

VAN PHUC SILK

HA CHAU

Van Phuc is a small village by the Nhue River in Ha Tay province formerly known as Ha Dong. The village has 1,200 households with more than 5,000 people, which 60% work as silk weavers. It is said that silk weaving has existed in Ha Dong since the 13th century.

Silk weaving areas in Ha Dong have been formed to separate the handicraft industry from the agriculture in each village. According to the elderly in Van Phuc village the number of weavers in the region once reached between 4,000-5,000. Each village is independent turning out products with their own production process. Using the same silk materials and the same type of looms, these villages produced different types of silk products. The exchange of professional experience stays mainly between the key weavers of each village. The relationship between skillful weavers in each village is closely knit and they keep the professional secret of their village. This has gradually formed the identities of each village's products. The more skillful the weavers of the village are, the more diverse patterns their products will have and the more famous they will be with their own identities. Van Phuc village is well known for its *gam* (brocade) and *van* (silk cloth with woven design). La Khe village is famous for *the hoa* (flowery gauze) and La Ca village is known for *the tron* (plain gauze) ... Thanks to the weaving secrets of each village; silk products of Ha Dong are diverse. Ha Dong silk was once the symbol of Vietnam's silk.

The professional skills of village weavers are shown through their products sold in the markets. The market place is where all types of products are sold, meeting the local demand. Sellers and buyers represent the function of the market. To the silk

weavers, it is also the place where they can exchange experience and learn new weaving techniques from each other. The market is an important factor for the silk weaving region as it contributes to promoting the development of each weaving village. Cau Do market in Ha Dong is where all types of silk and silk products are found. It is where weavers sell their products and buy materials. At first, the market was open once every five days, but later on when silk weaving began to thrive people began to go to the market every day to sell their products and buy raw silk materials. Cau Do market has become the centre for silk products and raw materials for the whole region and even the whole country.

In the traditional silk weaving region of Ha Dong, there has been a spontaneous division of labour and specialization between the villages. Besides specializing in silk weaving, there are villages specializing in textile weaving and *the* (gauze) weaving. Hence the following verse:

Gauze from La, silk from Van, and textile from Canh

Let go and sell them quickly to the buyers of taste.

This old verse gives us a picture of the weaver's village including Van Phuc village. It is easy to identify the different silk products of Van Phuc village. *Van* and *gam* are the two typical higher valued products of the whole silk weaving region. *Van* is a type of silk cloth with a woven design - very soft, glossy and lasting. It is ivory, white or yellow in color. With higher levels of technique, weavers from Van Phuc village can turn out *van* in colors of peach, myrtle flower, green and dark purple ... The most beautiful are *van* products in the natural cocoon color. The talent of Van Phuc weavers is seen in the creativity of patterns and designs of their products. There can be flowers

against flowery background and the background may even consist of a system of patterns with very delicate techniques and against that is another layer of flowers with typical patterns. Therefore the patterns and flowers form paintings of different motifs:

- Rose butterfly, chrysanthemum butterfly.
- Crane in clouds, the four seasons.
- Longevity characters, Longevity character in the shape of the phoenix, longevity character in the shape of the bat.
- A school of fish watching the moon etc.

To make this type of *van*, there needs to be flowery weaving looms. From simple hand looms to flowery weaving looms, there has been a great effort in technical innovation by different generations of talented weavers who have turned out products of high artistic value.

Van is a type of thin silk while *gam* is thick and has different characteristics. *Gam* *nhat is the* pride of Van Phuc village. The typical character of *gam* *is its shining color*. Its main colors are: blue, red, white, violet and yellow with different degrees of light and dark. It also can be very glossy, smooth and shining. Van Phuc has created marvelous silk paintings, the work of creative and sensitive brains and skillful hands of many generations of weavers. It has taken many generations along time experimenting the combination of silk dyeing and weaving from flowery looms to reach such a high level of art. Van Phuc's *Van* and *gam* are the peak in Ha Dong silk products. When looking at these two types of products, it is easy for people to recognize immediately that they are from Van Phuc village. This is the labour, the talent and the state of art of master weavers of that village.

