

Lá thư *Việt-Kieu*
LA THƯ VIỆT-KIEU ENGLISH SUPPLEMENT I

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We take great pleasure in presenting in this issue of LA THƯ VIỆT-KIEU ('Vietnam Newsletter') our first supplement in English. Such supplements are to appear occasionally, for the benefit of those American friends who have expressed a deep interest in the cultural activities of Vietnamese in Washington, D. C. or elsewhere in the United States. From time to time various aspects of Vietnamese culture will also be highlighted in articles written by Vietnamese and American students.

Please address all contributions--double-spaced, typewritten--to

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Columbia Heights Station
Washington 10, D. C.

To: Our American Friends and Friends of Other Countries
From: The President, Vietnamese Association in Washington, D. C.

The Vietnamese Association in Washington, D. C. came into being in July 8, 1956, after three months of incessant discussions about its purposes, by-laws and the scope of its activities. It has the character of a friendly club.

The membership consists originally of Vietnamese residents, students, and Embassy staff members living in Washington, D. C. From the original meeting laying the first foundation of the Association in April 8, 1956 till now, the membership maintains the 50 mark which will soon extend to other parts of the U.S. where live the bulk of the Vietnamese students--about 200 now.

The Association meetings are held at the homes of members by rotation system, pending the selection of suitable headquarters capable to accommodate the increasing membership living scattered in the N. W., N. E. and S. E. sections of the nation's capital.

The whole purpose of the Association is to promote the friendly spirit and mutual cooperation among members whose active lives in business, government or school have perhaps blunted their friendliness by lack of frequent meetings and contacts. The Association purports to act like a forum or a meeting place where the members are free to come to exchange news, viewpoints on every subject, or simply to see each other. Through the Association, they realize that they belong to one country, speaking the same language, having the same history and the same old civilization, and they are but one people away from home.

The slogan "Uniting for Service" used in my introductory statement in LA THƯ VIỆT-KIEU takes the place of selfish interests and indifference. Our Association would like to help the Vietnamese student and visitor alike, whether they are freshly arrived in the U.S. or just old-timers. The Association purports to provide that "away-from-home" help.

Not only it brings about understanding and cooperation among the Vietnamese members, the Association wants also to make friends with the American people and people of other lands and cultures. We would like the American people and others to know about our country and its people, its culture, its great men, its civilization and its history. It can be done on a "people-to-people" or "group-to-group" basis.

The chief organ of the Association is the monthly newsletter published in Vietnamese giving news and information about Vietnamese students or visitors in the U.S., or other Vietnamese activities and accomplishments. So far LA THỦ VIỆT-KIEU has covered such big events as the 1956 Christmas Party celebrated in the Vietnamese tradition with a Vietnamese-clothed Santa Claus at Mr. and Mrs. Nguyen Duy Lien's home, the Tet Party at the Vietnamese Embassy, where H. E. The Ambassador of Vietnam announced the news of the draft resolution for the admission of Vietnam to the U. N., the giant Tet Party of the Association itself at the Y. M. C. A. in Washington, D. C., and various other meetings and gatherings.

With the intent of enlarging its scope, LA THỦ VIỆT-KIEU will publish, beginning with this issue, various articles dealing with Vietnam in English for its English-reading friends.

Working by standing committees (Advisory, Information, Student, Cultural, Sports), in the best democratic tradition, the Association purports to accomplish a greater quantity of business by dividing it among its members than would be possible if the whole body were to devote itself to each field of activity.

By bringing together its members in regular meetings or simply thru picnic or beach parties, the Association promotes solidarity and friendship among its members. There would be no more misunderstanding and suspicion when people live regularly under the same roof. By making them realize they belong to one big family, the Association inspires them to fully realize their capacity for patriotism. The Association is like a chunk of the dear old land on the other side of the antipodes.

The Association stresses on service above self. Who serves most enjoys best. Or, who serves best deserves most. That is the service beyond self which is important. By service and by group work, the members learn to like each other more and more, to feel like in a big family away from home, and thus, through the functional approach, to promote unity and solidarity through cooperation and mutual understanding.

