



Sylvie FANCHETTE  
Nicholas STEDMAN

Discovering  
**Craft  
Villages**  
in Vietnam

Ten itineraries around Hà Nội

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*To professor* Đào Thế Tuấn

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# Preface

A decade ago, I sat by the side of a road in Bắc Ninh with the owner of a small foundry discussing the recent history of his village's craft. As he was recounting this history he paused, then suddenly turned to me and said, "I am not an Annamite!" His Bắc Ninh accent baffled me for a second, so I asked what "A-La Mit" meant. "Annamite," he said, "is illiterate, stupid."

This phrase stuck with me more than any comment I heard during the year I spent in Bắc Ninh. The inhabitants of my friend's village, Đa Hội, like those of many other craft villages. I had visited, were not passively waiting for development to come; they had grasped the opportunities, and had begun innovating in the market for their products long before official policies confirmed their rights. Before Foreign Direct Investment entered the scene, these villages were providing Vietnamese with the processed foods, alcohol, cloth, building materials, bicycle parts, wickerwork, cigarettes, brooms, ceramics, and many other goods for everyday use, sometimes under contract to larger state companies. Despite this, both my friend's village and many other craft villages continued to struggle against an image of their work as traditional, technically backward, wasteful of labor, and low in income. In a word, "Annamite" in his colloquial sense.

For certain, many traditional craft villages of the Red River Delta were all of these, and many of those village crafts have now faded into the past. But for every craft village that disappeared over the last decade, another has shifted to production for new consumer markets, and still others that were formerly agricultural villages, have become craft villages in their own right - producing a wide range of goods, including plastic pellets and briefcases, that would not be considered traditional by any means.

As the chapters of this volume will illustrate, craft villages have filled a space between past and future to become both an emblem of traditional craftsmanship, and a dynamic force for economic development. They can be both because, at their core, they comprise an ensemble of skills, knowledge and relations that grow out of the merger of village and occupation, and provide, at least, a source of income to supplement farming, and at best, a source of wealth to generate higher living standards and investment.

Despite the role these villages play, development theory and practice have largely overlooked them. While the reasons why are complex, two points stand out. Vietnam entered its current phase of development enthralled with visions of large industrial plants producing goods on a mass scale, employing thousand of workers, freed from the drudgeries of agriculture. And not unlike others, they also entered this period with a bias toward the analysis of individual firms. Because the individual enterprises in craft villages are generally family owned and small, these two assumptions blinded many to the agglomeration of enterprises within a village or group of villages. This agglomeration creates economies of scale that rival larger factories and allow villages to produce goods competitively. This is not China, however, with its large commune-level enterprises. It is Italy, where the agglomeration of small firms in village- and town-based industrial districts served as the backbone of economic development for half a century. So, take this guide in hand, follow its itineraries, talk to artisans and traders, buy something to take home, create a business partnership, and imagine that you are witnessing the long period of the industrial revolution, compressed. You won't be disappointed.

Michael DIGREGORIO, Program Officer for Media, Arts, Culture & Education, Ford Foundation, Hà Nội.



## Foreword

“It is a well-known fact that tourism can be a deadly foe as much as a firm friend in the matter of development. Considering the economic might of the tourist industry—now regarded as the biggest in the world ahead of automobiles and chemicals—careful attention should be paid to this many-sided phenomenon with its global repercussions. The impact of tourism is such that progressive strategies are vitally needed in order to prepare the ground for genuinely progressive international, regional and local strategies.

It is UNESCO’s intention to assist the 191 Member states in preparing their policies while reconsidering the relationship between tourism and cultural diversity, tourism and intercultural dialogue, and tourism and development. In this way, the Organization proposes to contribute to the fight against poverty, protection of the environment and mutual appreciation of cultures.

Intercultural Roads of Dialogue projects analyse the global transformations – sometimes conflictual – brought about by encounters between different populations and continents: they offer a historical and geographical perspective on intercultural dialogue down through the centuries and contribute to the debate on the future of intercultural dialogue in modern societies. Cultural tourism provides concrete opportunities for genuine dialogue between visitors and hosts and promotes new types of co-operation. It offers the possibility of becoming better acquainted with the heritage of other territories and of contributing towards economic and human development.”

**Cultural tourism: creating a discerning type of tourism that takes account of other people’s cultures**  
(UNESCO web site)



During a research programme, begun in 2003 in partnership between IRD (the Research Institute for Development), the Vietnamese NGO PHANO<sup>1</sup> and CASRAD<sup>2</sup> at the Vietnam Academy of Agricultural Sciences, a team of researchers and students carried out a vast number of studies on rural life, the activity and history of over forty craft villages in the provinces bordering on Hà Nội. Some of these typical craft villages could be of interest to Vietnamese and foreign tourists. Close links with the local authorities and the most renowned craftspeople confirm the belief that there is a real interest for them in opening up to cultural tourism. They could receive small groups of visitors and demonstrate their crafts – some of which, such as *dó* papermaking, may disappear altogether because they are no longer valued nor passed down by elders.

We wish to share and spread this knowledge through a work that could be useful both to groups accompanied by local guides, for whom our book will provide necessary and relevant information, and to individual tourists. Scarce knowledge of the heritage of these villages among tourist guides explains why independent travel agencies like *Sinh Café* offer such a poor range of options in this area.

The villages suggested to readers are concentrated in provinces bordering on Hà Nội: Bắc Ninh to the east of Hà Nội and Hà Tây to the west, both provinces with a rich cultural heritage.

Hà Tây has always been known as the province of a thousand crafts – there are in fact currently an estimated four hundred. Hà Tây lies west of the capital, whose consumption of luxury items has boosted the production of high quality goods. It is intersected by the Đáy River, which acts as a waterway to the mountainous regions, where an abundance of sylvicultural raw materials can be found. Renowned rattan and bamboo artisans, silk manufacturers and weavers abound in Hà Tây Province. Processed agricultural products (e.g. rice wine, cassava flour, vermicelli and assorted noodles) have always been a source of income for a large part of the population of Hà Tây, which is subject to severe flooding during the monsoon. Handicrafts produced in this province of the Upper Delta are very diverse and more traditional than in Bắc Ninh. They form an essential part of village life. In addition, its rich architectural and religious heritage make Hà Tây a prime tourist destination, with sites such as the famous Perfume Pagoda, as well as Thây and Đậu Pagodas, which attracts thousands of domestic and foreign tourists.

Bắc Ninh Province, east of Hà Nội, is situated at the intersection between several major road routes and river arteries, and more importantly, is on the road to China. Here, craft techniques have undergone a deeper transformation process. Formerly part of Kinh Bắc, this province is hemmed in by the mountains that surround the Delta. It is considered the cultural cradle of the Upper Delta, the birthplace of Vietnamese Buddhism and has been strongly exposed to Chinese influence. The first Deltaic kingdom of Âu Lạc originated in this province. Archaeological research has shown the importance of ironwork and ceramics in the area. Bắc Ninh owes its renown to several historical relics – such as Bút Tháp and Chùa Dầu Pagodas – where rituals are performed in honour of important figures, such as the two Trưng sisters who fought off Chinese invaders.

We offer 10 itineraries, each including several craft villages and cultural sites with architectural heritage of superior quality. The selection criteria for villages when drawing up the itineraries were:

- Presence of traditional crafts dedicated to making everyday or cultural and decorative goods (we avoid villages that have become too industrialised);
- Presence of ancient crafts and those from which originate ancestor worship during festivals;
- Possibility of visiting about a dozen workshops, some of them belonging to famous craftspeople;
- Access to architectural heritage of superior quality (pagodas, temples, *đình*, etc.);
- Presence of traditional markets;
- Accessibility from Hà Nội.

<sup>1</sup> Vietnamese Association for Rural Development

<sup>2</sup> Center for Agrarian Research and Development

**ANCIENT CRAFT AMID BY  
VILLAGE CULTURAL HERITAGE**

# HANDICRAFTS IN THE RED RIVER DELTA:

## HISTORY REPEATING ITSELF

Vietnam is unusual in that its industries are not entirely concentrated in the cities. Although village dwellers of the Red River Delta give precedence to growing rice, they began very early on to integrate industry and handicrafts into the rural economy. During the feudal era, such activities were practised in specialised villages rather than in cities; the latter stood as symbols of power and were regarded as religious and political centres, as well as business hubs for trade with the outside world.

Until the country's independence, craft villages had a marginal status compared with other forms of production. Since the Renewal, or *Đổi Mới*, village craftsmanship has been revived by market liberalisation, the resurgence of individual business and the implementation of government policies promoting the development of non-agricultural rural activities. After decades of disparagement, a rich architectural and cultural heritage is now being restored. Festivals and rituals in honour of guardian (tutelary) spirits and patron saints of crafts have been rehabilitated. This highlights the vitality of the intangible heritage of villages, which for centuries acted as a cohesive force between city and countryside.

### AN ANCIENT HANDICRAFT REGION INTEGRATED WITHIN AN ORIGINAL POLITICAL AND URBAN SYSTEM

#### *Ancient history: the importance of ties with China*

##### **The Red River Upper Delta as cradle of Vietnamese handicrafts**

Craftsmanship appeared long before Vietnamese society began to organise itself into villages; thereafter, handicrafts became a structural and integral part of Vietnamese economy and identity (Trương Minh Hằng, 2006).

By the time of the Chinese conquest in the first century A.D., handicrafts in the Red River Delta had already reached a relatively high technical level. Iron and bronze casting and metalwork techniques were known, while pottery – which had flourished during previous centuries – became increasingly sophisticated with the use of enamel techniques. Weaving and wickerwork were the most successful crafts. Cotton, silk, bamboo and rattan baskets from the Red River Delta were renowned for their properties. Paper manufacturing began in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., using techniques imported from China. Later, thanks to close ties with China once more, silver and gold chasing techniques were refined in order to produce luxury goods for the Court and local officials. Lacquer had been known since the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. (lacquered objects and lacquering tools have been found in tombs dating from this period). At the beginning of the first millennium A.D., Vietnamese craftsmanship was highly developed (Nguyễn Khắc Viện, 1993).

Craft villages began to thrive as the Chinese conquest was ending. After Emperor Lý Thái Tổ moved the Imperial Court from Hoa Lư to Thăng Long on the banks of the Red River in 1010, several villages began developing craft activities. They were granted monopolies and dedicated themselves fully to the manufacture of religious and luxury handicrafts for the Imperial Court and the affluent classes in Vietnam and other Asian countries (such as China and Japan); these goods were also used for religious worship (e.g. silk, ceramics, jewellery, embroidery, paper for royal edicts, furniture, objects inlaid with mother-of-pearl, statuary, etc.).

A guild of artisans specialising in the construction of lavish dwellings for the Imperial Court (including carpenters, as well as metal, stone, painting and lacquer specialists) was at the service of the state.

"The artisans of Chàng Sơn and Nhân Hiên, who specialised in wood and ivory carving, have left their stamp on great work, such as the Temple of Literature, the communal houses of **Đình Bảng**<sup>1</sup>, Tây Đằng, Chu Quyển and Tương Phiêu, and the pagodas of Tây Phương and **Thầy**. Traders and artisans were organised into guilds, which were heavily taxed by the monarchy" (Papin P., 2001<sup>2</sup>).

The textile industry was concentrated within a cluster<sup>3</sup> of a dozen villages near the town of Hà Đông. A buoyant, high quality silk industry fed Hà Nội's large consumption and redistribution market (Gourou P., 1936).

Although intended to supply a sizeable domestic market, some of these products – such as Tonkin cotton and silk cloth – became well known abroad. Ceramics were sold on the Japanese and Chinese markets, thanks to their reputation for quality.

Craft products were also used in the daily life of the villages, which were largely geared towards home consumption: cotton cloth, ceramics, agricultural and hydraulic tools, rattan and bamboo goods, sedge mats, processed foodstuffs, (e.g. from flour mills, oil mills and distilleries) and industrial products (metalwork, milled paper). A wide range of items could be manufactured, owing to the availability of a large variety of botanical and animal raw materials.

Each village produced infinite variations on the one item it specialised in. Wickerwork is the best example of this diversity. There are eight varieties of bamboo, each with its specific characteristics, from which an endless variety of baskets can be made: baskets of all shapes and sizes, with a tighter or looser weave, baskets for cooking, for transporting the harvest or soil, for irrigation, for drying the harvested crops, for preserving goods or breeding silkworms; watertight baskets to carry water (Gourou P., 1936). An important hat- and coat-making industry used *nón* (latania palm) leaves as its raw materials.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the most famous villages around Hà Nội were **La Khê**, La Cà and La Nội (currently part of Hà Tây Province), which specialised in silk weaving, **Vạn Phúc** (also currently part of Hà Tây), specialised in brocade weaving, and Phùng Xá (Sơn Tây Province), specialised in silk for manufacturing turbans.

The villages of Hương Canh, **Thổ Hà** and **Phù Lãng** (Kinh Bắc) and Đình Xá (Sơn Nam) specialised in pottery; **Đại Bái**, Đề Cầu and Đông Mai (Kinh Bắc) in bronze and copper tincoating and casting; Đào Xá village (Hải Dương) made paper fans. Professional weavers lived in Đan Loan village (Hải Dương), goldsmiths in the villages of Đồng Xâm (Thái Bình) and Định Công (Sơn Nam), wood turners in **Nhị Khê** village (Sơn Nam), painters in Hà Vĩ and Bình Vọng (Sơn Nam), leather workers in Trúc Lâm, Phong Lâm and Văn Lâm villages (Hải Dương), and embroiderers in the village of **Quất Động** (Sơn Nam) (Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, 2002).

### Exchange of goods and know-how with China

The origins of crafts are sometimes lost in the mists of time. However, some have been transcribed in genealogical registers or on parallel sentences jealously guarded within the walls of *nhà thờ họ* – the ancestors' house where the illustrious lineages of the village are worshipped. Unfortunately, recent wars have severely damaged the communal memory of villages and these registers have often vanished or been destroyed.

Founding myths may or may not have some factual basis, but numerous written documents affirm the Chinese origins of many of these crafts. Those involving complex techniques, such as ceramics, embroidery, jewellery, metal beating and silk weaving, may have been introduced by mandarins, craft ancestors, who had spent long periods as ambassadors in China. Diplomatic missions stimulated trade and enabled knowledge and technical expertise to be collected (Papin P., 2001)<sup>4</sup>. Other crafts may have been introduced to villages by famous artisans; later on, 'post-ancestors' – either mandarins or monks who had travelled widely – may have introduced new techniques (**Đại Bái**, Itinerary n°3 p. 155, and **Chuôn Ngọ** /Cửu Lâu /Hàng Khay, Itinerary n°6 p. 233) and improved the quality of the craft. Such forms of know-how, taught either by outsiders or by prominent members of the village, were received as tokens of gratitude by the villagers of this overpopulated plain, whom rice cultivation often left hungry. Religious edifices were erected in honour of these benefactors, who became objects of worship and are still celebrated at festivals to this day.

<sup>1</sup> Villages and other sites of interest in bold type indicate places to be visited on the itineraries of this guide.

<sup>2</sup> Names in brackets with a date refer to quoted sources given in the bibliography at the back of the book.

<sup>3</sup> A geographical grouping of villages specialising in the same sector, whose businesses are interconnected and within which there is a high degree of labour division (see p. 36).

<sup>4</sup> The founding legends of some of these crafts are described in detail in the featured itineraries.

Vietnam was under Chinese domination for over a thousand years – from 111 B.C. to 938 A.D. Over the course of the following centuries, the Vietnamese feudal state was obliged to pay a tribute in the form of handicrafts to demonstrate its allegiance to the former Chinese colonisers. The feudal state held sway over its subjects, who paid numerous taxes, worked as forced labour and were conscripted into the army. Craftspeople were heavily taxed and, under the *công tương* system – effectively a system of statutory labour or corvée – were sometimes forced to leave their village to work in state factories (e.g. shipyards, weapons factories, the mint) or, during the city's extension in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, on the construction of houses or palaces (Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, 2002). Land tax was used to pay tribute to China:

“A list of products accepted in 1724 for the payment of land tax included alcohol, fine cotton fabric, ordinary cotton fabric, plain silk, Ý La silk, gauze, satin, various grades of paper, ordinary sedge mats, paper votive objects, etc” (Gourou P., 1936).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, artisans who wished to be exempted from statutory labour or military service had to become members of a professional guild and pay taxes in kind, while producing goods according to the norms required by the state. **La Khê** had to pay an annual levy of 600 silk items; in **Bát Tràng**, each craftsman was liable to pay 300 quality tiles (Itinerary n°2); the guilds of Yên Thái and Hồ Khẩu incurred taxes of several hundred sheets of paper of various grades (Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, 2002).

### ***Craft activities based on specific commercial relations between cities and villages***

#### **The Quarter of the 36 Streets or 36 Guilds: the link between the trade town and craft villages**

Since their earliest beginnings, crafts of the Red River Delta have been integrated within longstanding networks connecting them to the capital, through the Quarter of the ‘36 Streets’ or ‘36 Guilds’, to areas where raw materials are extracted and to domestic and foreign markets – especially China.

The Quarter of the 36 Streets in Hà Nội affords tourists a first glimpse of North Vietnam's handicraft culture and its deeply localised roots. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this quarter was organised around individual streets, each specialising in one specific type of goods produced in craft villages situated in the Red River Delta or around West Lake, near the capital. There were in fact roughly one hundred streets – 36 was chosen as an auspicious number. Each street was named after the goods it sold: Sugar Street, Hemp Street, Cards Street, Dyers' Street, Cup Street, Cotton Street, Chicken Street, Tray Street, Tin Street, Drum Street, Fan Street, Comb Street... (Papin P., 2001). Shopkeepers were sometimes themselves craftspeople. Many shrines to craft ancestors were built there.

Each street was inhabited by artisans from one or more of the villages that practised the same craft: in the street of jewellers, Hàng Bạc, lived artisans from the village of Định Công (Thanh Trì District, Hà Nội Province), who specialised in silver jewellery, as well as others from Trâu Khê (Bình Giang, Hải Dương) and Đồng Xâm (Thái Bình), who produced silver utensils. Hàng Đồng manufactured bronze and copper objects and also sold items from **Đại Bái** and Ngũ Xã villages.

Several village areas known as *phường* were located around West Lake. Some grew vegetables (Nghị Tầm and Quảng Bá) or fruit to supply the Court with fresh produce; others (Yên Phụ) produced painted images or cast bronze (Ngũ Xã Peninsula on White Bamboo Lake, Hồ Trúc Bạch). The neighbourhoods situated on the west bank of West Lake were famous for weaving ordinary silk (*Bái Ân*), black silk (*Võng Thị*) and brocade (*Trích Sài*) (Papin P., 2001). Around West Lake, Nghi Tầm and Nghĩa Đô and south of Hà Nội, Thanh Trì and Thụy Ai were well known for breeding silkworms.

Other villages on the southern bank of West Lake and near Paper Bridge, such as Yên Thái, Hồ Khẩu and Nghĩa Đô, earned their living in the flourishing paper industry. Yên Thái, also known as Bưởi, originally specialised in ordinary paper and gradually diversified its production. Towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, these villages began to produce very high quality paper and sell it to the Imperial Court (Papin P., 2001). These activities developed near the lake because producing paper requires large amounts of water; in addition, proximity to Tô Lịch River, an important trading channel between the Red River, Hà Nội and today's Hà Tây Province, was a distinct advantage.

This trading system that connected the Imperial capital to villages of the Delta and closer suburbs triggered the countryside's process of urbanisation and brought about Hà Nội's economic boom. A network of markets could be found within a radius of a day's walk from Hà Nội, where tradesmen who also worked in the capital regularly plied their wares (Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, 2002). This system contributed to the growth of Hà Nội's sphere of influence, which until then had been reined in by successive monarchs. The commercial integration of the countryside and of the country as a whole revolved around the Quarter of the 36 Streets. Its location at a junction of river routes – the Red River, Tô Lịch River and Kim Ngưu River (Hà Tây) – turned it into a centre for regional – and later international – trade (Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, 2002). This integration was a two-way process and has lasted to this day:

“The countryside certainly fed the city, but commercial relations established very early on between the capital and villages of the Delta also brought money to the countryside: initially, when orders came in from the city and later on, when migrants reinvested the capital they had earned in the city in their home villages” (Papin P., 2001).

More importantly, craftspeople and tradesmen who had set up shop in the ‘36 Streets’ maintained ties with their home villages, where they could make use of the plots of land that were distributed periodically (Papin P., 2001). They made regular donations towards the construction of temples and communal houses in their city neighbourhood in memory of their home village (Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, 2002). Most of these social and religious buildings still stand today, though some of them have been converted for commercial or residential use.

When the Royal Court moved to Huế in 1806, state craft workshops experienced a period of decline; meanwhile, slackening state control over the industry encouraged private trade and craftsmanship. At the onset of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hà Nội's crafts and trade prospered, thanks to Chinese merchants, and exports to China soared (Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, 2002). At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, according to a report to the Court in Huế, “nine-tenths of silk cocoons produced in the village of La Khê were exported to China”. Chinese merchants were also involved in trading paper produced in the villages around West Lake: they would sell *dó* bark on credit and ask to be repaid with the finished product (Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, 2002).

### **Vietnamese cities as centres of power and trade**

Traditionally, cities in Vietnam were symbols and seats of power and were regarded as religious centres. They were military strongholds responsible for defending the integrity of the national territory and the place of residence of the celestial appointee – king or lord – or his representatives (Langlet Quach Thanh-Tâm, 1993). Mandarins, especially eunuchs, played an active role in local life when they retired to their home villages at the end of their career. In return, villagers would build stelae in their honour (Phạm Thị Thùy Vinh, 2003) (**Phù Ninh**, Itinerary n°2 p. 133). Unlike China, where the elite were city-dwellers, Vietnam produced a class of mandarins, many of whom originated in the countryside and would return there to spend their final years. Similarly, some artisans went back to their home villages and invested there once they had acquired wealth in Hà Nội, either buying land or building a house for themselves. Rich craftspeople also made donations towards the construction of religious edifices in their home villages.

“Indeed, Vietnamese civilisation is deeply rural. It does not radiate from the city to the countryside; instead, its very foundations lie in the villages. Intellectual activity also revolves around scholars living in villages. The Confucian state was entrenched in the village and erudite culture embedded within popular culture” (Fourniau, C., 1991).

The market supplying court and army officials was situated around the Thăng Long Citadel (the former name of Hà Nội) and along the banks of the river on which the city was built. Around West Lake were many markets trading goods from surrounding villages, including Bưởi market, which specialised in selling paper. Another specialised market was held near Cầu Giấy. Hàng Đào Street (Dyers' Street) hosted a market specialised in silk products. A temple named Bạch Bố (White Cloth) was built at number 47 and artisans from La Cà and **La Khê** would come there to sell velvet, while those of Đại Mỗ sold various types of silk; brocades came in from Vạn Phúc and *lĩnh* from Bưởi (Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, 2002).



City markets were held at the various gates of Kẻ Chợ's surrounding walls. There were eight large ones in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, excluding specialised markets such as the rice market, fish market or frog market. Small markets would take place in front of the Red River wharf; brine, salt and sugar were traded in the streets bearing their names (Hàng Mắm, Hàng Muối, Hàng Đường), which are located near the river.

Yet Confucian doctrine was focused on rural society and attributed little value to commerce, which held back the emergence of a merchant and industrial bourgeoisie. Merchants came last in the hierarchy of labour: "scholar, farmer, craftsman, merchant".

### **Craft activities linked to rural market and communication hubs**

The creation and development of craft villages on a plain criss-crossed by several river routes stimulated the growth of village markets in Kinh Bắc, east of Hà Nội, and reinforced the culture of trade and networks. Large markets were held in the villages of Phù Lưu, **Đình Bảng**, **Đồng Kỵ**, Tráng Liệt and **Phù Ninh** in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. A stele erected in 1693 in Đoan Minh Pagoda in the village of **Thổ Hà** (Itinerary 1 b) reminds us that :

"Since the previous dynasty, our local village has had a wharf for its Buddhist market, which met 12 times a month to sell earthenware and ceramics. Traders piled up their stocks in mounds and wealth and goods were always in circulation. Each and every household had its own kiln to make tools in and every autumn there was a festival for celebration."

Similarly, the upper gate in Phù Lưu's village, where Chợ Giàu market was held, read as follows:

"Here is the place where one finds all goods and products of Đông Ngàn District, the largest market in Bắc Ninh Province" (Phạm Thị Thùy Vinh, 2003).

At this time, Phù Lưu contained over 30 trading houses dealing in copper, tin, ceramics, silk cloth, sedge mats, sesame, cotton, ploughs, livestock and processed foodstuffs. Unlike local village markets, most of the goods available in Chợ Giàu were commodities produced for sale by households in specialised villages. Copper and bronze goods sold on the market came from **Đại Bái** through traders in Tráng Liệt; ceramics came from **Thổ Hà**, **Phù Lãng** and **Bát Tràng**; cloth originated from the weaving villages of Tương Giang and **Đình Bảng**; buffaloes from traders in **Đồng Kỵ**; rice alcohol from Quan Đo, Cẩm Giàng and Vân, and ploughshares and other steel agricultural implements from Đa Hội and Đông Xuất (DiGregorio M., 2001).

The people of Kinh Bắc were involved in trade between the Delta and the mountainous regions, as well as between the Delta and the capital Kẻ Chợ. The merchants of Tráng Liệt – a village close to **Đồng Kỵ** – would travel a long way to buy copper, which they would sell at village markets or in the capital (Phạm Thị Thùy Vinh, 2003).

Specialised markets usually have connections with craft villages. Each village was named after the goods it specialised in (e.g. betel, rice, silk: Chợ Trầu, Chợ Gạo, Chợ Tờ Lụa, etc.). **Thổ Hà** had long since acquired a reputation for its pottery. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a market specialising in pottery took place up to twelve times a month in the courtyard of the village pagoda. The village of **Bát Tràng**, on the north bank of the Red River, had also been famous for its pottery and earthenware since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Its pottery market took place twice a day on the banks of the river, where merchant junks would flock. The markets in the communes of Nội Độ (Yên Phong District) and **Đại Bái** were known respectively for their ironwork products (sewing needles, iron chains) and bronze foundries. Many craft villages found an outlet for their wares by setting up markets on their territory. However, none of these markets could claim to specialise in a single item (Nguyễn Đức Nghinh, 1993).

## **A plain that is subject to partial flooding during the monsoon**

The Red River Delta is a densely populated plain where intensive rice farming required a large workforce during peak periods, but left the population idle during the fallow season. In this context, handicrafts provided seasonal employment. According to Pierre Gourou, households in areas with biannual rice harvests needed 125 days of work per year on average in the 1930s. Such households considered craftmaking as a secondary activity besides agriculture. However, handicraft activities prevailed in villages where land was scarce, or those that had developed highly specialised activities requiring a high degree of training.

In villages where flooding prevented a tenth-month harvest, crafts began to emerge as a way of providing work to an underemployed workforce (Gourou P., 1936). Thus, craft activities were widespread in the southern low-lying plains of Hà Đông and Hà Nam Province, where there were large numbers of itinerant carpenters known as *thợ mộc*. Villages were located along navigable waterways and could import raw materials from the mid-highlands and highlands of the North – such as rattan, bamboo and canna (a tuber used to manufacture vermicelli). This partly explains the number of villages producing wickerwork and food products along the River Đáy in Hà Tây.

## ***The collectivist overhaul of the production system in craft villages***

### **The role of the state in supporting certain activities**

Individual production was banned after 1954. Villagers were made to become members of agricultural or craft co-operatives to reinforce the country's industrial potential. In 1963, they began to participate in the war effort by producing commodities both for the daily life of the domestic population and for the vast consumption markets of socialist countries and were integrated within the collectivist system (DiGregorio M., 1999). The handicrafts industry then experienced two contradictory trends: production was reduced in certain sectors as a result of the ban on individual production, while it increased via craft co-operatives in sectors under tight state control. Craft co-operatives were to fulfil several functions:

- Enable provinces to become self-sufficient in agricultural and hydraulic machinery and tools in order to increase agricultural production and manufacture supplies for everyday life, such as paper, furniture, pottery, food products.
- Produce commodities for Eastern European countries – the West was in the grip of the Cold War and therefore boycotted the new Communist state of Vietnam.

It was no longer possible to practise craft and agriculture jointly, as had been the custom. Craftspeople lost their small plots of land upon becoming co-operative members. Some of them chose to produce handicrafts illegally, although obtaining supplies was especially difficult now that the state had a monopoly on the sale of raw materials via its co-operatives.

The state would issue orders to the co-operatives. **Quất Động** co-operative (Cờ Đỏ or Red Flag), created in 1961 and originally specialised in embroidery, made flags and banners for the Ministry of Defence. In 1974, the main activity practised by the artisans of **Đương Ổ** became the manufacture of firecrackers (DiGregorio M. et al., 1999).

### **The role of co-operatives in disseminating and modernising handicraft techniques**

Luxury items, formerly used for payment of tribute to China and later to supply the wealthy middle classes, lost their market after the revolution. Production of luxury goods was rekindled when the Eastern European markets opened to cultural and decorative goods. Co-operatives were able to shake some of these activities out of their post-colonial apathy. Such was the case in **Phù Lãng**, where ceramics were falling into disuse, or **Bát Tràng**, which today has become one of the most famous craft villages in the region. Ceramics required large investments for kiln maintenance, which only a co-operative could afford.

Wickerwork, woodcarving and wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl received substantial support from the state and the provinces. Co-operatives in the most renowned craft villages would provide training courses to farmers from the surrounding area: rattan weaving was taught in **Phú Vinh** (Itinerary n°8), wood carving in **Phù Khê** and **Thiết Ứng** (Itinerary n°1), embroidery in **Quất Động** (Itinerary n°6), etc. This ensured that sufficient numbers of workers were available to fulfil orders from the vast Eastern European market. Master artisans were requisitioned by the state to train an army of new artisans. The state was responsible for taking orders and marketing raw materials and commodities. Know-how was either passed on through apprenticeship and training or transmitted from generation to generation within families.

Rattan weaving originated in **Phú Vinh** and spread to all the villages of Phú Nghĩa Commune. Gradually, other communes in the area took an interest in this craft. People would come to work for two months as apprentices in the rattan workshops. Around 1970, the inhabitants of the communes of Trường Yên, Trung Hòa, Đông Phương Yên and Ninh Sở (Thường Tín) invited famous craftspeople over from **Phú Vinh** to teach their craft.

In the 1960s, the number of artisans grew rapidly, thanks to a few artist sculptors who provided training in co-operatives in the villages of **Thiết Ứng**, **Phù Khê** and **Kim Thiều**. At the end of the 1970s, these co-operatives numbered between 100 and 150 members, compared with a few dozen in the 1960s. A craftspeople's income was several times that of a farmer.

Hà Tây's new lacquerware production centre **Hạ Thái** (Itinerary n°5) succeeded in taking over from Bình Vọng, birthplace of the craft, after a co-operative was founded there in the 1960s. A Hà Nội fine arts teacher, himself from **Hạ Thái**, returned to his home village to help set up a co-operative with his brother. He organised training courses for a few dozen villagers and developed the craft. Farmers from the nearby village of Duyên Trường left agriculture and became co-operative members.

However, due to disorganisation, mismanagement, lack of quality control and, more crucially, the low wages paid to co-operative members, the wealth of know-how passed on to farmers by master craftspeople failed to be profitably exploited. In the 1980s, 700 villagers worked at the lacquerware co-operative in **Hạ Thái**, yet it took six months to produce a single item. Goods were sometimes returned as substandard. Famous artisans were unable to make full use of their talent and creativity, as the co-operative could only duplicate models imposed by the state. Some villagers became co-operative members just to receive rice.

Weaving co-operatives were set up to supply state shops. Weavers received looms wider than those traditionally used and sometimes worked at home. Some women tried to keep practising this craft illegally, but the state monopoly made it difficult to find yarn. When the Eastern European market collapsed, in the late 1980s, co-operatives shut down and artisans were left without an outlet for their wares.

### **Craft activities wiped out by co-operativism**

Co-operatives caused the decline of a number of crafts. Cultural and decorative goods as well as goods for use in everyday life were affected. **Thổ Hà** (high quality ceramics), **La Khê** (luxury silk) and mid-range textiles are prime examples. For centuries, **Thổ Hà**, which specialised in the manufacture of ceramics for cultural, religious and domestic use, had earned its reputation from its highly sophisticated funeral urns (Itinerary n°1 bis). A co-operative was set up there in the collectivist period and dissolved in the early 1990s. It had about 500 members in total and was located away from the village. Production was carried out in accordance with government plans and clients' taste and mainly consisted in large items of pottery for use in everyday life. Co-operative members were inadequately paid in rice and neglected the quality of their work. The state was responsible for marketing and organising production and could no longer subsidise losses. The village ceased producing ceramics. Most of the talented craftspeople have since died and their skills have disappeared with them. Another activity emerged in its stead: the manufacture of *bánh đa*, made from rice.

Since 2002, a family of artisans has attempted to revive the craft – mainly quality funeral urns – and founded a new private co-operative with help from the Ministry of Culture, with mixed results.