The silk weaving tradition of Van Phuc village has been intergraded into the international markets. Van Phuc's silk is lasting and crease-resistant.

From the first shipment to East European markets, Van Phuc's silk products have been much sought after by customers. Compared to previous silk products, crease-resistant silk is a great step in progress of Van Phuc's products.

Crease-resistant pure silk is a high quality product. It is durable whether it is thick or thin. For *silk mixture*, the production cost is lower but it remains durable and crease-resistant. Van Phuc silk mixture is unique. The mixture is as follows:

- Pure silk thread vertically and glossy silk threads horizontally, producing a silk mixture thinner and glossier than pure silk products.

- Pure silk threads vertical and flax threads horizontal direction, producing a thick silk mixture but still subtle. Although its quality is not as good as pure silk shantung, it is suitable for making overcoats.

- Pure silk threads on vertical and *ship* threads on horizontal direction, creating a medium-thick silk mixture, ensuring its durability but low in cost production, thus meeting the demand of low-income customers.

By improving the durability and crease-resistance of all these products, Van Phuc's skillful weavers have created a new quality for their traditional products, with each having its own advantages. Customers can select different silk materials for their different types of clothing and their tastes- *van* is used for long dresses, pure silk for blouses and shirts, and thick for overcoats.

Beauty is second to quality. Van Phuc's silk has its own beauty, whether traditional or improved patterns.

Van was a special product of Van Phuc village. Today *van* is still being improved, with different types of rich flowers' patterns and non-fading colours. In the past artisans expressed their souls in the beautiful images of their products. Following

the path of their forefathers, weavers, grasped the key features along with creativity to make their own products from traditional patterns and designs of bamboo, seal characters of longevity, peacock tails, chrysanemum etc. thus satisfying the taste of customers today. Industriosly collecting and learning ancient patterns and designs and creating new ones suitable to the present day life is the new feature of weavers. This makes Van Phuc's silk more attractive to customers who prefer buying harmoniously colorful silk products of this silk weaving land.

Important improvements have been seen since silk products were first exported to East European countries and now are being further promoted.

The improvement of flower patterns and designs shows the artisan's new creativity, meeting the variety of demands of customers. Some ancient flower patterns and designs are still maintained such as: *Que hong diep*, four seasons and seal characters of longevity. The improved patterns are popular such as: bamboo-apricot-longevity - happiness, chrysanthemum, peacock tail, tulip. Since improving the flower patterns, many families consulted the imported silk products, and learnt the best patterns to produce for their new silk items. Those who have relatives and friends living in Ho Chi Minh City specializing in importing flower patterns have helped each family to turn out their own patterns. It takes only a week to copy a new flower pattern. Some villagers from Van Phuc who have migrated to southern provinces since 1945, still follow today silk weaving and are in regular contact with their native villages, thus creating exchanges between people from Ha Dong and those in the South in general and Ho Chi Minh City in particular.

Attention should be paid to Van Phuc's ancient flower patterns and designs. It is important to stress the significance of those ancient patterns. Ancient

people did not create them carelessly. Each flower pattern showed their dream, a symbol or an image of their conception of life. The importance is to find out the significant meaning of each ancient pattern for learning and developing new patterns. Van Phuc's artisans today are working with all their hearts and minds to create new patterns. The new and improved patterns continue the ancient artisan's dream: bamboo-apricot-longevity is harmonious with nature for a long and happy life. Chrysanthemum – longevity means a peaceful, safe and long life. The peacock tail expresses splendid and noble beauty. Tulip is a new type of flower imported for foreign pattern.

The quality of Van Phuc silk colours is shown by not fading when washing and the lasting colour. Our ancestors dyed the silk with plant varieties. Today it is dyed with chemical substances. The colour of Van Phuc's *van* silk was mild, today it retains this tendency. Thanks to glossy, mild coloured silk threads, the silk is still splendid. The cyanthe and peach colours were much sought after in the past. Today, they are no longer typical of Van Phuc's silk as there are many more colours available.

