

RICE IN THE LIFE OF A VIETNAMESE

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SUMMARY

The relationship between rice production and Vietnam people was highlighted using the information from cultural and custom areas of the population. Rice is the staple food of the Vietnamese as demonstrated by the statistical data and Tuc Ngu, Ca Dao and Dan Ca (or proverbs and folksongs). Special festivals were also dedicated to rice.

Tuc Ngu, Ca Dao, Dan Ca and festivals were also cited to demonstrate the role of rice production in supporting the life of Vietnamese farmers, in building up and maintaining the society and in providing strength to the country and its people during the difficult times.

INTRODUCTION

Rice production is perhaps the brightest spot in the Vietnamese economy in recent years. It is successful even by world standard. There are many factors contributing to this success. Researchers claim that it was

good research. Government and policy makers claim that it was right policy. However, the key factor for the successful rice production may be the fact that rice is life for the Vietnamese.

A Vietnamese eats rice daily. Rice is also a source of wealth, especially for the farmer. Rice is not only a food crop, but also it is related to science art, customs and culture of Vietnamese. Rice and its cultivation and post cultivation activities have been widely described in Tuc Ngu (proverb), Ca Dao (folk song) and Dan Ca (folk songs). Also special festivals have been dedicated to rice and its production.

This paper attempts to present the role of rice in the life of the Vietnamese by examining the information from various aspects of Vietnamese culture and tradition. The culture and tradition of Vietnamese society are very rich. What is written here represents only a part of Vietnamese culture and tradition concerning rice and its cultivation. It would take more time and research to exhaust the rich heritage of the Vietnamese rice tradition.

RICE, THE DAILY FOOD OF VIETNAMESE

The Vietnamese are among the 3 billion people in the world today, who depend on rice for daily calories and protein. In 1996, on the average a Vietnamese consumed 245.5 kg of paddy as food in a year. The per capita rice consumption in Vietnam ranked third among the top ten rice-consuming countries in the world in 1996 (Table 1). If they could afford, Vietnamese would eat two or more meals of rice a day.

Table 1. Some characteristics of the top rice-consuming countries in 1996

| Country | Per caput rice | Population in 1996 | Gross domestic |
|---------|----------------|--------------------|----------------|
|---------|----------------|--------------------|----------------|

| | consumption in 1996 (kg/year) ^a | ('000) ^b | product in 1995 (US\$/caput) ^c |
|---------------|---|---------------------|--|
| Myanmar | 320.4 | 45 922 | 2 399 |
| Laos | 265.2 | 5 035 | 359 |
| Viet Nam | 245.5 | 75 181 | 270 |
| Cambodia | 238.3 | 10 273 | 130 |
| Bangladesh | 232.7 | 120 073 | 280 |
| Indonesia | 219.5 | 200 453 | 1 019 |
| Guinea-Bissau | 171.4 | 1 091 | 131 |
| Thailand | 166.2 | 58 703 | 2 896 |
| Suriname | 155.1 | 432 | 967 |
| Philippines | 143.8 | 69 282 | 1 093 |
| Nepal | 142.6 | 22 021 | 203 |
| Madagascar | 142.1 | 15 353 | 215 |
| Korea Rep. | 140.9 | 45 314 | 9 736 |
| China | 138.5 | 1 232 083 | 582 |
| Sri Lanka | 134.1 | 18 100 | 716 |
| Korea DPR | 130.5 | 22 466 | 271 |
| Sierra Leone | 129.2 | 4 297 | 293 |
| Malaysia | 127.5 | 20 581 | 4 313 |
| Guyana | 119.1 | 838 | 726 |
| India | 118.1 | 944 580 | 365 |
| Gambia | 115.7 | 1 141 | 321 |
| Mauritius | 113.6 | 1 129 | 3 580 |
| Guinea | 111.0 | 7 518 | 442 |
| Senegal | 108.7 | 8 532 | 572 |
| Macau | 106.6 | 440 | |
| Comoros | 104.0 | 632 | 367 |
| Cape Verde | 103.7 | 396 | 994 |
| TOTAL | | 2 931 866 | |

^a FAO, 1999a; ^b FAO, 1999b; ^c UN

In 1996, rice provided more than 60% of the daily requirement for calories and protein of a Vietnamese. If

he could afford, a Vietnamese would eat two or more meals of rice a day.