**La Khê** (Itinerary n°4) used to specialise in manufacturing “*the*” silk, a very light, transparent and flowery fabric worn by the Hanoian aristocracy and used for payment of tribute to China. In the colonial era, there were more master craftspeople in **La Khê** than in **Vạn Phúc**, yet today silk production has almost vanished from the former. During the collectivist period, a crafts section was set up within the agricultural co-operative and family workshops stopped weaving silk. After the co-operative shut down, villagers moved on to other activities. According to one of the last great artisans in **La Khê**, multi-activity spelled the end of the craft, as it restricted the possibilities of developing silk weaving, which requires heavy investment in terms of machines, technical improvements and training. The lack of a market finally killed off what used to be one of the most famous villages in the silk cluster.

In order to resurrect the age-old craft of this prestigious village, a craft co-operative was founded in 2005 by the People’s Committee, the agricultural co-operative and with the help of talented 80-year-old craftsman and former deputy chief of the defunct co-operative, Mr. Nguyễn Công Toàn. The co-operative aspires to produce the antique cloth that earned **La Khê** its former glory. Female workers from the village are paid a piece rate and work on a dozen electric motor looms. Wages are low and employees lack sufficient know-how to rehabilitate this craft.

When co-operatives did not take over, war, insecurity, the loss of a market for luxury goods, social instability, resulting from years of conflict and the large number of men fighting at the front, spelled the death of certain craft activities.

## THE ADVENT OF THE MARKET ECONOMY: WITH OR WITHOUT THE STATE

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, co-operatives could no longer rely on the preferential markets of Eastern Europe. After decades of state control, craftspeople were faced with a tough challenge: in the context of *Đổi Mới* and its open-door policy, they would either have to find new markets by themselves or watch their craft founder. Some villages managed to adapt to the new context, depending on the nature of their activity and on artisans’ personal history and social networks (especially relations with the merchants of Hà Nội, an age-old tradition connected to the Quarter of the 36 Streets). Today, some craftspeople run prosperous international businesses, some have reinvested their talents in other commercial or production activities, while others have left the village or gone back to agriculture.

### *The early days of *Đổi Mới*: some villages were ready for the market economy*

#### The failure of the collectivist system and the laxity of local leaders

Some of the more active craft villages in Bắc Ninh Province developed private initiatives long before the advent of *Đổi Mới*, thanks to the acquiescence of local authorities aware of the failure of the collectivist system. A number of disgruntled artisans left dysfunctional co-operatives and continued practising their craft illegally. Some villages, such as **Đại Bái** and **Dương Ổ**, had taken part in the war effort and produced military equipment (helmets, belt buckles and munitions) in the former, paper for revolutionary tracts in the latter. Then they very early carry out individual production.

In **Dương Ổ** (Itinerary n°1), only the production group that manufactured paper for army batteries could sell goods produced by family workshops. Before the market liberalisation of the 1980s, handicrafts was sometimes sold on the market. As its production grew, **Dương Ổ** became the hub of a mass production network integrating several villages and, to a lesser extent, the army. However, supply of raw materials remained an issue. *Dó* bark could be bought through trade connections with highland people, but acquiring recycled paper was more problematic. A barter system operated between villagers and some administrations, whereby rice was traded against used paper. It is during this period that the craftspeople of **Dương Ổ** built networks with the leaders of small paper manufacturing state enterprises. This gave them access to mechanised workshops and allowed them to become acquainted with production methods thus far unknown to them (DiGregorio M., 1999).

## **The entrepreneurial spirit of merchant villages: lawbreaking, derring-do and business acumen**

In **Đồng Kỵ** (Itinerary n°1), four former buffalo merchants ventured illegally into the antique furniture trade, despite the hazardous nature of the enterprise. It was wartime and the market was limited, but they nevertheless were the instigators of a new craft, thanks to which their village rose to become one of the more dynamic in the Delta. In the iron and steel industry village of Đa Hội, many artisans who did not want to become co-operative members continued to produce goods illegally. Women were responsible for fetching raw materials and selling tools produced in the workshops. Michael DiGregorio's thesis provides us with a lively and gripping account of the perilous situations these intrepid black market amazons got themselves into in order to cross the bridge into the capital city. DiGregorio shows how these craftspeople and merchants managed to maintain their commercial and social network:

“As they had done under the old regime, the traders and producers of these villages escaped the authorities using a variety of means. They feigned ignorance of the law, colluded in erecting a wall of secrecy around the activities of other villagers and solicited the direct support of sympathetic village authorities. Women were tactically deployed to sell goods, while illicit activities were secluded within the inner lanes of the villages. It is no accident that much of the contraband and counterfeit goods that circulated in the socialist “second economy” originated in Từ Sơn's workshops.”

## ***The 1980s and 1990s: the tough lessons of free enterprise***

With the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc, co-operatives went bankrupt and producers had to find new markets for their wares.

### **Tapping into villagers' initiative after decades in the co-operative straightjacket**

When the **Phù Lãng** co-operative closed down, its craftspeople returned to individual production and fired their pottery using the co-operative's kilns, most of which were in Thủ Công. They encountered countless difficulties in trying to adapt to the market and complete orders. The state imposed this activity on Thủ Công, which is in an area not liable to flooding, while other villages had to practise agriculture. Producers tried to adapt and produce different goods. Originally, **Phù Lãng** produced ceramics for daily use, mostly for the local market: tiles and large yellow ochre jars for storing alcohol. The market for these products was limited: they were not in step with the modernisation of lifestyle and there was no market for them at all in the south of the country. Being fired in wood kilns, such goods were not standardised.

Since the 1980s, a number of artisans have started producing funeral urns similar to those from **Thổ Hà** village, which was then going through a period of decline. **Thổ Hà** urns were more expensive than those from **Phù Lãng**, although they had more simple patterns. They were made using moulds rather than a potter's wheel, which is a simpler technique. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, young craftsmen took over from their parents and gave up making funeral urns and jars. They started making decorative pottery, following in the footsteps of Vũ Hữu Nhung, a young craftsman trained at the Fine Arts School in Hà Nội.

In 1965, only eight families in **Đồng Kỵ** were experts in decorative furniture. This new craft initially appeared during the war and only really took off at the end of the 1980s, with *Đổi Mới* and the ensuing liberalisation of trade in wood products as well as the emergence of a middle class. In the space of two decades, this enterprising village of buffalo merchants and small-scale craftspeople enjoyed nationwide success and came to control a large swathe of the export market in wood and quality furniture to Asian countries – especially China, where it has made use of its commercial networks, old and new. At the dawn of *Đổi Mới*, these courageous villagers succeeded in making their craft prosper: the number of artisans rose from 100 to 1,000 between 1970 and 1985.



## Modernising and choosing industrialisation: innovation and entrepreneurship

A first step towards mechanising production had already taken place within the co-operative system. When the majority of these closed down in the early 1990s, co-operative members bought the machines and continued production at home themselves. With the advent of *Đổi Mới*, artisans were aware of the need to increase production and modernise their businesses in order to access new markets and tried to buy machines by any means possible. Networks of textile merchants with links to Hồ Chí Minh City made it possible for villages such as **La Phù** to modernise their knitwear factories rapidly. Workshops in **Vạn Phúc** acquired sophisticated electric looms. Those textile, paper and metalwork villages that managed to reach the semi-industrial stage became players in the market economy system and must now face tough competition from Vietnamese or Chinese companies. **Dương Ổ** and Đa Hội in Bắc Ninh Province are both typical examples.

In **Dương Ổ**, between 1974 and 1994, craftspeople mostly produced paper for the manufacture of firecrackers, using recycled paper and *giấy dó*. Since 1994, when the Vietnamese government banned firecracker production, Dương Ổ has undergone a swift evolution in production methods and techniques: in the space of ten years, producers went from manually producing *giấy dó* to mechanically producing toilet paper, Kraft paper and cardboard on medium-sized production lines. The biggest producers are specialised in typewriter paper and paper for quality notebooks, relying on the international market for their supply of raw materials. **Dương Ổ** is highly industrialised, in the sense that companies are vertically integrated and have succeeded in making the technological advances necessary to adapt to modern production. Industrialisation took place through technology transfer and a pre-existing division of labour, as this village was already somewhat open to the outside world. In 1988, a visionary craftsman initiated the mechanisation of paper production. His family is still prominent in the village and owns two of the three largest businesses in the industrial park.

The main factor behind the rapid surge in scope of this village's activities is its sharp awareness of the need to improve quality and build economies of scale. Owing to the growing size of its businesses and the extraordinary growth of its production, the village now relies on outside workforce, some of whom are technicians trained in the factories of Bãi Bằng.

Within fifteen years, Đa Hội was transformed from a village of producers of agricultural tools, knives and assorted metal instruments into one of the main producers of ingots and iron and steel bars for the construction industry (12% of national production). This success story has been described in detail by DiGregorio. Producers managed to integrate the market through sheer adaptability, organisational skills and ingenuity. They started partly mechanising their production using machines that they altered and adapted to their specific products and relied on a highly fragmented production line. Each workshop specialises in just one stage of the production process.

This is one of the most industrialised villages in Bắc Ninh Province (and so obviously is not on our list of itineraries!), owing its success to entrepreneurial drive, financial risk-taking and a capacity for innovation developed by tightly knit networks of villagers. Đa Hội stands at the helm of a cluster whose ramifications branch out to a dozen nearby villages, with outposts as far as the suburbs of Hồ Chí Minh City.

## The disappearance of the least profitable crafts in Hà Nội's peri-urban area

Elderly people still practise minor crafts, but they are not passing on their skills to the next generation. Some of these crafts, such as gold and tin beating (**Kiều Kỵ**, Itinerary n°2) make do with a workforce that is inadequately trained or very poorly paid. Minor crafts can be seasonal activities connected with religious or cultural rituals, which have enjoyed a revival since the decline of collectivism.

Despite a dramatic drop in the number of artisans, *tò he* rice dough toys and recycled metal toys continue to survive, as long as festivals such as the Mid-Autumn Children's Festival remain an important tradition for Vietnamese people. – But for how much longer?

In many villages, elderly people who formerly specialised in the manufacture of votive objects now spend a few hours in their daily routine producing such goods – mainly ingots. This brings in less than 10,000 VNĐ a day, but helps the poorest households to keep their heads above water.

Production of very labour-intensive cultural and decorative goods by master craftsmen is becoming a thing of the past. A bronze jar incised with gold or silver wire can take an artisans of **Đại Bái** six months of labour, but only sells for three million VNĐ!

Growing urbanisation, unbridled construction in industrial parks with foreign capital or capital from cities, and resulting land speculation, are all a potential threat for such vulnerable activities. Some of these crafts are still practised for lack of alternatives, especially where women are concerned. The production of *nón* (palm leaf conical hats) in **Chuông** village (Itinerary n°7) is mainly carried out by women, children and the elderly. Income from this work is very low – under a dollar a day – yet a large consumer market exists for this elegant emblem of Vietnamese style. *Nón*-making is easily integrated into the family environment and, more importantly in the case of **Chuông**, a local market is at hand to buy the necessary materials and sell one's production. However, should a more lucrative activity be on offer nearby, then a sizeable proportion of young girls would probably relinquish this ancestral craft. In the near future, unrestricted construction of industrial parks in the area producing rattan and bamboo goods (Chương Mỹ District in Hà Tây) may introduce new competition for craft activities and attract part of the workforce from surrounding villages with higher wages.

The map of craft activities in Hà Tây and Bắc Ninh Provinces clearly shows that wickerwork, which is mainly practised by women, developed within a radius of 20 km from the centre of the capital. Textile production has virtually disappeared in Hà Tây, apart from **Vạn Phúc** and mechanised textile villages (**La Phù**, **Ỡ La**, **La Dương**, etc.). However, the most profitable and dynamic sectors of the weaving industry did undergo a process of labour concentration. Certain craftspeople were allowed to employ skilled workers in addition to their family. A report sent to the Court in Huế in 1886 established the presence of one hundred weaving households in the village of **La Khê** (Hà Tây). Each business employed up to 10 weavers (Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, 2002). Today, the former silk cluster village of **La Khê** (Itinerary 4) has changed entirely: all of the land was expropriated and villagers have either become shopkeepers or simply live off the compensation money. Some of them have invested their compensation in the construction of dormitories for workers.

The fact that agriculture is no longer practised in peri-urban areas is a greater cause for concern. Even though agriculture does not in itself suffice to feed a family due to the small size of fields, it can be practised in conjunction with a manual craft requiring little capital input or know-how, such as wickerwork. There is a long list of craft villages whose activities died out after they were engulfed by the city of Hà Nội: the famous papermaking villages on the banks of West Lake (see boxed article p. 28-29), votive ingot manufacturers in Giáp Tứ and Giáp Nhị villages, in the south part of the city (Thanh Trì), the lacemakers of Hà Đông suburb... Two or three copper smelters remain in the famous village of Ngũ Xã on the banks of Trúc Bạch Lake, currently a popular residential spot for wealthier expatriates.

Yet urbanisation is not necessarily a harbinger of impending death for craft activities. Indeed, the most famous craft villages, such as **Bát Tràng** and **Vạn Phúc**, are located in the suburbs of Hà Nội. It all depends on the scale of production, level of mechanisation and cohesion of trade networks underlying these activities. Selective discrimination through urbanisation occurs because of complex economic, social and political criteria, which need to be examined in more detail.

# Hồng

This village, in the southern suburbs of Hà Nội, specialises in manufacturing goods from recycled metal. Is this a dying craft?

Once nestled on the banks of Tô Lịch River, Hồng is home to about fifty families who previously manufactured toys from recycled metal (drum-beating rabbits, butterflies on springs and ships that could sail on water, given a modicum of skill and a dollop of motor oil).

The artisans of this village would spend their days cutting sheet metal, hammering, welding and painting objects that filled children with joy during the Mid-Autumn Festival. Before it became flooded with Chinese goods, Hàng Mã Street in Hà Nội sold products from Hồng. In 2001, only three or four women were still practising the craft. They were the last inheritors of this skill. Today, the village has been absorbed into the urban fabric and no longer coils along the famous Tô Lịch River – whose beauty and cultural wealth was celebrated by famous Vietnamese poet and strategist Nguyễn Trãi (Itinerary n°6) – but along Hà Nội's largest open sewer.

Such toys can now only be found in the Museum of Ethnography and in a few shops on Hàng Thiếc (Tin Street), where shopkeepers have seized on tourists' fascination for these colourful and exotic objects that fit easily inside a suitcase.

(Boulden R., 2007)

# Xuân La

This village (Phu Xuyen, Hà Tây) is specialised in making rice dough figurines (*tò he*). For three centuries at least, Xuân La has produced these dainty and short-lived toys that bring delight to children during festivals or outings to markets and public parks. Despite not being very profitable, the tradition lives on in the face of infinitely superior competition from Chinese-imported video games. These toys have the interesting feature of being edible after use. Around 300 artisans still practise this craft, which is passed on from one generation to the next. These tireless craftsmen-cum-travelling salesmen criss-cross the region, making and selling these magical and ephemeral objects for children. Some of them have left Vietnam and practise their craft in neighbouring countries (China, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand).

(Vietnam Cultural Window, 2002)



# Papermaking villages of Northern Vietnam

When they arrived in the north of Vietnam in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the French took an interest in local paper manufacturing techniques. Although more of a craft than an industry, fundamental papermaking processes did not differ much from what was being practised elsewhere in the world. The main difference concerned the use of 100% botanical raw materials, in contrast to Western practices where rag-based paper dominated the market – at least for the best grades of paper.

In Vietnam, traditional paper (*giấy dó*) was exclusively produced by certain villages, each specialising in one particular variety: wrapping paper, votive paper, printing paper, or watermarked paper for imperial patents. Often, they were the sole crafts practised in a village. The number of villages that earned all or part of their living from this activity is not known. Some of them were located close to areas where raw materials were plentiful. In the region of Phú-Thọ, for instance, villages were built close to the hills where paper mulberry trees, or *cây giương* (*Broussonetia papyrifera* L.) and *dó* (*Wikstroemia balansae* Gilg.) grew – although only the latter were cultivated. In the twentieth century, Crevost Ch. (1917), Clavierie F. (1903) and (1904) and, later, Hunter D. (1947), described how bark was bought, the quality and quantity of paper produced and the papermaking technique of Phi Đình village (Hạ Hòa District, near Thanh Ba). However, the greatest number of papermaking villages was to be found on the outskirts of Hà Nội, close to potential buyers. Bark was brought to the villages by porter or by cart from Phú Thọ and from as far away as Quảng Ninh, Hòa Bình, Bắc Cạn and Thái Nguyên.

Although proximity to raw materials and consumer markets initially appeared to be the essential motive behind the specialisation of papermaking centres, this does not stand up to further analysis. It seems that historical factors linked with the initial establishment of this imported craft had much more to do with the locations of specialised villages. After papermaking techniques were introduced, artisans passed on their jealously guarded trade secrets from one generation to the next. Today, certain skills and approaches to papermaking have declined to the extent that only a single individual remains who is capable of producing goods of a specific quality. While being the last depositary of this know-how, such a person recognizes that unless papermaking techniques can be passed on to a family member, who alone is entitled to receive it, they will be lost forever.

We know many things about these villages on the outskirts of Hà Nội. The road known as Thuy Khuê leading to the grapefruit village (Bưởi) and running along the southern bank of West Lake was known as Paper Village Road until 1951. In the colonial period, it was a spot for Sunday walks popular among the French. As a result, technical descriptions and exceptional visual archives remain, including drawings by Henri Oger and Gustave Dumoutier, photographs from the former EFEO<sup>1</sup> collection (now in Vietnam) and private collections such as that of the Imbert brothers, kept at ECPAD<sup>2</sup> (Ivry-sur-Seine, France). Using this documentation and testimonies collected from the elders of Yên Thái village, it is relatively easy to recreate the production techniques as well as the social context of paper production.

In Yên Thái, paper production is a very ancient craft. For seven centuries, this village has been famed for this activity in much the same way that Bát Tràng is known for ceramics and Ngũ Xã for its bronze products. In 1921, 126 families in the commune were listed as making a living from paper production. The adjoining villages of Hồ Khẩu and Đông Xã also derived their livelihood from this craft. Villages specialised in paper production as follows: Yên Thái village produced writing and printing paper, while Hồ Khẩu and Đông Xã villages made higher quality paper in a

larger format used for printing traditional folk images. A few workshops were scattered further south near Paper Bridge (Cầu Giấy), including that of the Lại family, the papermaking elite who only produced higher-end paper for official patents. A string of specialised villages stretched from West Lake to Tô Lịch.

As industrialisation took off rapidly in the 1920s, newsprint, the quintessential industrial product, began to flood the market of the new colony and hastened the decline of local production. The French eventually concluded that proper factories needed to be established locally to produce cellulose fibre, using local wood. At the time, Indochina was experiencing a paper crisis with significant financial repercussions, since printing paper had to be imported from Metropolitan France. Pawlowsky summed up this paradoxical situation as follows: “we are importing cellulose from the chilly North, where vegetation grows most slowly, as though the warmest regions refused to supply us.” Yet very few species of tree had the qualities required for papermaking. This largely remains the case today, especially considering the extent of deforestation in Vietnam. Paper produced in Bãi Bằng factory, established thirty years ago with help from Sweden, is made with cellulose from eucalyptus trees that sprout all over the hills of the midlands of Northern Vietnam. Eucalyptus trees were chosen because of their ability to grow rapidly, but their cultivation has caused the soil to become acidified and barren. All this highlights the fact that previous decisions made by Vietnamese or Chinese paper manufacturers were largely sound, although they only satisfied limited demand in a country with a low literacy rate, where paper was used sparingly.

Today, paper production remains inadequate in Vietnam as it covers at best a third of domestic demand. The country is dependent on imported paper pulp due to a lack of raw materials. Supply is not sufficiently diversified and the influx of imported paper, which has been easier to obtain since Vietnam became a member of the WTO, represents a considerable threat to an industry already in crisis. Besides a handful of factories worthy of the name, production units are nothing more than village workshops that use obsolete technology and produce low-grade paper. As they work on a small scale, they have to buy raw materials in small quantities and at a higher cost. They are shutting down one after another, as they do not have the financial means to implement the treatment of wastewater now required by law.

The high quality paper market, reproducing the kinds of traditional paper already mentioned, could be made to yield more added value, but is not being exploited to its full potential. Yên Thái discontinued production of this entirely manual craft in the early eighties. Manufacturing high quality paper consumes large amounts of water, as well as firewood for the furnace, and the industry fell victim to competition from industrial paper manufacturers. In search of ancient techniques, we visited Bắc Ninh Province and more specifically the village of **Đương Ổ**, Phong Khê Commune, Yên Phong District, where paper production is still a major activity and almost 3,000 people make a living from this craft. Though production of *dó* paper still survives, it has become marginalised, largely replaced by recycled and votive paper. The know-how remains intact and a few technical improvements have been added; ancient methods for screening a thin layer of *dó* bark pulp onto the papermaking frame or removing *dó* bark from strips of wood have remained unchanged. They are in fact identical to the methods and practices captured in old sepia photographs.

Le Failler P., EFEO, Hà Nội, March 2008

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<sup>2</sup>L’Etablissement de Communication et de Production Audiovisuelle de la Défense, Ivry-sur-Seine, France. <http://www.ecpad.fr/>

## ***Historical perspective: rapid turnover, market adaptation and the ancestral roots of handicrafts***

As we contemplate the history of handicrafts in the Red River Delta over the course of several centuries, an endless cycle seems to emerge: its narratives tell of the birth of the crafts, their dissemination and specialisation, technical improvements and eventually their death and resurrection. Crafts are mobile: artisans have a strong tendency to migrate and develop their techniques wherever they find a favourable market. Indeed, the origins of many of the crafts of South Vietnam can be traced back to the Red River Delta. Craftspeople have always been present, regardless of the vicissitudes in the country's economic history or tensions with the colonisers or dominant powers. The instigators of crafts were frequently individuals – whether mythical or historical figures. Each era has been more or less favourable or detrimental to each specific craft, depending on factors such as the dynamism of the capital, the nature of the reign of each ruling monarch, or changes of influence in markets and communication routes.

- The subregional and international context has had a significant impact on these crafts: since *Đổi Mới*, competition from certain foreign goods has toughened (during the colonial period, coarse textiles were undermined by competing European-made fine cotton fabric); competition with China has been disastrous for such sectors as silk production, metal and bamboo containers, etc.
- Fashions change – latania palm leaf coats and heron feather hats are no longer popular – and this, coupled with industrial development, has sounded the death knell for many craft activities.
- Crafts associated with religious worship are being revived (votive objects, lacquer and wood carving, bronze and copper objects for ancestors' shrines, etc.). These practices were abolished during the collectivist era.
- Political and customs measures may have limited the production of certain crafts, while encouraging a process of conversion for others. The 1994 ban on firecracker production boosted the industrialisation of papermakers in **Dương Ổ**, but also wiped those villages in Hà Tây who failed to reconvert to a different activity right off the handicraft map. Firecracker production had been established through co-operatives in Thanh Oai District in the 1980s, where it took over from an ailing wickerwork industry.

The type of cluster organisation characteristic to Vietnamese handicrafts is a pre-capitalist system that has survived the advent of the market economy. This stands in sharp contrast with the rest of East and Southeast Asia, where large, international corporations thrive on laissez-faire economics and cheap labour. Despite the competition with China, Vietnam is managing to steer its own course and continues to produce artisans. But for how much longer?

The rate at which villagers are renewing and replacing craft activities is indicative of these people's potential for adapting rapidly to new situations (some villages have successfully mechanised and increased the scale of their production and employ a sizeable workforce). However, this also highlights the frailty of certain crafts that are particularly vulnerable to economic and social conditions or suffer from geographical isolation.

A number of trends emerge from a longitudinal study based on the mapping of craft villages in Hà Tây and Bắc Ninh Province; this study consists mainly of a comparison between the mapping and the census conducted by Pierre Gourou in the 1930s along with various censuses carried out in the 2000s.

### **Hà Tây: the province of a thousand crafts**

A comparison between the 2003 map and the map of villages drawn up on the basis of the 1930 census reveals that out of 216 villages listed in 1930 for which an activity was specified, 103 no longer practise a craft activity, 56 have changed their activity and 60 are still working in the same sector.

During the colonial era, half of the villages were grouped in craft clusters: a large concentration of textile villages appears in the north (Hoài Đức District), while another cluster of villages specialised in conical hats, raincoats and, to a lesser extent, rattan and bamboo goods, appears south of the centre (Thanh Oai); *thợ mộc* villages in the south, embroiderers in Thường Tín District in the south-west and a smaller cluster of lacquerware and wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl in Phú Xuyên. Food production is highly diversified and dispersed around the province (rice husking or *hàng sao*, alcohol, assorted noodle producers, soya bean or rice cakes). The other villages are scattered according to a rationale of spatial distribution that can only be explained on a case-by-case basis, by examining their founding myths (see map p. 32). The dissemination of the crafts, the good and bad fortune of each village and the role played by craft ancestors all contributed to creating the very complex geographical configuration of craft villages.

**Textiles** are prominent in this province: 20,000 workers are involved in this industry, out of a total of 54,000 listed in the Delta. 4,500 lace makers, over 6,000 weavers producing a wide variety of cotton cloth and over 4,000 silk producers and spinners. Cotton producing villages manufacture clothes, terry towels or belts. Each artisan specialises in one type of goods, but several activities such as production of cotton, coarse silk, lace or fishing nets can take place within the same village. This sector is mainly the preserve of women.

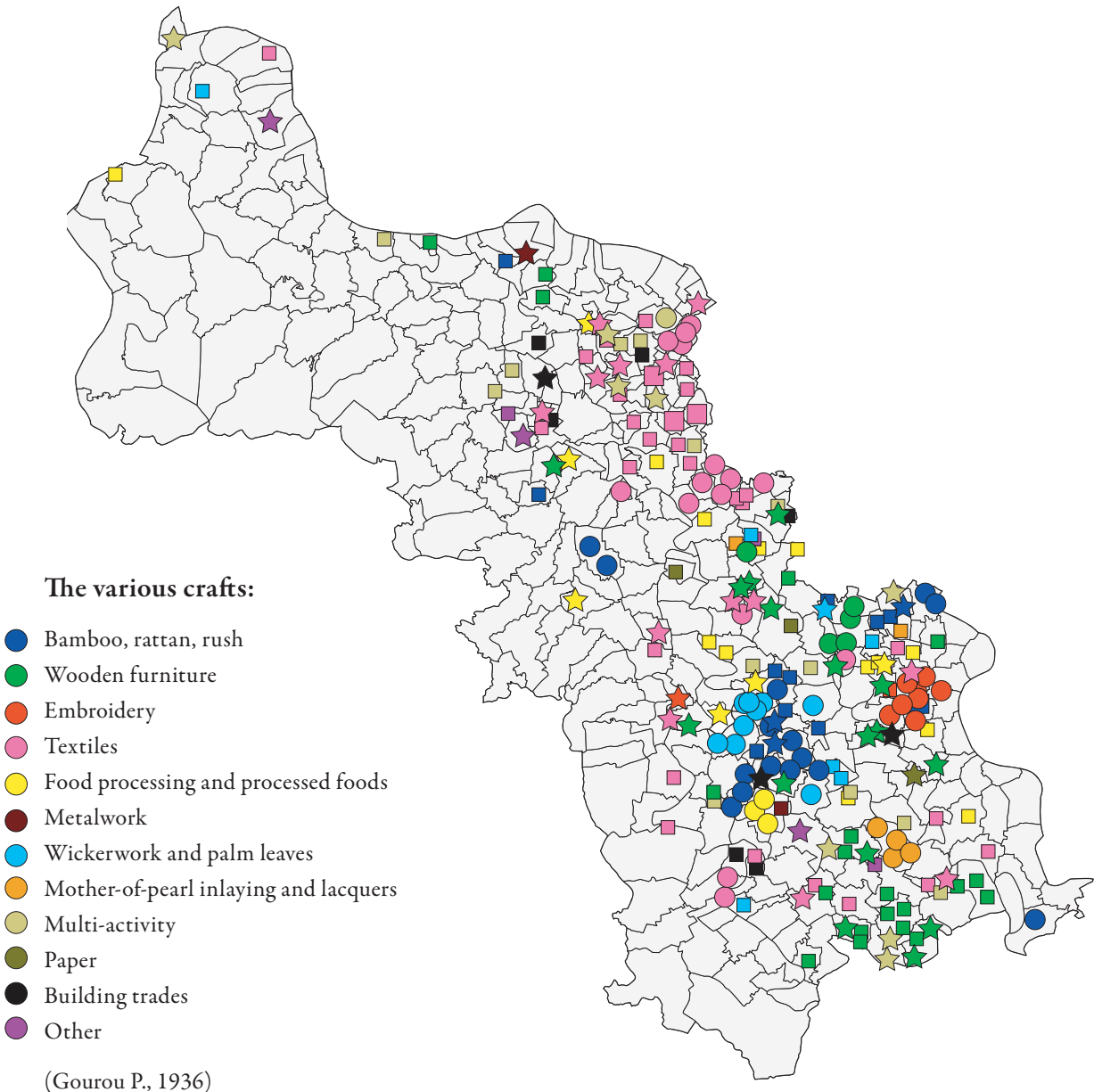
In 1930, the province of Hà Tây (at that time made up of the former Hà Đông and Sơn Tây Provinces) numbered 37 villages specialising in cotton cloth and cotton by-products and 25 silk spinners or silk producers. Half of these villages were located in Hoài Đức District and its surroundings (34 villages). Near Hà Đông was the silk cluster composed of seven La villages (**La Phù**, **La Khê**, La Nội, La Dương, La Cỗ, Đông La, Ý La) and three Mỗ villages (Đại Mỗ, Tây Mỗ, Văn Mỗ) (Itinerary n°4). The other villages were located north and south of this large textile-producing hub. Embroiderers were – and still are – situated around the parent village of **Quất Động** in Thường Tín District. This craft is doing fairly well. It was helped along and revitalised by co-operatives during the collectivist era and, despite a series of severe jolts in the early days of *Đổi Mới* because of the lack of a clearly defined market, today there are over fifty embroidery villages in Hà Tây Province (Itinerary n°6).

What is left of colonial-era spinning and weaving villages? Only 11 remain in Hoài Đức District and its surroundings, which mainly specialise in mid-range cotton cloth for the local market, in addition to two silk villages. Others have either completely ceased producing handicrafts or reconverted to another activity, such as food production, as is the case of most villages around **Cát Quế**, **Minh Khai** and **Dương Liễu** (Itinerary n°9). Those new textile activities that successfully spread to bordering villages have become mechanised. Some such villages (e.g. **La Phù**, Itinerary n°4) employ a large workforce.

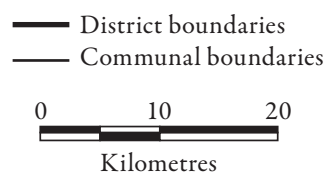
**Woodcraft** also used to be a prominent activity in this province, with about sixty specialised villages. Itinerant carpenters, known as *thợ mộc*, came from about thirty villages, mostly in the south of the province (Ứng Hòa) in an area prone to flooding during the monsoon. Pierre Gourou counted 9,000 of them in Hà Đông Province, out of a total 23,000 listed in the Delta. As their land could not be cultivated during the monsoon, these artisans would spend half the year elsewhere in the Delta – some would go as far as Saigon – where they worked on the construction of houses and religious buildings. Other woodworkers – lacquer artisans, pit sawyers, woodcutters and woodcarvers, machine tool manufacturers – were scattered around the province.

Woodcraft currently employs an abundant workforce, but today the crafts are different: new activities have appeared (mainly production of quality furniture around Vạn Điểm or Chuyên Mỹ in the south) while others no longer exist. *Thợ mộc* have vanished from the landscape: large-scale water management projects carried out during the collectivist era have made biannual or even triannual rice harvests a reality, and the concrete strip houses that replace traditional dwellings with heavy wooden beams have turned this craft – formerly organised in guilds – into a thing of the past. Some *thợ mộc* villages turned to the production of rattan and bamboo goods, which requires little investment, or gave up crafts altogether. Only four *thợ mộc* villages in the province managed to continue working with wood, none of them in Ứng Hòa District, which is poorer and further removed from urban centres. In the north of the province, in Thạch Thất District, a large mid-range furniture cluster has developed around Hữu Bằng and Chàng Sơn, formerly populated by travelling craftspeople and women weavers. This cluster produces furniture for the domestic market only and is almost as vibrant as **Đông Kỵ** in Bắc Ninh. **Nhị Khê**, which specialises in wood turning (Itinerary n°5), has passed on its craft to two former *thợ mộc* villages.