Fraternally yours,

Trinh Van Chanh

Trịnh Văn Chán

COUNTRY LIFE IN VIETNAM

by Nguyễn Đinh Hòa

Traditionally the Vietnamese society is said to consist of four strata of people (tứ dân) listed in order of importance as follows: the mandarins and scholars (sĩ), the farmers (nông), the craftsmen (công), and the merchants (thしょう). Each claims that its members contribute a vital part to the existence of the Vietnamese society. A popular saying, however, seems to show that this order of ranking is not always true in real life:

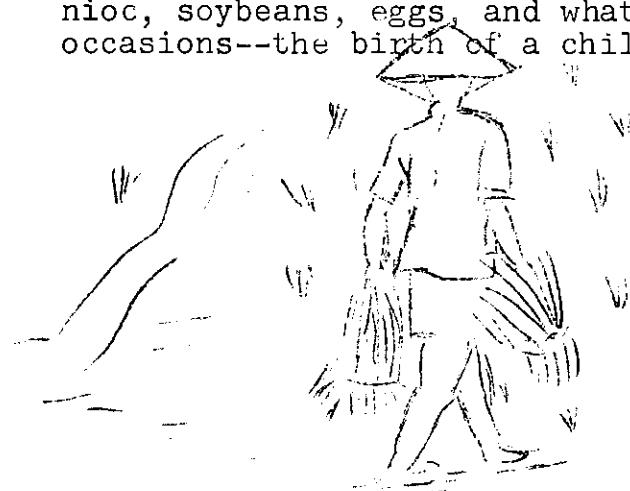
"Scholar ranks first, then comes the peasant;
But when rice runs out and you run wildly about,
Then peasant comes first, and scholar second."

(Nhất sĩ, nhì nông.

Hết gạo chạy rông: nhất nông, nhì sĩ.)

The truth of this saying becomes obvious when one realizes that Vietnam is a country with an agricultural economy and that the farming population constitutes roughly ninety per cent of the total.

Simple Diet Despite his pre-eminent role, the farmer in Vietnam leads a simple life. His diet consists of the staple food, rice, to which are added corn, sweet potatoes, taro, manioc, soybeans, eggs, and whatever fish is available. Only on special occasions--the birth of a child, the wedding of a daughter or the death of a parent--does the Vietnamese peasant kill a chicken, a duck or a pig. Although under such good pretexts, wealthy families may entertain lavishly for days, and many a fatted pig, cow and water buffalo be doomed to death, the farmer's daily meals are composed mostly of salted vegetables and salted fish. Meat, when it does appear, is considered a great treat, both for the guest and the host.



Besides tea, the national drink, some people take rice wine with their meals. Food is nearly always served on a round or rectangular tray made of wood or copper. Members of the family sit cross-legged around the food tray which is placed in the center of a low-legged bed. Each person uses a porcelain bowl and a pair of chopsticks. These are made of bamboo or wood, although well-to-do households are proud to display ebony or ivory chopsticks. Men, women and children partake of the meal at the same time, the mother or her daughter-in-law sitting nearest to the rice pot so as to be able to serve the others. Meat and vegetables, very often just boiled, are dipped in a fish sauce called nuoc mam. The same indispensable condiment is used in cooking, too. Before and after the meals women chew a quid of betel, and men smoke a hookah--a pipe so arranged that the smoke is cooled by passing through water--and drink cup after cup of tea.

Simple Dwellings In building his house the farmer is more concerned with practical needs than with beauty although ornate architecture coupled with magnificent landscape are sought by wealthy villagers. The farmer's dwelling is usually built of local materials such as bamboo, wood, straw and mud. Even bricks and tiles are baked out of the clay dug up from the rice fields. The walls and partitions are made of woven bamboo, over which is plastered soft mud. The roofs are usually covered with thatch or latania palm leaves.