*Ngay hai bua com no
Doi vui nhu the do*

Two rice meals a day
That is my happiness

Therefore, a grain of paddy is a grain of gold or "*Hat lua, hat vang*" (Tuc Ngu Vietnam). *Lua* is rough rice or paddy, *gao* is milled rice and *com* is cooked rice in Vietnamese. The paddy grains are so precious not only because they are food, but also because they are very hard to produce. Farmers have to spend days under scorching sun or heavy rains to prepare land, to transplant, to weed, to fertilize and to water rice fields. In early times, rice production was done mostly under rainfed conditions. Yields, therefore, were usually low, regardless of the hardship and the sacrifices of the farmers.

*Cay dong vao buoi ban trua
Mo hoi thanh thot nhu mua ruong cay
Ai oi bung bat com day
Deo thom mot hot dang cay tram phan*

Plowing the field at noon
Sweats drop to the field as raindrops
Who hold a full bowl of rice?
Remember that each of the tasty grain contains
hundreds of pains and hardships.

With a full understanding of the difficulties of rice farming, the Vietnam people pay high respect and importance to farmers. They rank rice farming among the highest professions in the society.

Nhat si, nhi nong

Het gao chay rong
Nhat nong, nhi si

First are scholars, second are farmers
No rice, you have to search
Therefore, first are farmers; second are
scholars

There were many popular stories such as "Banh Chung, Banh Day", "Tam Cam", "Thang Bom" and others; in which rice and its by products were used and/or described. Below is the story of Mr. Bom (Dan Ca Vietnam), which was very popular during the early 1950s.

Thang Bom co cai quat mo
Phu Ong xin doi ba bo chin trau
Bom rang Bom chang lay trau
Phu Ong xin doi chin xau ca me
Bom rang, Bom chang lay me
Phu Ong xin doi ba be go lim
Bom rang Bom chang lay lim
Phu Ong xin doi con chim cu moi
Bom rang Bom chang lay moi
Phu Ong xin doi nam xoi,
Bom cuoi

Mr. Bom has a special fan
The rich man proposed to exchange with a troop of nine
cattle
Bom said, No I am not interested in cattle
The rich man proposed nine chains of "ca me" (a sea
fish)
Bom said, No I am not interested in "ca me"
How about three trunks of precious wood, proposed the
rich man
No, neither am I interested in wood, Bom said
How about the excellent fighting pigeon? Proposed the
rich man

Oh, no! I am not interested in fighting pigeon
How about a hand of glutinous rice, the rich man said
Oh yes sure, Bom smiles

Rice is a staple food and it is a fortune to have adequate amount of it. Vietnam people, therefore, celebrate the **Com Moi** festival. It takes place sometime in November or during the harvest of the monsoon crop. After harvesting rice crops, the farmers mill some paddy, cook the newly milled rice and offer it to God, to their ancestors, or to any one, who had helped to make the crop successful. Today, the **Com Moi** festival includes gift giving to allow the people more ways to show their respect and appreciation. Children give gifts to parents, students give gift to teachers, recovered patients give gifts to doctors for successful treatment, and others (Toan Anh, 1997).

Rice is appreciated not only by the common people, but also by the rulers. The Hung's kings built a complex of temples in Phong Chau, Vinh Phuc (sometime called Vinh Phu), consisting of the Lower Temple, the Central Temple, the Upper Temple, the Mausoleum of Hung kings and the Water Temple. The Upper Temple was for exclusive use of the kings for offerings to the Sun God, the Earth God, and **the Rice God** (Anonymous, 1997).

RICE, MEANS FOR SUPPORTING LIFE

Food is important in providing energy and protein and to the body. However, food is only a part of one's life. Life requires clothes and shelters. Also, to live in a society, one has to pay taxes, duties and to spend for education and other social obligations. In the early times, education may not be a very important expense to the majority of Vietnamese as shelter, clothes, taxes, duties and social obligations.

Vietnam's economy has been dominated by the agricultural sector. Agriculture provides employment and incomes for the majority of Vietnamese. In the rural areas, there are limited employment opportunities. Rice production is often the main source of incomes for majority of rural population. Farmers depend on rice production to provide food and money to cover other expenses. Therefore, people are happy and society is peaceful when rice crops are good.

*Nho troi mua gio thuan hoa
Nao cay nao cay, tre gia dua nhau
Chim, ga, ca, lon, canh cau,
Mua nao, thuc ay giu mau nha que*

Thank to God, the season was good
People, young and old, plowing,
transplanting
Birds, chicken, fish, pig, and vegetable soup
Each season, each special food, to maintain
the village

A good harvest provides farmers' families with means to raise livestock, and with money to pay taxes and duties.