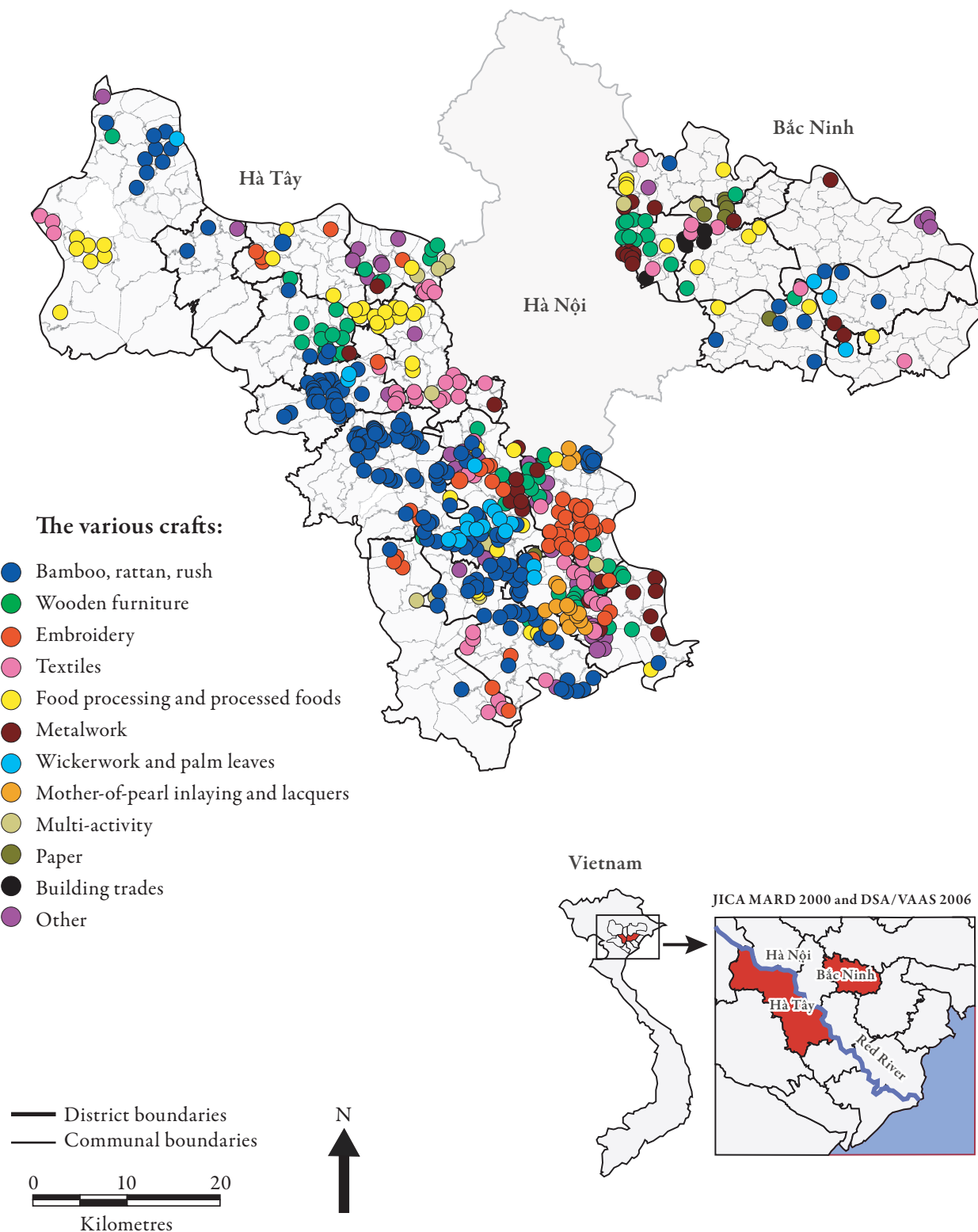
# Craft villages in 1930 (Hà Tây Province)



- Villages still practising a craft:**
- ☆ Villages that have changed crafts since 1930
  - Villages still practising the same craft
  - Villages that no longer practise a craft



# Craft villages in 2006 (Hà Tây and Bắc Ninh Provinces)





Bình Vọng – the birthplace of lacquer in Hà Tây Province – prospered from this craft in colonial times, but it has since died out: artisans passed away one after another and no-one took up the trade. After the war, the craft and the temple dedicated to its founder had both vanished without trace. The only surviving craftsman is now over 90 years old and no longer practises the craft. This village, situated near the A1 Road and Thường Tín Station, now earns its income from commerce; since this is more profitable, no-one has tried to resurrect lacquerwork. The village of **Hạ Thái**, which practises diversified crafts (e.g. wickerwork, votive objects) and commercial activities, is situated a few kilometres north and took over the lacquerware business during the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the great artisans from this village learned their skill in Bình Vọng.

Finally, **wickerwork** is currently present in over 40% of villages in Hà Tây and was already highly developed by the 1930s, when it was practised in about fifty villages around the province. Gourou listed 19 types of utensils and objects made from bamboo: from chopsticks and headdresses to fishing implements and baskets of all kinds. In addition, over twenty villages manufactured latania palm leaf products. Villages specialised in such goods were scattered around the province and each of them would supply its local population.

This fluid and changeable craft is prevalent today, but its geographical configuration and type of production have changed. Although a few elderly people still weave fish traps, scoops for bailing water or large baskets for carrying rice, most of the production is for export. Decorative tableware (e.g. trays, baskets, vases, pictures, lamps) is sold to developed Asian countries or in the West.

In the area to the north of Hà Tây (a number of whose villages are now under the jurisdiction of Hà Nội), 17 villages specialising in the production of various types of items were listed (*nón*, latania palm leaf coats, large baskets (*bó*), etc.). These crafts are no longer practised there, except in the Ninh Sở cluster on the banks of the Red River, which includes seven villages and a total of 4,000 craftspeople. This cluster formerly produced very tightly woven bamboo jars for storing unhusked rice. Nowadays, these artisans produce bamboo and rattan objects for export. A co-operative set up during the collectivist era helped to spread the craft to other villages and obtain access to the international market.

One of the largest basket-weaving clusters was set up around a single village, **Phú Vinh**, in Chương Mỹ District, in the west of the province. It is renowned for its ancestral know-how in producing rattan products. Thanks to a co-operative whose output sold on the East European market, the craft was passed on to a dozen other villages in the area (Itinerary n°8).

Over fifteen villages in the conical hat cluster of **Chuông** managed to survive the vicissitudes of history and preserve their craft, despite its low profitability and labour-intensive nature (Itinerary n°7). It has only died out in four villages. The cluster has become integrated within an area specialising in bamboo and wicker that has managed to diversify and extend its activities (fans, cages, incense sticks, etc.).

A village specialised in wicker weaving, **Lưu Thượng**, in the south of the province (Itinerary n°7), was moderately active in the 1930s and became the centre of a small and dynamic cluster open to the export market. It has disseminated its know-how to a dozen other villages. It is linked with the *nón* manufacturing cluster through subcontracting.

Small, scattered villages specialising in a single item did not survive the open-door policy, except in cases where they were helped along by co-operatives and managed to disseminate their know-how and increase the scale of production for export sales. Former clusters manage to survive, but this may not last much longer for those who fail to break into the international market.

## **Bắc Ninh: cradle of Vietnamese civilisation, Buddhism and... trade**

Half of the 77 villages listed in Bắc Ninh Province in 2003 developed a craft activity in Imperial times. Bắc Ninh forms part of Kinh Bắc, the cradle of Vietnamese civilisation, birthplace of Vietnamese Buddhism and home to a particularly rich religious and cultural heritage. It also boasts a great many market places, as it is located at the crossroads of commercial routes between the Delta and the highlands on the road to China:

- wood carving villages of **Phù Khê** and **Hương Mạc**;
- the bronze and copper beating centre of **Đại Bái**;
- pottery villages of **Phù Lãng**;
- **Đa Hội**, formerly specialised in the metal parts of ploughing tools, has become an important centre for the iron and steel industry.

In colonial times, craft villages were concentrated along the **Đuống** River and in the area close to **Hà Nội** to the west. There were just over sixty of them within the territory of today's Bắc Ninh Province (Bắc Ninh has lost many of its former communes to Hà Nội). However, over half of these villages no longer practise their craft, 16 of them have kept it up and 12 have converted to other types of production.

The textile industry suffered most from collectivisation: only three of the province's 12 textile villages remain (work is mainly performed by women). Silk production has completely disappeared. Only one village situated on the other side of Hà Nội's provincial border, **Chi Đông**, still breeds silkworms as a seasonal activity. Cocoons are reeled off and treated in a different village (**Bunney T.**).

Yet in 1930 **Pierre Gourou** counted 1,650 weavers in this province, 600 of whom specialised in silk. Cotton cloth was mainly produced by women using rudimentary narrow looms. Colonial-era wickerwork villages have all disappeared, except for one. The dozen or so villages practising this craft today only started doing it more recently. Only two colonial-era food-processing villages have survived (e.g. noodles, various cakes, rice wine, rice flour or cassava starch). As with wickerwork, today's food-processing villages are recent recruits.

Food-processing activities have greatly changed. Although such practices as noodle and vermicelli production are still widespread, others such as distilling rice wine and rice husking performed by *hàng sáo* are only practised by a handful of villagers; rice husking only brought a very meagre income. Despite low standards of living and the predominance of rice in their diet, villagers of the Red River Delta have a fertile culinary imagination: for decades, many villages have learned to make a wide variety of rice cakes, noodles and sweets to spice up an otherwise dull diet. The poorest families still eat *đậu phụ*, or tofu, made from soya, to replace animal protein. Nowadays, only one village specialises in producing *đậu phụ*. During the colonial era, eight villages were specialised in alcohol production. Today, only two remain in Bắc Ninh Province, one of which is trying to improve the calibre of its output and obtain a quality-label for commercial purposes.

Although wickerwork is practised by almost 40% of craft villages in Hà Tây Province, it is uncommon in Bắc Ninh, where growing industrialisation and the mechanisation of many activities have caused the ruin of this labour-intensive and poorly paid craft. It also suffered from the competition created by plastic containers, largely imported from China. Former wickerwork villages in Bắc Ninh have ceased practising this craft. Only five villages in the east of the province produce baskets or bamboo furniture, all of them only since relatively recently.



## CRAFT VILLAGES TODAY: NEW FORMS OF PRODUCTION

Between 1995 and 2002, the number of craft villages in the Red River Delta increased from 500 to 1,000, which represents 40% of craft villages in Vietnam. Half of these are located within a fifty-kilometre radius of Hà Nội. The rapid development of crafts and especially industrial activities has generated a vigorous growth in production and increased the surface area used; it has also provided jobs for many under-employed villagers previously working in agriculture. According to a 1999 World Bank report, craft villages represented 41% of GDP in the industrial non-state sector and employed 64% of the workforce in the non-state-run industrial sector. The growth rate for rural handicrafts and industrial production reached 9% a year at the end of the 1990s and exports exceeded USD 600 million in 2003.

Some village clusters, led by highly enterprising craft villages, concentrate a large workforce within a wide radius. Their environment has greatly changed and the average family income is four times higher than in agricultural villages. Wages range between 500,000 VNĐ and 2.5 million VNĐ per month, depending on tasks and type of goods. Artisans' standard of living has vastly improved and many of them are investing in modernising their homes.

Villages are diversifying their activities and accommodate larger numbers of people, which prevents migration to cities or to other productive regions of Vietnam. However, how can one create new craft and industrial parks in the densely populated villages of this flood-prone Delta without harming the environment or jeopardising a culture and heritage that is thousands of years old?

### *Family-run businesses in craft village clusters*

Three-quarters of all businesses are still small-scale and family-based. Craftsmanship is still largely manual work practised in workshops in the heart of the villages. These activities are very much integrated into the life and daily routine of families, with children and the elderly assisting when necessary. Handicrafts employ over 50% of the population in most of these villages. Only the wealthier artisans have access to land outside the village, where small and medium-sized businesses set up shop, developing and modernising the production process.

### **Villages pooled into clusters**

The map of craft activities around Hà Nội (**see map p. 33**) shows groups of villages practising the same activity. Some clusters include several dozen villages – as is more commonly the case for wickerwork and embroidery clusters. Pierre Gourou already described this trend during the colonial era and it has become more pronounced with time: currently, very few villages are not part of a cluster. Only those pottery villages that survived the political and economic upheavals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are able to perform the entire production process within their village, as is the case in **Bát Tràng** and **Phù Lãng**. These villages are also situated along rivers, the preferred communication routes for obtaining raw materials and selling heavy, bulky goods. However, they do rely on other villages for workforce and services.

A cluster is a geographical grouping of villages specialising in the same sector, whose businesses are interconnected and within which there is a high degree of labour division. The development of this geographically based production system came in response to the need for production to expand spatially after Vietnam opened up to the market economy. Clusters widen rural workers' scope for employment to neighbouring villages, facilitate the creation of new production sites and allow for the division of labour among villages with complementary activities; they also encourage the development of commercial services higher up and lower down the commodity chain. An elaborate subcontracting system links the most dynamic villages with neighbouring ones who have more recently joined the cluster, or private companies with family businesses – depending on the type of activity. Relations among craftspeople and between villages within the same cluster are largely based on family ties, friendship or political and professional connections whose origin may go back a long way.

The particularity of Vietnamese craft villages compared with their Western equivalents is largely the result of the country's economic, demographic and political context. Like China, Vietnamese economy is in transition. Rural density can be very high and the workforce is abundant, young and only partly qualified (in ancient craft villages, know-how is passed on within families from one generation to the next). This production system stimulates the ingenuity of producers,

as demonstrated in various ways: the widespread use of recycled materials, the practice of making home-made spare parts when they are too difficult or expensive to obtain on the local market, or prolonging the use of machines far beyond their conceivable lifespan.

Lastly, these peculiarly social and political forms of organisation, built up from family dynamics, clearly favour trade, organisation into commodity chains, networking, etc. They encourage integration and co-operation between workshops and businesses of varying sizes, each one responsible for a part of the production process. A cluster of craft villages is a localised production system bringing together traditional rural industries within an endogenous development process. Geographical concentration of small businesses can be associated with the development of trading networks: it promotes economies of scale, enables a more efficient use of supply networks and encourages dissemination of know-how within a society deeply rooted in village culture where several generations live under the same roof. A cluster of craft villages includes variable numbers of localities and businesses, whether officially registered or family-based. The way these clusters function depends on the nature of their activities.

The organisation of clusters takes place on three levels:

- **At village level:** work is divided up between complementary businesses, each responsible for one stage of production: For instance, an aluminium kettle is manufactured by several workshops, each specialising in making one part of the object – the bottom, the spout or the handle. Businesses can also specialise in one type of product: kettles, trays, basins or decorative objects in the case of the metal beating village (**Đại Bái**, Itinerary n°3); fresh rice noodles, dried rice noodles, rice wine or cassava starch in the case of food-processing villages. In addition, mechanisation and diversification have extended the production chain and generated an increase in the division of labour between households. Recycled raw materials (paper or metal) are traded down a long line of collectors, then processed by artisans who have invested in machines – smelters sell recycled metal in the form of ready-to-use sheets, which can then be cut to make pots, trays and gongs.
- **Between villages:** several types of inter-village relations can be found within clusters. Each village specialises in one type of product but relies on others for raw materials, know-how, production space and workforce. In the iron and steel village of **Đa Hội**, artisans from the parent village are responsible for smelting and casting scrap iron, selling ingots and turning them into rods or bars, while surrounding villages provide the workforce and services (e.g. manual transport, trading in chemicals and technical assistance), rent out plots of land to extend production space and manufacture iron gates with rods bought from **Đa Hội**. A subcontracting system operates among villages. The most dynamic ones, where many private companies are based, have contractual relations with family businesses in neighbouring villages. These prosperous communities are the instigators of the craft who disseminated its practice, either via co-operatives during the collectivist era or apprenticeships after *Đổi Mới*. Large-scale enterprises in the formal sector take orders from foreign clients and subcontract them out to production managers from different villages in the cluster that specialise in this type of product. The latter then redistribute the work among numerous households who only carry out the manual part of the production process. Assembly, quality control and finishing take place in the prime manufacturer's workshops.
- **Between village businesses and formal sector companies on industrial parks:** large-scale companies established on urban industrial parks subcontract the production of spare parts to specialised workshops in craft villages. This type of relationship can be found in the metalworking industry.

In addition, this system is well adapted to the context of a transition economy. According to Michael DiGregorio (2001), cluster structures are far more flexible and more capable of responding rapidly to market demand than private or State-run formal sector enterprises. This is in large part thanks to reduced bureaucracy and to the fact that most businesses within cluster structures belong to the informal sector. Indeed, family members can contribute to production, residential dwellings can be used and working hours can be adapted to individual orders, which increases flexibility (i.e. night shifts, overtime, etc.). Employment is flexible and can easily adapt to the market or to the conditions of production (frequent power cuts and problems with the supply of raw materials can slow down production).







SANDING FURNITURE, ĐỒNG KỲ

Businesses within a production chain are able to take over economic niches neglected by large, formal sector companies, who must adhere to management and quality standards and abide by much more restrictive legislation. For the least skilled tasks, they also have the advantage of a more flexible and largely underpaid family-based workforce, most of whom carry out agricultural activities in parallel. During the rice harvest, workers abandon the workshops, even though their presence might be needed to complete orders for clients.

### **The origins of clusters: high division of labour and specialised villages**

Pierre Gourou observed a tendency for each village to specialise in one specific activity and for labour to be divided among villages, which thus become integrated production groups manufacturing the same type of goods.

This process probably started at the onset of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, at a time when handicrafts underwent rapid development under the impetus of the growth of Hà Nội. The production process needed to be rationalised. According to Gourou, it was based on:

- A monopolistic mindset organised around social rules and rituals. Once they had succeeded in developing an industry, villages wanted to protect their production methods, which therefore had to be kept secret.
- Poverty meant that craftspeople sought to make a swift profit and lacked the means to purchase large amounts of raw materials or to lock up capital. Individual villages would therefore only carry out part of the production process and sell semi-manufactured goods to another village, which would in turn manufacture the finished product.

Division of labour is particularly noticeable in the silk industry, where the production process entails several different stages. Each stage is carried out by a different village within a network: growing mulberry trees and breeding silkworms, reeling off the silkworm's cocoon, spinning silk, weaving and dyeing. Many weaving villages were unable to breed silkworms, because their land was not suitable for growing mulberry trees. In addition, each weaving village specialised in one of the many different varieties of silk – organza, brocade, taffeta, velvet or raw silk (Itinerary n°4). This is how craft village clusters originated. Some activities were complementary: the lacquerware manufacturers of Bình Vọng often worked with woodcraft or wickerwork villages.

Another factor explaining the high degree of interdependence among villages is the fragmented way in which raw materials are used for the manufacture of various goods (e.g. bamboo or latania palm leaves). Each village only uses part of the raw materials for the manufacture of the goods it specialises in, and then sells on what is left to other villages, which use it to produce the category of objects they specialise in. For example, the potters of **Bát Tràng** use ash for the enamel on their pottery. They buy this ash from the potters of Đình Xá, who produce unvarnished pottery.

### ***Villages as a densely populated and multifunctional space subject to the stress of growth***

In 1999, residential density was higher than 15,000 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> in 28% of villages in the Delta. This is similar to the figure for Hà Nội city centre. In most craft villages, craftmaking is performed at home, in the heart of the village. Available space in the home is very limited and some activities – especially those involving machines – cannot be accommodated. This is an issue when it comes to modernising an activity.

In the 1990s, in villages that had begun to mechanise their production process or increase their scale of production thanks to access to international markets, the most dynamic artisans, with help from local authorities, set up new production facilities wherever they could find space – along roads or dykes, on the site of former co-operatives or administrative buildings or on ponds that had since been filled in. At the request of craftspeople, provincial People's Committees changed the status of agricultural land, which became land to be used for industrial production, and created informal mini-handicraft zones. Provincial and communal People's Committees established a battery of legal and regulatory provisions to facilitate access to land for artisans; this, in a country where paddy fields are regarded as sacred and where the status of agricultural land cannot be changed easily. Then in the 2000s, provincial People's Committees enacted laws to enable the creation of industrial parks in the most dynamic communes.

A three-tier production regime has emerged:

- In industrial parks, businesses undergoing a modernisation process have attained a similar level of production to that of state-run or private mixed capital formal sector enterprises. Their production costs are lower and they have colonised niche markets for secondary quality goods. They are using increasing amounts of space and energy.
- Companies beginning the mechanisation process have set up on the outskirts of residential areas, along dykes, on the sites of former co-operatives or by partially filled-in ponds.
- In village residential areas, only manual activities or those requiring small machines remain. Family businesses have a weak capacity for investment and rely largely on family members or workers paid a daily flat rate. They mostly work as subcontractors. Such activities are tolerated despite the deafening noise emitted by some workshops (e.g. metalwork, papermaking and textiles).

These policies are nevertheless causing severe problems: farmers are being expropriated of their land while the more affluent craftspeople indulge in land speculation; in addition, residential property is being built in these industrial parks and industrial wastewater treatment systems are not being used. The high price of land restricts possibilities for the less affluent artisans to access such sites. As long as the specific sociology of craft villages is not taken into account, attempts to separate production from living space are doomed to failure. Craftspeople live with their craft. They are, so to speak, married to it. Their daily routine is structured around it. They sometimes work at night to complete large orders and prefer to live and produce in the same place in order to supervise their workers and protect their property. All family members, young and old alike, are involved in the production process, according to their abilities and available time, which is also a way of passing on family know-how from generation to generation. Owing to the rapid increase in the scale of production, village workshops are packed with raw materials, machines and workers. The homes of **Dương Ổ** are stacked with recycled paper, while those of **Đông Kỳ** are crammed solid with wood and machines. In the homes of **Đại Bái**, basins containing hazardous chemicals sit alongside utensils for everyday life. Pollution is harming public health and especially children, who roam inside these multi-purpose and cramped dwellings at great risk to their health. Hazards are particularly numerous in metalworking villages, where lung diseases, infertility among women and deformed babies are common consequences (Institute of Environmental Science and Technology, 2002).

Most artisans are unaware of these risks as they single-mindedly pursue the development of their activity. Public space is also overrun with raw materials as some consider the street outside their door to be the perfect storage place. Local authorities lack the legal apparatus to prevent craftspeople from acting as they see fit. Interaction between lineages and local authorities disrupts land management.

In wickerwork and food-processing villages (e.g. vermicelli, yeast, etc.), artisans have to deal with a shortage of space to dry their products. Their activity drops off sharply during the rainy season. As these crafts yield low profits, they can only be carried out in villages equipped with drying areas, such as those located along the dykes (**Dương Liễu** and **Minh Khai**, Itinerary n°9). They are restricted to parts of the village with still undeveloped land or to family homes with large courtyards. However, drying food products along extremely dusty dyke roads poses hygiene problems.

The rapid growth of companies situated in industrial parks has nevertheless reached its peak due to competition from China and between mechanised businesses within the area. The surge in the price of raw materials (it is becoming increasingly difficult to import wood or buy recycled metal) and the high cost of borrowing further contribute to curbing the trend.

In villages where craftspeople have little means at their disposal, building an industrial site is a thorny undertaking. Artisans who bought a plot of land in the industrial park in **Đại Bái** are taking a very long time to set up there. In 2008, four years after the site was established, only about twenty out of 168 registered businesses had built a workshop. Lack of funds, compulsory construction standards imposed by the Management Committee, the need to mortgage one's home to obtain a loan and the length of administrative procedures to borrow money all impede the process. Craftspeople are only able to change the scale of production and mechanise their business – an essential move if one is to afford the industrial park's higher production costs – if the economical context is favourable and they control



the production chain upstream and downstream. Lastly, moving away from other artisans who are part of the same production chain tends to destabilise the way in which work is organised. Many craftspeople wait for sufficient numbers of their colleagues to have moved before following them. The location of plots of land in the industrial park is drawn by lots without taking into account the spatial distribution specific to clusters (see Itinerary n°3, the quest for the holy kettle in *Đại Bái*, p. 162-163).

### ***Challenges to improving rural planning in the Red River Delta***

Craft villages are facing multiple challenges, one of which is Vietnam's accession to the WTO. The latter implies an array of economic measures in order for companies to comply with requirements, which may have serious implications for craft workshops, three-quarters of which belong to the informal sector. However, we will only examine two of the most conspicuous questions: environmental issues and improvement in the quality of products.

#### **The difficulties of managing environmental challenges**

The rapid development of craft activities, and especially industrial activities, has caused serious environmental and public health problems. The original spatial configuration of craft villages was forged over centuries by the practice of handicrafts; today it is subjected to new environmental and social stresses resulting from the increase in scale of production methods. In this densely populated deltaic region, agricultural land is criss-crossed by a dense network of waterways that overlaps areas dedicated to handicraft production. The water management system has been designed and modernised at communal level to maintain agricultural production and protect the population against flooding. However, waterways have been diverted from their original purpose. Some waterways and water holes originally intended for irrigation and agricultural runoff or for fish farming have been turned into sewers by handicraft and industrial companies who tend to set up close by. Since the water system is unable to separate agricultural run-off from industrial wastewater, pollutants produced by craft villages are discharged in the waterways and end up on agricultural land.

In some craft villages (e.g. papermakers, metalworkers, textile workers, etc.), water is very heavily polluted with heavy metals, acids and coliform bacteria (DiGregorio M. and al., 1999). This threatens the productivity of paddy fields as well as the inhabitants' health, while spreading to neighbouring areas. Smoke from ceramic producers' coal-fired kilns scatter dust particles hazardous to the health of the villagers. Small rural businesses pollute less than large factories because they use recycled raw materials that require less chemicals for processing and consume less energy. They do, however, cause severe damage to human health and the environment because of their large numbers and the fact that they are geographically dispersed and located in village centres.

Craft activities are imperilled by the growing numbers of family-based, individual businesses lacking the capital to invest in wastewater treatment, by the shortage of space to extend production and adapt it to human health concerns, and the absence of co-operative or community-based authorities able to take a comprehensive approach to dealing with waste. Some water-thirsty businesses (e.g. metalworking and papermaking companies) have decided to sink artificial wells, a practice which is liable to cause subsidence, knowing that the Delta is already prone to flooding. Meanwhile, large paper manufacturing companies have had to set up very expensive closed circuit water recycling systems, as artesian wells were no longer sufficient. As a result, they discharge very little wastewater in the canals and pollute irrigation waters far less than small companies. Small-scale artisans cannot afford to build chimneystacks high enough to disperse harmful smoke.

Since local People's Committees have no territorial development plan, problems may emerge in the short term as a result of unco-ordinated individual strategies carried out by the wealthiest artisans and of the densification of built-up areas and their expansion onto sites prone to flooding: congestion problems may appear due to a poorly-adapted road system and flooding problems could be exacerbated during the monsoon. In addition, social problems may develop among villages and between craftspeople and expropriated farmers. This could weaken productive cohesion within clusters.

Communal People's Committees lack the political or financial power to manage areas in the process of industrialisation. Regulation concerning the management of industrial areas is not enforced and traditional laws on environmental protection are unable to deal with the overload of waste and raw materials, which is choking public space.

### Labellisation of craft products

With the growth in numbers of craft villages and an increase in production volume, competition has intensified between villages specialising in the same sector. Many artisans resort to reducing wages or using low quality raw materials to bring costs down, at the expense of the quality of the finished product. **Vạn Phúc** (Itinerary n°4) is a case in point. During the feudal era, the craftspeople of this cluster attained a very high level of technical competence. Part of their production was used to pay tribute to China or sold to the Hanoian aristocracy, which compelled the artisans to maintain certain standards of quality. Today, synthetic silk thread is widely used in the workshops. No quality-label could protect the few master artisans who still manufacture pure silk. This lowest common denominator approach threatens to mar the village's reputation. The same problem exists in the lacquerware village of **Hạ Thái** (Itinerary n°5). Synthetic resins have replaced *son ta* from Phú Thọ.

In addition, intellectual property rights are not being respected. Some dynamic villages have succeeded in developing activities that had originally been initiated by their neighbours. Unable to adapt to the new production and marketing context, the latter saw their share of the market snatched from under their noses. Some of the craftspeople of **Đồng Kỵ** are proud of their daring and entrepreneurship and boldly claim to have "stolen the craft" of the carpenters, wood carvers and mother-of-pearl inlay artists from neighbouring villages. A further example is the famous ceramics village of **Bát Tràng**, which is very well integrated in marketing network and seeks to sell new types of pottery. A number of artisans-cum-merchants from **Bát Tràng** sell 'Phù Lãng' style decorative pottery, while **Phù Lãng** is experiencing great difficulty selling its output. They buy clay in **Phù Lãng** and hire craftspeople from this village to produce **Phù Lãng** style ceramics, then claim that such objects are made in **Bát Tràng** and sell them for three or four times more than in their village of origin.

Protecting know-how and product quality is vital if innovation is to be encouraged among the more creative and bolder artisans. The idea of quality-labelling certain craft products is beginning to catch on and already interests the Trade Departments of provincial People's Committees. However, this project is encountering the many obstacles inherent in most craftspeople's low level of qualification, the fact that production is generally small-scale and the short-term benefit of choosing quantity over quality.

In order to register a quality-label, specifications must be met: technical procedures and quality criteria have to be complied with. Artisans who have mastered these techniques must be able to check the work of their colleagues within the framework of a producers' association. However, such associations have yet to be created. The few existing associations of lacquer artisans, paper manufacturers or furniture makers often bring together competing craftspeople. In addition, quality assessment of the finished product and the monitoring of specifications required for granting a quality-label can be quite difficult to make, as the origins of raw materials can vary and the production process is fragmented among multiple workshops. Some talented artisans believe that the quality of work should be improved first and quality-labels granted later. This is a long-term project, as the awareness of artisans must first be raised.



# PROMOTING THE CULTURAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE OF THE DELTA THROUGH TOURISM

The Upper Delta is known as the birthplace of ancestral Vietnamese society. A rich cultural and architectural heritage nestles in its villages. This heritage survived the country's political and economic vicissitudes and forms the cultural basis of North Vietnamese village society's tangible and intangible heritage.

This densely populated plain suffers from a shortage of space. Villages are bunched together on hillocks or on rivers' natural levees, which protect them from flooding. They are, in some ways, very urbanised, but their layout ultimately responds to religious concerns and mostly to the requirements of *feng shui*. Traditional houses built around a lush and leafy courtyard are protected from outsiders' gaze by brick walls and staggered along a web of labyrinthine concrete or brick-paved narrow alleyways. Beautiful old houses remain, in spite of the real estate frenzy of the *nouveaux riches* in busier villages. They stand as symbols of the bygone affluence enjoyed by lineages of wealthy landowners and talented craftspeople.

This architectural heritage (traditional old houses, alleyways, pagodas or *chùa*, communal houses or *đình*, temples and mausoleums) has largely been preserved, although during the collectivist era many religious buildings were diverted from their original function and turned into administrative buildings or simply destroyed. The Ministry of Culture has set up rehabilitation programmes for the most majestic *đình* and village associations look after the preservation of pagodas. A revival of religious fervour has surfaced since the ban on religious practices was lifted in the 1990s. Village identity is valued once more and festivals in honour of craft ancestors and guardian (tutelary) spirits are organised. Festivals revive the history of the villages and, in a context of economic openness and competition, serve to rekindle solidarity among artisans and among the craft villages' lineages. This rich cultural heritage remains very much alive and is seeking to be recognised and preserved. Representations have been made to this end to UNESCO.

## RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL HERITAGE: THE CULTURAL ROOTS OF HANDICRAFTS

### *Revival of cultural heritage since Đổi Mới*

Intangible cultural heritage includes certain forms of oral performance (*quan họ*, love duets from Bắc Ninh province, Itinerary n°1), performing arts (*chèo* theatre and water puppets), social practices, rituals and festive events (festivals and games). The main outlets for these forms of expression are the spring festivals and celebrations of craft ancestors.

#### **Festivals and the worship of crafts' patron saints**

Festivals are generally held after the Lunar New Year, as a folk song declares that:

*The first month is for enjoyment  
The second for gambling  
The third for festivals!*

Since the 1990s, local elites have revived ancient rituals celebrating patron saints and guardian spirits, which had been banned in the 1940s. State interference in the cultural life of the village, authorising or banning such events, is not a new occurrence.

“During the reign of Lê Thánh Tông, village deities were removed and replaced by heroic figures from the historical hall of fame. This marked the onset of constant intervention by mandarin authorities in the political, economical and cultural life of villages” (Papin P. & Tessier O., 2002).

Village festivals take place to render homage to a guardian spirit or other protective genie of the village community. The guardian spirit may be a historical or mythical figure who has greatly contributed to the construction of the village, helped the country fight off foreign invasion or taught villagers a craft. A common man – even a beggar or a thief – who died at a sacred hour might become such a spirit. The same applies to illegitimate children or incestuous couples. Authorities tend to view such practices with suspicion, especially if the spirits are not commendable characters. But villagers respect their guardian spirits regardless of their morals. Poverty and prosperity, good and bad harvests, health and protection against epidemics, all rely on the protection of the *thần thánh hoàng* (literally ‘genie of ramparts’).

“In a village whose name we will keep quiet, the village spirit is notoriously lecherous. When a woman walks past his altar, she must bend over and lift her skirt to keep him happy” (Nguyễn Văn Ký, 1995).