Dyeing technique: Traditional dyeing techniques are still maintained. About 30 families are engaged in dyeing, but Mr. Thanh's family is more successful. His family dyes threads for export and also silk yarns for many other weaving families in the village. His dyeing techniques have reached a very high level. From the seven basic colours, he can turn them into hundreds of colours varying from light to dark, contributing to diverse silk products of Van Phuc.

From childhood, Van Phuc villagers have lived in the atmosphere of weaving and had natural access to high quality products of the weaving village and been part of the family's production line. Each family member is in charge of a stage of

the silk weaving process. The work of one member directly affects that of another. Work discipline is closely linked to the family's lifestyle in which members are closely bound together and responsible for each other. This is greatly sensitive in *gam* silk producers' families. The working and lifestyle, in which each member is devoted creates high-quality products. This contributes to an advanced cultural life of the traditional weaving village of Van Phuc.

Each household is a production unit that undertakes the whole weaving process from production to marketing products. The productivity of each household depends on the number of work hands - both adult and children. The quality of the products depends first of all on the key skills of work hands. The key workers are the core in technical innovations and improvements. The family being the production unit; is responsible for preserving and handing down the weaving profession. There is a labour distribution in each family: the master weavers operate the looms while other work such as bleaching silk, crisscrossing threads, spindling etc. is done by assistant weavers. Children have their own work to do. At a very young age, they know how to crisscross threads and to spindle. The living style of the family depends on - *silk weaving*. When the work demand is great, the family changes the time of their meals and their way of eating. For example, the key *gam* silk weavers are not allowed to be too full, therefore they eat small rationed meals, four times a day so they can easily handle this very technical work.

The households compete with each other to produce the most beautiful and highest quality silk products. Each household has to manage their own capital, purchase raw materials, and find their own customers. All family members join in the production process. If the household is in shortage of capital, it can borrow money from the credit cooperative in the commune (very few borrow

money from the provincial banks) or borrow money from their relatives and close friends whichever is more convenient. To date, each weaving household owns one or two electric-powered looms. Some families are operating large-scale production such as Mr. Mao's (6 looms), Mrs. Hien's (5 looms) and Mrs. Bich's (7 looms). These families run their own shops to sell their silk products. Most of the staff working at the family workshops and shops are their children, relatives and members of the family clan, therefore they have close and harmonious ties. If they need large area for their workshops, they can rent the premises of former enterprisers. Although the signboard "Van Phuc silk weaving enterprise" remains, all the workshops belong to families. It is the symbol of close ties and sentiments of villagers. Those working in family workshops, have good collective sense and interrelations.

Family and extended family business is the current popular mode of production in Van Phuc weaving village. It seems that this mode of production has been tested by time.

During the period from 1920-1940 Van Phuc's weavers together with handicraft workers from Ha Dong silk weaving region were subject to the policy of technology improvement of the French colonialist administration. Fairs were opened, museums were established and Van Phuc's silk products were sent to be displayed at exhibitions in French colonies. The French also built "model village" and "rural reforms". They conducted such activities to promote silk weaving and get profit. However, Van Phuc's silk weaving thrived only for a short period of time – from 1935-1936 and then fell into a recession.

Van Phuc's traditional silk weaving was restored under the collective production form in the 1950s and 1960s. It began with families where hand looms were operating. In 1958, the commune

planned to set up weaving cooperatives. At first there were 11 cooperatives and by 1962 they had merged into a big cooperative. All the families contributed their looms to the cooperative which was divided into five production teams. The cooperative signed sub-contracts with Ha Dong Cotton and Textile Company. The cooperative's board of management was in charge of the import of raw materials, labour distribution and delivery of products to the company. The weavers worked as wage earners. The head of the production team was responsible for the team's productivity. The collective production has been bustling in the village. Members of the cooperative's management team took care of the "input and output" and its members just worked under the production team's work plan. The spirit "Cooperative is the house and its members are masters" has been the motivating force that sets the production pace. The common mottoes "Rapid production, more products, good quality, low production cost" and "Planned business" have prevailed in the cooperative's activities. When the weavers began to restore the traditional weaving craft, production developed on a larger scale. A major change took place in the weaving village: restoring the weaving craft, producing orders from the Cotton and Textile Company, working collectively and now the weaving village faced a new challenge.

