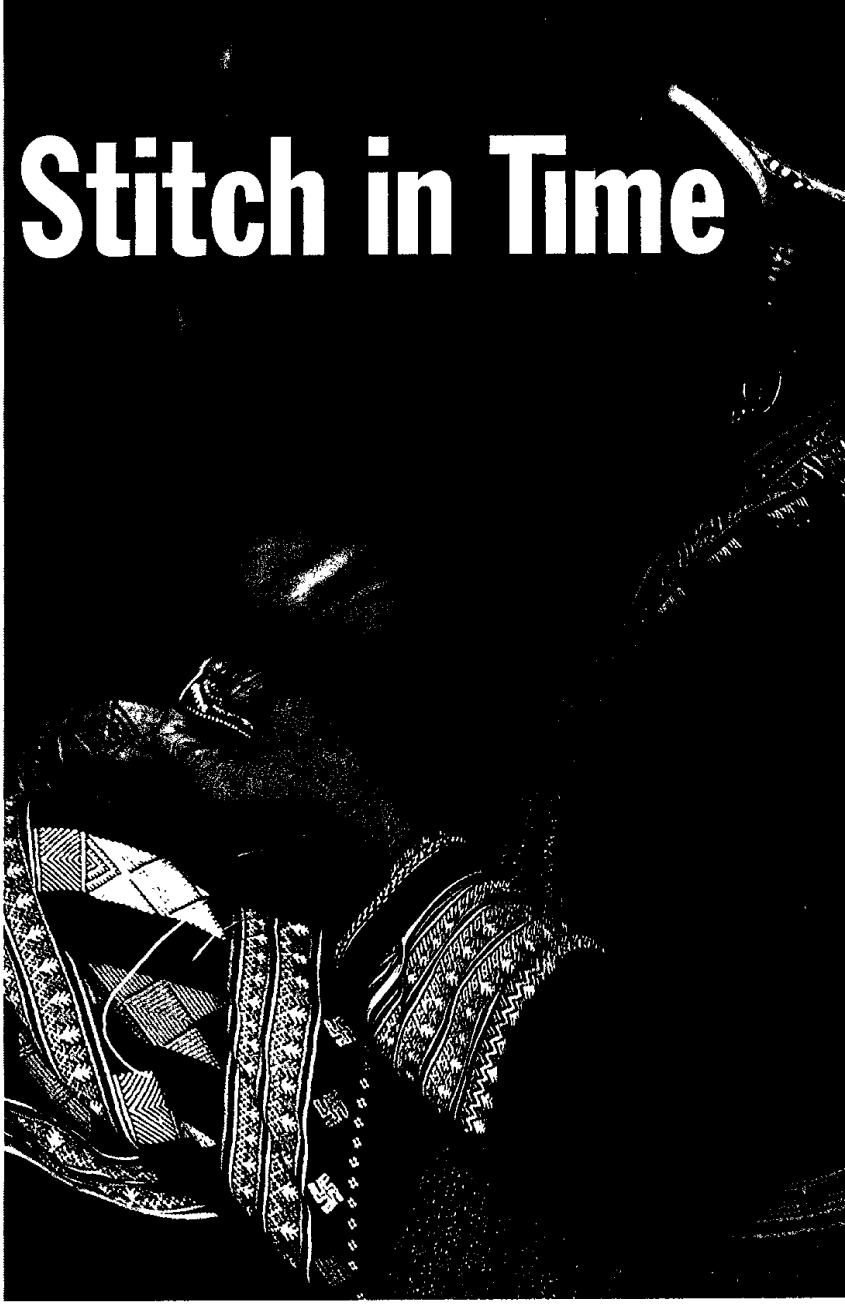
Vietnam's Stitch in Time

Village artisans reach for the global marketplace.

BY CHRISTOPHER REARDON



Ta Phin Commune, Vietnam—High in the mountains of northern Vietnam, where terraced rice paddies climb to meet the clouds, Chao Su May sits by the hearth and smiles at her good fortune. Her seven-year-old daughter, Lieu, hovers nearby, snacking on sticky rice harvested two weeks earlier. The tile roof overhead is new, a welcome improvement over leaky thatch. Just outside, a water buffalo and her young calf graze quietly in the mist.