When the state manages to enforce its decisions and makes the village adopt a hero from the national hall of fame as its guardian spirit, the beloved ‘immoral’ spirit will slip in among his cohort of servants. This is one of the reasons for the secrecy surrounding the cult of guardian spirits. The diversity of such spirits points to the idiosyncrasy of each village of the Delta. “There are in theory as many spirits as there are villages” (Nguyễn Văn Ký, 1995). Nguyễn Văn Huyền counted about 770 guardian spirits in Bắc Ninh Province in the 1940s.

“Worshipping *thần thánh hoàng* has become a structuring element for villages. This form of worship was responsible for solving the tensions and contradictions that emerged in the 15<sup>th</sup> century between the requirements for the construction of a Confucian and centralised state, able to exert its authority on the smallest and remotest village, and the village communities’ aspirations for autonomy. This contradiction was political, cultural and religious in nature. *Thần thánh hoàng* worship was a form of compromise between village custom and state regulation, local cults and official Confucianism, between the autonomy of rural communities and the imperative of national unity upheld by the Imperial Court, whose objective was to promote the advent of the centralised state in Vietnam” (Đặng Thế Đại, 2002).

Festivals are an opportunity to reawaken the common memory of the villages, to reactivate solidarity among craftspeople and among lineages and to bring together a diaspora of artisans, who were sometimes dispersed around the country (as is the case in **Đại Bái**). This mixture of ritual life with the world of human actions provided a context for sanctions contained in village charters and an arena for competition in the local status hierarchy. It was also the time when village trade secrets, their *de facto* monopolies over particular products and techniques, were enforced (DiGregorio M., 2001).

Out of approximately one hundred festivals held in the Delta (see the calendar of major festivals in the **Appendices, p. 309**), half take place during the lunar month of February, fifteen in January, after Lunar New Year (*Tết*) and thirteen between March and April. There are few festivals during the lunar months of May and June and only a handful in November.

According to this data, only about twenty festivals are held in homage to craft ancestors. Many villages have lost their historical roots (especially crafts concerned with the manufacture of goods for everyday life such as wickerwork). A third of these festivities is dedicated to guardian spirits, mountain and water spirits (or genies), mythical figures such as Lạc Long Quân, the “father” of the Vietnamese people, another third to princes and princesses or to generals such as Trần Hưng Đạo (1228-1300), who victoriously fought China. The most famous pagodas organise annual festivals.

Many of these festivals (40%) are concentrated in Hà Nội Province, which shows that these traditional cults are upheld in spite of urbanisation. Hà Tây comes second with 19%, Bắc Ninh third (14%) and the remainder are distributed among the other provinces of the Delta.

Village festivals are often a harmonised blend mixing remnants of native animism with elements of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Vietnamese people believe deities, guardian spirits and evil genies live in the rivers, mountains, rocks, trees, wind and rain. Animistic beliefs are at the core of Vietnamese religion: Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism often provide the varnish.

Celebrations and ceremonies mark the beginning of production cycles: the opening of the hunting season or crop planting season, the end of the harvest, etc. It is the time for a return to the *primaeval* order of the universe that prevailed when life first appeared on earth. Festivals and ceremonies take us closer to the dawn of mankind. They are a simulacrum of creation and allow Man to free himself from the constraints of society. They disrupt habits, customs and taboos, and generate chaos, thus destroying barriers and induce harmony within the community.

Festival time transcends daily life and the commonplace, allowing Man to inhabit a dimension of time beyond the present reality. However, people reproduce their production activities and everyday behaviour in this particular context. There are scenes of extravagant feasting and outrageous drinking bouts, of flirting so stylised that they enter the realm of the symbolic (Hữu Ngọc, 1999).

Festivals sometimes take place over several days and include two types of activities: ceremony and entertainment. The ceremony includes processions of the revered spirits or ancestors to sacred places (*dinh*, pagodas and temples), and rituals inspired by Confucianism (ancestor worship, worship of objects such as the three sacrificial animals, offerings of fruit and flowers, and burning of incense sticks and votive paper). The entertainment part of the festival focuses on fun and amusement: folk entertainments such as human chess, cock fighting, rice-cooking contests, swing games and performances of folk opera. Water rituals are held in villages located on the banks of rivers and lakes: saints' statues are washed, the gods are invoked to bring rain and water puppet shows are staged.

### The symbolic nature of games and pastimes

In the past, entertainment was meant to increase efficiency at work and generate trust. Work occasionally had to be interrupted, production levels could be very poor and disasters could strike repeatedly: sometimes, there was no choice but to rest (Đạo Hưng, 1991).

Well-defined social groups usually partake in village games: players must conform to certain traditional requirements reflecting social hierarchy. Some games are only open to unmarried boys and girls – as the dance symbolises sexual intercourse – others to fifty year-olds (*một tấ*) or other specific age groups. Some games are relics of forms of collective marriage that no longer exist: this is the case of a boat race held in Đào Xá (Vĩnh Phúc Province). The two boats decorated with dragon and bird heads symbolising *yin* and *yang* are reminiscent of weddings between two groups belonging to separate clans. The most visible traces of this custom are *giáp*, an idiosyncratic trait of Vietnamese village communities. *Giáp* are subdivisions of a hamlet grouping male village members according to the area they live in. They no longer exist but their role endures, especially for the organisation of festivals. Games tighten bonds between existing social groups (age groups, gender groups). Age groups, personal history and differences between social and ethnic groups all have a bearing on the cultural role and contents of the game.

Games also reflect age-old beliefs that persist today. Spring festivals are held primarily to solicit an auspicious year for harvests, associated with beliefs concerning fertility. Such beliefs manifest themselves through the idea of universal rebirth and are expressed in the worship of sexual intercourse or genital organs. This is linked to *linga* and *yoni* worship, traces of which can be found in the veneration of the 'mother-stone' or in the custom of rubbing the Buddha's head while making a wish to become pregnant.

Sexual emblems were long ago not recognized by official religion in Vietnam as they went against the spirit of Confucianism, but traces remain in village festivals. The custom of turning out the lights to allow men and women to banter and frolic and even indulge in sexual acts was practised at certain festivals: this ritual was celebrated during the festival at Nga Hoàng (Yên Giả Commune, Quế Võ District, Bắc Ninh Province), from the **6<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**. See p. 309 with calendar of events). The worship of natural phenomena (e.g. sun, moon, wind, rain, thunder, lightning, earth, etc.) originated in beliefs relating to fertility and in turn gave rise to animist beliefs. Many of the games mimic the trajectories of the stars and planets, or other natural phenomena (Hữu Ngọc, 1999).

Boat races are a ritual associated with the Water Festival, which is celebrated by all the rice farming and fishing populations of Southeast Asia. According to Chinese records, these celebrations first appeared on the southern reaches of the Yang Tse River. Boat races are associated with the worship of the Water Spirit, celebrated at the start of the rainy

season or flood season (from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> moon) – which is also the season of thunderstorms – and at the start of the season when floodwaters recede (end of the 8<sup>th</sup> – beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> moon). The festival summons rainstorms, which are good for the rice. Other boat races mark the end of autumn.

The same applies to kite games. A *Diều* (kite) represents a vulture. In Southeast Asian mythology, the bird of prey is the opposite symbol to that of the fish and the water snake, which represent rain and floods. Kite festivals take place towards the end of autumn (in the 9<sup>th</sup> month) when the high water season ends. Birds also symbolise the sun, whose rays dispel the darkness of the flood season: this game is related to former sun worshipping rituals among the Việt people.

Pastimes such as games with swings and tug-of-war appear to be purely popular entertainment. Yet in the context of ritual celebrations, they are reminiscent of the cyclical movement of seasons imparting harmony to the cosmos: the swing carries a couple adorned with flowing pink silk belts, following a predetermined trajectory and its motion evokes the cycle of heavenly bodies rotating endlessly through the universe.

## Folk opera or *chèo*

This theatrical genre emerged from the sacred and profane folk dances and songs of the Red River Delta. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, it included folk performance and mime. Later on, short scenes describing religious narratives were added. The genre reached maturity in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. It developed in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in parallel with *nôm* folk novels; distinctive examples of this genre have been kept to this day. Unlike *tuồng*, a classical theatrical art for the aristocracy, *chèo* depicts rural life and gives a voice to the peasants. The most common theme concerns the sorry fate of women under the feudal regime; in some of the stories, they rebel against the system. Satirical buffoons also castigate feudal society.

Troops perform in the courtyard of the communal house during folk festivals. The sedge mat serving as a stage can represent the earth and the skies, rivers and mountains. Actors and musicians sit on either side of the mat and sing in unison. The audience stands around the stage. Drums feature as time-honoured musical instruments. Spectators and audience often hail each other. Improvisation plays an important role as *chèo* tells stories through speech, songs, dances and music.

Some famous plays from the classical repertoire play to a full courtyard (so to speak), such as Lưu Bình and Dương Lễ's famous play advocating loyalty, which tells the story of a friendship between two schoolmates taking the exam to become mandarins. In the past, artists were mere penniless peasants who had to provide their own costumes, musical instruments and other expenses for the performance.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *chèo* made its appearance in the city. It was actually performed on a stage with sets. It was adapted to suit the taste of city dwellers. Modernised *chèo* borrows from classical opera, adopts westernised songs and deals with fashionable themes. Later came Nguyễn Đình Nghi's (1925-1945) updated *chèo* style, less eclectic and inspired from new realist theatre. Following the 1945 revolution, modern *chèo* mostly developed in the 1960s (20 professional theatre troupes performed traditional, historical and folk themes as well as modern ones).

Folk opera and water puppets are pure products of the civilisation of the Red River Delta. Nam Định is one of the traditional water puppetry provinces. Yet *chèo* is a more refined art form. Its plays are funny, lyrical and always have a happy ending.

(Hữu Ngọc, 1997 and 2002)

## Water puppets or *rối nước*

This is an art form originating from Nam Định Province in the Red River Delta. It is part of the rituals used to invoke the rains. The puppets were originally associated with fertility cults before they became village entertainment during festivals. Water pavilions or *thủy đình*, such as those in **Thầy Pagoda** (Master's Pagoda, Itinerary n°9), **Giống Temple** (Phù Đồng, Gia Lâm, Hà Nội) or Chàng Sơn (Hà Tây) were permanent constructions. However, during most tours, puppeteers' rooms were built using light materials, such as bamboo and wood, which could easily be carried to the countless ponds around the various villages. The puppeteers' room in Thầy Pagoda is the oldest one to have remained intact.

When the show opens, little *Tễu* (the buffoon) presents the programme with the following prologue: *"I am Tễu, of heavenly origin, exiled on earth for having stolen a peach from the Immortals; as the affairs of this world are tortuous and appalling, I slosh about and handle my puppets as best I can"*. After this introduction, the performance kicked off with fireworks and firecrackers – that is, until the ban on firecrackers; they have since been replaced with drum rolls.

As in *chèo*, performances are full of imagination, humour, laughter and satire. The buffoon is a central character. Fairies dance to the sound of the flute, dragons spit fire and phoenixes glide amorously on the water. These plays deal with village life: buffalo fights, fishing and craftmaking. Like *chèo*, they find their inspiration in Vietnamese history and classical Chinese literature.

Generally speaking, theatre troupes – there are 15 of them in the Red River Delta – have more or less similar founding histories. They have a craft ancestor, the most ancient being the 11<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist monk Từ Đạo Hạnh. He is associated with the founding of **Thầy Pagoda** (Itinerary n°9).

Before 1945, water puppet troupes gave performances in their own as well as surrounding village during festivals. They belonged to a guild and puppeteers had to observe a very strict set of rules, especially concerning trade secrets. Some troupes, such as Chàng Sơn's (Hà Tây) handled puppets with strings, while others used bamboo sticks. Troupes are unrelated and troupe members are usually part of the same extended family. One half of troupe members are puppeteers and the other musicians, singers, compères, plus a leader. In addition to performances, some of the troupe members also make puppets. Performances ceased during both wars. When they started again, they widened their scope to include cities: Hà Nội became a favoured spot to attend these shows. Two theatres were built for this purpose and became stepping-stones to the international scene. Four troupes perform in villages in Hà Tây, one in Bắc Ninh and another in Hà Nội.

(Museum of Ethnology, 2005)

(Nguyễn Huy Hồng, 2006)

## Rice-cooking contests

During *Tết*, a number of villages in northern and central Vietnam hold rice-cooking contests. Villagers in **Chuông** village (Itinerary n°7) organise separate competitions for boys and girls. Female participants must cook rice on the ground while carrying a six to seven month old baby from another family on their hip. They must comfort the infant when he or she cries. At the same time, they must prevent a toad from jumping out of a chalk circle drawn around them. The contest is made all the more difficult by spectators - especially children - taking every opportunity to tease the baby. The contest for boys is no less exacting. Each boy must stand ready with all the necessary items (rice, water, matches and firewood) on a light boat moored at the edge of the pond. At a given signal he paddles with his hands to the opposite shore, where a row of pots sit on tripods. He must stay in his now unmoored boat while cooking the rice on the shore. The slightest loss of balance tosses him over into the water.

## Tug-of-war

Players divide into two teams and face each other along a bamboo rope. A red piece of cloth marks the middle of the rope, which is above a line drawn with lime in the dust. After a signal from the referee, players tug the rope as hard as they can and attempt to pull the red cloth to their side. Eventually one team loses strength and lets go of the rope; the audience cheers the other team as winners. In Tích Sơn village (Vĩnh Phúc Province) a men-only tug-of-war is held on **the third day of the first lunar month**. Organisers arrange the rope in an east-west direction, evoking the trajectory of the sun. Older men stand to the east, younger men to the west. Over three matches, the team that compels the other group to take three steps forward is the winner. According to traditional belief, if the eastern (older) team wins, the villagers will have bumper crops throughout the year.

In Hữu Chấp village (Bắc Ninh), the tug-of-war takes place on **the fourth day of Tết**. Players form two teams of unmarried boys and girls. The boys represent the *đương* force (yang) and the dry season, while the girls represent the *âm* force (yin) and the rainy season. Although the boys are frequently stronger than the girls, the girls often “win” the tug-of-war so that the rainy season can outdo the dry season and the harvests that year will be good.

(Vietnam Cultural Window, 2003)



## VILLAGES OF THE DELTA: A RICH ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

Traditional North Vietnamese civilisation is deeply rooted in village culture. The seat of intellectual life is not located in cities but among scholars living in their home villages in the countryside. Religious buildings such as pagodas and temples are dispersed throughout the countryside. Unlike in Western countries, most of the Delta's cultural heritage (80%) is scattered around the countryside.

Villages used to fulfil an important political role, which is why buildings of high architectural value were erected there, such as communal houses or *đình*. When the Lý dynasty transferred the capital of Vietnam from Hoa Lư to Thăng Long, the golden age of pagoda building began, with the finest, in Kinh Bắc (a province in the North equivalent to present-day Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang Provinces, ).

“The buildings that can still be seen in villages today (communal houses, pagodas, temples, houses for ancestor worship, shrines to the “prince propagator of literature”, etc.) all originate from the great centralising and mandarinal Confucian tradition and offer little insight into what popular culture may actually have been like” (Papin P. and Tessier O., 2002).

Village gates are generally made of brick and often lavishly decorated, a reminder of the ancient power held by villages and of the cohesion of lineages, well protected behind the bamboo hedge surrounding the village and shielding it from invaders. These gates are part of the landscape of the Red River Delta, in the same way as ancient trees, lakes and ponds, and bridges across the many waterways surrounding the villages. On some bridges, small temples are dedicated to spirits of the land.

The Lý Dynasty, contrary to its predecessors (Đinh and Lê), attempted to reduce Chinese influence on Vietnamese culture. Their efforts resulted in an artistic burgeoning whose significance has not yet been fully ascertained; its most representative relics are associated with the worship of the four Buddhist mother goddesses.

Political, cultural and religious edifices fall into various categories:

- **Pagodas** (*chùa*), dedicated to the worship of Buddha, also serve as residences for monks. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, pagodas were very large and most of them were built by the state, as Buddhism was then the state religion. They are classified into three subcategories:

- **State pagodas** (*Đại danh lam*) were also used by the king to stay in during his travels. They were built away from villages, often on a hill.

- **Medium-sized sites**, regional pagodas (*Trung danh lam*).

- **Small sites**, generally village pagodas (*Tiểu danh lam*), or stupas (monks' tombs).

Subsequently – after the commune reached a higher and more complex stage of development – pagodas also became the place where village regulations were recorded. Among these were records of fees collected to fund collective activities in the commune. These records were kept for tax collection purposes. Those people on whom was conferred the title *hậu* (making them eligible to carry out sacrifices to Buddha) were worshipped in the communal house or pagoda with the consent of the commune (Phạm Thị Thùy Vinh, 2003).

These pagodas usually have a refined architecture and are often inside a garden.

- **Communal houses** (*đình*): it symbolises the power of villages. This is where the village's guardian or tutelary spirit is worshipped, as well as being a meeting place where day-to-day business is discussed (e.g. taxes, statutory labour (corvée), land distribution and the organisation of festivals). *Đình* are usually majestic buildings, luxuriously decorated inside with sculptures and engravings and with heavy wooden beams adorned with bas-relief. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the construction of a whole series of communal houses in an elaborate architectural style was evidence that village



structure had become tight-knit and well regulated. The communal house was the site where the entire cultural life of the village had developed: *tuồng* (traditional theatrical opera), *chèo* (folk opera), music, sculpture, painting, decoration, handicrafts, water puppetry, dancing, singing and martial arts.

In accordance with the rules of *feng shui*, most *dinh* were built facing a lake or pond or alongside dykes, facing the river. Many *dinh* can be found along the dykes of the River Đáy (Hà Tây Province), which runs through several of the craft villages presented in this book.

- **Temples** (*miếu*): this is the place to worship deities providing protection and succour to the people of the village. They are much more modest than communal houses and pagodas in size and architecture. They were mostly built as a single room with a simple structure, except for the worship of kings or high officials.

A whole hierarchy of edifices covering various functions can be found within the villages and are emblematic of the latter's wealth throughout history. Many of them are situated in the villages of traders, mandarins, intellectuals and artisan.

- **Shrine** (*từ*): this is a temple for public worship by the entire village, built with a covering roof and an altar for offerings. The worshipped deity may have been a village benefactor or a legendary figure thought to have helped his people.

- **Public memorial** (*từ chí*): this is where village benefactors are worshipped under the gaze of the clan lineage of the person being worshipped. A public memorial was a plot of land surrounded by a wall, but without a hall for offerings.

- **Ancestral hall** (*từ đường*) or (*nhà thờ họ*): this is where clan members worship their ancestors. Large clans, particularly those with many officials and successful graduates, built ancestral halls. Ancestor worship and the cult of bloodline relations gradually became more developed. In villages where high officials lived who made financial contributions to local public affairs, public memorials, living memorials and mausoleums were built in their honour. Many of them can be found in the more affluent craft villages.

- **Literary memorial** (*văn chi*): this is where successful graduates from the village are worshipped. It is established by the village literary association.

- **Mausoleum**/officials' tombs: *lăng mộ*.

- **Watch post** (*điểm*): these appeared when the village became fairly developed in its organisation. Each alley or *giáp* would have its own watch post, which was used as a resting place and shelter by local people during the day, as an encampment for night watch militia and as a checkpoint for outsiders who wished to enter further into the alley or *giáp*.

- **Stelae** could also be found in places dedicated to everyday activities, such as bridges and markets. Their purpose was to inform and remind passers-by of the origins of each bridge and market and to pay homage to the benefactors who had made a contribution to the village each time a bridge or a market was constructed or repaired.

The aforementioned elements of religious and architectural heritage feature in the 10 itineraries that follow. In the most prestigious villages, their location is indicated on the maps for easier access.

## VIETNAMESE TOURISM SEEKS TO DIVERSIFY

### *Growing demand for cultural tourism*

#### **Tourism supply needs to diversify**

Despite considerable and continual growth in the number of foreign tourists (from 250,000 in 1990 to 4.2 million in 2007), Vietnam is currently having trouble diversifying its supply of tourism products and generating repeat visits. Research has shown that foreign tourists do not return to Vietnam a second time once they have toured the main sites. For several years, products proposed to tourists have not evolved: always the same tours, the same sites visited, the same guides, while the tourism sector is booming. We are witnessing a decline in the quality of proposed itineraries. Demand is certainly there, but supply is not responding adequately. Attempts to develop rural tourism in craft villages are gaining ground and projects have been initiated by the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, but these experiments remain patchy.

Through lack of knowledge of places to visit and how to find them and scarce on-site tourist facilities in a country that was long closed to foreigners, only very few craft villages such as **Bát Tràng** (ceramics) and **Vạn Phúc** (silk), situated less than 20 km from the capital, are regularly visited.

The Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism seeks through rural tourism to preserve and promote the handicraft skills and the architectural and cultural heritage of some villages. Through the “Itinerary of Pottery Villages in the Red River Delta” programme (see p. 56), it is starting to become involved in heritage promotion. This Ministry is aware of the importance of involving villagers in the development of cultural tourism programmes. Craft villages may be a new destination for tourism, yet this requires development strategies to be determined and infrastructure to be built (e.g. local museums, handicraft shops, on-site tourist facilities). Local tour guides need to be trained and craftspeople should be involved in such projects. At the provincial level, a policy for the promotion of craft villages is being drafted. For the time being, its remit is restricted to financing road construction work and basic infrastructure.

#### **Why contact with foreigners is in the interest of many artisans**

Within the context of Vietnam opening up to the outside world, many craftspeople would like to promote their crafts and make them better known to foreigners. This would enable them to gain better insights into foreign tastes, create direct links with potential clients from the West or from Asia (Japan especially, a major consumer of Vietnamese handicraft products) and bypass the middlemen. They believe that an effective way of attracting tourists into the villages would be to build showrooms to display their wares and establish museums recounting the history and technical development of their craft. However, a lack of training among guides, scarce knowledge of the heritage of these villages and an absence of itineraries of interesting places to visit limit access to such destinations for Vietnamese and international tourists.

#### **A shared interest in craft villages**

Among the various foreign communities living in Vietnam and residents of Hà Nội, there is a real interest in the rich heritage of craft villages, villages that clearly supply the many handicraft shops in the capital city. The Vietnamese press echoes this demand almost daily, with numerous articles on villages to illustrate their economic and cultural interest. Vietnamese and foreign schools, expatriate associations and small travel agencies frequently organise visits to some of the better-known villages around Hà Nội. They would like to diversify these visits and not rely on inadequately trained “guides”.

## ***Spreading the word about cultural tourism***

The concept of “quality tourism” was defined by the Tourism Agreement adopted by ASEAN member States during the Phnom Penh Summit (4/11/2002). According to this agreement, member States ensure “quality tourism” by following the following directives:

- Encouraging all levels of government and local communities to carry out programmes to ensure the preservation, conservation and promotion of the natural, cultural and historical heritage of member states.
- Encouraging visitors to learn, respect and help preserve the natural, cultural and historical heritage of member states.
- Encouraging, where appropriate, the adoption of environmental management standards and certification programmes for sustainable tourism and for assessing and monitoring the impact of tourism on local communities, culture and nature, especially in environmentally and culturally sensitive areas.
- Promoting the use of environmentally sound technologies to preserve and conserve the natural heritage, the ecosystems and biodiversity and to protect endangered flora and fauna as well as micro-organisms.
- Strengthening measures to prevent tourism-related threats on and exploitation of cultural heritage and natural resources.
- Taking stern measures to prevent tourism-related abuse and exploitation of people, particularly women and children (Nguyễn Kim Dung, in: Musée royal de Mariemont, 2006).

### **The Museum of Ethnology: a living museum on craft villages<sup>1</sup>**

The **Vietnam Museum of Ethnology** established in Hà Nội in Cầu Giấy (Paper Bridge) District was inaugurated in 1997 in partnership with the Museum of Mankind in Paris. It is dedicated to the study of the 54 ethnic groups of Vietnam through the display of 25,000 objects taken from everyday life. It offers an insight into the country’s diversity through exhibits of traditional costumes, musical instruments, jewellery and weapons, and more importantly, through living exhibitions dedicated to everyday life, especially that of traditional craft villages.

The museum’s priorities include preserving know-how and taking part in the development of traditional craft villages by disseminating knowledge on the cultural heritage of techniques passed on from generation to generation within a specific village community. It aims to educate young people by organising workshops. In 2003 and 2004, four craftspeople from Phù Lãng held pottery courses at the museum for schoolchildren aged 10 to 14, in partnership with Unesco.

The museum is seeking new approaches to participating in the preservation of craftsmanship and traditional societies and to giving artisans the means to adapt to the modern world. New methods have to be found to bring the reality of village life to the public and to make politicians and future generations aware of the significance of such know-how. Exhibitions are organised in co-operation with the communities concerned: they are involved in the choice of objects and aspects of everyday life to be presented. They also collect information, as in the case of the Photovoice Project

#### **• Permanent exhibits on handicrafts**

- Some of the rooms on the ground floor of the museum are dedicated to the culture and handicraft techniques of the *Việt* people.

- Pottery is presented through the example of **Phù Lãng** village: village history, society, kiln architecture and original production techniques of this craft centre currently undergoing radical transformations.

- Wickerwork and conical hat making in Làng **Chuông**: life-size models of wicker artisans, videos presenting the different techniques, wickerwork items and history of the craft.

<sup>1</sup> (Nguyễn Văn Huy, 2006)

- Living culture in the spotlight in temporary exhibitions : village dwellers in Hà Nội

- Two traditional village dwellings from the Red River Delta were built in the museum garden. For the past few years, they have been used for temporary exhibitions on crafts. Over the course of several months, the artisans of a given village display their production and skills and present the history of their village and craft. Such 'living museums' are of great interest for both visitors and craftspeople, as the latter are able to bring to a wider audience crafts that may be on the verge of becoming extinct. Such experiments should be repeated in the villages; they could potentially attract many visitors.

- Đại Yên medicinal plant village is integrated within the city of Hà Nội, south of West Lake. In May 2004, artisans presented the different aspects of their craft (techniques and plant production) – local plant production still endures in this highly urbanised village and land speculation has not yet been able to stamp out this original and intensive agricultural production. They also described their everyday life using posters, photographs and plants. Craft products from the village could also be bought.

- The villages of Bắc Ninh Province specialising in the manufacture of paper and paper goods (prints, masks and toys), **Dương Ổ**, **Đông Hồ** and Tú Khê, were the subject of an exhibition. Posters presented different aspects of the life of these villages, the history of their crafts, production techniques and their future prospects, as well as some background information and biographies of some of its talented craftspeople. Most are elderly, a potential cause for concern for more vulnerable activities, considering the likelihood that these skills may not be passed on to others.

- In January 2002, an exhibition on Cửa Vạn fishing village in Hạ Long Bay, which consists in a group of floating houses, tells the peculiar story of a people who became sedentary by living on water. Artisan from Cửa Vạn demonstrated the manufacture of bamboo boats and basket fish traps.

- Craft people from **Vạn Phúc** silk village (Hà Tây), introduced their village, their history, their traditional and innovative techniques and various types of silk.

- In December 2008, two water puppet villages, Hồng Phong (Hải Dương) and Đông Các (Thái Bình), presented the history of their villages and their troupes, their organisation and the way in which know-how is passed down through generations.

- The Photovoice Project in Đại Bái village

Over the course of six months (from December 2002 to June 2003), in **Đại Bái** village, 18 villagers learned how to use a camera and began a Photovoice Project. Photovoice is a method that gives local people the opportunity to document and express their unique knowledge and concerns. In **Đại Bái**, craftsmen accustomed to holding mallets for beating metal took cameras and shared their experience with VME researchers. In their photos, they introduce fellow craftsmen, traditional knowledge, tools, materials and skills. Craftmaking is changing in **Đại Bái** and many photos and interviews show the difficulties and challenges villagers face today. This project was supported by the Japanese Agency for Development (JICA) in co-operation with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Craftspeople created approximately 3,000 photographs and participated in many interviews. These documents are preserved for the benefit of researchers and anyone with an interest in crafts, as well as for future generations. The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, in collaboration with local people, organized three photographic exhibitions based on photographs taken by artisans. The first two exhibitions were organised in the localities where its 'research subjects' live, making them all the more significant.

# A cultural itinerary through traditional pottery villages

This itinerary focuses on six pottery villages of the Red River Delta that combine traditional craftsmanship and architecture related to pottery (kilns, specific habitat, typical village architecture, etc.):

**Bát Tràng** (Hà Nội Province);  
**Phù Lãng** (Bắc Ninh Province);  
**Thổ Hà** (Bắc Giang Province);  
Chu Đậu and Cậy (Hải Dương Province);  
Đông Triều (Quảng Ninh Province).

The itinerary is reinforced by visits to a number of museums where prestigious Vietnamese ceramics collections are displayed: Vietnam History Museum, Vietnam Museum of Fine Art, both located in Hà Nội, the exhibition hall of the archaeological remains of Dương village ceramics kilns (Bắc Ninh Province) and Hải Dương Museum, where Chu Đậu ceramics collections are exhibited.

This tour is organised by the Cultural Heritage Department of the French speaking Community in Belgium, the Royal Museum of Mariemont, and the Cultural Heritage Department of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Vietnam. Its objective is to stimulate cultural tourism:

- Bringing heritage tourism concerning village culture to a non-specialist audience (marketing, setting up an information centre on the heritage of village culture and the cultural itinerary).
- State support through investment in museums, shops selling local handicraft, training villagers as tour guides, etc.
- Involving local populations in the organisation of cultural tourism programmes to improve their control over the promotion of their heritage and avoid the detrimental social consequences of mass tourism.

The tour is inspired by the European ‘Cultural Itinerary’ programme. Its central idea is to show a founding cultural heritage in a visible and recognised manner with a journey through space and time. Such cultural itineraries in Europe are the Mozart Route, the Viking Routes, the European Jewish Heritage routes, Architecture Without Borders, etc. Today, this programme is co-ordinated by the European Institute of Cultural Itineraries, whose headquarters are in Luxemburg.

The team launching this project hopes that it will be an example leading to the implementation of other cultural itineraries in Vietnam (Nguyễn Kim Dung, Musée royal de Mariemont, 2006).

A survey was led jointly by the project’s team members in order to assess the capacity of the six chosen sites. One of the main criteria was accessibility, followed by landscape on the way to the site and on the site itself and finally the site’s upkeep. Architectural aspects are examined from three different perspectives: the first aspect concerns residential buildings, followed by buildings where cultural life was played out – in villages of the Red River Delta, this mostly consists in edifices embodying spiritual life and local polity: communal houses, pagodas and the occasional dynastic temple, which today might be dedicated to President Hồ Chí Minh. The third architectural aspect concerns structures associated with ceramics productions – in other words, kilns.

Production techniques and know-how are part and parcel of intangible heritage. But besides these categories, intangible heritage has only been observed in very specific instances, such as the *quan họ* school in Bắc Ninh and during local festivals in **Thố Hà**. Other festivals are mentioned for the record by the team who implemented the cultural itinerary.

**Bát Tràng** and Đông Triều alone have on-site tourist facilities. There is currently no tourist infrastructure, however basic, nor are there any local projects concerned with protecting and promoting cultural heritage or with developing tourist infrastructure. The present situation of sites selected as part of the cultural itinerary varies widely. However, in the course of the survey, it became obvious that both local leaders and craftspeople were eager to use tourism as a means to develop economic activity and improve their community's standard of living.

Even though most of the people interviewed may not yet have a clear idea of the potential problems tourism can bring – whether or not it is termed “quality tourism” – all of them stated their intention of restoring monuments and preserving traditions intact (Noppe C. & Martinot D.).

The team has until now organised several events and written a number of articles:

- An exhibition titled “Potters of the Red River” at the Royal Museum of Mariemont in Belgium from 23rd November 2006 to 25th February 2007. A book was published in 2006 for this exhibition: *“Meeting the Potters of the Red River Delta, A Cultural Itinerary”*, edited by Nguyễn Kim Dung & Noppe C., 2006, based on technical research on traditional ceramics production conducted by ceramics engineer Pascal Léonard and Royal Museum of Mariemont curator Catherine Noppe.
- A seminar with the project's various partners at the Vietnam National History Museum. Its objective consisted in assessing the outcome of the project's first phase titled “Cultural Itineraries: Traditional Craft Villages” and exchanging practical domestic and international experiences on the subject.
- Training days organised in pottery villages by Pascal Léonard in April 2007. One of the aims of this undertaking was to make proposals to local partners and artisans for the development of a Red River Delta Pottery label.