To build the silk weaving enterprise from a low-level cooperative, to a high-level cooperative and then to for export, this process has taken nearly 30 years. Collective production means all production and products are owned by the cooperative. The weavers received wages and the cooperative's management board was responsible for all production activities. To easily manage this, the cooperative was divided into small production teams and when it was upgraded to an enterprise, they became workshops. All the products were delivered to the Union of Sericulture. This

production mode has gradually exposed its disadvantages.

This craft requires high techniques and great delicacy to turn out products of artistic values, family has long been a production unit. Small-scale production, has not brought about high productivity, but is suitable and convenient in improving flower patterns and designs. When production was on a large scale, it was hard for management to take care of all the details. Turning out plain silk products is easy. But *van* or *gam* silk products required highly skillful weavers. Silk weaving comprises many stages in the production chain, some of them are simple (crisscrossing threads, making spools) and some are difficult (copying flower patterns, operating looms ...). The characteristics of weaving are more suitable to small scale production.

The last decade of the 20th century witnessed *reorganization* of production in Van Phuc village to overcome constraints. The policy to move looms to households was wise. Since 1992, a new organization started: household family became a production unit, managing both "input and output" and marketing of its own products. The cooperative only managed the spinning workshop. Thanks to this rearrangement, there exists in the cooperative two types of ownership: private ownership by household family and collective ownership of the spinning workshop by the cooperative.

Households have breathed new life, devoting their efforts to boost production and improve their family living standards. Households and cooperatives have supported each other. Most of the families rely on the cooperative's spinning mill. There is only one household in the commune engaged in spinning but on a small scale and it cannot meet the needs of all the weaving families. *In spinning, collective economy supports household economy.*

In the spinning workshop, the production organization which has existed (since 1996) has developed the superiority of collective economy. The workshop has generated jobs for 80 people of all ages. The elderly handle the spinning wheels and the thread spools while youngsters operate the spinning machines. Besides supplying spinning to weaving families, the spinning workshop also produces coloured threads to be exported. This is a remarkable income source for the workshop. Every year, the workshop exports 2500 kg of coloured threads and is exempted from export tax. These types of thread, whose colours are difficult to fade, fill orders placed by French customers, winning their trust. This success is attributed to the *organic relationship* of the two economic sectors: the spinning workshop of the cooperative and the dyeing workshop of Mr. Thanh's family. In the process of renovation, not only silk from Van Phuc but also its coloured threads – another specialty is on sale in the market.

Re-organization of production has facilitated technical improvements. The dynamism and sensitivity of the weavers, in line with the State new economic policy have developed the weaving village's potential.

In the process of production reorganization for weaving development in Van Phuc village in the years of renovation, household has become the key production unit. The village's traditional craft has been preserved and developed. The "family-village" relationship and hereditary still remain, even though new signs are seen in the modern craft village.

Mr. Bang, now 70 continues the traditional handicraft. He is the technical advisor for the whole village. He has a profound knowledge of all weaving techniques. Those ancient patterns that he learnt by heart and the many new patterns he created. In 1960 - 1961, he went to China to learn

gam silk weaving. He has not had a chance to apply what he learnt or put it into practice as a great amount of capital is needed for *gam* weaving and the cooperative could not afford it. His son continues his profession. He has a resolve to develop the family's traditional silk weaving. He can operate the electric looms and repair them when they are out of order. This capacity is inherited by the younger generation.