In the main building, which has either three or five compartments, the ancestors' altar occupies the place of honor in the center area. Even in the poorest household there is an impressive display of candlesticks, incense burners, tapestries, scrolls, inscriptions, and a shrine containing the ancestral tablets. These bear the names of the omnipresent ancestors--up to the fourth generation--who witness all the happenings in the family.

Aside from the main living quarters, which are constructed in the shape of the Chinese character men ('gate') or an inverted block-U, and which are reserved for grandparents, parents and children, there may be separate quarters for servants and farmhands if the household is prosperous. But at least there are out-buildings to shelter water buffaloes, oxen, farm implement and grain reserves. At the back of the cow pen will be found a pigsty and a chicken house. Surrounding the buildings is the familiar wall of greenery--tufts of banana trees, areca palms rising above the gray thatched roofs, guava trees, mango trees, and the inevitable tall bamboo stems--screening the occupants from curious eyes.

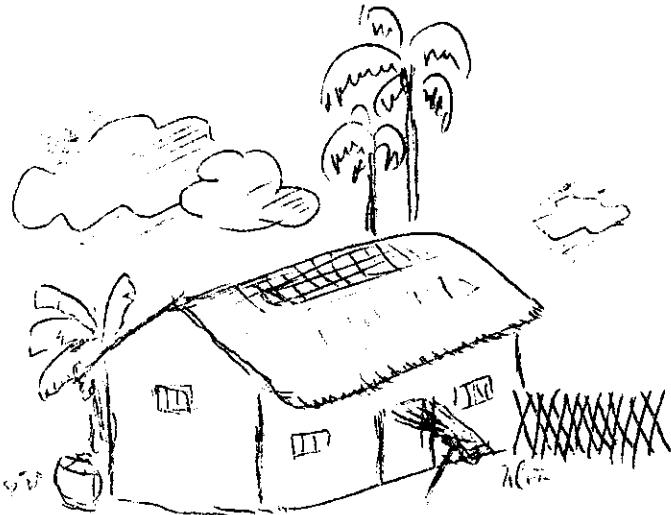
In the yard, by the kitchen, is frequently located a huge brick tank for storing rain water. At the back of each house there is very often a small vegetable garden and a little pond where children and adults bathe and wash their clothes and dishes.

Colorful Environment Other ponds and lakes, abounding in fish, are scattered within the village boundaries, and in front of the *dinh*--combination village temple and community center--it is not uncommon to see a lotus pond with beautiful, fragrant flowers and big, round leaves.

The village gate is always surmounted by watchtowers, a vestige of the old days when pirates and robbers infested the countryside and menaced the security of villages and hamlets. At the approach of strangers, dogs of every size and color, which people let run loose in the narrow village paths, start barking in unison. Woe to the intruder, for these canines are really ferocious--and bite, too.

Labyrinthine lanes, winding among hedges of bamboo and cactus, take the visitor past the schoolhouse, the Buddhist temple and the *dinh*. In the latter, housewives offer prayers and viands to the tutelary spirit--called *thanh hoang*--and ask for his good graces and protection against natural disasters. The tutelary god may be a celestial spirit or merely a common human who happened, a long time ago, to die an unnatural death. Amidst the quiet village the schoolhouse resounds to the voices of children reciting their primers, and from the curved-roofed temple come the monks' monotonous prayers, punctuated by the rhythmic beat of the wooden fish.

Right in the village there is possibly a market where are displayed uncovered loads of fresh vegetables, basketfuls of grain and peanuts, trayfuls of such commodities as fish, meat, salt, sugar, pepper, betel and tobacco. And if one goes riding in the Vietnamese countryside, one will see every five or six miles a roadside market place made up of a few dilapidated stalls. Unlike the village market, these trading posts are only opened at specified dates in the lunar month.