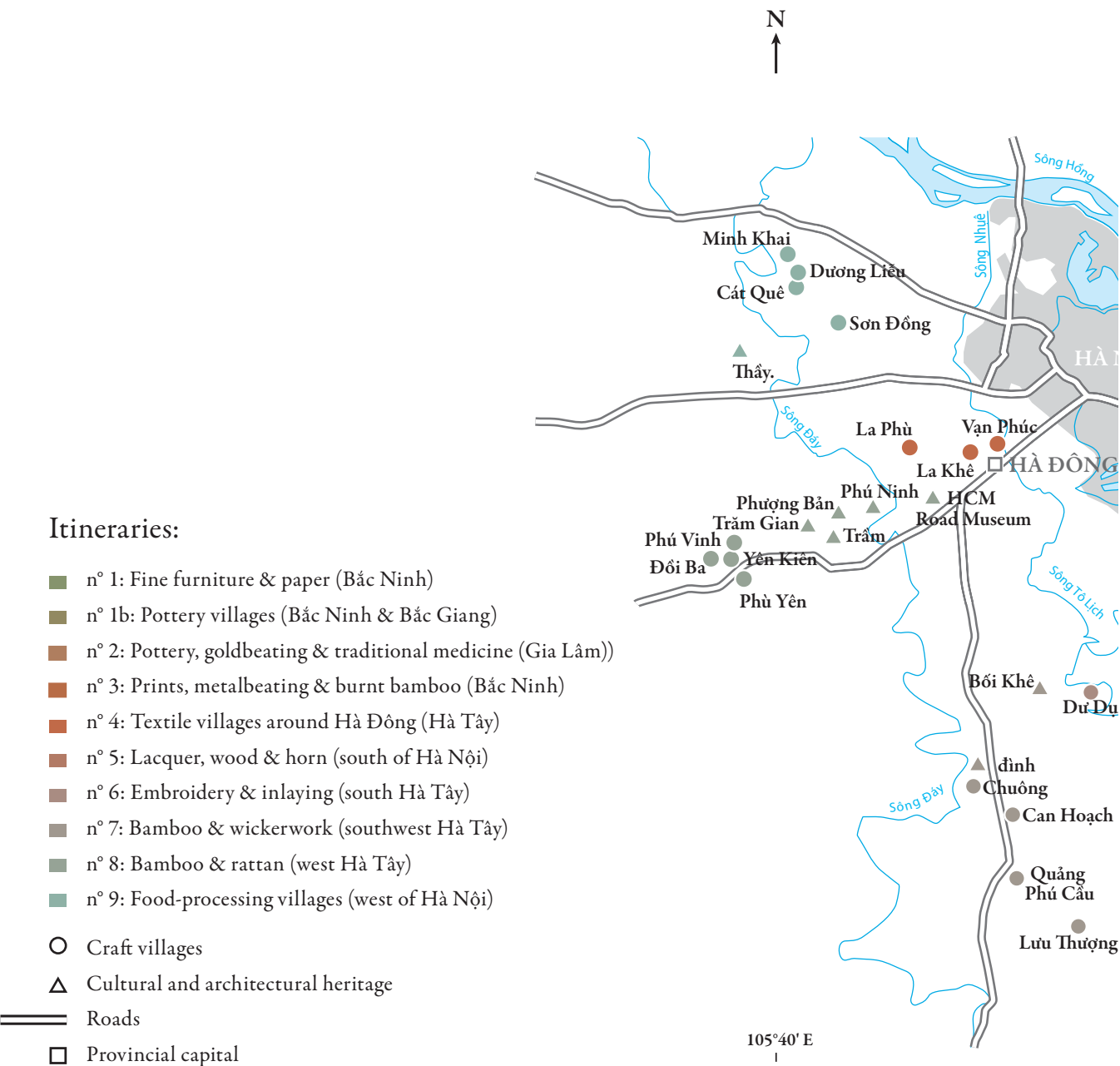
RICE NOODLES DRYING ON FRAMES, MINH KHAI

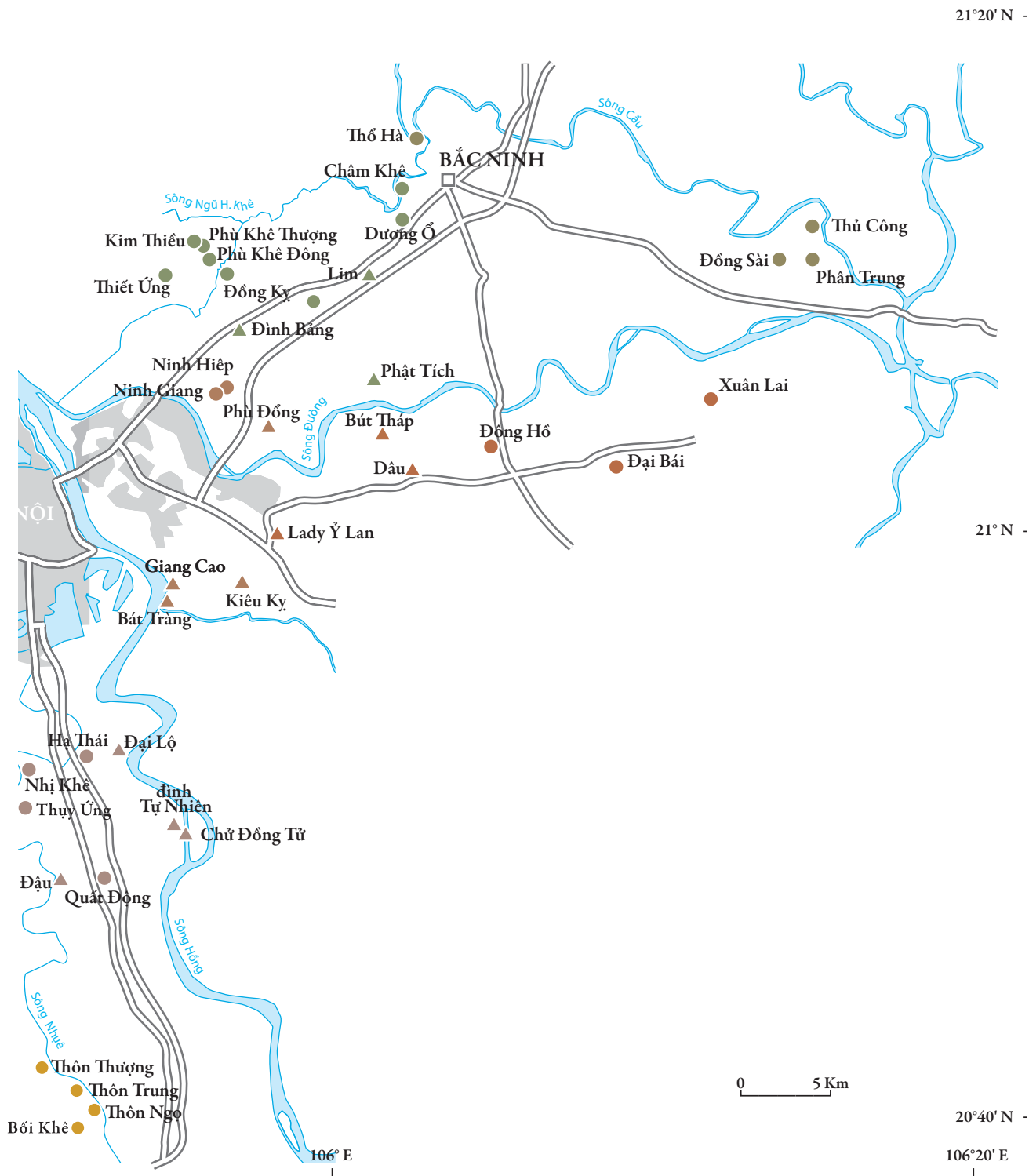




**ITINERARIES OF CRAFT VILLAGES AND  
OF CULTURAL HERITAGE**

# Craft village and cultural heritage itineraries around Hà Nội





# Itinerary 1

## Fine furniture & paper (Bắc Ninh)



### Cultural and architectural heritage

The *đình* and Đô Temple at Đình Bảng;  
 The *đình* at Đồng Kỵ;  
 The Lim festival;  
 Phật Tích Pagoda.

### The craft villages

Fine Furniture: Đồng Kỵ, Phù Khê Đông, Phù Khê Thượng, Kim Thiều and Thiết Ứng.  
 Paper: Dương Ổ and Chăm Khê.

Before arriving at the two groups of villages to be visited on this first circuit, we strongly recommend a visit along the way in order to admire the architectural, cultural and religious riches of Đình Bảng, a famous village, set back from the main road between Hà Nội and Bắc Ninh. This stop – nonetheless optional – can give you a chance to appreciate the amazing contrast between the industrial atmosphere that reigns in the commune along the main road (National Highway n°1A) and the timeless bliss at this site of temples overlooking paddy fields, their backs resolutely turned on the 21st century...

## ĐÌNH BẢNG AND ITS HISTORICAL BUILDINGS

### GETTING TO ĐÌNH BẢNG

To leave Hà Nội, cross Chương Dương Bridge towards the east and continue straight on until you reach the intersection for the motorway to Hải Phòng. Bear left on National Highway n°1A towards the town of Bắc Ninh. Continue straight on and cross the bridge over the Đuống River. At km 16 (shown by a kilometre marker on the side of the road), you enter the commune of Đình Bảng, very industrialised along the main road. Pass through this industrial area called Phố Mới (new neighbourhood). You will see a sign saying that the *đình* (communal house) is 500 metres further on, on the right after having passed through the centre of the village (in fact, it's more like a kilometre!). Approaching through narrower and narrower alleyways, you will at last reach this magnificent monument, surrounded on all sides by a market and some very dense housing.

Đình Bảng has been a prosperous village for a very long time, well known throughout the Red River Delta. It is the birthplace of the Lý Dynasty (11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries), of which eight kings are supposed to be buried in or around the village. Legend has it that the royal remains were placed under burial mounds scattered among the villages paddy fields: King Lý Thái Tổ apparently wished to rest in a simple earthen grave covered with forage for pasture, so that children minding water buffalo (as they still do today) might remember the Lý Kings. It is said that these simple royal tombs were placed in a forest, Bảng Forest to be exact, long ago situated in the middle of the village. Unfortunately, the last traces of this forest disappeared at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and nobody currently knows the location of these royal remnants; so see if you can find them! A map in the grounds of Đô Temple indicates the position of the graves, but it appears to be more a virtual or ideal layout than a real one.

The architectural jewel in Đình Bảng's crown, being renovated during our last visit: the *đình*, or communal house. Despite this being an area exceptionally rich in architectural heritage, the *đình* at Đình Bảng is one of the most famous in all of Kinh Bắc, the former region of which the current province of Bắc Ninh is a part. An old saying goes:

"In the classification of communal houses, Đông Khang comes in first place, then Đình Bảng in second, while Diêm occupies an honourable third place."

The *đình* at Đông Khang was reduced to dust long ago, which promotes that of Đình Bảng into first place in the *đình* hit parade – and the visitor won't be disappointed. It is a very fine building, impressive for its size, the originality of its construction, the richness of detail and its position set apart from the rest of the village.

Built at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by a mandarin, Nguyễn Thạc Lượng, the communal house was a present made to his village of birth to celebrate the cult of three guardian spirits (the Spirits of Water, Earth and Harvest). Unlike many other ancient constructions at Đình Bảng and elsewhere, it has survived the passage of time, fires, storms, various kinds of insects and even wars: in 1954, the French colonial forces, beating a destructive retreat (and one which transpired to be decisive) chained their tanks to the house's pillars, trying to bring it down. Happily for posterity, the communal house refused to be laid low.

Let us go back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century: aided by his wife Nguyễn Thị Nguyên, Nguyễn Thạc Lượng initially oversaw the construction of three smaller houses in the village in preparation of their masterwork. One of these houses, which was to become the retired mandarin's family seat, still stands and can also be visited since Japanese-aided renovation.





## The communal house (*đình*)

The communal house is one of the key centres of village life. A common Vietnamese expression can be translated as: “As big as a communal house”, which conjures up a building as imposing and omnipresent in daily life as the Gothic church at the heart of a European village in the Middle Ages. The historical annals recount the existence of communal houses in Vietnam since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but the oldest examples still standing to this day are from the 16<sup>th</sup>. These classical houses were built of solid wood with big and heavy tile roofs. Villagers have continued to build *đình*, even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it is no longer possible to put up such big and richly decorated buildings with so costly materials.

Each village in Vietnam usually has its communal house. It is normally the biggest structure in the village, and the focal point of community pride and identity, fulfilling the following functions:

- a place devoted to the worship of the village’s guardian spirit(s);
- a meeting place, where people gather in order to discuss the affairs of village life;
- a structure for holding festivals, celebrations and performances of all kinds, from *tuồng* (classical Vietnamese opera), *chèo* (popular Vietnamese opera), to *quan họ* (love duets: see box towards the end of this itinerary) to even *rối nước* (water puppets: see explanations in the **Part 1 p. 49**).

The other big traditional public buildings, also (and above all) places of worship, are pagodas (*chùa*), devoted to the worship of Buddha, and temples (*đền*), dedicated to deified people of all kinds, be they former kings, military heroes, various martyrs or wise benefactors (see **Part 1 p. 51**).

The *dinh*, at 30 metres long by 15 metres wide, is one of the biggest wooden constructions in Vietnam. The tiled roof makes up about three-quarters of the total height of the building and weighs several tons. Sixty enormous pillars carved from ironwood hold up the roof. Legend has it that Nguyễn Thị Nguyễn had the wood brought for these pillars from her native province of Thanh Hoá (where her husband had been governor). This kind of large-scale building project was carried out by workers under the control of a master-carpenter. Much of the woodwork was assembled beforehand down on the ground, and then two large teams each put up one half of the building. The celebrations when the teams finally met up in the middle were surely as memorable as those between the British and French workers boring the tunnel under the English Channel!

For reasons of geomancy, the *dinh* is placed on slightly raised ground and faces south. However, when it was built, care was taken not to cement the pillars to their stone plinths, making it potentially possible to move the building (a very theoretical option, it would seem, given the failure of the French tanks...), should future generations of geomancers advise this course of action.

The interior is richly decorated with wooden bas-reliefs and the beams and pillars are finely sculpted, particularly with several figures of dragons and other animals, real and mythical. Look for a particularly original carving on a panel of the partition (between the bigger and smaller pillars), depicting eight horses running a race.

The annual festival for the guardian spirits takes place on the **12<sup>th</sup> day of the 2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month**, and games and entertainment are the order of the day: Chinese chess, wrestling, cockfighting, games on a swing. In the evening, there are *chèu* and *quan họ* performances (see box p. 89). There is also an annual festival in honour of the Lục Tổ, the six founders of the village (from the 15<sup>th</sup> century), which is held on the **6<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**.

## ĐÔ TEMPLE

To get to Đô Temple, walk down the left side of the *dinh*, strike off to the left and then turn right. After 400 metres or so, you will see on your right a large expanse of water. Follow its edge and enter into the temple grounds. A large half-moon-shaped pond gives onto the various buildings of the site.

This *đền* (temple) to the east of the village is dedicated to the eight kings and is called Đô Temple, or sometimes Lý Bát Đế Temple (temple of the eight Lý emperors). The building you see today is a modern one, completed at the end of the 1990s, which replaces the original one, built in the 11<sup>th</sup> (or perhaps 13<sup>th</sup>) century. The original temple was extensively renovated and enlarged in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was made up of 21 structures, including a water pavilion that later appeared on the five-plaster bills printed by the French colonial regime.

Sadly, this old temple was destroyed at the beginning of the 1950s, during the war. The modern building houses statues of the eight Lý kings. It will be noted with pleasure that the names of these kings are much easier to tell apart and remember than, for example, the eight Kings of England called Henry, who (in keeping with tradition) all had the same Christian name (in this case, Henry). Beginning with the great Lý Thái Tổ (the Dynasty's founder) and his son, Lý Thái Tông, the others, in no particular order, are: Lý Thánh Tông, Lý Thần Tông, Lý Nhân Tông, Lý Anh Tông, Lý Huệ Tông and Lý Cao Tông. At the end of this circuit, slake your thirst with a few glasses of rice wine (also in keeping with tradition) and try to recite these names rapidly, first forwards, then backwards.

The kings' statues are worshipped during the temple's festival, which begins on the **15<sup>th</sup> day of the 3<sup>rd</sup> month of the lunar** calendar and lasts for four days. Every three or four years, the celebrations are on a much bigger scale. On the 15<sup>th</sup> day, the statue of Lý Thái Tổ is enthroned with great pomp. On the 16<sup>th</sup> day, a procession carries the eight statues to the Cổ Pháp Pagoda (named after the place where the Lý kings originally came from). It was here that Lý Công Uẩn (who later assumed the more media-friendly name – you know it well already – of Lý Thái Tổ) is said to have spent his youth as a Buddhist novice (unless it was at the Tiêu Sơn Pagoda, a few kilometres away, which also claims this distinction). In addition to these rites and many others, traditional games are organised: wrestling, cockfighting and, on the 17<sup>th</sup> day, in front of the temple, a life-sized game of (Chinese) chess using human beings as pieces. Once you have completed your visit, you can go directly back to National Highway n°1A, by going left along the road that passes in front of the temple.

# ĐỒNG KỲ AND THE CLUSTER OF FINE FURNITURE VILLAGES

## GETTING TO ĐỒNG KỲ

Once you're back onto National Highway n°1A, turn right towards the town of Bắc Ninh. You will come out directly at the entrance to the administrative centre of Từ Sơn District. You can even take the opportunity to taste the sweet speciality of the village of Trung Hoà (Đình Bảng Commune), *bánh Phu Thê* (husband and wife cakes) offered for sale by a host of vendors at the roadside. These square cakes, always sold in pairs (trouble and strife, sales and marketing, buy one, get one free<sup>1</sup>...), are a must for weddings in the Kinh Bắc region. It is said that the gooey texture of the cakes reflects the sticky nature of marriage ties. We leave it up to you to digest this parallel as best you see fit, but remember that they are much versed in very viscous victuals, the Vietnamese. The cakes are made with sticky rice flower tinted yellow with gardenia extract, while grapefruit flowers and chunks of papaya are added to give it more flavour. They are filled with a special mixture of green bean paste, coconut and lotus seeds (see *Itinerary n°2* for the processing of these seeds). They are cooked by steaming them in maranta (a kind of arrowroot or *dong*) leaves.

Trần Phú Street crosses this small administrative and commercial centre. When you get to n° 188, turn left and cross the railway line. You will come to Đồng Kỵ after having passed through the village of Trang Liệt that serves as an overflow area to artisans who did not receive a plot of land in the industrial park. To your right, a Riviera with lines of houses all built in straight rows, brightly coloured with brash façades: this is Đồng Kỵ Industrial Park.

## THE CONTEXT

Let's be clear from the word *gỗ* (wood in Vietnamese): Đồng Kỵ is one of a certain number of less bucolic craft villages in this guide, but (as are the others in the same category) it is a very interesting one, as it has a remarkable history and exhibits the various stages of a production process that is still a traditional craft industry. If you care to dig, there is a rich heritage to be uncovered here.

Đồng Kỵ is the village at the heart of a cluster of ten or so others that produce fine wooden furniture in the west of Bắc Ninh Province. As you will see, the centre of Đồng Kỵ is incredibly congested, with a particularly dense population (more people live in this one village than in several of the surrounding communes). It's a very unusual urban-style development in an environment that is still very rural, and one that confronts the visitor – there are piles of wood everywhere you look – with a critical issue here: management of space.

Đồng Kỵ has enjoyed a long history of trade (particularly in buffaloes), which without a doubt explains in large part its current success. Paradoxically, however, as in many craft villages, it is the lack of cultivatable land or its poor yield that pushed the villagers into finding other means of occupying themselves in order to survive: Đồng Kỵ has limited land resources in an area of the Delta that is relatively high in altitude and thus poorly served by the hydraulic network. The single annual rice crop that was originally harvested here did not suffice to fill all mouths to be fed. For in spite of a few sweet potatoes and peanuts cultivated on the side for diversity of diet, growing wet rice without enough water soon spells famine.

The solution found by some villagers was to do a little carpentry on the side – making simple furniture to be sold locally or by moving around elsewhere in the Delta as *thợ mộc*, itinerant carpenters, selling their services on construction sites for everyday or religious buildings. Several men from the village were away for months at a time doing this work during the agricultural low season, just as in many other villages, in Hà Tây Province for example, as we will see in the itineraries over there. Meanwhile, the women of Đồng Kỵ set about weaving: they produced a simple white or brown cloth, used to make clothes and sails.

<sup>1</sup> If you have the chance to visit Hạ Long Bay or anywhere along the coast, you may see some strange seafood on sale, like giant, olive-green woodlice, each sporting an enormous spike on its head: they are horseshoe crabs, or *con sam* in Vietnamese. These mysterious, prehistoric beasts (with literally blue blood and miraculous medicinal properties), more closely related to scorpions and spiders than to crustaceans, are also invariably sold in pairs – the husband and the wife – (the wife is the fatter one), mainly to courting couples on amorous trips to the seaside.





## 4 x 4 (x 5)

Some people from Đồng Kỳ managed to become water buffalo traders. In fact, it is believed that this trade began in the village a very long time ago. During the colonial period, there was the big **Giàu Market**, specialised in buffaloes, which was held six times every lunar month in the village of Phù Lưu, two kilometres from Đồng Kỳ, where about 500 head of cattle were sold every day! Ten or so rich traders from Đồng Kỳ used to collect buffaloes from all over the mountainous provinces of the North, selling them to intermediaries from the Deltaic provinces, either as work animals (70%), or for meat (30%). Indeed, if you order a steak this evening back in Hà Nội, there is still a very good chance that you'll be eating buffalo...

This activity required a lot of capital and a large workforce. The trader would send out teams to bring back buffaloes on foot (at a ratio of one man for five beasts), finding food for them along the way. Imagine the appetite of five hungry buffaloes (and one man) during three or four days' march across the plain... Back in Đồng Kỳ, about 200 people made a living providing forage for the animals, while another 50 or so retrieved their dung to sell it to farmers. Some traders became extremely rich – and even those who took care of the metabolising inputs and outputs of these insatiable bovines earned ten times more than their comrades slaving away over a hot paddy field. The ancient practice by village women of collecting dung did not always play in their favour: some people of neighbouring villages, jealous of the success of these businesswomen – they were notorious for driving a hard bargain –, delight in recalling to mind this humble activity, not without a certain irony. The strong polarisation of this trade in buffaloes led to the establishment of a vast commercial network: on the supply side, villages in mountainous and hilly regions; on the demand side, villages everywhere in the Delta and even further afield: during the colonial period, some traders exported buffaloes to as far away as Hong Kong, by train to Hải Phòng, then on by boat. A commodity chain was born.

SAWN TIMBER AT ĐỒNG KỶ





TIMBER MERCHANT AT ĐỒNG KỲ MARKET

### So how did the Dongkinese move from selling four-legged friends to making three-piece suites?

Of course, several factors came into play: the first, curbing the activity of the buffalo traders, was the revolutionary war. The buffalo trade halted completely from 1945 to 1954.

Later, after the Việt Minh victory, came the collectivist era. Vietnam began to receive agricultural machinery produced in countries of similar political complexion in the Soviet Union. (In fact, a tractor is not of much use in a flooded rice paddy: it is still possible today that the only one of these metallic beasts that you will see during this itinerary may be in the pagoda at the end, on 200 VNĐ bills, “money for the dead” now worth too little to be of much interest to the living). During this period, carpentry, not so very prevalent beforehand in Đồng Ky, developed greatly within the agricultural co-operative. There was a precious contribution of know-how from the artists-woodcarvers of the established neighbouring craft villages, long specialised in their art, such as:

- Phù Khê Thượng (religious items and roof carvings);
- Kim Thiều (statues);
- Thiết Ứng (statues of Buddha, phoenixes and turtles).

Other co-operatives were rapidly created in these three villages. Artisans also began to make things out of ivory and buffalo horn (a modest link with the past?). Orders started rolling in, particularly from Eastern European countries (fellow travellers towards a better world). Everything was managed by state agencies, which supplied the raw materials, sought out new markets, exported the goods and (sometimes) paid salaries. Then, in 1984 (a year that got plenty of people thinking), a fresh government directive allowed production outside the co-operative, with the proviso that it should still be in a collective context... State control of the means of production slackened a little, artisans started working at home again.

While all this was going on, in the post-revolutionary war period, a new craft came into being in Đồng Ky, invented by former buffalo traders seeking to invest their idle capital and put it to work to make more: fine furniture-making. In fact, these traders, making use of their old networks of contacts, crisscrossed the Delta in search of antique Vietnamese, Chinese and even French furniture, took it apart and copied it. To begin with, they had little idea how to do this, but thanks to the employment of specialised (well-paid) artisans, who were hired to train the children and apprentices of the Đồng Ky bosses, the craft began to deliver up its secrets...





A JOINER IN HIS WORKSHOP ĐỒNG KỲ



## Space: the final frontier

With a density of residential population far above that of the centrally located traditional neighbourhoods in Hà Nội (more than 300 people per hectare here), plus the carpentry workshops and a need to stock timber (which takes up a lot of room) and furniture in all stages of production, Đông Kỵ suffers badly from a lack of space that continues to become more acute – and also from an environment that is deteriorating.

The artisans of Đông Kỵ must find solutions to these issues, but unfortunately, such solutions often generate fresh problems:

- An **industrial park** (IP) has been created at the entrance to the village to increase production space, enable the mechanisation of processes, resolve the poor access to businesses far from the roads and reduce environmental problems, particularly those affecting public health (noise, harmful substances and overcrowding). However, little heed is given to zoning (often, families and workers are housed here and production continues as before in the centre of the village), some craftspeople have formalised their status solely to facilitate their access to the IP and only 30% of those requesting a plot of land actually received one... In addition, farmers expropriated to clear the site of the IP sometimes try to claim their land back and go and make representations in Hà Nội.
- Ponds and canals have, in an informal manner, been filled in with rubbish and bags of stones to reclaim land and then be able to build on it or to establish storage areas. But this practice reduces the efficiency of water drainage (the water is quite polluted here with chemicals used to stain and varnish the pieces of furniture) and increases the risk of flooding during the monsoon season.
- Some artisans buy plots of land in nearby villages, often covered with water or liable to flooding, and also fill them in. This practice has the negative effect of sending the price of real estate sky high all round Đông Kỵ and, once again, of impeding efficient water drainage.
- Other homeowners in Đông Kỵ destroy their old village houses (often beautiful, to our tourist eyes) in order to build several cement houses there, in the Hà Nội style (distinctly less beautiful, to the same eyes). You have probably already noticed these houses (the “strip” houses), built along similar lines to a compact castle in the Middle Ages, with a little drawbridge (for motorbikes), a folding portcullis (against burglars) and sometimes even a moat (in the form of sewers, a pond or flooded paddy fields). They nearly all have the silhouette of a matchbox placed on one end (although in this way they do create plenty of living space on the upper floors). In addition, the façade has been covered with pastel-coloured (or even fluorescent) paint, while leaving the other cement walls “au naturel”. These three walls are also blind: if you are expecting others to come and build their houses of an identical format (or even with additional storeys) up close and personal only a few centimetres distant from yours, what’s the point of fitting French windows into the other walls?

Let us return to space management... All these makeshift solutions and individual, poorly co-ordinated strategies from the richer artisans only provide partial and imperfect answers to the problems. The absence of any proper, integrated municipal planning is a growing source of worry: in addition to environmental damage, the insufficient road network is saturated and there is a risk of tensions between villages and between artisans and expropriated farmers, tensions that in the long term could also jeopardise productive cohesion within the cluster.

## THE (NEW) CRAFT

For a long time, this activity was not a particularly lucrative one: limited by the difficulty (at that time) in obtaining wood and the small size of the market, patience and deep pockets were needed by the handful of families in Đồng Kỵ that were the first to convert to this new craft. One craftsman tells of having paid a tidy sum simply for the right to take photographs of a set of pieces of fine antique French furniture, which he then copied from his photos!

The craft began to develop after the end of the American War (1975), but it was not until the end of the 1980s with the advent of *Đổi Mới* (the Vietnamese *Perestroika*) that it really took off. From then on, Đồng Kỵ became a permanent centre of craft activity (and a very large timber market), surrounded by satellite villages, which supplied a workforce, some of it well-qualified, thanks to its ancestral skill in carpentry and sculpture.

The particularity and the force of Đồng Kỵ's converted bosses was to channel these skills, previously limited to a religious vocation, into a new, secular, diversified craft, with multiple, even global markets. The craft expanded, became more organised and specialised: around Đồng Kỵ, a whole network of connections and supplies of labour, materials and services was set up with the neighbouring villages and others, sometimes much more distant.

In a graphic entitled "Connections between the crafts specialised in wooden furniture" (Fanchette S. & Nguyễn Xuân Hoàn, 2009), even if it looks rather like the Napoleonic battle diagrams in old history books, one can observe the complex and simultaneous movements in all directions, the balance of power (economic, not military here) and the delicate hierarchy of activities and skills woven around Đồng Kỵ. Some artisans from the surrounding area work in the workshops of this village. Many of them travel to and fro daily, others come from too far away and must find lodgings in dormitories, like the mother-of-pearl inlayers from the specialised villages of Hà Tây (see **Itinerary n°6**) as well as the workers who travel down from Thái Nguyên Province. Many craftspeople remain at home however, doing subcontracted work, thus taking up less precious space in Đồng Kỵ, minimising overheads for the owners of large workshops and very often only carrying out one very isolated part of making a piece of furniture.

You will see people in the villages round Đồng Kỵ who, for example, only make chair legs for a living. In the manner preached by Adam Smith (or F. W. Taylor), they can work efficiently, with a minimum of wasted time, energy or materials, but one cannot help but notice that they are trapped in a relationship of dependence with the person who puts the work out to contract (never mind the whims of the market), from which they cannot easily escape.

## THINGS TO SEE

- Go and take a quick look at one of the modern shops with a showroom in what is supposed to be the industrial park along the main road at the entrance to the village, in order to see a good sample of what people make here.
- Explore the old centre of Đồng Kỵ, very dense, with markets like the one for mother-of-pearl (organised by the inlayers who hail from Hà Tây) and the labour market (temporary workers – mostly women).

Concerning **architectural heritage** in Đồng Kỵ, leaving rapidly to one side the shiny new houses of Dongkinese nouveaux-riches, there are some very nice things to see here:

- The very famous *đình*. This communal house is a handsome building, but it was the firecracker competition, held just after *Tết* (the lunar new year), that established the national renown of Đồng Kỵ, long before fine furniture appeared in the front room. Not so much a proto-Woodstock amid the water hyacinths as a grudge match between volatile explosive experts, competing Donkinese families used to prepare at home, in great secret, huge firecrackers stuffed with gunpowder (in other words: bombs). The day of the competition, they proudly unveiled them on the forecourt of the *đình*, sometimes obliged to demolish and rebuild a wall of a house in order to get the rocket out of its hiding place! The firecrackers were judged not only according to their size but also by the quality of their subsequent explosion. One year, a firecracker blast even destroyed part of the roof of the *đình*... This practice commemorated the return from battle of General Thiên Cương, who had helped one of the Hùng kings (#6) to oust the <sup>n<sup>th</sup></sup> wave of Chinese soldiers to swoop down upon the Delta. In 1994 however, all this was sent for a spin by the government outlawing the production and

detonation of firecrackers, at last deemed too dangerous. This ban put an end to a very popular custom – and (as we will see later) disrupted the activities of several craft villages, including some on this same itinerary that produced the paper for the firecrackers. Đồng Kỵ has nonetheless maintained its festival – and its tradition (carving, since the ban, firecrackers out of wood: a curious busman's holiday for these slaves to the wood chisel!). The firecracker competition still takes place therefore, starting on the **4<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month** (the day after *Tết* ends). The fun used to last for 20 days; today, it only lasts for three...

- Several other ceremonies and games take place at the same time as the firecracker competition. Among these, let us mention a relatively explicit fertility rite. A farmer with children of both sexes (namely: of good breeding stock) is chosen to brandish objects representing the male genitalia (made of wood) and the female ones (made of *mo cau*, the fibre of the areca nut). Three times, he performs a dance while simulating carnal congress with these two objects. When it's all over, he throws the exhausted organs into the crowd for lucky villagers to catch. To find out what happens next, you'll have to go there yourself.
- Explore a couple of (craft) villages in the vicinity of Đồng Kỵ (see the list at the beginning of this itinerary). Observe artisans doing subcontracted work.
- Notice the impressive quantity and variety of wood stocked in Đồng Kỵ and its environs. Amazing but true, the biggest timber market in all of northern Vietnam is here, in this very village! Reserves of suitable wood have almost been exhausted in Vietnam, so it is bought from countries as distant as Indonesia and Burma; it is also resold here in Đồng Kỵ. (Unfortunately, this is another downside to this hive of activity working at full capacity: the difficulty of controlling the exact origin of the wood, the conditions under which it has been cut and any potential environmental damage caused by its removal. For example, Laos has been pillaged for its precious wood (Cambodia as well) and it is almost exclusively communities of mountain dwellers, already vulnerable to environmental disruption, who pay the price, without benefiting financially from this trade).

## A walk through Đồng Kỵ

Once past the industrial and commercial area, you enter into an older part of the village. The road lined with businesses, then with the big timber market (to the right) gives way to one of the main arteries of the cluster of villages. Choked with traffic at rush hours, it is an amazing spectacle of to-ing and fro-ing, made up of horse-drawn carts, motorbikes, bicycles, and the small vans that carry jumbled piles of furniture of phenomenal sizes: acrobats of a kind, these porters and couriers have become essential participants in the cluster's business activity. It is possible to escape the ambient chaos by taking one of the bigger streets to the right a little before the river. The entrance is marked by a very striking gate, marking the limits of *Xóm Bàng*, one of the village's hamlets.

