



## ***Making Connections***

***May 2006***

### ***Women in Vietnam***

*“Who wants barley sugar? Who want to swap chicken feathers, duck feathers, for my nice barley sugar? Does anyone want to turn in...old cooking pots for my barley sugar?”*

*The street vendors cry rang out, echoing through the hamlets until it was lost in the rustle of bamboo. As she trudged past us, a straw hat hiding her face, I stared at her blackened, dusty feet.*

*“Mother, when you were little, was there always someone like this?”*

*“Mmh. She’s dead now. This one is her daughter.”*

*I was mesmerized by her huge splayed feet. They were scored with tiny cracks, encrusted with gray patches of dead skin. Decades before her, another woman, just like her, had crisscrossed the same village, plodded along with the same feet.*

*“Mother?”*

*I grabbed the hem of my mother’s dress, too frightened to speak. My mother bent down toward me: “Yes?”*

*“No, nothing,” I stammered. I didn’t dare ask her, if in another ten years, I would live her life, this life. The thought made me shiver. – Duong Thu Huong, *Paradise of the Blind* (1988)*

The story is told by Hang, the central character in one of Vietnam’s most celebrated novels. She is a young woman on a journey, recalling a journey she’d taken as a little girl to her mother’s home village. But it’s really the story of Vietnam’s women, their resilience and resourcefulness, their sacrifice and suffering; their hopes and fears. And it resonates with the stories heard and responded to by Xanh Lilly Pyle of Vietnamese Hope Foundation—the stories of the women of her home village, Dong Ha. The sugar seller reminds one of Tu, a widow who sells corn and sweet potatoes, or Hoa, who sells soup from her tin shack and hopes to build a real home one day. Hang’s mother is a hardworking, self-sacrificing market woman like Do, Tuc, and Thuy, who strive alone to support their children and elder family members. And perhaps something of Hang’s fear of being fated to repeat her mother’s sorrows helps to explain the determination of Oanh, a language student supported by Vietnamese Hope. If you haven’t already, please read about these women and see their pictures at [www.vietnamesehopefoundation.org/Projects.htm](http://www.vietnamesehopefoundation.org/Projects.htm). This month’s *Making Connections* will focus on several factors that shed light on their stories.

#### **FYI**

##### **Rural Women and *Doi Moi***

*Doi Moi*, or “the renovation” is the term used in Vietnam for the economic reform that began in 1986 when the government initiated policies favorable to private enterprise. On some levels, *doi moi* has been successful. The availability of consumer goods and luxury items in the cities signals the rise of some into the middle class and beyond. The poverty rate fell an astounding 20% over five years in the mid-nineties. Vietnam went from being an importer to a major exporter of agricultural goods such as rice and coffee.

But there are mixed results. Accompanying economic change has been an increase in the drug and sex trades and in urban poverty as thousands of people from the countryside come to the cities to seek work.

*Doi moi* has been much less advantageous to women in general and rural women in particular. Industry is displacing women's traditional marketing and crafts. Despite equal rights legislation, women make lower wages than men in the new factories. And the vast majority (94% according to official statistics) of those below the poverty line live in rural areas. Increasingly, those people are women with dependent children or elderly family members under their care.

Many of the women aided by VHF are widows or single mothers. Thirty-two percent of all Vietnamese households are headed by women and the rate is higher in rural areas. Women outnumber men, especially in the 35-64 age group. The new economy is skewing the balance even further in the countryside as many men head to the city for work. Some send money back. Others can't find steady employment. Some abandon their families.

That leaves the traditional ways in which rural people have made a living to women. Women have always been active in farming and marketing, but now they find they must work even harder. The production of rice, for example, used to involve stages traditionally assigned to men and women. Now, women must manage it all. Their workdays are longer—16-18 hours a day on average. They can hope to make around \$32 a day.

