, I didn't have a choice because I didn't have a job. I had to live with them, because they financed everything. She said if you live with me it's better for you to find a job. I thought a lot about that. After a few months I finally got a chance to escape my family for a few days because I got the chicken-pox. I lied to my parents and told them I was staying at my friends' house. He already had the chicken-pox and I didn't want to give it to my sister. I stayed with Sonia for about a week. I felt good about it, so why not live with her? Then one night my parents came home and realized that all my clothes were gone. Of course they wanted to contact me, but I turned off the phone. After a week I went back to talk to them. In the beginning it was difficult for them to get used to the fact that I have a foreign girlfriend.'

Sonia: 'Not even a year later we decided to have a baby and to get married. It evolved fast, very fast, because we both knew we wanted exactly the same things. We wanted to start a family quick and young.'

Hung: 'The night we moved into our second place we found out we were pregnant. Then we decided to get married, because it's easier to get the paperwork for Tam done. We got married 26 June 2009. That's a day after Michael Jackson's death, so it's easy to remember. We had a short honeymoon in the Rex hotel. Just two days, but we enjoyed it. The big marriage celebration with the families was 7 February 2010.'



Hung & Sonia at the wedding party

What does it mean to your relationship to be of two different cultures?

Sonia: 'It means in one word, compromise. You have to compromise on a lot of things. It's also super interesting. I've learned more than any other foreigner I know here, because I have been in a Vietnamese family, seeing them regularly, living their customs. On the other hand, it's quite a lot of work to get the two cultures to blend in together and not clash, because they are very different.'

You just have to work with it. The main difference is the way the family in Vietnam controls everything. In Western countries we are taught to be independent very young. Once you are 18 you can pretty much do what you want and your parents if you're lucky, will help you. Your parents don't have this power and control over you until forever.

In Vietnam the family is the center of their life, their love life, career, everything, come after the family. You don't make any decisions, like buying a house or getting a new job, without consulting your family. I don't call my mum every time I get a new student, but Hung every time there is something new, even a new schedule at work, calls his dad to see if he thinks it's a good idea. Which is difficult to understand for me, because my mum always raised me quite the opposite: be independent and make your own choices as long as you think they're good. I'll be there for you if you fall down. In a sense it's nice, lots of respect for the family. We are losing that in Europe. But it's too much sometimes, for me anyway. Apparently most families are pretty controlling and even if they are not, the children have been brought up with this notion of respect that is so big, that they will always look up to their parents for everything they decide anyway, because their parents know best. The kids sometimes feel like that they can't decide anything by themselves.'

Hung: 'In Western culture if the kids are around 18 years old they live separately from their parents. That's normal, but in Vietnam it's not. Sonia was raised to be independent. She lived alone when she was 18 years old and I still lived with my parents when I was 26 years old. In the beginning it was hard to get used to the different cultures. We had to work really hard on that. The most difficult was to get to know and understand each other. It's really hard because of the language, the culture and the mindset that's completely opposite. But it's fine now.'

Has it ever caused any problems or miscommunication?

Sonia: 'Although Hung speaks almost fluent English, there still is a slight language barrier. There's still some idiom or jokes that he's not going to get. With the family it's difficult to communicate because they don't speak English. I did learn Vietnamese which helps. But communication has never really been a problem.'

Hung: 'We had a lot of small misunderstandings in the beginning, like with humor. If Sonia made a joke, I didn't understand it and when I made a joke, she didn't laugh. But when we explained it, it was okay. Now still, but less than before. I studied English but I never spoke to or communicated with foreigners. Just with the teacher, but that's different. I learned a lot from Sonia about Western thinking and about life. I had to adapt quicker than usual, and I had to change in a good way to adapt to the other culture. You have to find a way to do that. I choose a Western wife. It's my choice so I had to, and it's better for me too.'



Sonia's Mother, Hung, Sonia and Hung's father during the wedding ceremony that took place in Vietnam at Hung's parents house

How did your surroundings react to your mixed relationship?