Life wasn't always so good, May says. Then, adjusting the scarlet turban that covers her long, dark hair, she tells a story of failure and redemption. For generations, she says, it has been customary among the Red Dao, an ethnic group who came from China two centuries ago, that a young woman should not marry until she could embroider a traditional wedding veil known as a *pa*. May had always intended to follow tradition, but upon coming of age she found, like many of her peers, that the time-

honored skills eluded her grasp. Swallowing her pride, she ended up paying her fiancé's mother to make a pa for her.

That was 1978, when Vietnam was still reeling from the 30-year war that brought independence, reunification and Communist rule. Peace ushered in new perils: In the early 1980's, the country slid into a famine caused by floods, faltering attempts at collective farming and economic isolation. It wasn't long before the government changed course with a new policy called *doi moi,* or renovation. First announced in 1986, it has slowly opened the door to foreign investment and international trade, drawing a throng of eager capitalists from abroad. But the more profound and lasting effect may be reflected in the countless noodle shops and other mom-and-pop establishments that have opened in recent years.

May, now 41 and the mother of four, counts herself among this emerging class of entrepreneurs. After years of concentrated effort, she has become one of Ta Phin's most successful artisans, a master of the craft that once vexed her so. In the last year alone, she has doubled her family's modest income by embroidering purses, hats and cushion covers that bear traditional Dao motifs like peach blossoms, pine trees or the paw prints of tigers. Her earnings paid for the water buffalo—which gave a quick return on investment by giving birth several months later. (The money for the new roof came from her mother-in-law, Phan Su May, 74, who has also taken quickly to private enterprise.)

ABOVE Terraced rice paddies on the outskirts of Sapa.

FAR LEFT Chao Su May with her mother-in-law and mentor, Phan Su May.

ABOVE LEFT A fellow artisan plies her needle and thread.

BELOW LEFT Giang Thi Song working a sewing machine provided by Craft Link.

Chao Su May's tenacity in honing her skills was one key to her success. But what she and her mother-in-law sorely lacked, until quite recently, was access to consumers. They finally got it through Craft Link, a nongovernmental organization that markets handicrafts by many of Vietnam's 54 distinct ethnic groups.

Founded in 1995, Craft Link works closely with minority communities—who are at the greatest risk of being left behind in Vietnam's rapidly changing economy—to generate income while revitalizing traditional art forms. In Ta Phin, an alpine hamlet tucked just inside the border with China, it has provided May and 84 of her neighbors with training in tailoring, bookkeeping and management. Furthermore, through its store in Hanoi, Craft Link provides a conduit to consumers, first to expatriates and tourists in Vietnam and increasingly to shoppers overseas.

One such shopper happened to be the President of the United States during his visit to Vietnam last November. "I love programs like this," said Bill Clinton, noting Craft Link's respect for cultural diversity and its reliance on self-help. While perusing the colorful inventory of Dao embroidered cushion covers, Hmong applique handbags and Chau Ma brocade blankets, he remarked, "These are just fantastic. I bet you could sell tons of them in America."

Tran Tuyet Lan, Craft Link's general manager, proudly noted that she already has—even though Vietnamese goods face high tariffs because the country has not yet won "most favored nation" status from the United States or gained admission to the World Trade Organization. Craft Link's American buyers include Global Exchange, SERRV International and Ten Thousand Villages, three nonprofit groups that promote fair trade through retail stores in a total of 35 states. Through similar deals, handicrafts by May and other Vietnamese are also finding their way to consumers in Singapore, Japan, Belgium, Italy and Great Britain.

Craft Link began when a group of international nonprofits saw a flaw in their efforts to increase incomes by promoting handicrafts production: There simply wasn't much of a market for them. Today, finding buyers is no longer a problem for Craft Link's 46 producer groups, most of them made up of minority artisans from the uplands or street children in Ho Chi Minh City (still called Saigon by many in the South). If anything, these artisans are hard pressed to keep up with demand.

Led by a steady surge in exports, which have shot up from about $7,000 in 1998 to $140,000 last year, Craft Link has doubled its revenues two years in a row. In 2000 it brought in nearly $350,000. These figures may not dazzle Wall Street, but they mean a lot in Vietnam, where the average family earns less than $500 a year.