Eking out a living as a small farmer or produce seller gets more and more difficult for women. While Vietnamese property law isn't discriminatory, most rural families keep land titles in male family members' names. Many women don't even know that they can jointly hold a land title with their husbands. Thus when something happens to a man, his wife or female relatives are often left without any rights regarding their land or collateral for loans. Small farms can't compete with the large, western-style agribusinesses. Most women can't afford (or get a loan for) "green revolution" technology of hybridized seed, fertilizers, and pesticides. Even when they can (or when they work for large farm operations that have them), they often suffer from the negative effects of new technology such as increased health problems due to chemical exposure.

Policies tend to ignore the realities of rural women farmers. As one report states, they favor "cash crops over subsistence, export crops over self-sufficiency in food, cattle over small ruminants and poultry, raw materials production for factories over sustainable community...."

### **Violence and the Sex Trade**

One of the saddest stories told to Lillie Pyle is Bay's. Bay is a handicapped woman who was raped and subsequently gave birth to a daughter. Unable to work herself, her elderly mother now tries to support all three of them. Violence against women in many forms has increased with economic and cultural changes in Vietnam.

Prostitution is often assumed to be choice, but activists and scholars see it as a form of institutionalized violence against women. In Vietnam, women are used as incentives or "gifts" in business deals. While official policy prohibits it, some officials profit and procure from this unofficial commerce. Women and children are kidnapped and sold into prostitution in other countries. An estimated 20,000 Vietnamese prostitutes in Cambodia are under 18. Lilly wants to fence the schoolyard in Dong Ha and provide

daycare after school in part because the kidnapping and selling of children is a reality in Vietnam.

Prostitution has dramatically increased since *doi moi*, but prostitution is far from a new threat to Vietnamese women. In fact, perhaps the most famous Vietnamese story is “The Tale of Kieu,” a nineteenth-century saga about a virtuous young woman forced into prostitution after entering an arranged marriage. Scholar Kathleen Barry notes that the tale has been interpreted as an allegory of Vietnam in the hands of its multiple invaders, but it is all-too-literal for many women in Vietnam today. Girls are lured or sold into arranged marriages that promise a secure life in Taiwan or elsewhere. Too many find out too late that the “marriages” are fronts for sex slavery.

In the end, Kieu was redeemed and avenged. Because she remained “pure at heart,” she was esteemed and reunited with her family and beloved. That is not the likely outcome for most victims today. Their stories, however, often do have two aspects in common with Kieu’s. Kieu sold herself into the arranged marriage to ransom her father. Today, many women sacrifice themselves for their families or are sacrificed by families. And, many women share a sense of fatalism about their situations with Kieu. As she explained, women must “bow to circumstance.” Many women, even women who go “willingly” into prostitution, see no other choice when there are children to feed and educate. A domestic servant in Vietnam might make \$12 to \$20 a month; a third-class prostitute makes \$40-\$80. Lilly is trying to empower Dong Ha’s young women so that they won’t have to bow to such dire circumstances.

### **Women and Education**

Oanh is well on her way. She wrote to Lilly last Christmas, expressing her thanks and her hope. (See her letter on the VHF website). Her aspirations are high. For now, she hopes to pass the university entrance exam. Eventually, she wants to put her knowledge of languages to use in the tourism industry and to support herself and her family. Oanh hopes for a life that will be free from the struggles of the village women she has grown up around. But they too can benefit from learning about land and work rights and training for doing business in the new economy. Most essential, however, is basic education for girls. Oanh is a bright ray of hope on a dark horizon. Enrollment rates are lower for girls than boys at every level. Sadly, seventy percent of girls drop out of school.

### **The Sacrificial Woman and Vietnamese Culture**

Why so many female dropouts? Lack of financial resources is surely a main reason. Education is not free in Vietnam. In the rural economy (and urban to some extent), the family is the unit of production and child labor is often expected. These reasons combine with another potent factor in Vietnamese culture that may explain the dropout rate and many other things that hold women back: the influence of the Confucian worldview on law, custom, and attitudes.