The next generation of old Mr. Thien's family includes Mrs. Ty and Mrs. Giang's families who are very skillful in all stages of weaving. They are able to handle both ancient hand looms and improved looms. Mr. Thien's family has set an example in preserving and developing the craft.

Mr. Dat is in charge of the spinning workshop of the cooperative. He is able to handle the most basic production stage, provide technical guidance to workers and take care of production management. He has set close relationship between the cooperative and its clients - the families in the village. He was once an outstanding weaver and is a capable and dynamic manager.

Of the nearly 30 families engaged in dyeing activities in the village, Mr. Thanh is the best. His father was a dyeing worker from Hang Dao ancient street in Hanoi (of the Phuc Thanh's workshop). Since the 1940s, his family has followed silk dyeing. Until Mr. Thanh's generation, the whole family is engaged in dyeing. Through years of experimenting with different types of dye-stuff, using additional chemicals and applying hand-make methods, he has found the recipe for dye-stuff which meets all clients' demands, particularly the order for silk dyeing from Mr. Dat's spinning workshop. From 7 main colours, the clients can order 1000 colours of different light and dark degree. Mr. and Mrs. Thanh have only one son named Son. Son was a driver for a government agency in Hanoi. They wanted to hand down their

profession to their son, so they had to persuade him to quit his driving job. After some considering, Mr. Son voluntarily followed his family's traditional craft. He can now replace his father in doing many things. In addition to three dyeing families in the village, there are 2 - 4 workers engaged in silk dyeing. Mr. Thanh's family is whole-heartedly devoted to silk dyeing.

Mr. Bich has been the cooperative's manager for many years. He has been very dynamic, responsible and closely linked to the cooperative and the village since the period of State subsidies and then in the market economy. He is now manager of the weaving cooperative and Secretary of the Party Committee of Van Phuc commune. He is respected and loved by the villagers.

Van Phuc's traditional silk weaving has step by step developed into higher quality. To further develop silk weaving, the villagers have to overcome many challenges.

Children grow up in the village and learn silk weaving from their parents and brothers and sisters. The natural process of training continues. Many young men and women voluntarily follow their family traditional craft and love it. It is time to open regular training courses in the village to help young workers fully understand the village's traditional silk weaving and learn experience from other places (at home and overseas). It is essential to improve the professional level for the current generation of workers to sustainably develop silk weaving. Training from elderly workers who can pass down their skills will help the younger generation to follow their traditional craft and turn out more typical products of the village. Training is also essential and practical to enhance the love for silk weaving and opens up the way for creativity. The training will attract young people from other parts who want to learn the craft. Training of skillful workers is a difficult job, but Van Phuc

villagers who have undergone many difficulties in the past will certainly train their younger generation.

In the past, household family was a production unit with a new cultural lifestyle suitable to their professional activities, today, through years of experiments, household economy has been encouraged to develop. This means, it is the *most suitable production organization* for silk weaving. From these household families, a creative process has occurred. Development of family traditional craft and caring for weaving families will preserve and develop the cultural heritage in this land. A healthy family lifestyle constitutes great strength and an environment for its members' creative products.

Building a model family in close relationship with villagers is one of the objectives to develop silk weaving. Looking at the silk weaving craft from the angle of culture without confining it to the economic context, we can see the fine features of the spiritual life cultivated by the local people. In the market economy, a high cultural life will contribute to push away negative phenomena, and social evils cannot infiltrate in a healthy family life.

It has been a long road of developing Van Phuc's silk weaving. Its success in the period of development of Van Phuc silk weaving enterprise was thanks to fully tapping the weaving cultural potential of the villagers. Van Phuc is not a normal business but a cultural heritage. Its silk is not only consumer goods but also bears artistic and cultural value. Van Phuc weaving cultural identity as well as its silk and *gam* products continues to improve on the basis of developing their traditional values. And thanks to it Van Phuc becomes a cultural heritage, bringing happiness to tens of thousands of people.