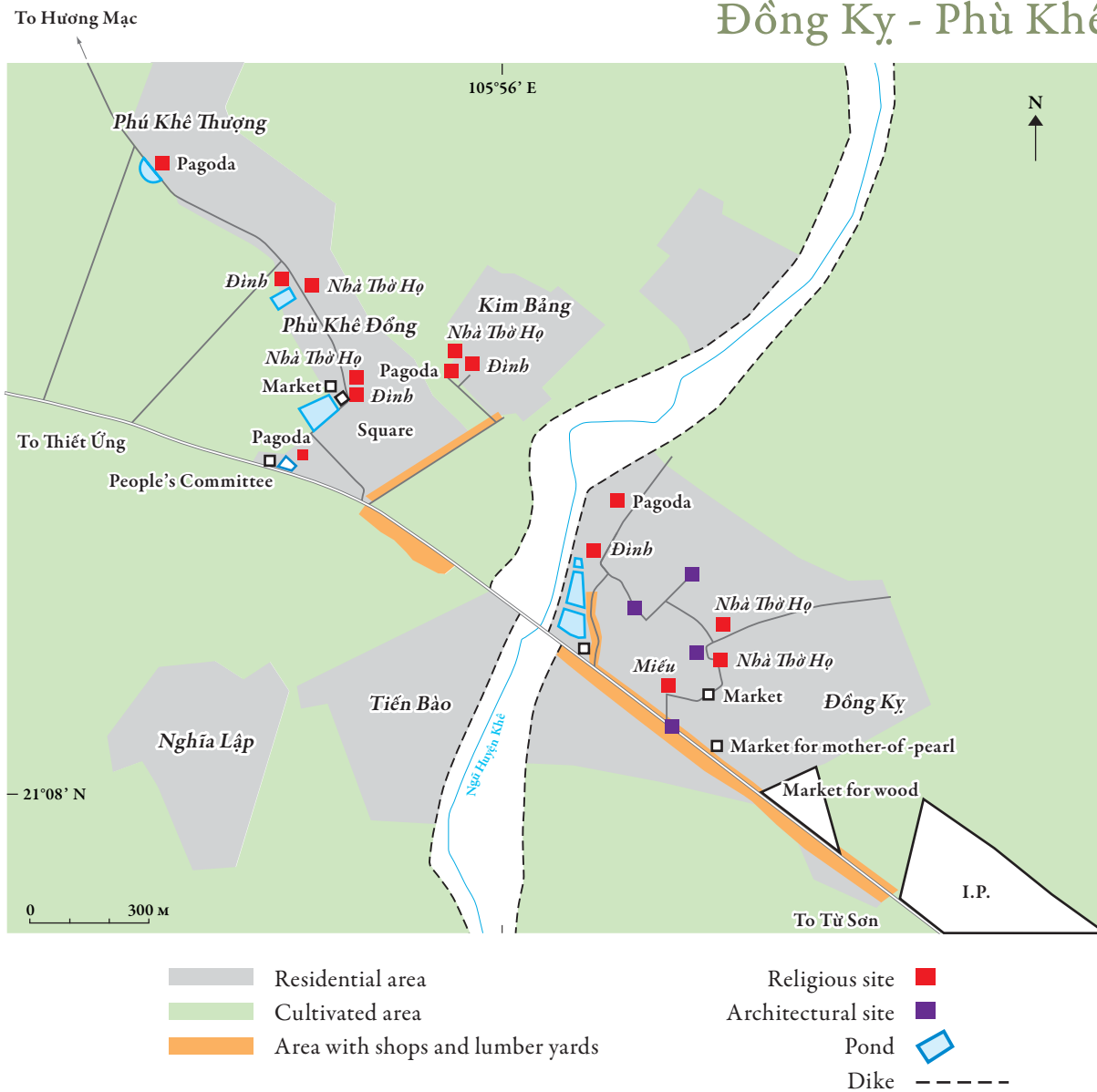
This lane leads to a junction where a small *miếu* (temple) stands opposite a slight rise in the ground where there was once a well. A hairdresser sporadically plies his trade here. Take the alley on the right and after a few metres, you will come upon the tiny market for everyday items. A small *miếu* dedicated to the worship of the spirit of the earth seems to protect the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. Follow the alley to the left that leads to a very attractive *nhà thờ họ* (to the left), where the Dương lineage, the biggest family in the village, meets for family festivals and to worship their ancestors. In this very densely populated place, maintaining such a building featuring a courtyard with a pond and lined with well-tended bonsais is quite an achievement.

A little further, to the left, once you have gone round the *nhà thờ họ*, a very beautiful gate opens onto a group of elegantly built traditional houses, lost in the middle of gardens, some of which serve as carpentry workshops. Once you are back in front of the *nhà thờ họ* Dương, carry straight on. You will pass in front of the former cultural centre *nhà văn hóa*, converted into an infant school. At the junction of alleyways, the *nhà thờ họ* of the Vũ family stands opposite. A plainer construction, it nonetheless marks the territory of another lineage, in this very ancient and very populous village (more than 13,000 inhabitants!).

Carrying straight on, the road bends round to the left. Several workshops are installed in the tiny courtyards of some ancient houses. It is possible to visit them, armed with a few smiles! The second blind alley to the right leads to the workshop of Mrs. Nhu who, in this traditional house more than 200 years old, puts to work a tightly-packed team of women who sand down, varnish and assemble very fine furniture inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Carrying on further down the street, keep going until you come to the *đình* by passing through a very striking gate that marks the entrance to *Xóm Đình*. Next to this gate, a compact *miếu* is used to worship the spirit of the earth that protects the inhabitants of this hamlet.

Early birds can take part in, or at least attend, an open-air session of tai chi in the courtyard of the *đình*... at five o'clock in the morning!

## Đồng Kỳ - Phù Khê



Source: Google Earth 2008, IRD Cartography Department



## A walk through Phù Khê

Once you have gone over the bridge that crosses the little Ngũ Huyện Khê River and marks the limit between the villages of Đồng Kỵ and Phù Khê, on the left you can see a fresh area of workshops, mostly occupied by craftspeople from Đồng Kỵ. To the right, partially flooded paddy fields will be used as an industrial park to relocate production from the village's core, once land problems have been sorted out. It is possible to visit a small pagoda, Chùa Vĩnh Lợi, on the roadside, after the first junction. Notice the presence of a banyan tree, symbol of Vietnam's 3,000-year-old society (with its intriguing adventive roots, home to benevolent spirits, unlike the kapok tree, which houses only malevolent ghosts, terrifying small children...) and admire the charming little pond in front of the pagoda.

Take the street to the right that leads to the village square. On the right-hand side of the square, first there is the small *đình*, recently restored, which stands opposite a vast stretch of water. Next door, you'll see the *nhà thờ họ* of the Lê family. The road that cuts through the village is lined with many old buildings, symbolising the age, affluence and expertise of this village of sculptors, whose origins date back more than a thousand years to the Lý Dynasty. The most talented artisans participated in the construction of the most renowned pagodas (Đâu and Đạm Pagodas) as well as the *đình* in Đình Bảng, which you have already had the chance to admire. Their speciality: carving animals, particularly dragons, one of the four sacred mythical animals.

As you pass the marketplace (on your left), opposite you is a small *miếu* that houses the hamlet's spirit of the earth and where a resting place has been set aside for villagers. On either side, the street gives onto blind alleys, where the sound of woodcutting machines and circular saws and suchlike reminds us of the vitality of this village with its rich architectural heritage. Try to lose yourself in these alleyways where you can observe the extreme division of labour between workshops: some produce only chair legs, while others busy themselves with tabletops inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Anyone for Lego?

Many of the workshops to the left of the main road are recent and have been built over former ponds that have been filled in. The conquest of space has gone hand-in-hand with the development of this village, boldly reclaiming land that no one has dared reclaim before, as proximity with Đồng Kỵ has galvanised this community. Further on, to the right, the modest *nhà thờ họ* of the Nguyễn family. Then to the left, another pocket *đình*, preceded by a stretch of water. Opening out onto paddy fields as far as the eye can see, this is a very beautiful building and the delicate, lacquered sculptures showcase the talent of the village's artisans. If you are lucky enough to find the *đình*'s gatekeeper, he can open it up for you, apart from on days set aside for ancestor worship (**the 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> days of the lunar month**). It is said that during the war against the French, this communal house served as a hiding-place for the Việt Minh (above a suspended ceiling hung from the main rafters). It was then destroyed by the villagers for fear that the French garrison, stationed in the nearby town of Đồng Anh, would make it its headquarters. It was rebuilt to identical specifications in 2002, thanks to contributions from villagers and relying upon the memory of village elders to keep the reproduction faithful!

If you carry straight on, you come to the huge, shiny new pagoda of Phù Khê Thượng, *Chùa Ông Hồng An*, rebuilt in 2006. The original became collateral damage during the war. A massive Buddha of over 15 metric tons watches over the faithful. This pagoda was once very famous in the region.



FURNITURE MAKER USING MACHINE TOOLS  
FOR FINISHING, ĐỒNG KỲ

LOCAL TRANSPORT IN ĐỒNG KỲ







WASTE PAPER FOR USE BY THE PAPER MAKERS AT DƯƠNG Ổ



# DƯƠNG Ổ, CHÂM KHÊ AND THE PAPER PRODUCING VILLAGES

## GETTING THERE

Go back to National Highway n°1 and turn left, heading towards the provincial capital, Bắc Ninh. At km 24, you go through the town of Lim, an administrative centre where the Lim *Quan họ* Festival takes place (see p.89). About another kilometre further on, you will reach the village of Xuân Ổ. The village's name is marked on shop signs. On your left, a road goes into the commune of Phong Khê to which Dương Ổ belongs. If you come to a motorway bridge crossing over the main road and you see a "no-entry" sign on the left-hand side of the road, which at this point becomes a dual carriageway, this means you've gone too far. Track back about 600 metres and you'll find the first entrance to the village of Dương Ổ. Cross the railway line (the same one you went over to get to Đông Kỵ) – and welcome to Paperland!

## THE CONTEXT

Dương Ổ is a traditional craft village, producing various kinds of *dó* paper, made from the fibres of the *rhamnoneuron*, a tree found in the mountainous provinces that overlook the Delta. This activity has been practised for several hundred years. It supplanted the production of Bưởi and Yên Thái villages, located on the shores of West Lake (the big lake in Hà Nội: see Part 1 p. 28), now absorbed by the capital. Dương Ổ supplied the villages of the Upper Delta via specialised markets for paper of various qualities: for writing royal edicts, for votive paper (Làng Cốt), for woodblock prints (Đông Hồ), for making firecrackers (Bình Đà), or later during the revolution, for printing tracts and revolutionary newspapers. The collectivist era saw the beginnings of modernisation and participation in the village's war effort through craft co-operatives, then production groups (see Part 1 p. 21).

Since economic liberalisation, production of *dó* paper has declined in favour of mechanical production of printing paper or toilet rolls. Dương Ổ artisans have better managed their diversification of production than those of other villages. In 1994, the government outlawed the production of firecrackers and precipitated the decline of a centuries-old form of papermaking. However, the artisans of this dynamic village refused to admit defeat. They began the process of modernisation and mechanisation of their activity and widened their range of products (toilet rolls, wrapping paper, printing paper and to a lesser degree, votive paper). In 2003, Phong Khê Commune had 125 industrial production lines with a capacity of from 300 to 2,000 metric tons per year. This process did not take place without more collateral damage: you will see this for yourself when you stroll through the village and above all, along the banks of what used to be the backbone of the village, the Ngũ Huyện Khê River. However, there are still a few artisans making *dó* paper, and others producing paper to make votive offerings. This small amount of handcrafted paper produced here is sold mostly to artists.

There are three other villages close by in this papermaking cluster: follow the bank of the Ngũ Huyện Khê River towards the north-east from Dương Ổ and you will end up in Đào Xá. Continuing further north, you will come to Châm Khê. In this village, paper production is much less mechanised than in Dương Ổ. There are more producers of *giấy dó* (*dó* paper) and paper for making votive offerings.



**SHEETS OF GIẤY DÓ SEPARATED AFTER DRYING AT DƯƠNG Ổ**



## Barking up the right tree

The first challenge for *dó* papermakers is to obtain the bark of this tree, the vital raw material. Bark from the paper mulberry tree is also used to a certain degree (but not much is said about this). It is hard to find supplies of *dó* bark these days: as there are fewer and fewer buyers, *dó* tree growers are becoming thin on the ground and prices are very high. Mountain-dwellers don't plant many of them; they are only found now in Lào Cai and Yên Bái Provinces, where the bark is harvested in September and October. Those who wish to make paper regularly must hoard supplies for the whole year.

On the other hand, papermaking is also seasonal: production is halted during the monsoon (June, July, August), as it is too hot – and in addition, the paper will no longer dry out. Once one has found some bark, it must be prepared: what follows is the recipe for making *dó* paper as it was done a century ago in a village on the banks of West Lake. With one difference (the amount of various chemicals and recycled paper being discreetly added to the pulp), the last papermakers of Dương Ổ and Châm Khê continue to do things exactly the way their ancestors did.

Making *dó* paper in the village of Yên Thái in the traditional way begins with the delivery of bundles of sticks that are put to soak or *ret* in the Tò Lịch River, for between one and three days. The bark is given a rough clean, by removing knots and cutting it into pieces and then it is placed into tanks where it soaks in a mixture of lime and water for 24 hours. Then follows the phase where the bark is steamed in ovens dug into the ground (for between eight and ten hours, according to Dard Hunter) or in a bain-marie (Claverie F. indicates three to four days). The bark is then placed in big baskets made of woven bamboo and washed in clean water. Women with knives separate the light-coloured part of the bark that will give the best-quality paper from the darker part, used for lesser-quality products. Having been soaked once more, then washed and drained, men crush the bark by hand in stone mortars until it becomes a coarse pulp. Diluted and homogenised in a vat, thickened with *mò* wood shavings, the pulp is screened in thin layers with the help of a mould made from a wooden frame and a fine bamboo latticework screen, called a *liếm xeo*. The sheets of paper are piled onto a tray of 500 or 1,000 pieces. A press is used to gently squeeze the water out of this pile of fresh sheets and then the drying phase proper begins, either outside or using an oven, the sheets being placed around its exterior. It only remains to put the uncut sheets into bundles for sale.

## A paper trail through Dương Ổ (Phong Khê)

An introductory caveat: this village is neither bucolic, nor attractive, nor charming... Mechanised paper production has invaded all the nooks and crannies of local life, has polluted the watercourses and occupied both public and private space. The scale of activity and its speed of growth and change have spelled the end of environmental control by the lineages and local authorities. In this deltaic society perpetually confronted with the risk of floods, traditional institutions had been established to manage this risk. The integrated system of production known as VAC (*Vườn, Ao, Chuồng* : garden, pond, herd) made it possible to recycle some organic waste. The road network was planned in parallel lines to ease evacuation of water from the main street into the perpendicular secondary arteries and towards the paddy fields and ponds that constituted a network throughout the village, thus enabling the recycling of nutrients for fish farming. Village charters, which regulated all aspects of village life, in this manner organised waste management and maintenance of public thoroughfares.

You will soon see the breakdown of this ancient and outdated system. There is paper EVERYWHERE. By paper, we mean not only paper for recycling, which is the prime raw material used by village artisans, but also the finished products: huge stacks of wrapping paper that block the roads in the industrial park, mountains of loo rolls in front of shops... In the first case, that of the paper for recycling, we will leave you the task of measuring the extent to which it has occupied all available space, and the variety of this matter to which we, in the West, to promote it once it is recycled, apply the onerous label of “green” merchandise.

However, we will also get you to visit addresses that offer a more traditional experience. Here you will meet the Last of the (Paper) Mohicans, who struggle against all odds to pursue their art, for very modest profits: the makers of *giấy dó* (often wrongly called rice-paper). In the spring of 2008, there remained four workshops active in Dương Ổ and about ten in Châm Khê. We will lead you to the least industrialised part of the village (even though the environs of the railway lines, more recently developed, give the opposite impression) and we'll leave you to judge, at the end of the tour, the transformation in the nature of these villages' activity, by finishing up in the industrial park, located to the north-east.

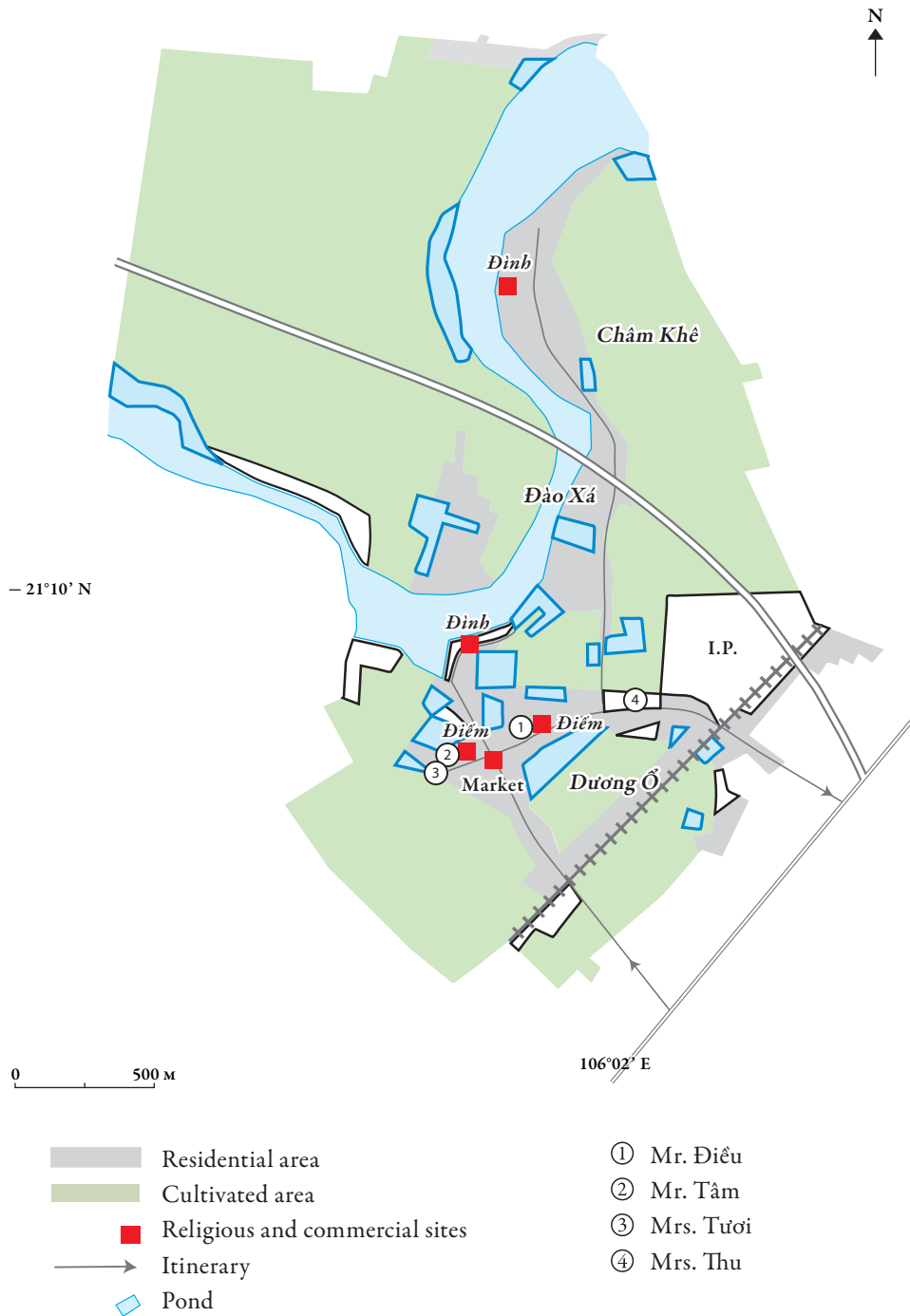
As soon as you cross the railway line, a small *miếu* marks the village limits. Take the recently built main street: the heart of the old village is further on, towards the Ngũ Huyện Khê River. Before you get to the market, you will see on your left a company specialised in sorting paper thrown away by the Bãi Bằng paper mill. This high quality paper is obtained from notebooks made with cellulose pulp. A forest of small hands plunged into these snowy mountains of paper strips sorts through this quality raw material: they remove bits of sticky tape, staples, coloured covers. Sorting keeps a large workforce busy, predominantly female and little trained (the elderly, children...), while the men busy themselves with the machines and industrial activities. A company with about 15 employees can sort up to five metric tons of paper a week.

The village's main street is lined with new houses, whose courtyards are invaded by... paper. Only when you enter the maze of small streets in the old core of the village can you see little houses with courtyards full of flowers, which constitute the charm of these Delta villages.

Once you get to the market, turn left. A small temple, *diêm*, serves as a place of worship for the inhabitants of this *xóm*. Through a crack between the doors, one can see, here and there, elderly people busy sorting piles of paper strips. In spite of mechanisation, the activity works its way into every corner of the village and into the intimacy of houses, mostly deserted since mechanised production was forced to relocate into the industrial parks of the commune or along the river.



# Phong Khê



Source: Google Earth 2008, IRD Cartography Department

In the first alley on the right is the house of **Mr. Phạm Văn Tâm**, whose wife is one of four *dó* papermakers. You can request a visit of her workshop and buy a few sheets of paper. Each workshop carries out the whole production process, so it is often possible to see every stage of papermaking. In the vats in the courtyard, the *dó* bark is put to soak, while to one side women clean the bark, and it is possible to see presses, strainers, mortars and other papermaking instruments. The screening of the pulp in the mould is really the most impressive stage. In her living room, stuffed full with piles of paper of various sizes, Mr. Phạm Văn Tâm's wife peels off a dry sheet and inspects its quality. She produces 100 kilos of paper a month, of different qualities, or about 20,000 sheets. She prepares orders for clients, most of them regular ones. The levels of quality depend on the proportion of pulp in the mixture, on the quality of the bark and on the thickness of the paper: *giấy dương* is thicker than *giấy dó*. In some cases, recycled paper is mixed with bark pulp.

To get to Mr. Ngô Văn Hiến's workshop, retrace your steps. At the end of the alleyway, turn right (with the market on your left) and continue a few metres further. His workshop is on the right. When we visited, his wife, **Mrs. Tươi**, was screening *dó* pulp in a tank with the help of the *khuôn* (mould). She passes the mould, on which there is a latticework of thin bamboo strips (*mành*), through the tank of water (*tàu xeo*) mixed with pulp and she removes the sheet to put it on a pile of them, then repeats this movement over and over again: 800 times a day. From time to time, she gives the water in the tank a good stir with a stick to mix the pulp in well and obtain a smooth liquid. This traditional and manual craft, an exhausting one, because you have to stay standing up the whole time, with your hands in the water, has been carried out by women in this village for generations.

If you wish to assess the impact on the environment of this highly mechanised activity, when you get back to the market, turn left and go straight on down to the river (see map, p. 85). Walk along the river between Dương Ổ and Châm Khê: you will see a good sample of more mechanised production, doubtless witness production lines in operation (the biggest ones keep going all night) and workers preparing recycled paper, wrapping toilet rolls, etc. You will see that, as in Đồng Kỵ, space is lacking here, and the riverbanks, despite being the site of the *đình* and the majestic wharf, are polluted with used paper pulp. It is also difficult to ignore the pollution of the waterway: this industry requires large amounts of water and generates a lot of waste (which often ends up in the river), as well as using toxic chemical products.

If you wish to carry on visiting *giấy dó* producers, go back to the market and follow the street leading off to the left. This street leads to the new industrial park, cutting right through the heart of the village. This street is a rather unprepossessing concrete strip, but the side roads lead to little houses nestling at the ends of alleyways. Here and there, unused tanks can be seen in courtyards where *dó* bark was once soaked. In the last alley on the left before coming to a small *điểm* (temple) is the house of **Mr. Ngô Đức Diệu**, a respected and elderly artisan who has in his keeping a document dating from 1435 mentioning papermaking in the village. He continues to make paper the traditional way, but his sons have switched to mechanised production in the industrial park.

Then, before leaving the old village, on the right, in an old house, a woman makes *giấy dó* with a mixture of recycled paper and *dó*. This poor-quality *dó* paper is used by the goldbeaters of Kiêu Kỵ, a village near Bát Tràng (the famous pottery village on the bank of the Red River). Kiêu Kỵ and its goldbeaters are described in detail in **Itinerary n°2**. This woman (like two others in a more remote hamlet of the cluster) buys paper for recycling, has it pulped in another workshop, then mixes it in water with *dó* bark. She makes 1,000 sheets a day and, for 100 sheets, she only asks 20,000 VNĐ! She can't receive many sheets of gold leaf in exchange for sheets of paper...

Then, if you wish to visit Châm Khê, take the street that goes left at the crossroads. Go past the communal People's Committee. Then go into Đào Xá, a village of papermakers, cut into two by the motorway bridge that leads to Nội Bài Airport. After a kilometre or so, you come to Châm

Khê. Recycled paper is much used in making the village's specialities: votive offerings and fans. For example, look for workshops that make 'counterfeit' 100 dollar or 50,000 VNĐ bills, burnt by the buyer in order to 'pass them on' to the dead so that they can make ends meet in the hereafter. Would the difficulties of other worlds be similar to those of ours?

If you decide against a detour via Châm Khê, at the crossroads, carry straight on. To the right is a well, called the fairy's well, *giếng tiên*. It was restored and enlarged in 2004. Originally, it served to slake the neighbourhood's collective thirst, now it is only for decoration. On the side of the well, there is a small shrine for ancestor worship.

Then, in the small, informal industrial park to the left of this very busy and noisy street, look for **Mrs. Ngô Thị Thu** who, as well as making wrapping and other sorts of paper industrially, produces 1,000 sheets of high quality *dó* paper a day. She states that she does it "for pleasure" and claims that it is no longer possible to live from this craft. Once again, it is possible to obtain supplies of high quality paper here, notably sheets in bigger sizes.

Finally, if you're not afraid of chlorine fumes and industrial noise, we recommend that you have a quick look around the large industrial park, at the end of the street on the left, where most of the big companies are to be found. It is astonishing to see the numerous and spacious villas, painted pink, green or yellow, which have been built in this heavily polluted environment.



QUALITY PAPER OFFCUTS READY FOR RECYCLING, DƯƠNG Ổ

## LIM HILL AND PHẬT TÍCH PAGODA

On the road back to Hà Nội, five kilometres after the town of Bắc Ninh (six before the village of Từ Sơn) on your left, take a moment to discover the charms of Lim Hill (in the town of Lim), to the left after the railway station. On this hill, also called Mount Hồng Vân, is held Lim Festival. This is a celebration of spring through *quan họ* music (see box p. 89), songs typical of Bắc Ninh Province, which is held on the **13<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**.

If you go at the time of the Festival, you will see young singers sing to each other, positioned around the hill, in the neighbouring meadows or on boats tethered in the Tiểu Tương River below. The songs can last all night, and become particularly intense when the sun reappears above the horizon. The singers often eat small, pickled, yellow-green fruit with restorative powers (*trám trắng*: *Canarium album Rausch* or Chinese white olives) and sometimes put salt into their mouths in order to preserve their voices during a long night of warbling.

It is also an occasion to pay homage to Hiếu Trung, the founder of the *quan họ* village and at the same time, visitors can watch weaving competitions (during which the candidates sing *quan họ*) and take part in games, swinging contests, wrestling, etc.

If you are not lucky enough to see the festival, we recommend Lim Hill as a place for a picnic: located between the two clusters of craft villages, it's a very pleasant spot (with trees under which to sit in the shade), if you are suitably organised and the weather is good enough.

### THE RETURN OF THE MUMMY

Some kilometres further on (about eight), on the road that leads from the turning at Lim towards the Đuống River, is Phật Tích Pagoda (with the remains of the original Buddhist pagoda, built around the 7th-8th century) on Lạn Kha Hill (also known as Phật Tích). It was restored and enlarged during the Lý Dynasty and on several subsequent occasions. Large lacquered and gilded statues can be seen there. According to Nguyễn Vinh Phúc (2001), there is a seated statue that is the mummified and lacquered corpse of a monk, dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This was once quite a common practice in Vietnam and other pagodas contain similarly sombre treasures (see box in Itinerary n°5 p. 217 and also Itinerary n°8 p. 271).

The original name of the hill that is home to this pagoda – Lạn Kha – comes from a story that could have come straight out of Grimm's fairy tales... Lạn Kha means "rotten axe" and derives from an adventure in the life of a woodcutter called Vương Chất. One day, he climbed the hill to chop some wood and chanced upon two old men playing chess (Chinese chess, of course). Leaning his axe against a rock, the young man lingered to watch the action. At the end, the two players flew directly up into the heavens: they were immortals. Vương Chất tried to carry on with his work, but the handle of the axe had rotted away: whole centuries had passed during the game...

### Another strange story for the road back to Hà Nội

Heading home towards Lim, the road goes back over **Mount Bát Vạn** (actually a vague hillock 150 metres high: any blip on the deltaic horizon gets people waxing lyrical...). Bát Vạn here signifies **80,000** and refers to an identical number of tiny terracotta towers (only 20 cm high) that are said to be buried at this site. Legend has it that in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, a Chinese administrator (the prototype of the wicked coloniser) named Kao-Pien had these strange things buried here in order to enable him to put a curse on this prosperous corner of the Vietnamese countryside. This ancient superstition involves special rites and the burial of objects, usually made of copper or iron (but terracotta clearly gave a cheaper curse for your kopek). We have located the position of only **78,694** of these little Sino-Vietnamese gris-gris, so if the sun is not already beginning to set into the paddy fields when you pass by, please feel free to check the authenticity of this strange story – and of course, make sure you let us know.





## A lover's discourse: fragments

*Quan họ* is a traditional form of singing closely associated with Bắc Ninh Province, also practised in several neighbouring provinces, that first appeared in around the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It takes the form of love duets between men and women and between inhabitants of different villages, singing alternately *a cappella*, drawing on a rich traditional repertoire, obeying strict musical rules, but leaving ample room for improvised lyrics.

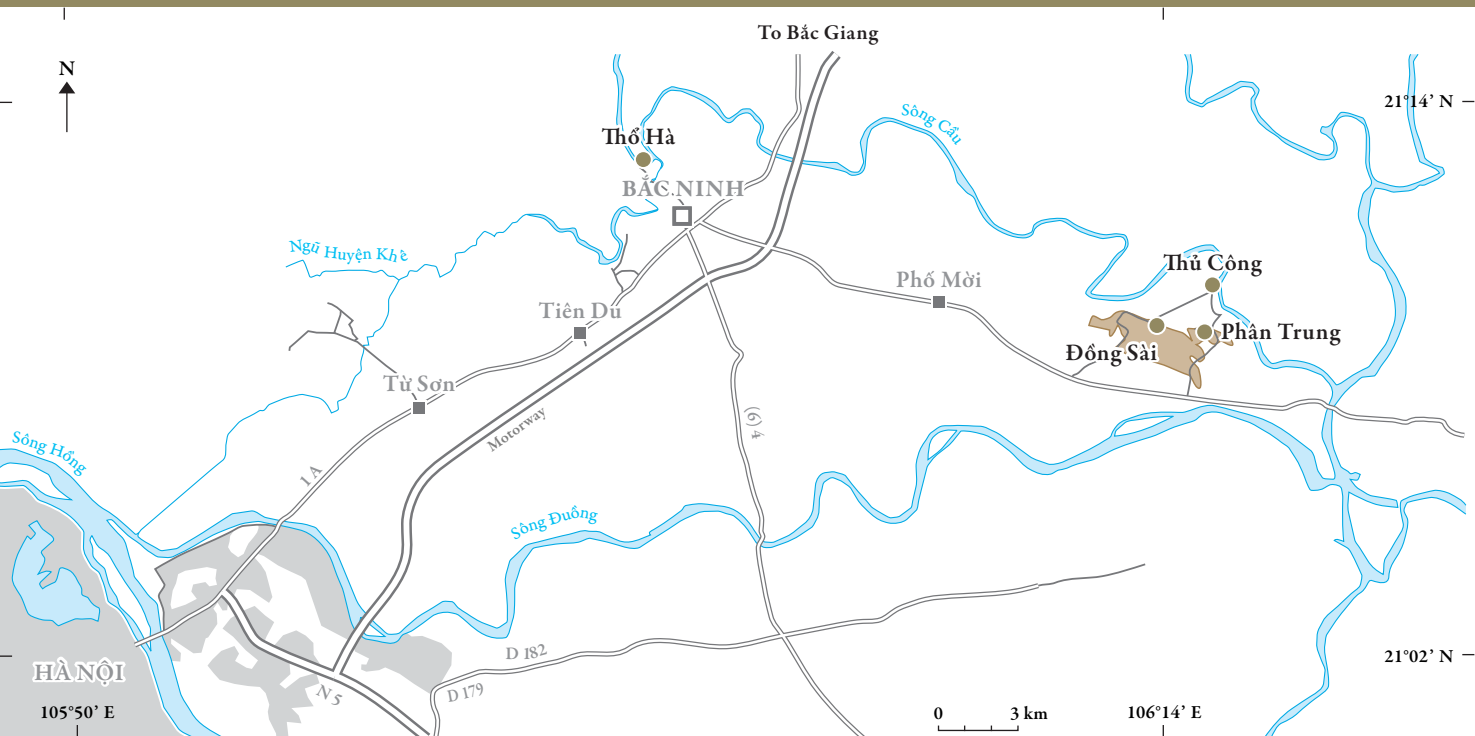
This musical discipline, considered a high point in the Delta's heritage of popular arts, is still practised in about 50 villages found in the former region of Kinh Bắc. Experienced singers look out in their own villages for girls and boys on the verge of adolescence who have singing voices that may go together well, then put them into pairs for vocal and musical training. A singing couple, thus united, is rarely separated, yet it is strictly forbidden for these young people to marry one another. Indeed, songs often deal with the wistful subject of unattainable love.