Vietnam, according to some scholars, had a pre-history of matriarchy. We know that it has a long history of heroic women leaders and fierce warriors. The most revered are the Trung sisters, who led a rebellion against Chinese overlords in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. There were women mandarins (imperial officials) and professors and women were active small trade and agriculture as they are today. But in the middle ages, the influence of Confucian ethics and social teaching began to erode women’s status, and at the same time require them to meet impossible expectations of femininity and family obligation.

The Confucian worldview centers on a harmonious universe with a hierarchical and patriarchal order: ruler over people, elder over younger, and man over woman. Women should exhibit “the four virtues”: beautiful appearance, polite speech, polite behavior, and work. They must uphold “the three submissions” to their father (or brother), their husband, and their eldest son. Women labor in hierarchy among themselves in the domestic sphere. Married women must submit to their mothers-in-law.

Under the demands of filial piety, one’s debt to parents and ancestors can never be fully repaid. Women are primarily responsible for maintaining the family shrine at which ancestors are remembered and worshipped. At Tet, the New Year celebration in spring, the ancestors hold the family accountable for its comportment in the past year and women prepare an elaborate banquet to appease and honor them.

Bound up with the four virtues and three submissions, sacrifice and suffering are virtuous in themselves for women. The needs and desires of others should always come first and women should expect to suffer in their roles as housekeeper, wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. These are common threads that run through Vietnamese literature from “The Tale of Kieu” to the novels of Duong Thu Huong. They are woven into the stories of the women of Dong Ha. When Professor Kathleen Barry visited an overcrowded Vietnamese maternity ward where several women were in labor, she was struck by the silence. When she inquired, the doctor in charge told her that Vietnamese women “have learned to suffer in silence.... They have survived this way.”

Communist and socialist regimes promoted equal rights legislation for women but only “exchanged one form of patriarchy for another,” according to scholar Ashley Pettus. They took up the Confucian model of femininity, turning it toward duty, devotion and sacrifice on behalf of the State. Even in the age of *doi moi*, traditional Vietnamese family values are potent rhetorical tools for the State as it attempts to maintain national identity and control of the free market economy. Vietnamese media are full of visual and verbal images of “good” (sacrificing, domestic) and “bad” (greedy, independent) women. The conflicting message to women is one that tells them to become modern and yet remain submissive. As Pettus surmises, women are told “to enrich family but avoid excessive ambition; modernize your appearance, but remain modest; put domestic duties first, but continue to advance your ‘scientific knowledge.’”

Things are changing for women, and yet they are remaining the same. There are fewer extended family households in Vietnam these days and more that attempt to reinterpret the traditional values to accommodate progress for women. Girls may be taught the virtue of work primarily as achievement in school rather than domestic arts and beautiful appearance may be taught as an inner quality of self-confidence and goodness. What these young women may encounter once they grow up and marry, however, are mothers-in-law who interpret the virtues more traditionally and a society that expects everything and nothing from them at the same time.

Professor Pettus found that Vietnamese women she interviewed were keenly aware of the “lack of fit” between their lives and the models held up to them. This was especially true for the factory workers and merchants with whom she talked. These working women, often single-parents, do not fit the ideal Confucian model or the revised model of *doi moi*: they are too independent, too “unfeminine,” too focused on making a living and acquiring things for themselves and their children. Yet when asked, they relied on the old value system to defend themselves: they insisted that they too were self-

sacrificing mothers and victims of circumstance. Few could name the desire to be valued for who they are as individuals, yet this echoed in their complaints and in the humor and fantasy they used to cope with their circumstances. An editor of a women's publication did express this clearly as she spoke with Dr. Pettus: "My social self, that is not me... I am separate. I cannot show my real self... we are no more free in our private family lives than we are in the society.... In marriage we are simply acting out another kind of role... We must be wives and daughters-in-law and then mothers. We cannot be ourselves. In the family, we are never free."

To be free to be themselves, to fulfill their callings, to develop their talents *in* their families and *in* their country—these are far-away dreams of many Vietnamese women who struggle for the mundane necessities of living. Oahn's mother, the fictional Hang's mother, and so many other mothers struggle, sacrifice, and suffer because these are the only ways they have to keep the dream alive for their daughters. Lillie Pyle and others are trying to provide resources that lessen their suffering, complement their resilience, and better the chances that their daughters will not have to repeat the worst aspects of their mothers' lives. As Lillie understands it, creating opportunity for a bright future for Vietnam's daughters is a better way of honoring the ancestors.

