Vu Ngoc Anh stands on a performance stage. Bright lights shine on her from above hundreds of people are watching her. they are interested in her beautiful clothing. she is wearing a kind of traditional Vietnamese clothing called an Ao Dai or Ao Dai. Ngoc Anh walks slowly across the stage Her Ao Dai moves gently side to side. This is because it is made of silk, a light flowing material the Ao Dai is two pieces of clothing, trousers and a long fitted shirt or gown. Ngoc Anh’s trousers are white her gown is a golden yellow color. It covers her arms down to her wrists and it fits tightly around her chest and neck. It hangs almost to the ground. The gown is split, it opens on the sides from her waist to the floor. As Ngoc Anh walks across the floor, she looks as if she is floating

On that night Vu Ngoc Anh won the 2012 Miss Vietnam Ao Dai competition. The judges thought she looked the most beautiful in her Ao Dai. Achieving the title miss Ao Dai is a great honor this is because the Ao Dai is more than just traditional Vietnamese clothing. It is a symbol of the history and beauty of the Vietnamese culture and people. Today’s Spotlight is on the Vietnamese Ao Dai.

The Ao Dai has a long history in Vietnam. Experts believe forms of the Ao Dai have existed for hundreds of years. Traditional Chinese clothing has influenced the history of the Ao Dai. In the 1600s and 1700s Chinese rulers occupied the land of Vietnam. People were required to wear traditional Chinese clothing. Vietnamese clothing designers began to change the design of the traditional Chinese clothing. They created early forms of the Ao Dai to show Viet Nam’s separate and independent culture. During this time members of the Vietnames ruling family began wearing these early forms of the Ao Dai and both men and women wore them.

In 1802 there was a Vietnamese leader called Gia Long. He freed Vietnam from Chinese rule before this time people in different areas of Vietnam wore different forms of the early Ao Dai, but designers began to combine the different regional designs. The result was a form of the Ao Dai called the Ngu Than. From 1820 to 1841 rulers made the Ngu Than Viet Nam’s official national clothing

For the next 50 years, a new foreign power ruled Vietnam. France claimed Vietnam as a colony. During this time many people began wearing clothes influenced by Western design. However, some Vietnamese designers reacted against this foreign cultural influence- just like they had when China ruled over Vietnam.

During the 1920s and 1930s,designers in Hanoi began redesigning the Ngu Than. The most famous designer was Cat Tuong also known as Le Mur. This new design was particularly for women. The designers used some of the new French or Western design influences, but what they designed was not Western. Instead it was a modern version of Viet Nam’s traditional clothing, what people today call the Ao Dai

the modern Ao Dai became very popular in parts of Vietnam after the end of French rule. The Ao Dai was most popular from 1960 to 1975. After 1975 Vietnamese women wore the Ao Dai less often. The Vietnamese economy was struggling and most people did not think the Ao Dai was necessary.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the Ao Dai experienced a new growth in popularity. In 1989 a Ho Chi Minh City newspaper began the first miss Ao Dai competition. 16,000 people attended the competition, but this was only the beginning of the Ao Dai new popularity. from Ho Chi Minh City miss Ao Dai competitions spread around the world to places like Long Beach California in the United States and the City of Toronto Canada. Today there are many countries that have large populations of Vietnamese immigrants. When these people moved out of Vietnam, they brought the Ao Dai with them

Originally each woman’s alley I was custom-made. Ao Dai makers sewed each Ao Dai using only a needle, thread and her hands. A woman visited her Ao Dai maker many times to make sure her Ao Dai fit perfectly. Today, factories have begun to produce Ao Dai in large numbers. These Ao Dai are sold in Vietnam and around the world. The export of the Ao Dai has influenced global clothing designers as far away as Paris, France and New York City

Unlike many forms of traditional clothing the Ao Dai is still worn by many Vietnamese women and wearing the Ao Dai has special meaning. Kimlai is a Vietnamese American writer. On her website she explained what the Ao Dai meant to her as a child.

I remember when I was a little girl. I would walk into my mom and dad’s room. Behind the door hung long pieces of fabric. I knew these beautiful pieces of material were going to be made into Ao Dais. I remember staring up at my mom when she wore her Ao Dai .I would think how beautiful she looked. I could not wait until I could have an Ao Dai for myself.

We asked Vietnamese spotlight listeners when Vietnamese women wear the Ao Dai.

Listener Cong Le explained: women usually wear the Ao Dai during official holiday celebrations Listener Trinh Hoang said: I think all women in Vietnam where the Ao Dai at least one time when they get married.  
And Nguyen Tran told us: when I studied in high school, I wore the Ao Dai six days each week.

In Vietnam, women wear many different colors of Ao Dai. Usually younger women wear light colors and older women wear darker or bolder colors.

Spotlight listener Tuan Anh Nguyen explained: Every different Ao Dai color and design shows the beauty and character of the person wearing it. For example students wear a white Ao Dai. This shows purity innocence and young beauty. A woman may wear a Ao Dai at her wedding when she marries. This shows graceful beauty .

The Ao Dai continues to be popular in Vietnam and people in Vietnam are proud to share the Ao Dai with people around the world as spotlight listener

Tuan Anh Nguyen writes: the Ao Dai is the pride of the nation it is the pride of every woman every time she puts it on.