*Nho troi mot mau, nam nong thoc day
Nam nong day, em xay, em gia
Trau u phan, cam ba nuoi heo
Sang nam lua tot tien nhieu
Em dong dong thue, dong suu cho chong*

Thank to God, a "mau" produced five nong
of paddy
Five "nong" of paddy, I mill, I polish
Husks mix with manure; bran feeds the pigs
Next year, rice crop will be good, more
money

I measure the paddy to pay tax, to pay duties
for my husband

Mau is a unit of land area; one mau = 3,600 sq meter in north
and about 5,000 sq meters in south Vietnam. Nong is a unit of
storage

People suffer a lot when rice crops failed. They
can not find means to meet the household expenses, to
pay tax and other expenses of life. Many people get
hungry and go into debt due to the failure of rice crops.

*Bay gio gap phai hoi nay
Khi troi han han, khi nay mua dam
Khi troi gio bao am am
Dong dien lua thoc muoi phan duoc ba
Lay gi dang nap nua ma
Lay gi cong viec nuoc nha cho dang?*

Now with this difficult time
Today it is drought; tomorrow it is continuous rains
Another day, there are storms
Rice yield is only a third of that in the normal year
What could I use to pay tax and duty?
What could I use to pay for other expenses?

The failure of rice production in 1945 caused
about 2 million deaths. A bountiful rice crop, therefore, is
a source of happiness for Vietnamese farmers. They
would be very happy and more generous.

*Ngay mua lua tot tuoi.
Chim oi lu chim troi.
Quay ve day, cung ta vui voi*

The rice crop is healthy.
Oh the birds of the universe.
Come here, to share my happiness.

RICE FARMING AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Good rice harvest is the wish of many Vietnamese families. Rice cultivation is hard and difficult. Member of farmers' family must work hard, must work together. In doing so they stay close together and understand each other better. Land preparation is the heaviest work in rice production and is usually done by men. The women, however, participate in land preparation by reminding and encouraging their husband to do the task:

*Mat troi tang tang rang dong
Chang oi! tro day ra dong keo trua
Phan hen bao quan nang mua
Cay sau bua ky, duoc mua co khi*

The sun is rising

Dear! Wake up; go to work if not it will be late

We are poor, please do not be afraid of rain or sun

Plough deep, harrow carefully, we may have a good harvest

Although the total farm area cultivated by a Vietnamese farmer is small, his farm may consist of several pieces at different places. Some may be at high elevation; other may be at low-lying area. The fields at low-lying areas (lower fields) normally have water earlier than those at higher elevation (upper fields). Land preparation in the lower fields can be done earlier and by the time there is enough water for land preparation in the upper fields, the lower fields are ready for transplanting. In this case the man is doing land preparation, while his wife is doing transplanting at the same time.

*Tren dong can,
Duoi dong sau,
Chong cay, vo cay
Con trau di bua*

In the upper field,

In the lower field,
Husband plowing, wife transplanting
The buffalo harrowing

Although the work is hard and difficult, members
of a farmer' family are happy that they are together.

*Ai ai cung vo cung chong
Chong cay, vo cay, trong long vui thay*

Every family, husband and wife together
Husband plowing, wife transplanting, it is so happy

Drought is a major cause of low rice yield. The effect of drought stress on rice yield is devastating, if it occurs during the reproductive to flowering stages. Severe drought during this period may result in total crop failure. Seeing the rice plants suffer from drought at booting stage makes the farmers feel that their throats are choked. They mobilize their strength and work hard to save the crop.

*Nang chieu, lua nhen, anh oi
Ta lay suc nguoi chong lai thien tai
Cac anh tat mot gau dai
Chung em hai dua tat hai gau song
Ngay dem dan nuoc vao dong
Lua ta lai tot, thi long lai vui*

The panicles are choking in the evening sunshine, my
dear!

Let us use our strength to fight the disaster

You men use a “gau dai”¹

We women will use “gau song”²

Let us water the rice fields days and nights

The rice crop become healthy, our heart feels happy

¹gau dai and gau song are tools used for lifting water from
lower to higher points

Rice cultivation and post cultivation activities provide occasions for young men and women to meet, to know each other and eventually to marry. Through the performance of rice crops, young men would evaluate their future wives and vice versa.