### ***Recommended Book***

Duong Thu Huong has become an outspoken advocate for democratic reform and human rights in Vietnam. A former Communist party member who had led a youth brigade on the frontline of the Vietnam War, she became disillusioned with government and the increasing dehumanization of Vietnam's people after the War. *Paradise of the Blind* is the second of three novels she wrote in the eighties that express the plight of average people, and especially women, in contemporary Vietnam. Extremely popular, her books have been banned in Vietnam. She was arrested without trial and imprisoned for several months in the early nineties. Attempts have been made on her life and the government carefully monitors her movements. She lives in Hanoi with her children, where she continues to write novels and short stories to international acclaim.

In *Paradise of the Blind*, Hang tries to come to terms with the women of her past, her future, and Vietnam. It is a poignant story; the pain and injustice are almost palpable in Duong's beautiful prose. But so are the liveliness of Vietnamese village life and especially, the wonders of Vietnamese food. Duong Thu Huong, *Paradise of the Blind*. Phan Huy Duong and Nina McPherson, translators. New York: William Morrow, 1993 (includes an introduction and glossary).

### ***Shopping for Vietnam***

Both Ten Thousand Villages and Global Exchange carry a variety of items—from bamboo furniture to ceramics to handbags—made in Vietnam. Highly skilled artisans following patterns or practices centuries old make many of these items. See their websites (or visit a Ten Thousand Villages store):

<http://www.tenthousandvillages.com/catalog/search.php>

<http://www.gxonlinestore.org/all-vietnam-2.html>

### ***Dining with Women: The Food of Vietnam***

If you haven't experienced Vietnamese food before, you are in for a treat. It is truly a wonderful cuisine—generally light and without a heavy use of fats or thickened sauces, based on vegetables and rice products, often enlivened with heat from chilies, sweetness from caramelized sugar and freshness from herbs. Vietnamese dishes are

studies in contrast, often involving cold and hot ingredients, soft noodles, and peanuts (a new world import) for crunch. The influence of China can be found in the soups and stews of North Vietnam, the most famous being the beef and noodle *Pho*. South Vietnam enjoys tropical fruits and even more spiciness than other areas. The long occupation by the French left the Vietnamese with a taste for French pastries, bread, and “western bamboo shoots” (asparagus).

In all this variety, two ingredients are almost always present. *Nuoc mam* is a liquid seasoning that functions as the salt (or soy sauce) of Vietnam. It is made of fermented anchovies, most often processed by women. Before you quit reading, please remember that many cultures use fermented fish sauces to round out their dishes—ancient Rome for one, contemporary America for another (read the ingredient list on the Worcestershire Sauce bottle). *Nuoc mam* is pungent but when used in combination with other ingredients it helps to balance a dish and is almost undetectable.

The hot sauce made from it, *Nuoc cham*, (see below) is a staple. For many Vietnamese just *nuoc cham* and rice make up many of their meals. Rice products are the other common ingredients. Besides rice (jasmine rice generally, although “sticky rice” is also common in certain dishes), rice noodles in a variety of widths are prevalent. Rice noodles, and rice in general, are largely produced by women.

In Vietnam, the family gathers around a low table, each person with a bowl of rice, chopsticks and a spoon. A soup and other dishes of vegetables, fish, or meat that have been grilled or stir-fried are served at the same time. Everyone helps herself to the food, placing it on top of the rice and adding *nuoc cham* to taste. Tea is ever-present and drunk all day in Vietnam.