Inexpensive Clothing Clothing is not a large item in the Vietnamese farmer's budget. A suit consists of a pair of loose, low-crotch-ed trousers, a long-sleeved blouse buttoned in front and resembling a pajama top, and a long tunic buttoned on the right-hand side. The men usually wear a turban and a pair of sandals which look like slippers but have no counters. In everyday use the outer garment is omitted, and people who labor in the fields add a conical hat made of woven latania leaves to protect their heads against the hot tropical sun or the spring rain. Color schemes are not complicated--people merely dye their clothes in black or brown-- but to her mud-colored outfit a country belle may provide a gay contrast with her vermilion ~~and~~ sash and bright green sash. Materials are invariably cotton or hemp cloth, although winter clothes may have a layer of kapok quilted in between the fabric.

Some of the peasant women wear a full skirt instead of trousers. Shoes have little use when people have to work knee-deep in the leech-infested mud of the rice fields, or walk in the rain on the soaked, muddy ground. Very few country folks can afford them anyway.

Rare Entertainments Unlike his Western counterpart, the farmer in Vietnam knows no Sunday at all. Plowing, harrowing, sowing the precious seeds, transplanting the rice shoots, weeding, irrigating, then reaping--every operation is carried out by hand or with the most rudimentary tools, yet attended to with minute care, utmost patience, in joyful anticipation of the golden sheaves.

The workday begins at cockcrow. After a hasty but hearty breakfast

the peasant family works continuously in the fields until late in the afternoon. Around noon they stop to have a heavy lunch, to talk, to smoke, and maybe to take a nap under the shade of a banyan tree.

When evening comes and the peasants begin to return home, there exists no more peaceful sight than that of a young boy riding astride a huge buffalo, the beast walking slowly down the familiar homeward path after a full day's work. The child may lie down on the animal's back to look at the twilight sky, or play his bamboo flute, or watch the moon rise above the distant bamboos.

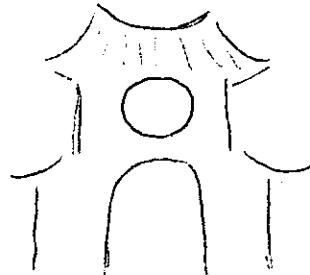
After dinner those lucky children who can go to elementary school may do their homework by the smoky castor-oil lamp. The others may still stay up to hear their grandparents tell them fabulous tales which have been handed down for generations. The story-telling and the conversation, filled with candid humor, continue while the women are busy grinding paddy in the polisher, or pounding the ground rice in the stone mortar.

Day in and day out, year in and year out, rain or shine, the Vietnamese farmer and his wife and children labor untiringly, unrelentingly. Entertainment is rare. An itinerant troupe may stop in the village to give a few performances in the *dinh*. Festivities with chess games, card games, buffalo fights and cock fights are reserved for the New Year--the *Têt*--at which time every penny saved by dint of hard labor throughout the year is spent on food, clothing and gambling.

Harvest time is feast time, too. The whole village is alive. Children run around with their mouths full of candies. All inhabitants in the village are busy winnowing and threshing the precious grain. Piglets and buffalo calves receive extra rations.

Hard Work A life of hard work, thrift and austerity is the common lot of the Vietnamese farmer. But despite the back-breaking toil, the Vietnamese peasant is happy and full of hope. Children work hard in school in anticipation of a rice cake, or a nice break during which they can shoot marbles at the foot of the red-blossomed kapok tree, or ride the water buffalo, or fly their kites in the summer breeze. Young men and women work hard in hopes that their parents will allow them to marry the ones they fell in love with during a song contest the previous month. Nature is sometimes merciless when she unleashes the river water against the dikes, thus destroying crops, livestock, homes and humans. But between two famines Vietnamese farmers are always happy and wish for the best.

Hopeful Life Even the old people, who have to stay indoors to weave baskets and hammocks and to tend babies, thus leaving the harder chores to their sons and daughters, symbolize the longanimity and endurance of the Vietnamese peasant, eternally overflowing with hope--hope in future generations, hope in the morrow, amidst delights of fields and gardens (*điên-viên*), ancestral rites, and age-old traditions of peace and harmony.



Read in the next issue

EDUCATION IN TRADITIONAL VIETNAM by Vũ Tam Ích