Sonia: 'On my side everyone was really happy for me. My mum was surprised but happy. She said if you're happy then it's fine. It's your choice. She met Hung when we already had a baby and she loved him the second she saw him. He met my grandmother, brother, everybody loves him. My friends all like him. A lot of people were surprised that I choose someone who is so very different from me. He's very quiet and calm. We are opposites. The fact that he was Vietnamese wasn't really a shock to anyone, because I left my country to come here. So it made sense that I would end up marrying someone from here. And I always was unconventional.'

Hung: 'My parents thought that my wife stole me from the family. That was difficult. But now they are used to it, it's fine. My friends never invaded our privacy. We didn't talk a lot about our wives or girlfriends. They think I'm cool for having a foreign wife. I have a few close friends. One went to Germany to study and now he's in the UK for an internship. We talk a lot and they are really open-minded with me, not with their families. After I got married with Sonia, they asked me a lot of advice about how to escape from the family.'

Sonia: 'It's funny; he has become a role model for young Vietnamese men who want to become independent.'

Hung: 'When a friend asked me: how did your family accept a foreign wife? I told him to leave the family and he would find a way to deal with it. Later it would be okay. Because in a Vietnamese family even if they are really mad at you in the beginning, you're still their son and they have to adapt to the new

situation. Even if they say things to you like: I don't trust you like a son, and I don't treat you like a son anymore. But that's just talk. They will be okay in the end.'



Sonia & Hung during the wedding ceremony at Hung's parent's house

What are the biggest challenges you had to overcome?

Sonia: 'His family. It's true, it's really the only big challenge we have had as a couple. The first two years they wouldn't accept me at all. They refused to acknowledge me as his girlfriend and

even as his wife. Once the baby was born they started changing and now we have a great relationship. His family was really a challenge for me, because I didn't see why I should force myself to respect them when they didn't respect me and didn't want me in their lives. But for Hung of course it was normal that I should pay huge respect to his parents. After a lot of fighting we ended up agreeing on how often I would see them and all that. We're done now, we're good.'

Hung: 'In the beginning the challenge was how to convince my family that they have a foreign daughter in law, and that we were pregnant before we got married. That was difficult and not normal in Vietnamese culture. It's changing, now more people have a kid and then get married, but that was much later.'

Sonia: 'In everyday life the challenge is the power of sexes. In Vietnam the man doesn't do anything in the household, the woman does it all. Where I was raised in France by a mother who told me men can do things just as well as women can and they should. It's not even a challenge, it's just everyday life. I have to try to make him understand that as much as I'm happy to integrate with his culture, he has to understand where I'm coming from to and it's not always easy.'

Hung: 'It's not easy to adapt to another culture. I can change but it will take quite a while. I think I should help Sonia with the everyday housework instead of doing nothing.'

What are the biggest differences in raising a child the Vietnamese or the European way?

Sonia and Hung want to raise their son the European way: strict with rules, but no physical abuse.

Sonia: 'In Europe we try to teach manners and rules to our children. Tam has been on a schedule since he was born and he knows he must go to bed when we say so. He knows he has to stay at the table until he's done eating. He knows he must say please and thank you when he wants or gets something.'

Young Vietnamese kids (as young as toddlers) are often seen playing in the streets until 10 or 11 pm and their parents or nannies follow them around with spoonfuls of rice. That's something we both dislike very much.'

Hung: 'Most Vietnamese parents hit their kids when they do something wrong and yell at them to make them scared of them. That's why the kids obey them. I disagree with that. Boys are more important than girls here. If parents have two kids, they spoil the boys so much. I once saw a boy hitting his sister and the parents just laughed and think it's normal. I don't like that.'

Sonia: 'We love our son so much and do spoil him every now and again but he also knows there are limits. Most Vietnamese kids (especially boys) are like little kings at home and rule over the parents. We don't want that!'