There are several websites on Vietnamese food. All the major food magazines and their websites offer many Vietnamese recipes. My current favorite Vietnamese dish (a salad with shrimp and squid) appears in the May issue of *Food and Wine* in a story about cooking in Vietnam. And highly recommended are two cookbooks written by Vietnamese women who now cook professionally in North America. Nicole Routhier’s *Foods of Vietnam* (Stewart, Tabori, and Chang, 1989) is perhaps the best introduction to Vietnamese cuisine and contains a wonderful overview (from which I’ve borrowed here) and tempting photos. Mai Pham’s, *Pleasures of the Vietnamese Table* (HarperCollins, 2001), offers not only recipes but also memories of her return to Vietnam to reconnect with family and country through food. It’s an excellent introduction to a people and their food.

And please, see the photos of women street vendors, farmers, and home cooking in Da Hong on the VHF website: <http://www.vietnamesehopefoundation.org/Life.htm>.

### **Goi Cuan** (Salad Rolls)

At your next DFW meeting, or for some family fun, set up a *Goi Cuan* bar (or table). Ask individuals to bring the various ingredients and have everyone make her own roll as the Vietnamese would. (They would more likely sit on the floor with all the ingredients in the middle, however.) This is a great introduction to Vietnamese food and perfect for May. It’s light and refreshing and uses many ingredients that are typical of Vietnamese cuisine including *banh trang*, *bun*, and *nuoc mam*. You’ll find these in some supermarkets or in Asian markets.

To set up a *Goi Cuan* table or bar, you’ll need (in this order):

### Foundations

Banh Trang (rice paper wrappers, 12” round), a couple for each person, plus some extras in case of breakage—they are delicate, but inexpensive (imagine the skill of the women who make these!)

A couple of bowls of hot water, wide enough to hold the 12” rounds; keep the water hot

A couple of soft cotton (lint free) tea towels

Fillings (think in terms of 3-4 pieces or tablespoons of each item per person to make two rolls each):

1. A Tray of Meats (cold or room temp)

Cooked (roasted, smoked, take-out works) pork, chicken, or beef in very thin strips.

Cooked, shelled shrimp, halved lengthwise

A shrimp and pork combination is most traditional

2. Bun (dried rice “vermicelli” pasta—there are several widths of this; you want the thin “angel’s hair” type), cooked until softened in boiling water (5 minutes or less), rinsed and drained well and cut into manageable lengths if very long. These will get somewhat sticky as they sit—that’s okay (the rinsing helps).

3. A Tray of “Salad” (some or all of the following, cold or cool room temp):

Shredded or grated carrot, cabbage, lettuce, and daikon

Bean Sprouts (raw or blanched for 5 seconds, refreshed under ice cold water, and drained)

Thinly sliced mango

Shredded fresh mint, basil, and cilantro, green onion, or chives

Some herbs, as well as carrot and lettuce, are most traditional.

### Accompaniments

Hoisin Sauce, thinned with just a little warm water, or Peanut Sauce (see below)

Nuoc Cham (absolutely must have; see below)

Procedure: It’s more efficient to set up two stations with the banh trang, water bowls, and towels, perhaps on either end of the table or bar, and one station for the other ingredients in the middle. Each person dips a rice paper wrapper in the warm water until it begins to be pliable (10 seconds or so), shakes off the water and lays it on the towel to dry and soften for a few seconds. Then, she proceeds to place the other ingredients. Leaving approx. 2” borders on the bottom and sides of the wrapper, she stacks a variety of ingredients on top of each other in a line at the bottom border along the width of the wrapper. Don’t overfill: a couple of shrimp and slices of meat, a large pinch each of a couple of vegetables and noodles, and a few pieces of herb or lettuce should do it. Fold the bottom edge over the filling while pressing to pack down the filling. Roll once and then fold in the sides. Continue rolling into a tight cylinder. Place on a plate and spoon some of the sauces on the plate. (Or, the sauces can be served in small bowls on the table.) Cut in half or eat whole, dipping the rolls in the sauces.

The rolls can be made a couple of hours ahead and covered with plastic, but that’s all work for one and less fun for all.

### **Peanut Sauce**

Adapted from Nina Simonds, *Asian Noodles* (Hearst Publications, 1996).