Not surprisingly, Craft Link has spawned dozens of imitators in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Some buy their inventory from Craft Link, while others seek out their own producers. The competition bodes well for minority artisans, Craft Link's Lan says, because it expands their access to consumers.

Even so, Craft Link holds an advantage through its partnership with the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi, which lends it the credibility that purely commercial handicrafts shops often lack. Since opening its doors in 1997, the museum has won international acclaim for the visionary way it showcases the identities and lives of Vietnam's many different ethnic groups.

(Most of the country's 78 million people belong to the Kinh majority, with the remaining 13 percent split between 53 other ethnic groups, each with its own language and culture.)

Nguyen Van Huy, the museum's founding director, says he and his staff look for cultural heritage not in ancient artifacts or lofty abstractions but in familiar, everyday objects. One standout in the 15,000-piece collection is a bicycle laden with dozens of bamboo fish traps—the same bike that Pham Dang Uy, a local trap seller, pedaled around Hung Yen province from 1982 to 1997.

Also on view are an ingenious trap for catching field mice (used by the Giarai people), a conical hat woven from bamboo and palm leaves (Nung Loi), a woven bamboo box for storing rice (Kinh), string puppets of dragons and mandarins (Tay) and an assortment of musical instruments and traditional garments from various ethnic groups. With few exceptions, these pieces are presented not as discrete objects but as windows into the lives, values and motivations of their creators.

In a series of documentary films shown at the museum, Hmong weavers demonstrate how they work with flax, a Dao shaman conducts an initiation ceremony and Kinh artisans make fish traps and conical palm hats. Similarly, on the lawn outside stand 10 traditional dwellings—including stilt houses from Dao, Ede and Tay villages—that were brought down from the mountains and reconstructed by their owners.

Lately, with help from Craft Link, the museum has begun inviting artisans and folk performers from different ethnic groups to present their cultural heritage firsthand in a series of performances and craft demonstrations called "Living Traditions." In November, for example, it brought in paper artisans from Dong Ho and two nearby villages. With dozens of schoolchildren at their side, Hoang Ba Kinh and Hoang Ba Phat, both 75, used paper and clay to make toys and festival masks. Pham Duy Luu, 72, showed how he makes rice paper from the bark of the mulberry tree. Nguyen Dang Che, 65, gave a demonstration of woodblock printing, an art form that has been his family's livelihood for 20 generations.

"Our tradition was in danger of dying out 10 years ago," Che says. "Now it's coming back."

TOP An artisan from Dong Ho village demonstrates the art of woodblock printing at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology.

MIDDLE Nguyen Dang Che paints on handmade paper.

BOTTOM Hoang Ba Kinh puts the finishing touches on a festival mask.

Huy, who won a John D. Rockefeller III Award last year for his contribution to Asian art and culture, says Craft Link has played a pivotal role in shaping the museum's orientation.

"Museums have a tendency to pay attention only to preservation and the past," he says. "But through our collaboration with Craft Link, we have realized the importance of building close ties to the people living in mountain villages today. We think the best way to preserve the cultural heritage of these minority communities is to make it economically viable for them to continue producing traditional handicrafts. That means developing new products and new markets, as Craft Link is doing."

Yet, as a seasoned anthropologist, Huy, 55, also worries that market forces could compromise the integrity of traditional handicrafts. There is a thin line, he says, between selling and selling out.

Together, Craft Link and the museum have developed a novel way to manage that tension. Whenever Craft Link begins working with a new group of minority artisans, the museum sends out researchers to study the local traditions and gain a better understanding of their meaning in the community. Craft Link's designers take this knowledge into account as they assist the artisans in conceiving new products—like embroidered handbags and cushion covers—that appeal to modern consumers while maintaining traditional techniques and motifs.

The Black Hmong, for example, are renowned for the embroidered collars that adorn their indigo coats. Yet because the demand for these coats is small, Hmong women in Tà Phìn have begun stitching collars (or similar pieces of embroidery) onto black velvet cushion covers and dyed hemp handbags. Although purists may object to this commodification, Lan and Huy see it as part of a dynamic process as old as Hmong culture itself.