*Ruong nha em lua xanh xanh ngat
Ruong nha anh lua ngat ngan bong
Lua xanh dep xom, dep dong
Nen ta som hop thanh doi vo chong*

In the field of my family, rice crop is healthily green
In the field of your family, rice crop bears thousand panicles
The green rice plants make the field, the hamlet beautiful
Therefore, we become husband and wife early

Young ladies in rural areas, therefore, attach importance to rice farming activities, as they want to convince young men about their virtue.

*Nguoi ta ruou som tra trua
Em nay di nang ve mua da nhieu
Lay troi mua thuan gio deu
Cho dong lua tot cho vua long anh
Long em da quyet thi hanh
Di cay di gat voi anh mot mua*

Others enjoy wine in the morning, tea at noon
But I left home when it was sunshine and return when it rains
I pray that the weather is good
So that the crop is healthy, so that you are happy
I decided, I will do
From plowing to harvesting with you one whole crop

Before a man and a woman had to enter the engagement a few years before marriage. During the engagement, the man usually tries his best to please the parents of the lady. Contributing to the raising the rice crops of the lady's family is the best way for the man to win the heart of her parents. However, such work may be very tiring.

*Cong anh lam re da hai nam rong
Nha em lam ruong, lam dong
Bat anh tat nuoc cuc long anh thay
Thang chin mua bui gio bay
Cat lay gau nuoc, hai tay rung roi*

I have been performing as son in law for almost two years
Your family has so many rice fields
I have to water them, it is so hard
October, there are light rains and winds
Keep the water can aside, my arms are so tired

After harvest, women would do the drying, cleaning, milling and polishing. In the early days, the polishing of rice grains after milling was done with pestles and mortars. In Vietnam, the polishing of rice with pestles and mortars is called "gia gao". "Gia gao" provides chances for young men to make acquaintance with young women and vice versa. During the "gia gao", people would sing. "Ho gia gao" are popular folk songs in many rural areas of Vietnam. Singing would be more romantic and enjoyable if there are more people, especially with the presence of both sexes. Therefore, young ladies would invite passing young men to join them in "gia gao".

*Dem trang trong, tieng chay quanh
Co tieng ca theo tieng ho thanh thanh
Vo day anh
Dung so truoi khuya khong co ai dua anh ve*

In the night with clear moon, the pounding of rice
takes place
With song after song
Come, my dear
Do not fear that no one takes you back home

Once young men accepted to join them, young
ladies would tease them

Den day chang nhung ngoi khong
Nho chang gia gao, cho dong tieng ho
You are here, do not just sit
Please join us and participate in our singing

Young men would challenge young ladies,
especially in the knowledge about rice cultivation.

Do ai biet lua may cay?

Biet song may khuc, biet may may tang?

Do you know how many plants are there in a rice
field?

How many turns does a river have, how many folds does
cloud have

To propose marriage to young ladies during
sessions of “gia gao”, young men would sing:

Nang ve gia gao ba trang
De anh ganh nuoc Cao Bang ve ngam
Nuoc Cao Bang ngam thi trang gao
Anh biet em co lieu duoc chang
Tran tran Cuoi ngu cung trang
Biet rang cha me vua long hay khong?

If you “gia gao” three moons
I will fetch the water from Cao Bang¹ to soak it
Rice will be white if soaked with water from Cao Bang
Let me know, if you would agree
As bare as Mr. Cuoi² sleeping with the Moon
Let me know, please, if your parent would accept?

¹ Cao Bang is in the mountainous region in the north, indicating
that he is willing to do hard work

² Vietnamese call the image in the Moon, Mt. Cuoi

Rice is life. A Vietnamese, therefore, always show gratitude not only to God, to ancestors, to people, but also to animals and tools used in rice cultivation and post cultivation activities. Land preparation is difficult and requires important energy and force. Buffaloes are used in land preparation in the early days. Farmers, therefore, treated the buffaloes as their companions and friends

*Trau oi ta bao trau nay
Trau ra ngoai ruong, trau cay voi ta
Cay cay von nghiep nong gia,
Ta day trau day, ai ma quan cong*

Dear buffalo, I tell you
Let us go to the field, you and I would plow
Plowing, transplanting are the jobs of farmers
You and I together, no one should wait for the other

The farmers' appreciation to the tools used in rice farming is expressed in the following Ca Dao:

*Gia on cai coi cai chay
Nua dem ga gay, co may co tao*

I thank you, the mortars the pestles
You and me are always together, "gia gao" late into night

RICE, THE COUNTRY' S STRENGTH

Rice cultivation is a national strength. It provides wealth and stability to the country. Vietnamese Governments during the early history of the country have

organized Tich Dien and Thuong Dien festivals to dedicate to rice cultivation (Toan Anh, 1997).