1/2 c hoisin sauce (found in Asian markets and many supermarkets)  
4 T smooth peanut butter  
1 T tomato paste  
2 t sugar  
2/3 c water  
2 t vegetable oil  
1 T minced garlic  
1-2 t crushed red pepper

Combine the first five ingredients. In a (preferably nonstick) pan, heat the oil and stir-fry the garlic and red pepper for a few seconds (don't let garlic brown). Stir in the mixture and cook 4-5 minutes. Serve warm or at room temp. Makes around 2 cups.

### **Nuoc Cham**

This is essential to the Vietnamese table and relies on *nuoc mam* (see above). Vietnamese use it as a sauce, salad dressing, or condiment on just about everything. Nuoc Cham and rice or rice noodles are the basis (if not the only ingredients) of most every Vietnamese meal. The exact "recipe" varies by cook, family, and region. Here's a basic version. If it's just too fishy, salty, sour, watery, etc. for you, feel free to adjust.

1 to 3 (!) hot peppers, sliced into thin rings (see note below)  
1-2 garlic cloves, smashed  
6 T sugar  
3 T fresh lime juice  
1/2 c nuoc mam  
1 c warm water

Mash the peppers, garlic, and sugar into a coarse paste with the back of a fork. (If you have a mortar and pestle, here's the place to use them.) Add the liquids and stir until the sugar is dissolved. Let it sit at least 10 minutes before tasting and adjusting. You can add any of the following: 1 T grated carrot, 1 T diced scallion, 1 T chopped peanuts, 1 t minced ginger, or more sliced hot peppers! Makes around 2 cups.

Note: Start with 1 pepper and add more if you dare. Thai bird chilies (very hot) are more authentic, but jalapeno or serrano work. Note that the heat of jalapenos, especially, can vary widely. To cut the heat, use fewer or remove the white membrane and seeds before slicing. Be sure to wear rubber gloves or rub your hands with lemon/lime juice and wash them well after working with chilies.

One more easy recipe, this one from the old imperial city and some-time capital, Hue, which is near Da Hong, Lilly's village:

### **Ga Bop (Hue Chicken Salad)**

Adapted from Mai Pham, *Pleasures of the Vietnamese Table*

Mai Pham says that a whole chicken is very special to the Vietnamese: "Symbolizing abundance and prosperity, it sits prominently on the ancestor worship altar" and is a favorite at Tet, the New Year holiday in which ancestors are especially revered. The original herb called for here is the Vietnamese coriander, *rau ram*. If you can't find it, cilantro and mint are good substitutes. This recipe is adapted from the directions given to Mai Pham by a Chi Hanh, a cook in Hue who is trying to preserve its traditional dishes.



Massaging the cooked chicken with the salt and sugar is very important according to “Sister” Hanh.

1 3lb chicken

1t freshly ground black pepper or more to taste

salt to taste

4 t sugar

5 T fresh lime juice

1 1/2c thinly sliced onion, soaked in cold water for 1/2 hour, drained and dried thoroughly

1-2 diced hot chilies to taste (Jalapeno works well, although the fiery Thai bird is more authentic. Start with half a pepper, de-seeded, and work up from there. Wear rubber gloves and/or wash hands thoroughly with lemon juice and then soap/water.)

2 c loosely packed Asian basil leaves (or half basil, half mint)

1 T vegetable oil

butterhead lettuce leaves (tender inner leaves)

Fill a large stockpot with water (around 5 quarts – the water must cover the chicken by at least an inch once it’s place inside the pot). Add enough salt to give the water a slightly salty taste (a tablespoon or so) and bring to a boil. Add the chicken, bring back to a boil and simmer for 10 minutes. Turn off the heat, cover the pot, and let it sit for an hour. The chicken should be done by then (if not, let it sit another 20 minutes). Remove the chicken, drain it well and let it cool.

Shred the meat into 1/4” strips by hand. Taste for and add salt (probably around 1t) and the sugar. Massage these gently into the chicken. Add the other ingredients (except the lettuce) and toss very gently (you don’t want to bruise and darken the herb leaves). Line a plate with the lettuce leaves and gently place the salad on top.

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