In times past, in a society where Confucian values severely limited any contact between the sexes outside the family, *quan họ* constituted a safety valve and an outlet for emotions not easily expressed elsewhere, safely couched in social approbation and an extremely codified structure, despite offering significant freedom for flights of improvised fancy.

With just such a chaste but intense partnership understanding, at once strong and flexible, if one were also to teach these young singers to play bridge as partners (bridge being better suited to the conditions in the Delta than ice dancing, we contend), Vietnam would soon be challenging for the world title...

# Itinerary 1 b

## Pottery villages (Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang)



### The craft villages

The craft villages: villages of Phù Lãng Commune (Đồng Sài, Phân Trung and Thủ Công) and the village of Thổ Hà.

### Cultural and architectural heritage

Brick architecture of the three very picturesque villages that make up Phù Lãng and its surroundings, the very rich and varied traditional architecture and the communal house of Thổ Hà.



# PHÙ LÃNG

## GETTING THERE

Exit Hà Nội to the east through Gia Lâm. Go straight through the Nguyễn Văn Cừ /Nguyễn Văn Linh intersection and turn right towards the motorway (National Highway n°5) to Hải Phòng. After about 11 kilometres, turn left to get onto the motorway that leads to the provincial capital of Bắc Ninh. After 25 km of road through the paddy fields, take the exit for Bắc Ninh, turn right (National Highway n°18) towards Phố Mới, the administrative centre of Quế Võ District: leave the bridge over the motorway to your left. When you get to this small town, you have another six kilometres to go. You will see a large brick kiln on your left. Turn left and follow the narrow, raised road that crosses the paddy fields. In the distance, you will see the hills on which are perched the villages of Phù Lãng. After about a kilometre, the road begins to climb. It goes through the village of Hữu Bằng and winds along the hill. You go through the village of Phùng Di, then the road makes a long curve to the right round the hill. You will begin to see potters' signs. Nearly there! A kilometre further on, you come to a T-junction. If you go straight on, you will come to Đồng Sài, the village where the famous ceramist Nhung lives. If you turn left, the road leads to Thủ Công, the village where the craft originated.

## THE CONTEXT

This visit of three pottery villages is also a trip back through time concerning the story of this craft in the Red River Delta: the visitor can at once admire fascinating remains from the past and observe the pitiless interplay of forces driving towards the present.

We begin this itinerary with the most far-flung destination of all the villages proposed in this guide: Phù Lãng. However, the distance (just over 60 kilometres) is largely compensated for by the beauty and the singularity of this place. In reality a succession of three separate pottery villages (Đồng Sài, Phan Trung and Thủ Công) located along the banks of the Cầu River, Phù Lãng is a very charming place. Surrounded by fertile paddy fields and far from the region's main roads, this little clump of houses, snugly settled on the slopes of a short chain of hillocks, retains many elements of traditional Tonkinese villages, while presenting unique aspects and boasting a distinctly modern dimension.

## THE CRAFT(S): A POTTED HISTORY

Potters have been at work in Phù Lãng Commune for a very long time: archaeological research has uncovered, buried deep in the ground, shards of ceramic dating back to the Trần Dynasty (13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century). Legend has it that the expertise was brought back to the village by three mandarins, Hứa Vĩnh Kiều, Đào Trí Tiến and Lưu Phong Tú, after their diplomatic mission to China and passed on to the inhabitants of their village.

Catherine Noppe (Musée royal de Mariemont, 2006) offers us one of the versions of this founding myth: "...Having returned home safe and sound, they enabled the people of their native villages to benefit from their experience: Kiều taught at Bát Tràng (**Itinerary n°2**) the art of producing a white enamel glaze, Tiến taught at Thổ Hà (**see p. 102**) that of a red glaze and Tú taught at Phù Lãng how to make a dark yellow glaze. Shortly afterwards, their work was presented at Court where it was found satisfactory and the glory was reflected onto the villages, which in turn honoured the mandarins as *tổ sư* 'founding ancestors' and worship of them with solemn festivals was established..."

Originally, the village potters mainly produced articles useful for everyday life: cooking pots, bowls, mugs, jars for alcohol, tiles, perfume-burners, etc. These articles were covered with a light brown glaze and were sold to other Delta villages and as far away as Hà Nội. Phù Lãng enjoyed quite good transport connections by river to bring in raw materials (once the local clay deposits and available wood were exhausted) and then to distribute and sell the – relatively heavy and fragile – produce. However, this village never managed to break into the export market, unlike Bát Tràng (**Itinerary n°2**), Chu Đậu and Hợp Lễ (formerly major ceramic-producing villages of the Delta), which in the 17<sup>th</sup> century were dominant traders in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, Phù Lãng was famed for the quality of its products: at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the best artisans of the commune were chosen to make 200 finely worked and glazed perfume-burners to be presented to the Royal Court.





ASSORTED POTTERY, PHÙ LĂNG



The improvement of roads and the arrival of motorised vehicles in Vietnam supplanted transport by river, which became too slow and costly for the competitive transport of goods in the Delta, save for the use of big barges and junks still plying up and down the Red River. Phù Lãng was disadvantaged by this evolution: far from Hà Nội and rather poorly connected by road, it suffered from, among other things, the competition of Bát Tràng, the best-known pottery village in the whole Delta (see **Itinerary n°2**) and located close to Hà Nội, the main commercial hub for the entire region.

However, it is above all the course (or the curse) of geopolitical events and the great social upheavals of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, washing over the deltaic plains of Vietnam as elsewhere, that temporarily submerged Phù Lãng's traditional activity in a period of decline. A state of war took hold and a guerrilla movement sprang up against the French colonial regime. The kilns of Phù Lãng were left to go cold and fall into ruin.

The revival of the activity did not take place until during the collectivist period. In contrast with Thổ Hà, where the co-operatives precipitated the demise of a high-quality craft established many centuries ago, Phù Lãng's co-operatives enabled it to re-establish the production of pottery of moderate quality made for everyday life, using the string of kilns in Thủ Công village, hugging the bank of the Cầu River.

Then, about 20 years ago, a small group of craftsmen from the commune found a new way of diversifying their activity and increasing production. They went to Thổ Hà (see **p. 102**) to obtain models of burial caskets (see **box p. 94**), the traditional stock-in-trade of Thổ Hà's potters, and set to making moulds in order to copy them, sell them more cheaply and thus replace Thổ Hà in this lucrative market for the whole of the northern part of the Red River Delta.

More recently, some young artisans in the village have also opted to switch crafts, this time to artistic ceramics: some of them have studied at the School of Fine Arts and the School of Industrial Arts in Hà Nội, bringing back new, creative ideas to the village. This 'new' craft has been very successful and some of these artisans-cum-artists have become quite famous.



## For whom the bell always tolls twice

Ceramic burial urns or caskets (*tiểu*) receive the bones of the dead during a solemn exhumation ceremony, held three (or sometimes four) years after the demise of the loved one. On that day, a smartly dressed group (each member wearing the white headband of deep mourning) can be seen heading through the fields to the graves. With them, they carry shovels and toothbrushes (to dig up and then clean off the bones picked dry by... the passage of time) – as well as a casket (made without a doubt these days in Phù Lãng), destined to be the final resting place amid the rice fields. The sides of this little coffin are pierced with small holes to let the guardian or tutelary spirits of the skeleton pass freely in and out. Before retrieving what is left of the dear departed, sacrifices must be made, firstly to the ancestors, then to the spirits of the earth – the one the dead person is leaving that day as well as the one where the departed will lie for eternity (or at least until the next bone-cleaning ceremony). As at the first burial, the mourners remember their loved one and perhaps surrender to their grief as an outlet for their bereavement.

The casket, filled with the bare bones blackened by the elements, once they have been sprinkled with perfume, placed according to a special order and covered with gilded and red votive paper, is buried in a tomb in a new place, chosen with care according to the rules of geomancy in order to aspire to a helping hand from the dead in favour of the living. The capital importance of a piece of land respecting a certain topographical configuration is summarised thus by the Vietnamese historian Hữu Ngọc:

“...The breath of the White Tiger or that of the Dragon could give the family impoverished runts or well-heeled scions, peasants or aristocrats, or even kings.” (Hữu Ngọc, 2007)

Hoping to sire royal children (and not just children who behave like royalty) might seem a tad optimistic, but one must admit that, despite the turbulences and ‘cultural liberalisation’ of recent times, the beliefs and observances of ancestor worship are still very much respected in Vietnam.

The Vietnamese are well aware that these traditional practices concerning human remains – which nonetheless find very similar echoes in many other cultures in Asia and elsewhere – are more than foreign to Westerners; you must be considered a very close friend of the family before you get an invitation to attend such a rite of final passage into the hereafter.

FUNERARY URNS PILED HIGH AT THỦ CÔNG (PHÙ LÃNG)



## THINGS TO SEE

First of all, there are several beautiful buildings: aside from the inevitable crimes against architecture in pastel-painted concrete (or *nouveau riche* style), the houses, mostly quite small and discreet, are usually built with local clay bricks (as are the walls surrounding the original hamlets of the commune) and blend harmoniously into the surrounding countryside. These villages give a sense of space, for they are perched on the hillside: there is no competition here with agriculture, in contrast with villages on the deltaic plain (imagine, for example, Burgundian villages chronically short of room for expansion, but exchange the vineyards of Nuits-Saint-Georges in front of the church for paddy fields behind the pagoda). The other interesting architectural features include the pottery workshops (often behind the houses) and the kilns for firing all the ceramics being produced.

### The kilns

They are a prominent feature of Phù Lãng (there are about 30 of them) and are worth special attention. They are of the kind called 'kiln laid flat' or tunnel kiln (in Vietnamese: *lò ống*), of relatively large volume compared to other models of traditional kilns (many are over 20 metres long). Built level or slightly sloping, some of them are partially buried and blend into the voluptuous curves of this charming place. Each kiln is protected from the rain by a fine tiled roof, which can also shelter many drying articles, waiting to join the next batch in the kiln.

The kilns are heated with wood (traditionally the only fuel used by Tonkinese potters), and everywhere in Phù Lãng, you come across dizzying piles of the stuff: skyscrapers and wooden tower blocks, built high against the sky and blocking out the landscape, but also conferring a chaotic charm on the village. Using wood as fuel adds to the craft dimension of the process: it gives limited control to the duration of firing and its temperature (which should be 500-700°C). Gas kilns will doubtless be progressively introduced here (as in Bát Tràng: see **Itinerary n°2**) – which will answer the more precise demands of artistic ceramics (sometimes complex or fragile articles, a variety of glazes, etc.). It must also be said that the use of wood raises serious environmental problems: people have to go further and further to find any (now as far as the mountainous areas bordering on the Delta) and the smoke pollutes the village air, all the more so given that the volume of production continues to increase (and that when wood is scarce, it is replaced by charcoal).

Don't hesitate to go inside a kiln (preferably one with no fire in it) in order to appreciate its dimensions and its detail. In Thủ Công hamlet (located on the dyke), the kilns are grouped round the former co-operative. Save for a handful of private operations, each kiln is shared between 10 to 12 potters who take turns using it for their independent production. They draw lots for their turn, but club together to buy the wood needed for the first batch, when the kiln is still cold (and hoping not to be saddled with the second turn, reputed to give poor quality produce...). It is also important to point out that indirect taxation collected by Phù Lãng Commune is not paid according to the number of windows or staircases per property, nor the right to wear hats or beards, – but is indeed linked to possession (or time-sharing) of potters' kilns!

Another striking aspect of the landscape is the use made of broken or defective items of pottery: these rather aesthetic waste products (mostly burial caskets, but also jars or other pots, which seem so much better than plastic bags or chemicals), are used to build enclosures, make walls higher, fill in holes, or are simply piled up around the village. The use of defective pieces of pottery to make fences between kilns and houses, rather than the usual little hedges made of plant matter, has the added advantage of minimising the risk of fire spreading from the kilns.

### The potters' workshops

These can be found all over the village – family workshops (some of which have been used for several generations) as well as small companies producing ceramics. By asking permission first (naturally), several of them can easily be visited. Since the revival of the trade with help from the burial caskets, the style of pottery common in Phù Lãng (easily recognisable as hand-crafted with an ash-grey glaze) has become popular once again. For example, several restaurants aimed at a fashionable or artistic clientele in Hà Nội now use it, and here in the village, you will see a wide variety of objects at all stages of production. It is also possible to buy pottery here directly from the workshops, at well below Hà Nội prices.



POTTERY YARD AT THỦ CÔNG (PHÙ LÃNG)



# The Velvet Revolution

By far the best known craftsman-cum-artist is Vũ Hữu Nhung, known as just **Nhung**, the name he signs his work with. This personable young ceramist and painter (he was born in the village in 1975, while Vietnam was rising from the ashes of the American War), has clearly hit the jackpot... Of very humble origins, having started out in life with his feet solidly stuck in Phù Lãng's soft clay, today he has risen to be at the helm of a registered company with over 200 employees. He exhibits and exports his work all over the world; his pieces are bought to decorate boardrooms of big companies, consulates of European embassies, mantelpieces of distinguished guests of state, etc.

Leaving Phù Lãng to study at the Fine Arts University in Hà Nội for five years, (still a very rare educational path for the vast majority of young people from rural areas), the future ceramics artist **Nhung** acquainted himself thoroughly with both classical and contemporary influences. Then, instead of succumbing permanently (like many of his generation) to the siren song of big city life, after spending a short but fruitful time in Bát Tràng as an apprentice (to the 'modern' ceramists of the Hanoi suburbs), he returned to his *quê hương*, the land of his forefathers. He set up his own business, borrowing when necessary from his family, establishing his reputation as an accomplished craftsman and an original artist. This originality, allied to commercial success, make him a shining example – but also a choice target: imitating other people's work is a national sport in Vietnam, and many people try to copy Nhung, firstly among those around him in Phù Lãng, and increasingly in Bát Tràng, where the forgery is even more difficult to detect or to denounce.

However, our Nhung is not so easy a **potter to harry**... He has registered models of his work with the Service for Intellectual Property (a national body that most definitely has its work cut out). He changes and varies his products regularly, creates a lot of work and economic activity for the commune, attracts foreign buyers and visitors to the village, gets Phù Lãng mentioned in the media, does business with Bát Tràng artisans, etc.

Nhung's work sells for high prices (especially the real stuff...); however, his growing international reputation can make purchasing a piece of his pottery an investment, as well as being a beautiful item to admire and display. Original pieces can be found in the village of Đồng Sài, where young Master Nhung has set himself up in a very large space, hidden from the prying eyes of his imitators (the ceramics are on sale in the showroom of his own business, Gốm Nhung/Công Ty Gốm Sao Bắc/North Star Ceramics Company). You can also get a piece of Nhung in Hà Nội, in the boutiques that line Nguyễn Thái Học and Thọ Nhuộm Streets, but unless you're sure you know what you're doing, it's probably better to buy directly from Phù Lãng. We also advise against buying artistic ceramics, among those on sale in Bát Tràng (Itinerary n°2), that resemble strangely (and specifically) those of Nhung (even with the same high prices), but that are sold as the original work of complete unknowns (in fact, mostly former apprentices trained by Nhung who have set themselves up in business or who work for good money with companies in Bát Tràng). Nhung hopes to attract progressively larger numbers of visitors to his showroom (and consequently to Phù Lãng), by indicating the route with some of his ceramic tiles (securely fastened to walls, one supposes) and by opening up a café, offering pottery classes, etc.

Concerning households that produce **artistic ceramics**, there are about 20 of them in the commune, of which six have set up declared companies that reap 40% of all the profit made by this activity, but these figures will surely change very rapidly, seeing the success (artistic, yes, but above all commercial) some of them are enjoying.

We should mention the names of some other artists whose work is not without interest:

**Mr. Phạm Văn Cường** (Thủ Công village) lives in a beautiful old house by the river, where, after studying engineering in Czechoslovakia (as it was then), took up his parents' craft. He has his own kiln and produces a small amount of decorative pottery. He regularly receives students from the Fine Arts School on internships.

**Mr. Minh Ngọc** is a neighbour of Mr. Cường, with a small workshop opposite the hamlet's big kiln; he makes and sells (though much more cheaply) shameless copies of Nhung's work. His pieces, created with his son, a student at the Fine Arts School in Hà Nội, are bought up by boutiques in the capital and wholesalers from Bát Tràng.

**Mr. Trần Mạnh Thiều** set up a registered company in 2007 called "Thiếu Ceramics" that enables him to export his products all over the world. He has built a very pleasant workshop in Phân Trung village, on the hilltop, from whence the paddy fields stretching away across the plain can be admired. He, too, has studied at the Hà Nội Fine Arts School and has exhibitions. His work is very original, both in terms of form and in choice of items made and colours used; in this way, he stands out from most of his neighbours, whose pieces really do have an uncanny tendency to resemble those of Nhung. Thiều's ceramics can easily be found on sale in the boutiques on Nhà Thờ Street in Hà Nội, but we recommend a visit to his interesting workshop (where about 30 people work) – as well as the (more reasonable) range of prices asked in the village.

It is also possible to visit workshops where burial caskets and other everyday items are made: there are lots of them (especially in Thủ Công village) and one has only – as always – to ask permission to enter. Take advantage of your wanderings through Phù Lãng to appreciate the special 'natural' beauty of this place, with its complementary colours and pleasing perspectives, where waste products add to the beauty of the landscape: a fine exception to a rule all too sadly established by man in his environment.

### A few things to look out for:

- It is nearly always women who work with the potter's wheel: according to one of the craftsmen we asked about this (a male one, of course), this is not work 'worthy' of men... The few men who do put their hands to the wheel do so uneasily. One of them recently died suddenly, and his fellow craftsmen mention the fact that he used to spin the potter's wheel as one of the possible reasons for his untimely death! He had dared to defy the age-old traditional division of labour along gender lines.
- Once the basic articles have thus been created by women, it is usually the men who are responsible for decorating them.
- Articles are then left to dry, wherever room can be found sheltered from the risk of rain. Space is short, as in many craft villages, and its management is in itself a fascinating spectacle.

### Annual festivals

The festival for the founder of the potter's craft (according to legend), Lưu Phong Tú, takes place on the **7<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**. Another village festival is celebrated on the **21<sup>st</sup> day of the 2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month**.



## A walk round Phù Lãng

When you get to the T-junction, mentioned previously in the directions for locating this hard-to-find commune, we recommend that you first go to visit Mr. Nhung. Therefore, carry straight on and leave the road that crosses the paddy fields on your left. You enter into the village of Đồng Sài. After 400 m, turn right, a sign with an arrow shows the way to the workshop. Then left, and right again. The alley climbs uphill. Continue another 400 m: a second sign indicates the direction to the well-hidden workshop. At the end of the road that continues to climb the hill, there is a wrought iron gate: you have arrived. This very famous young craftsman is used to receiving visitors, so don't hesitate to go in. If you are led straight to the shop, you can ask to visit the workshop first, made up of a group of buildings, where several hundred young workers and artisans (depending on the orders being prepared) are carrying out all the steps of ceramic production: preparing the pinkish clay, turning the pots on the wheel, drying, engraving of designs, coating of objects with various products, then finally, firing. There are several gas kilns on site. In the shop, you will find all kinds of articles (pots, pictures, jars, plates, tiles, little statues ) at prices well below those in Hà Nội.

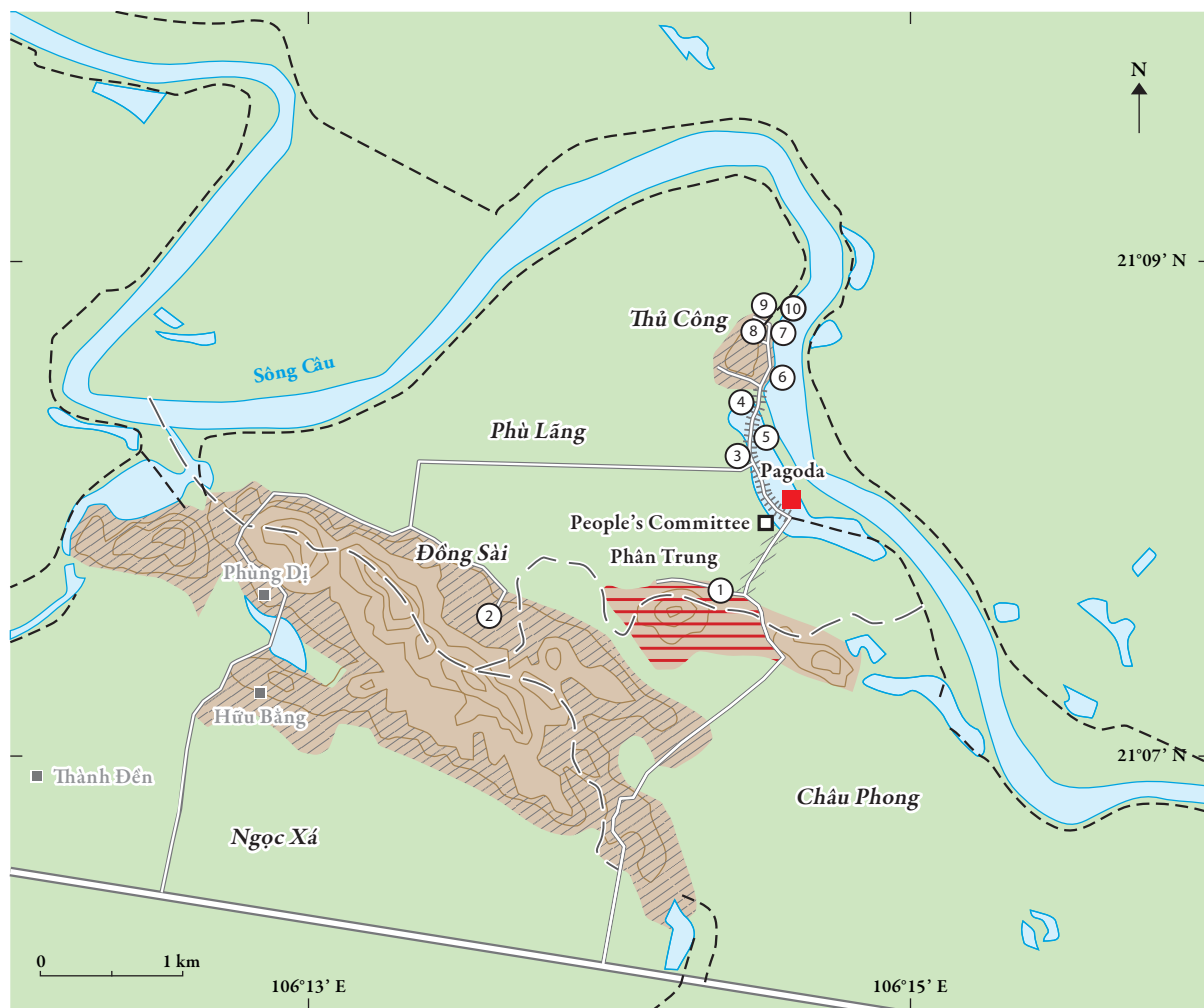
The second stop that we suggest you make is a visit to Thủ Công, a village on the riverside (all pottery villages are to be found next to rivers!), where you can see the wood-fired kilns of the old co-operative.

Go back to the T-junction and turn right. The road sets off straight through paddy fields, then makes a right-angle turn (still in the middle of the paddy fields). After about three kilometres, you come out into the marketplace (to your left). Turn left and go up onto the dyke road. You are overlooking the very wet paddy fields on your left and a large expanse of water to your right (the remains of an old meander in the Cầu river). On either side of the dyke road, artisans have reclaimed land to build workshops, some of which have traditional tunnel kilns, like that of Mr. Hùng Loan (**n°5 on the map**). Space is at a high premium in this village and memories of the terrible floods of 1971, which destroyed part of the village and forced workshops to move up to Phân Trung village, remain vivid in the minds of many inhabitants. Along the road, you will come across those dizzying piles of kiln fuel, wooden skyscrapers and tower blocks built high against the sky that we mentioned earlier, along with equally chaotic piles of burial caskets awaiting their purchasers... Then you will come to the village proper: charming brick houses amid a jumble of piles of pottery of all kinds. An alley turns right towards the wharf (**n°6 on the map**). From this vantage point, heavy barges loaded with sand, clay, wood or pottery can be seen sliding smoothly down the river.

Carry on down the road that winds through this village of clay and bricks. On both sides, signs saying « *gốm mỹ thuật* » indicate the potters' workshops that make artistic artefacts. You will also see workshops specialised in burial caskets. Courtyards are covered with moulds and drying caskets (on rainy days, you won't see much, as these artisans stop work!). A few hundred metres further on, you will come out into the area of the wood-fired kilns (to the left). On your right are the workshops of Mr. Ngọc (**n°7 on the map**) and Mr. Cường (**n°10 on the map**) (see p. 98, presentation of craftsmen). Below street level, piles of wood surround the village like medieval fortifications.

The final stop on this guided walk through Phù Lãng is Phân Trung village, perched on the hillside, out of the clammy reach of potential flooding. Go back to the market. Continue straight on along the dyke road, leaving to your right the road crossing the paddy fields by which you came. After about 500 metres, you will see a pagoda on your left. Turn right here. You will go past the offices of the communal People's Committee, Ủy Ban Xã. After another 500 metres through paddy fields, the road begins to climb: you have arrived at the final stop.

## Phù Lãng



- Residential area
- Paddy fields
- Area of traditional brick houses
- Religious site
- Dyke
- Communal boundary
- Hill
- Pond

- ① Mr. Thiều
- ② Mr. Nhung
- ③ Market
- ④ Big piles of wood
- ⑤ New workshop with tunnel kiln
- ⑥ Wharf
- ⑦ Mr. Ngọc
- ⑧ Area with kilns
- ⑨ Big piles of stocked wood
- ⑩ Mr. Cường

Source: Google Earth 2008, IRD Cartography Department

Turn right and take the time to admire this very beautiful village that overlooks the plain, its alleys lined with walls made of broken or defective items of pottery. Immediately on your right is the workshop of Mr. Thiều (**see p. 98**, presentation of craftsmen). You can continue straight on and lose yourself in the maze of lanes clinging to the hillside.

To leave the village and return to National Highway n°18, we suggest a different route than that by which you came to Phù Lãng. Retrace your steps, passing in front of Mr. Thiều's workshop and continue straight on, leaving to your left the road by which you came from Thủ Công. Calculate about three kilometres through the paddy fields and the hills to link up with National Highway n°18 again. When you get there, turn right and after a little less than three kilometres, you will go past the road that you took on the way up to Phù Lãng. Carry on to the motorway. Go over the motorway bridge and you come to the provincial capital of Bắc Ninh.

# THỔ HÀ

## GETTING THERE

Very difficult to get to by road, we suggest that you go to Thổ Hà by ferry, the simplest (and most enjoyable) way of getting there, leaving your vehicle not far from the crossing point. These rudimentary little boats leave just a few kilometres from Bắc Ninh town centre (although Thổ Hà is today just inside the neighbouring province of Bắc Giang), and only have to cross the width of the Cầu River.

If you come to the town of Bắc Ninh by the N1 Highway from Hà Nội, look for a church on your right at a crossroads/roundabout. There is a sign on the church railing that says: “*Tòa giám mục*” (Diocese). (N.B.: if you come from Phù Lãng, enter town through the administrative district, going right to the bitter end of the road you are on, which then crosses the town centre. Then turn left, take the road towards Hà Nội and ... look out for the diocesan church on your left).

At this intersection, turn left (or right, coming from the centre of Bắc Ninh) onto a street called Đường Thiên Đức. Cross the railway tracks. After 800 metres (the same road is now called Đường Lê Phụng Hiểu), turn right on Công Hậu (Phường Kinh Bắc, Bắc Ninh) and continue straight on for two kilometres (leaving the town). You will go over a bridge.

You are travelling along the bank of the **Cầu River** (to your right), with **Thổ Hà** opposite, in the district called Xã Vạn An; there are two ferries that cross here, the first a small one, then a bigger one about 300 metres further on. The first crossing point is especially hard to find: the narrow alley that goes down the bank is three or four houses after a big dark blue/light blue house, with a sign: “*Giữ xe*” (guarded vehicle parking).

## THE CONTEXT

Continuing our travels back through time and up the Cầu River, we thus proceed to Thổ Hà, a fascinating village, with a rich pottery tradition, alas almost entirely conjugated in the past tense. Thổ Hà is built on a strip of land slightly raised above river level, but outside the protective perimeter of the dyke, within a sharp bend in the Cầu River (well upstream from Phù Lãng). Although pretty much perfect according to the criteria of *phong thủy* (in Chinese: *feng shui*) – Vietnamese geomancy, this geographic position exposes the village to severe flooding, normally at least twice a year, and it almost disappears temporarily from the landscape during exceptionally high floods (once every 15 years or so, when both of the ponds that surround the northern end of the village overflow). Another problem linked to the village’s geographic location is the lack of land suitable for growing rice: Thổ Hà is condemned, so to speak, to be a craft village, since it could not feed itself otherwise, but it also lacks room to expand industrial activities.

Everywhere in Thổ Hà, the traces of a more glorious past can be seen: the host of fine old public and private buildings, in particular the famous *đình* and the Đoàn Minh Pagoda. It is not difficult to conclude that this village has fallen on hard times, without having found the means as successfully as Phù Lãng has to revive its fortune.

## THE CRAFT(S)

As we have already mentioned, Thổ Hà was once famous in the Northern Delta as a supplier of burial caskets, as well as of non-enamelled ceramic products of a light brown or dark grey colour (such as jars, vases, or perfume-burners). Craftsmen from Phù Lãng ‘stole’ the know-how to make burial caskets from Thổ Hà ceramists at the turn of the century, but the decline of the craft dates from earlier than this.

Since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century (a native of Thổ Hà claims that archaeologists have found traces of kilns dating back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century) until after the end of the colonial period, Thổ Hà was a very noted centre for the production of ceramic items (and especially these famous burial caskets of which you may have seen the copies made in Phù Lãng). The French geographer and researcher Pierre Gourou, author of a superb in-depth study of the life of the peasants of the Tonkin Delta recounts, in 1936, that the Thổ Hà craftspeople went down the Cầu River with boats filled with ceramics for sale, going as far as the extreme south of the Delta and coming back up with *nước mắm* (fish sauce) and salt in order to make the trip pay.





LARGE POT DRYING AT THỔ HÀ

In an admiring passage on the ingenuity of alcohol smugglers, Pierre Gourou tells us that: “jars full of fermenting rice have been found (...) hidden in broken or defective items of Thổ Hà pottery, big jars or small caskets made of terracotta, which make up the walls of many villages west of Bắc Ninh...”

Sadly, practically all ceramic production has now ceased in Thổ Hà. Why? There are several reasons, some of which explain moreover why tens of other pottery villages have ‘disappeared’, leaving behind almost no trace of their previous activity.

First of all, the advent of other, lighter, more robust, less expensive materials, such as aluminium, stainless steel and plastic. New tastes, new fashions take hold. We call this **progress**. Next, there is the problem of transport, already mentioned in the case of Phù Lãng: Thổ Hà turns its back to Hà Nội, perched on its tight meander of Cầu River alluvia, and road access is astonishingly awkward. Crossing over on the ferry and taking the small roads towards Bắc Ninh and beyond is hardly more convenient. We call this **modernity**. Finally, there was the collectivist period. The potters of Thổ Hà were made to work in a co-operative, quite far from the village, in keeping with a policy of collectivisation of craft industries. Previously, potters sold their wares directly. Then the state took charge of this, and the artisan was paid mainly with rice. The problem was that the state paid little and irregularly, the marketing of products was not a great success and artisans, less involved and therefore less motivated, did not always produce their best work. In 1991, the co-operative was disbanded. We call this **ideology**.