Tich Dien (or Land Opening) Festival is celebrated during the beginning of spring. Special fields were selected for the celebration of Tich Dien in the capital and each province, district, and village of the country. Selected farmers were assigned to take care of the crops in these fields. In the capital, during the festival, the king, his relative and ministers do the plowing, seeding or transplanting. At village level, the Tich Dien festival was less elaborate but more enjoyable. Normally it included the transplanting of rice. Senior farmers were selected for the transplanting of rice. When these farmers transplanted the rice crop, on-lookers would throw water and mud to them, mocking, and singing songs or folklore. The farmers who transplanted rice do not get mad but enjoyed the jokes by throwing back other jokes and songs to on-lookers and happily completed their work (Toan Anh, 1997).

According to folk-lore, Le Dai Hanh King found at one time a vase of gold and at another time a vase of silver when he plows the field during Tich Dien Festival (Toan Anh, 1997). The Tich Dien festival continued during the Ly and Tran's dynasties. During the Tran, due to the war with the Mongolia, the celebration was less elaborated and this was continued during the post Le and the early Nguyen dynasties. The festival's activities during these dynasties were simple. During his reign, Ming Mang king, the second king of the Nguyen's dynasty, reinvigorated the festival activities. Minh Mang established an office, called Tich Dien, with officers responsible for the organization of the festival. In the capital, Tich Dien office is located at Yen Trach village, Thua Thien province where infrastructures were built for the keeping of equipment, tools and materials needed for the celebration of Tich Dien Festival.

Thuong Dien (or harvesting) Festival was celebrated during the harvest of the rice crops. During the Nguyen's dynasty, in the capital the Governor of Thua Thien led the festival. In provinces, districts and villages, it was presided by the head of local units concerned. Other activities were also carried out to make the day more colorful and lively.

The “lang” or village is the basic administrative unit in Vietnam. Lang is also a key structure of Vietnamese society. Many Vietnamese associate themselves more with lang than with provinces or country. During peace times, rice cultivation and post cultivation activities constitute the daily life in lang. Good rice crops make lang beautiful.

*Lang toi phong canh huu tinh
Dan cu dong duc nhu hinh con long,
Nho troi ha ke sang dong,
Lam nghe cay cay vun trong tot toi
Vu nam cho den vu muoi
Trong lang ke gai, nguoi trai dua nghe
Troj ra, gang; troj lan, ve
Ngay ngay, thang thang, nghiep nghe
truan chuyen*

My Lang is so beautiful and romantic
The population crowd form the shape of the dragon
Thank God, from summer to winter
The weather is good for crop cultivation
The “thang nam”¹crop, the “thang muoi”¹crop
Young ladies, young men compete in cultivation
From early morning, they try hard and return home only
at sunset
Days, months, they try to improve their performance.

¹thang nam crop is spring crop, thang muoi crop is the main crop

However, Vietnam has experienced foreign occupation several times in its long history. During such periods, rice cultivation served as the source of strength of the resistant forces. Farmers, soldiers and the whole population would feel confident when seeing healthy and productive rice crops.

*Lua chin vang hoe, giac mat hon
An khong ngon, ngu khong yen*

Seeing the golden rice crop, the enemy loses its courage
Food tasted bad, sleep is disturbed

During the war times, men would become soldiers. They have to leave the villages and leave behind rice farming activities to their wives. They often worry, knowing the hardship of rice cultivation. Women, however, were equal to their husbands. They would work hard to assure their husbands in the battlefields, so that they could devote full time to fighting.

*Dong ta truoc bua anh di
Dat chua cay ai, ma thi chua gieo
Bay gio ruong da kin beo
Lua xanh mot dai luon theo nui doi
Mong anh giu vung bien troi
Que nha da co em roi, dung lo*

When you left
Our field was not plowed; the nursery was not seeded
Now the fields are filled up with rice crops
The green rice plants form a blanket, reaching up to the
mountain
Please do not worry, but keep the country safe
At home, I could manage every thing

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