"Tradition and modernity are not the two ends of the continuum," says Huy, who has been sought out by curators from the American Museum of Natural History in New York and the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna for help planning two upcoming exhibitions on Vietnam. Instead, Huy says, tradition and modernity "are continuous processes of inheriting, eliminating, selecting and creating

A member of the handicrafts cooperative in Ta Phin shows her wares, including this velvet jacket with a traditional Hmong snail motif.

material and spiritual values."

Based on their work together in Ta Phin, Craft Link and the museum mounted an exhibit on Hmong culture last year in Hanoi. They are now producing a book about Dao and Hmong traditions in Sapa district, which includes Ta Phin Commune and the neighboring town of Sapa, a leading resort during the French colonial era.

Since the Vietnamese government reopened the area to tourism in 1993, it has once again become a popular destination, especially for backpackers from Europe. Some come to climb Mt. Fansipan, Vietnam's highest peak at 10,312 feet, but local artisans are clearly the biggest draw.

"You find people selling Dao and Hmong handicrafts on the streets of Sapa and taking a loss without realizing it," says Lan. "In our training, we teach people about basic costing so they can agree on a price structure that's in line with their actual expenses and the value of their skills."

Some 85 women in Ta Phin have built on that knowledge and formed a handicraft cooperative to boost production, quality and sales. In the workshop downstairs, Dao and Hmong women engage in friendly competition to turn out the best work. Upstairs they sell their wares in a small shop they named Calabash. They charge a little more than merchants and street peddlers in Sapa, but they are quickly gaining a reputation among tourists for making some of the finest handicrafts in Lao Cai province.

Many of them attribute this new opportunity to engage in commerce and camaraderie to doi moi, the policy of renovation that is introducing Vietnam's command economy to the law of supply and demand.

"We're very pleased with the policy of openness," says Ly May Chan, 47, a Red Dao woman who manages Calabash. "The tourists who are coming here have given people in our community an opportunity to work together and earn more income."

Just a few years ago, she says, most of Ta Phin's 278 families went hungry anywhere from two to six months a year, depending on the weather and its impact on the rice harvest. Now, Chan says, such deprivation is rare.

The handicrafts cooperative is not the only reason. In 1986 the Vietnamese government began allowing farmers to work individual plots of land. As a result, people are working harder and investing in better seed and fertilizer. The consequence has been dramatic: Vietnam, which endured a famine two decades ago, is now the world's second-largest exporter of rice, behind only Thailand.

Yet most of the gains in agricultural production have been in the south, in the Mekong River delta, where farmers can harvest three crops a year. In Ta Phin, where weather conditions only allow one growing season, residents stand to benefit more from making handicrafts. Giang Thi Song, 58, whose forte is embroidering hats worn by Black Hmong children, used her earnings from the last year to pay 20 percent of the loan that she and her husband took to build their home the year before.

The handicrafts cooperative is also bringing social changes in Ta Phin. As women gain in earning power, they are assuming a larger role in decision making at the family and community level. This is particularly true for Hmong women, who traditionally have had little access to education.

"At first, some of the men didn't want their wives to get involved with the handicrafts project," says Ma Thi Da, 30, an officer of the Sapa District Women's Union. "But now that they have seen its effect on family incomes, they are taking care of the children in the evenings so the women can produce more embroidery for export. A few men have even asked to learn how to do the simpler designs themselves."

The women of Ta Phin are also gaining access to a wider world. Since 1998 many of them have taken the train to Hanoi—for the first time in their lives, in most cases—to participate in the handicrafts bazaar that Craft Link holds once or twice a year.

May, who was recently elected to the management board of the handicrafts cooperative in Ta Phin, has no plans to give up farming altogether. But in the marriage of craft and commerce, she believes she has found her true calling.

"I really let myself down with that pa I tried to make for my wedding," she says, casting an appreciative glance at her mother-in-law, who plies a needle and thread by the flickering fire. "But I've gotten much, much better." ■

The Ford Foundation's support for the collaboration between Craft Link and the Museum of Ethnology reflects a conviction that artists and social scientists can play an integral role in helping societies adapt to major economic reforms and rapid social change. The joint venture is one of the first in Vietnam between a nongovernmental organization and a government agency. For more information visit www.craftlink-vietnam.com or send an e-mail to vme18@hn.vnn.vn (Vietnam Museum of Ethnology).