Hung: 'Even girls! But the boys understand what power they have at home.'

What are the best things that this relationship brings you?

Sonia: 'Safety, perfectly honestly, safety. I have a wonderful husband who is really there for me if I need him. He's a wonderful dad, which is awesome. This relationship brought me Tam, our son, who's just absolutely amazing. It's nice to have someone whatever country he's from, who I can peacefully live with. I know Hung's going to be there for me no matter what. We also have fun every now and again, and have a nice comfortable life, but the main thing is I feel safe and secure with a husband who is there for me.'

Hung: 'The family I have. I have a sweet wife and an awesome son. I have a family of my own, not chosen by my parents. In many families the parents decide that their kids should get married and look for a partner they like. I'm proud of myself to get the woman I love, instead of the woman they know, they like.'

What language do you speak with one another?

Sonia & Hung: 'English.'

Are religious differences an issue between you and your partner? How did you solve these?

Sonia: 'Absolutely not, because I'm not religious at all. Hung was raised a Buddhist but he does not really believe in anything either, so he just follows the traditional ceremonies with his family whenever he has to. He doesn't go to the pagoda or anything and he doesn't drag me into it, so I'm perfectly okay with that.'

Hung: 'In my family there are different religions. On my mothers' side, my great grandfather was a Catholic and my father is a Buddhist. I don't believe in anything, so it's not an issue.'

Hung, Sonia and Tam

What are your future plans?

Sonia: 'We're already married, we already have a child. Future plans: stay here, raise our son until he's old enough to go to university and then



hopefully if we can afford it, travel around the world. Hung says he would like to do that too, so I hope he will. Just go and enjoy time without our son, freedom.'

Hung: 'Hard to say, but we want to live in Vietnam happily. But if we cannot pay the tuition for our son, we can decide to move to France, where schools are free, or somewhere else and live there. If Sonia can get a job in an international school and Tam can get in for free, we will stay here. When Tam's grows up he can go to University, if he wants to, and we can travel around the world. I love to travel, but I didn't have the chance. When I got married with Sonia, I got more opportunities to travel. She has travelled a lot and knows the world better than me. Next year I have to go to France alone with Tam. Sonia will be there taking exams and we'll join her. It's the first time I travel to a country alone. I traveled to Singapore and Malaysia, but my parents were sitting next to me. Singapore is two hours away, but Paris is 14 hours away. Alone would be okay, I can take care of myself. But with Tam, he's still small, that's scary.'

Do you have any tips for other mixed couples?

Sonia: 'Be patient. A lot of couples have the same problems with the family. I really thought after about two years with this constant fighting, it would be better to just give up because I was fed-up with it. But be patient, because it can change. Four years later here I am, seeing my in-laws every weekend and we have a great time and everything is fine. So be patient and try to understand where each is coming from. You can't expect someone from another culture to adapt to yours if you don't make efforts too. It's all about compromise again. If you want them to adapt to yours you have to adapt to theirs, especially since we live in their country. So I think it is even more important for me to adapt to his culture. He has chosen a foreign wife so he has to adapt to mine a little, but I'm living in his country.'

But you do live separately from the family. Sonia: Yes, that's one battle I won. No compromise on that one, but on a lot of things I did, because I'm living with a Vietnamese man. Learning the language helps a lot, because the family sees that you are making efforts. Try the food, even if you would prefer pizza or spaghetti. Just try to adapt and don't always force the other person to do things the Western way, because in that case, there's not much point in living here. But if we do go back to Europe to live one day, than he would have to make more efforts to adapt to the European way.'

Hung: 'Open your mind to something different. Adapt to the new culture. Don't show off by saying your culture is the best. Not this culture is the best or that culture is the best. Get used to it in a positive way, and be patient. We both changed since when we met each other. She adapted a lot to my culture and I adapted a lot to hers. We go to my parents' house every week, to let them see Tam. I live independent from my parents which is good, and when I need help, they can help.'