Since then, most of the inhabitants of this very densely populated village, almost without any cultivatable land, have had to find other ways to feed themselves. Thổ Hà has changed crafts en masse and today it is famous for its *bánh đa*, small, very thin rice pancakes used for making spring rolls. One of the greatest pleasures of a visit to the village is the beauty of the half-light filtering through these translucent pancakes, put out to dry on bamboo racks, forming a delightful roof over alleyways no more than a metre wide. Racks of rice pancakes can also be found in front of the pagoda, on rooftops, balanced on walls, leaning against graves in the cemetery... Therefore, try to arrive at Thổ Hà as early as possible in the afternoon or in the morning, on a dry day... and when the power is on, to admire this sight! The villagers start to take their racks of rice pancakes inside from about 3 or 4pm.

One of the less vivid delights of a visit through the alleys that all run at right angles to the village’s main street, is the stench of pigs... The processing of rice into pancakes, noodles of all kinds and alcohol is always carried out in conjunction with keeping pigs, which are fed with rice waste products.

## WHERE DID ALL THE KILNS GO?

Before its decline, Thổ Hà boasted at least 50 wood-fired kilns within a very dense urbanised space. Pierre Gourou (*op. cit.*) points out that already in the 1930s, wood being scarce, potters used even dried grass as fuel. Today, only traces of old kilns remain – mainly ‘frog kilns’ (*lò cóc*, literally ‘toad-shaped ovens’, the smallest and oldest type of kilns found here), still very fine to behold, but all left to fall into disrepair. – All? No, there still remains one household in the village where, with the help of a small frog kiln in their courtyard, they produce a limited quantity of ceramic items.

This is the home of **Mr. Trịnh Đắc Tân**, a restorer by trade and formerly of the co-operative (the one from the collectivist era), and of his relative, **Mr. Cáp Trọng Tuất**, a retired soldier. Together, they are trying to revive ancestral know-how (they are descended from a long line of ceramists) and to train other artisans in order to re-establish the village’s traditional activity. In 2006, about 10 people were active in the workshop, the co-operative beginning once again to produce burial caskets with sophisticated lids (that cannot be found in Phù Lãng), big pots for bonsai trees, tanks for fish, small teapots, flowerpot stands, etc. This co-operative can be visited and simple items of pottery can be bought (teapots, bowls...). Access is to the right of the square with the pagoda on it.

One can only hope that this brave initiative bears fruit: currently, a significant proportion of the inhabitants of Thổ Hà (as many as 70% back in 2003, according to *Le Courrier du Vietnam*, the State-owned Vietnamese language newspaper published in French) live in need. The village, already very densely inhabited a century ago, now has a population of 4,000 for an area of only 30 hectares or so. On top of this – adding insult to injury –, the bereaved of this village once famous throughout the Delta for their burial caskets now find themselves obliged to purchase them from the ‘craft robbers’ of Phù Lãng...

Those who are trying to re-establish production of ceramics in Thổ Hà are beginning to enjoy significant support from several quarters:

- The village authorities (who are only too aware of Thổ Hà's decline in fortunes and who, within the traditional public buildings of which they are the guardians, have access to examples of ancient ceramics dating back to the Lý Dynasty);
- The provincial authorities (who have agreed to hand over a piece of land in order to assist with the revival of the craft);
- The Fine Arts School (which would like to train students from Thổ Hà and to see pottery traditions re-established there);
- The Department of Cultural Heritage of the Vietnam Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism (which has long worked to protect and renovate certain buildings in the village and represents the central government, which itself is becoming very interested in craft villages as a potential means of stemming the rural exodus towards the big cities;
- The General Department of Cultural Heritage and Fine Arts of the French-speaking Community of Belgium as well as the Royal Museum of Mariemont in Belgium (which have set up a cultural itinerary in the pottery craft villages of the Red River Delta, including Thổ Hà, and have offered to participate in the restoration of the village's architectural and cultural heritage).

## THINGS TO SEE

Even though there is practically no pottery production to be observed currently in Thổ Hà, there is no shortage of things well worth seeing. Let us begin with the remarkable heritage linked to religious and animist beliefs, which dates from the period when Thổ Hà enjoyed exceptional prosperity and fame thanks to its traditional craft:

### The communal house (*đình*)

If you walk straight ahead with the main ferry (called *Van*) behind you, you will come almost directly upon the area of the village that contains most of the religious buildings and which splits the village in two. You must first cross the village marketplace, then a large, open space lined with low buildings that have been recently renovated. The *đình* is now right in front of you: one of the biggest in the whole Delta (27 metres long and almost 16 metres wide), it is really impressive by dint of its imposing size, its decorative detail and its good state of preservation (despite some fairly recent repairs).

This building is constructed in two parts: first a **sacrifice chamber**, five arches wide. A stele inside marks the building of the *đình*, at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, while two smaller stelae record the financial participation of Thổ Hà families in the construction work. Some of their descendents live in the village to this day.

Next comes the **prayer chamber**, a separate building seven arches wide (and with a surface area of 500m<sup>2</sup>). Here, there are 48 pillars made from *lim* trees (or 'iron wood') that stand on bases made of green stone. The main pillars at the centre are painted red and gold with images of dragons and clouds. In keeping with popular tradition, the beams are decorated with skilfully carved sacred and mythical animals; very comely dancing girls sit astride some of these beasts, accompanied by distinctly less comely male dancers (guess which ones the sculptors had more fun carving).

This main chamber of the communal house gives access at the back to the sanctuary chapel of the village guardian spirit, through a small, narrow passage, thus giving the group of buildings the approximate outline of the Chinese character « I » (*cong*).

Don't miss the very fine exterior **roof** of the prayer chamber, with its four wide sections covered with tiles called 'pointed shoe' tiles. The tiles along the edges of the roof are curved and decorated with terracotta figurines (made in Thổ Hà, of course), representing water dragons and lion cubs. There are other finely wrought decorations within the hollow bricks that support the roof.

In October 2008, the *đình* was in the middle of being renovated, under the guidance of the Ministry of Culture within the framework of the “Cultural Itinerary of Pottery Villages” project. (see **Part 1 p. 56-57**).

## The Đoan Minh Pagoda

If you carry on further through the village, you will come to the pagoda (*chùa*). Predating the communal house by about 60 years (built in 1633), it betrays a strong Chinese influence, similar in design to the superb Bút Tháp Pagoda (**Itinerary n°3**), and is made up of several fine elements, such as its magnificent statues and censers (ceramic incense-burners, ones with ‘eel-skin’ coloured glazes). A stele, erected in 1693, records the commercial ascendancy of Thổ Hà (already mentioned in the Part 1): “...during the last dynasty, our village already had a ferry crossing to its Buddhist market, which was held 12 times a month. Glazed earthenware and pottery were sold there: traders stockpiled their wares, money and goods circulated freely and abundantly. Each household had its own kiln for making tools and a festival was held every autumn.” In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, (according to Nguyễn Đức Nghinh, 1993), a large pottery market was still held in the courtyard of the pagoda in Thổ Hà, up to 12 times a month.

Today however, the position of this pagoda in the village leaves it very exposed to flooding. It has an exceptionally heavy roof that is beginning to cave in and numerous repairs (alas not always of the most respectful nature for a heritage site) have not prevented the building from falling into a critical state of disrepair. Ambitious renovation projects are currently under consideration.

## Other interesting buildings and constructions to be seen throughout the village

- The imposing entry gate to the village, on the north-west side, near the pagoda;
- The small *điểm*, temples, found in each of the four *xóm* (hamlets) of the village. These little temples serve as places of refuge during rain, for prayers, as gathering points before attending funerals, as meetinghouses... Every fortnight (the **1<sup>st</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> days of the lunar month**), incense is burnt here for the ancestors. They are even used as storerooms for the bamboo racks on which the *bánh đa* are put out the dry.

## The annual festival

The village’s spring festival begins on the **20<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month** and goes on for three days, with traditional games, entertainment, *quan họ* singing (see **box Itinerary n°1 p. 89**) and *tuồng* opera.





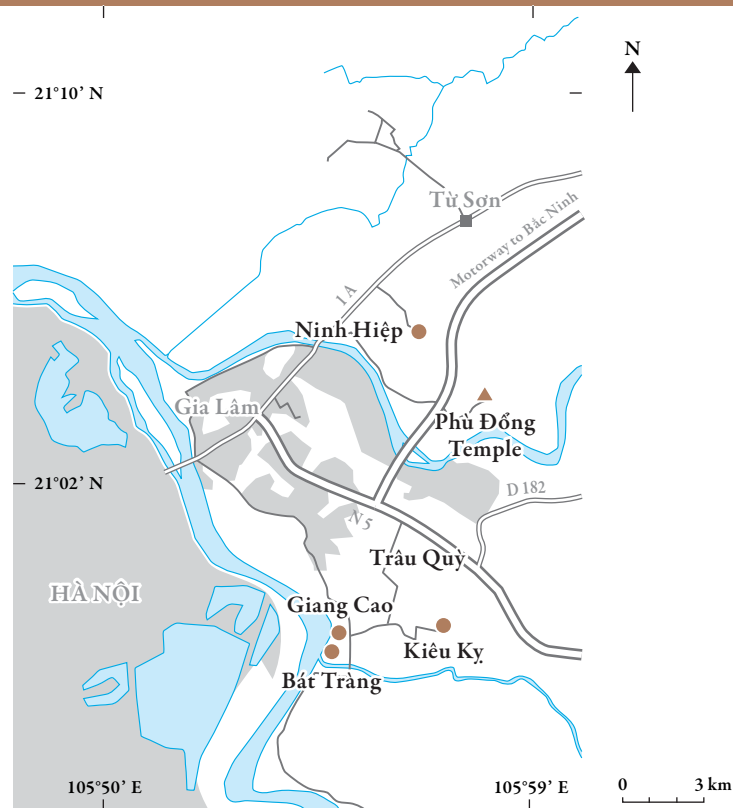
ENCOUNTER IN THE BACKSTREETS OF THỐ HÀ

CROSSING THE CẦU RIVER TO THỐ HÀ



## Itinerary 2

### Pottery, goldbeating & traditional medicine (Gia Lâm)



#### Craft villages

Ceramics: Bát Tràng, Giang Cao;

Goldbeating: Kiều Ky;

Medicinal plants and trade in textiles: Phù Ninh and Ninh Giang (Ninh Hiệp Commune).

#### Cultural and architectural heritage

Điểm Kiếu Temple and Chùa Cả (Phù Ninh) Pagoda;

Three temples dedicated to the spirit Gióng and its festival (Phù Đồng).

# BÁT TRÀNG

## GETTING THERE

It is the closest of our villages to Hà Nội and the easiest to get to. Exit Hà Nội to the east by crossing Chương Dương Bridge and immediately turn right onto the dyke road that follows the Red River towards the south. Follow the 'meanders' of this road for about 10 kilometres. Soon afterwards, you will see the new bridge sitting astride the river. On the right (outside the dyke's protection), a large sign tells you that you have arrived. In fact, you enter via the village of Giang Cao, which has become something of a market town, reselling ceramics from the famous village of Bát Tràng, located on the riverbank (**see map, p. 123**).

## THE CONTEXT

*Chinese ceramics please the eyes;  
Vietnamese ceramics please the heart...*

Bát Tràng, located on the Red River, about 15 kilometres downstream from Hà Nội (but on the left – opposite – bank), is prime real estate in the craft village domain. It is the most famous ceramics village in the Red River Delta, way ahead of Phù Lãng and Thổ Hà (**see Itinerary n°1 b**), let alone other significant centres of production in the Delta (particularly Chu Đậu, near Hải Dương), which have all sadly long since gone to pot...

Bát Tràng (this relatively recent name can be translated as 'bowl makers', 'bowl workshop' or even 'of 100 kilns') today dominates the handcrafted ceramics trade in the north of Vietnam. It is without any doubt one of the most visited craft villages in the entire Delta. Its success is assuredly a deserved reward for the hard work and ingeniousness of its inhabitants. However, one might be permitted to observe that Bát Tràng, located as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century on the waterway between Thăng Long (Hà Nội) and Phố Hiến, the two biggest towns and commercial centres at that time, has never wasted time bowling to the fielding side, nor (if you will pardon the expression) throwing pots just to see whether they will fly.

Its current success as a tourist attraction (with consequently positive economic effects) stems from the proximity of Hà Nội, the ease of getting here by road or by river (**see box, p. 110**), the buzzing and omnipresent activity in the village and the profusion of ceramics (made according to various techniques) that can be admired here – and of course purchased.

In fact, the origins of this success story can be found in a geographical location that in principle is far from ideal for a Delta village: firstly, Bát Tràng falls outside the dyke wall, thus rendering it prone to flooding, and it has little cultivatable land. Worse still, this village is terribly exposed, perched above a bend in the river on a mound of accumulated alluvia (and once on deposits of white clay, long since exhausted). The Red River is notorious for the huge volume of water that surges down a narrow channel with speed and strength in times of flooding, carrying off or swamping everything that it finds in its path.

It was therefore necessary to find an activity that could take root and flourish here, without being too vulnerable to the hydrological risks and the geomorphologic configuration of its position. In 1352, when the environs of Bát Tràng were already established as a ceramic-producing region, the very first specific mention of the village in the Vietnamese annals recounts a severe case of flooding in the area. In the middle of the 1950s, much of the old village was carried off by floodwaters; during digging to cut a canal to the south of the village, remains of inhabitations and broken pottery were found at about 12 metres below ground. When you walk to the western side of Bát Tràng, overlooking the river, you will be able to judge the severity of the erosion endured here for yourself.

Ceramics have been made near the current site of Bát Tràng since at least the 14<sup>th</sup> century (according to certain sources, even since the 13<sup>th</sup> century – during the Lý Dynasty, after the foundation of Thăng Long/Hà Nội, in 1010). During the Lê Dynasty, in 1435, the village had to supply a set of 70 plates and bowls as a tribute, presented to the Emperor of China. Porcelain and glazed earthenware from China had long been the Far-Eastern model (all legends concerning craft ancestors in the Delta's pottery and ceramics villages attribute Chinese origins to this Tonkinese know-how).





## Eaux Rouges in first gear

A pleasant and original way of getting to Bát Tràng is to take a boat with the agency *Du lịch Sông Hồng* (Red River Tourist Agency). Boats leave from the Chương Dương Pier, opposite the Vietcombank Tower. The price, lunch included, in 2008: 150,000 VNĐ per person. A boat leaves at 7h30 am and comes back at 4h30 pm. To find out on which days it sails, call the agency on 3826-1479 or 3932-7094. 42 Chương Dương Độ, Hoàn Kiếm, Hà Nội.



Such an event leads us to conclude that Bát Tràng ceramics must already have reached a certain level of sophistication at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century for a tribute of this kind from a vassal state to be deemed acceptable.

It should however be noted that this coincides with a period (1371-1567, during the Ming Dynasty, like the vases) when China forbade its citizens to engage in all foreign trade. This ban had the effect of severely limiting the export of the renowned Chinese porcelain and other ceramics of the time, leaving the field open to other producers at the periphery of the Middle Empire. Other political restrictions and turbulence in China later favoured Vietnamese ceramists and potters, in particular furthering a sustained trade with Japan, where Vietnamese influences can still be seen to this day (*kochi* ceramics).

Nevertheless, with or without the Chinese, the spread and success of Vietnamese ceramics were undeniable. A blue-and-white Vietnamese vase, made in 1450 at Bát Tràng by a member of the Búi family and acquired by an Ottoman sultan, is on display at the Topkapi Saray Museum in Istanbul, Turkey. On Java, at the centre of the island, a latter-day decoration of the Great Mosque of Demak (15<sup>th</sup> century: reputed to be the oldest in all Indonesia) is made from pieces of Vietnamese ceramics, retrieved from the mosque at Mantingan (erected in the 16<sup>th</sup> century: – it’s complicated, as they say on Facebook...). This second mosque is on the north coast of Java, where, at that time, reigned the Sultan of Majapahit, who had married a Cham princess, a native of what is now part of southern Vietnam, where the survivors of her people still live today. Similar traces have been found in Thailand, at Malacca and on Sumatra.

## THINGS TO SEE

Today, even more so than the day before yesterday, Bát Tràng devotes itself exclusively to this ancestral craft and to the marketing of its produce (at the turn of this century, 86% of village households were found to be directly involved in production). However, in the shadow of the shiny new Thanh Trì Bridge spanning the Red River, inaugurated in 2007, Tradition and Modernity scuffle for pole position in the village’s narrow alleyways. While some inhabitants begin to grasp the importance of preserving traces of a heritage bursting with traditional charm – and thus a magnet for tourism –, production of ceramics is becoming increasingly intensive and sophisticated. Some positive news: a project to restore 37 ancient houses in the commune is under way within the framework of marking Hà Nội’s millennium (2010) and hopes to reinstate some distinction to this village, which is already very popular with tourists, but is beginning to lose its authenticity.

Charcoal patties made mostly of coal dust (the fuel used in the older kilns) are stuck up to dry, like midnight cowpats, over kilometres and kilometres of the village’s walls (when it rains, the alleyways look like something out of *Germinal* or *The Road to Wigan Pier*). Big wooden crates block the streets, filled with ceramics wrapped in straw. Fluorescent mansions rear up behind high brick walls (Bát Tràng bricks), each one sporting a gleaming showroom giving onto the street, in order to present the wares made in the family workshop.

In contrast with the lumberjack camp atmosphere that prevails in Phù Lãng, eminently modern gas kilns (liquefied petroleum gas: LPG) began to appear here 20 years ago. Gone is the period when Pierre Gourou (*op. cit.*) could observe: “piles of firewood towering seven or eight metres high” in Bát Tràng. Today, those that don’t run on **coal**, fire up with **gas**. Large numbers of temporary workers are employed (mostly women, as is often the case), natives of other surrounding villages and especially from neighbouring Hưng Yên Province. Large companies produce orders on an industrial scale that leave by truck for Hà Nội, Nội Bài (the capital’s international airport), Hải Phòng (the Delta’s main seaport) and elsewhere.

Always short of space, the village is very tightly-knit and buildings are placed very close together, with the ceramics workshops mixed in among residential housing, reached through a skein of exceptionally narrow alleys. A saying dear to the inhabitants of Bát Tràng summarizes the situation:

*Live in cramped conditions, die on borrowed land...*

Not only do they have few paddy fields or none at all, but there is not even a piece of land available to make a cemetery in the village: a plot is literally rented for this purpose from their neighbours in the village of Thuận Tồn.

Much of the ceramics and porcelain is sold at the many shops in Giang Cao, located near the dyke, but a very lively market siphons off a growing proportion of Bát Tràng's production and saves artisans having to depend on their neighbours to trade their wares. In addition, boats filled with merchandise leave regularly from the village pier. Many of them sail upriver to Hà Nội. Once there, the crates of ceramics are loaded into tiny vans (which are permitted to pass through the capital's saturated streets) and itinerant hawkers on bicycles or scooters, equipped with big wickerwork panniers, fill up with bowls, vases or teapots and set off in search of local and tourist customers. Most shops on *Bát Đàn* and *Bát Sứ* Streets in the Hà Nội's Old Quarter were originally the property of Bát Tràng natives: ordinary bowls, found everywhere in the Red River Delta were sold in the former; more refined porcelain and earthenware pieces were to be found in the latter.

## THINGS TO SEE MORE CLOSELY

**The maze of alleyways:** take the time to get lost, asking yourself why do you think the villagers built such a baffling skein of pathways...?

The planning is similar to that of many villages in the north of Vietnam where space is restricted: the village is a place of refuge and retreat on this plain where there is no natural citadel, nor dense forest. Faced with invaders or pillagers (and frankly, these have never been in short supply), villagers flee and hide themselves down a twisting alleyway. It's a way of deterring any intrusion by those who are foreign to the village, including thieves. The maze of alleys in Bát Tràng also reduces the force of floodwaters.

**The kilns:** Bát Tràng has a profusion of kilns of a different sort to the tunnel kilns in Phù Lãng or the frog kilns once used in Thổ Hà (see **Itinerary n°1 b**). In the handcrafted category, there were certainly also frog kilns here once, but no traces of them have yet been found. Later came the *lò dân*, similar to tunnel kilns, but with multiple chambers, enabling high firing temperatures. An impressive variation on this kind was the enormous *lò rồng* or dragon kiln, with chambers in the shape of giant, overlapping shells. It is possible to admire a fine example of such a kiln, preserved in the compound of the Hamico Ceramics Company, north of the pagoda and the ceramics market, just before the water-lily pond on the other side of the street.

Moving on down the family of handicraft kilns, someone came up with the **chimney kiln** (*lò đứng* or 'upright kiln' in Vietnamese, also called *lò hộp*, 'box kiln'), still very widespread in the old quarter. However, this style of construction is not really very old: the "four or five kilns in use" recorded by Pierre Gourou in the 1930s were all very big tunnel kilns, none of which has survived. The chimney kilns appeared in Bát Tràng only about 30 years ago, doubtless in reaction to the lack of space and wood. Made of local bricks, they are about ten metres high and these days sport a charming little corrugated iron roof. A kiln of this type only has a useful life of about six or seven years, maximum: they are not made to last, undergo huge changes in temperature and you will see some in a very dilapidated state. The fuel, namely the charcoal patties (in fact, it's coal dust from the mines near Hạ Long Bay, mixed with sand or ceramic waste) is piled up at the bottom of the kiln or stuck to the walls by agile workers.

These charcoal-fired handicraft kilns create a lot of pollution (see **box on the environmental issues in Bát Tràng p. 121**). Gas kilns are cleaner and more efficient for complex and delicate firing, which often needs more regular or higher temperatures (multicoloured glazes, fine porcelain and so on). These kilns, much smaller, but much more expensive (200 million VNĐ in 2002), have begun to replace the chimney kilns, at least among those who find the necessary funds to procure them.

## Bát Tràng in the 1930s

Thanks once again to Pierre Gourou, the French geographer who scoured the craft villages of the Delta with an attentive eye and a perspicacious pen in the pre-War years (a biography of Gourou is currently being written), we have a rather surprising portrait of a downturn in the village's fortunes:

“Bát Tràng is certainly the village of the Tonkinese Delta that gives the strongest impression of industrial organisation, with its monumental kilns (...), its cramped houses, where there are no buffaloes or ploughing tools (...). But this almost exclusively industrial village, which has almost no cultivatable land at all, is in decline: there are only four or five kilns in use; the inhabitants ascribe this decline to the difficulty in obtaining clay and to the inflated prices that they have to pay for it. (...) It would appear that the inhabitants of Bát Tràng expend more energy on complaining than on taking action. Some of them have set themselves up outside the village as brick-makers and the women of Bát Tràng do a roaring trade in areca nuts [an essential ingredient in a quid of betel leaves] and in *nước mắm* [the famed national fish sauce].” (The Peasants of the Tonkinese Delta, p. 502-3)

This lacklustre activity, among ceramists chastened by an industry largely gone to pot, was certainly not limited to Bát Tràng: in 1936, Gourou counted more than 20 pottery villages still active in what he calls the “Tonkinese Delta”. Twenty years later, as witnessed by two more French researchers, Pierre Huard and Maurice Durand, while the colonial era was coming to a close and the struggle for independence was taking hold, there were only three important centres left: Thổ Hà, Phù Lãng and Bát Tràng.

Currently, only the inhabitants of two of these Delta villages – Phù Lãng and Bát Tràng – really produce handcrafted ceramics. Đông Triều (a village near Hạ Long Bay that features in the Potters' Itinerary: **see p.56-57**) is not mentioned by Pierre Gourou. A local tradition relates that the craft dates from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but the first kilns were built there in 1955.

DIVERSIFICATION AT BÁT TRÀNG: TERRACOTTA WARE





## A potted glossary of baked clay

- **Pottery** in its strictest sense signifies everyday containers made of a treated and fired clay paste, but more commonly, it refers to all non-vitrified ceramics made of clay paste, with or without a coat of varnish.
- **Ceramics** (in Ancient Greek, *kéramos*: ‘clay’ or ‘potters’ earth’) refers to all items made with clay (or other substances in the form of a damp and plastic paste) that have then undergone an irreversible transformation while being baked at relatively high temperatures. More generally, the term ‘ceramics’ refers to the art of pottery.
- **Faience or glazed earthenware** is a form of ceramics, coated with an enamel (or glaze) containing tin that gives it a white, shiny appearance. Faience is one of the oldest and most common of all techniques used in ceramics. It is less compact, less hard and more porous than porcelain.
- **Porcelain** is a delicate and translucent ceramic, produced by moulding. It is usually coated with a white glaze. It is the most sublime of ceramics, fired at high temperature. The mixture prepared for making porcelain must contain kaolin, among other ingredients. (Kaolin is a word of Chinese origin: *Gaoling*, or ‘high hills’, is a quarry located in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, the birthplace of porcelain).

And since we’re on the subject of etymology, here is the origin of a word that you won’t forget in a hurry: the term ‘porcelain’ comes from a shell of the same name, so called because it resembles a sow’s vulva (*porcella*: sow in Latin). When the Italians brought back porcelain from China in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they thought it was made of crushed shells of this type, and baptized it ‘*porcellana*’, porcelain in Italian.

An incontestably fascinating snippet of information, but one you’d better keep to yourself during Sunday lunch, when the mother-in-law brings out her Wedgwood china...

CUP MOULDS IN A WORKSHOP IN GIANG CAO (BÁT TRÀNG)



The production process offers several interesting aspects to be observed and can be divided into four main phases:

## 1) Preparing the clay

Bát Tràng once possessed generous deposits of **white clay**. Since their exhaustion, potters have to obtain supplies from elsewhere, mainly by road from the Hải Phòng region, along with **kaolin**, a whiter and more refractory variant, essential for making porcelain and better-quality ceramics. Once these two ingredients have been lengthily mixed with sodium carbonate, it is all left to decant through a series of four tanks, in order to extract impurities and to improve its physicochemical properties. This stage lasts a minimum of three to four months; there is no maximum limit to obtain 'perfect' clay for making ceramics. (A brief aside to our chemist readers: the chemical composition of this perfectly chimerical clay would be:  $\text{Al}_2\text{Si}_2\text{O}_5(\text{OH})_4$ . There will be a test later). You can set off in search of this earthy paradise, at the clay-processing centre, directly opposite the water-lily pond.

## 2) Shaping

The potters of Bát Tràng shape either with a potter's wheel, or by moulding. Hand-throwing pottery on the wheel (*vuốt tay*), a very ancient technique, remains the best way to make light and unique items. Using a wheel is a real craft (a woman's craft in Vietnam). Contrary to Phù Lãng (**Itinerary n°1 b**), where this skill is still prevalent, even with non-motorised wheels, it is gradually dying out in Bát Tràng. For bigger and heavier items, a **coiling** technique can be employed (*bế chạch*): it is usually men who build up long, sausage-like coils of clay on a slow-turning wheel and finish them off by hand.

Various forms of **moulding** (or slipcasting) are on the up-and-up in Bát Tràng: these are modern techniques that make it possible to standardise and accelerate production. Slip (liquid clay) is poured into a plaster-of-Paris mould made up of two or several parts, created from an original mould, which will give the exterior contours of the item or of a part of the item and will absorb a good deal of the water in the mixture. The artisan will later carry out the delicate assembly of the parts thus moulded (*đắp nặn* or appliqué moulding). Another technique: a plaster (or wooden) mould is placed on a wheel, clay is placed inside it and when the wheel turns, the clay is pressed against the sides by a sort of levered punch that is inserted into the mould (*Khuôn in*: 'in' meaning 'print'). The item is removed from the mould, from ten minutes to two hours later, depending on the nature of the object, then begins the work of correcting imperfections and adding handles, spouts or extra designs etched into the clay, with or without the help of the wheel. The liquid clay mixed with kaolin comes from the workshops on the small industrial park opposite the water-lily pond. Next, 'acrobat-porters' carry this milky liquid through the maze of alleys to deliver it to the workshops. Watch out for your shoes when you pass them in the narrow labyrinth near the river!

Items thus shaped must now be left to dry. Traditionally left out in the open air in order to guarantee a drying process that was slower, complete and less dangerous, the march of progress has begun to render this process too slow and uneconomical. Many artisans now use their kilns to accelerate the drying process.

## 3) Decoration and glaze (enamel, varnish)

**Decoration** is something that you can admire without need for much help from us. Let us simply note that there is a wealth of designs and subjects used in Bát Tràng. There are animals, real or mythical, landscapes, famous or imaginary, characters from folklore, allegory or history, Chinese ideograms, flowers and trees and more abstract or contemporary decorations (such as artistic works, but also characters from Korean soap operas). You can even have almost anything you want drawn to order: several days will be necessary for firing and door-to-door delivery (in Hà Nội, or even back home). This decoration confers great charm to Bát Tràng ceramics: usually anonymous painters, who do a lot of mass-produced work, but who are often very talented draftsmen and women, draw complex and elaborate images freehand in a medium that leaves no room for error: impossible to erase a bungled drawing cleanly from a porous clay surface.

**Glazing** is the stage at the heart of the production process. Traditionally, the secrets of the craft were jealously guarded in Bát Tràng, to the point of forbidding a girl from the village to marry outside, or of not teaching her the key rudiments of the craft, for fear that she would carry off this precious know-how with her and share it elsewhere. The secrets of how to prepare and use glazes were assuredly the most important ones.

The glaze breathes life into the clay: it clothes it, makes it waterproof, more robust, with a smooth and shiny finish. It can have a radical or a subtle effect on the colours of the decoration applied previously, it can add a little or a lot of colour itself, or if it is transparent (entirely colourless glazes are rare), it can give a pleasing impression of depth to someone admiring the pattern underneath – or it can even be the pattern itself, so to speak: like the famous Bát Tràng crackled glaze.

The glaze, applied as a dry powder or as a damp paste and ‘cooked’ at high temperature, undergoes an irreversible physicochemical reaction. The craft history of Bát Tràng is studded with patient research, ingenious adaptations and successful discoveries in this field. Of course, we have succeeded in unveiling the secrets of these preparations and we could reveal them to you (only you), but this will be the subject for a future book.

Suffice it to say that from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup>, five main kinds of glaze were developed and used in Bát Tràng, with extremely varied ingredients. Ashes (*tro*) have been much used: ashes of rice husks, ashes of buffalo bones (and maybe human bones?), ashes of mangroves and other trees, sometimes of very distant origins. At the time of a study by A. Barbotin on *Indigenous pottery in the Tonkin Region* (1912), there was at least one village (in Hà Nam Province) that “burnt the wood of certain specially-chosen trees with the sole aim of selling the ashes in Bát Tràng”.

A glaze also contains kaolin, lime – and often brighter colouring agents, such as an iron oxide that gives a chocolate-brown hue, probably used in Bát Tràng since ceramics were first made there, or cobalt oxide (a powdered red stone that becomes blue at 1,250°C – therefore even in an old frog kiln). Cobalt, which appeared in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, is also much used for decoration: a ceramic is adorned with a hand-painted pattern (you can easily see this being done) and will then be coated with glaze and fired in the kiln, where the cobalt assumes its final hue. Items made in this way have been one of Bát Tràng’s trademarks for centuries. Pierre Gourou (*op. cit.*) notes:

“[Bát Tràng potters] make bowls and various containers for daily use from clay covered with a film of kaolin and coated with a whitish varnish containing a crude blue pattern”.

What struck more than one observer of deltaic society, before the modern era, was precisely this use of attractive everyday utensils, humble items certainly, but decorated and unique, and lovingly fashioned by human hand. It was possible to see Bát Tràng bowls filled with rice gruel in a remote mountain village to the north and west of the Delta.

Then came a time when the Chinese arrived with their explosive marketing of plastics and duly blew away these handcrafted artefacts. Today in that mountain village (the one we know), ubiquitous instant noodles, seasoned with a certain artificial flavour enhancer (the one you know), are served in polychrome polymer bowls, all these three items probably produced at factories in Guangzhou Province, China. But all is not lost: in Hà Nội alone, it is noticeable that those members of the new middle class with a taste for things artistic and aesthetic are beginning once again to show an interest in this beautiful, local and culturally traditional produce.

It would be impossible to close this chapter without mentioning two other glazes. The first is the **crackled glaze**. This striking effect, which first appeared in Bát Tràng at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the help of a pale pink kaolin from the Hôi Pagoda, achieved by getting the clay and the glaze to contract at different rates, is a technique unique to Bát Tràng among Vietnamese pottery villages. A true crackled glaze is more decorative than functional, since it does not seal the porous surface of the clay.

The other glaze that deserves a special mention is **celadon**. This attractive decoration, invented by Chinese potters to look like jade (the favourite precious stone all over this part of the world) has a colour described severally as varying from bluish-white to bright green, or from a turquoise hue to olive green. It first appeared in Bát Tràng in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, often combined with brownish and ivory-hued glazes (and called a tricolour glaze), but it has recently come back into fashion, as you can see for yourself. It is apparently the presence of ferrous particles, transformed by firing at very high temperature, that gives a celadon glaze its subtle tints.





## Ashes to ashes, dust to dust

To illustrate the covetousness and mystery that can envelop those enamoured of an enamel, we cannot resist the temptation to quote a work by a colonial veterinary surgeon, Louis-Eugène Douarche, entitled *The Bovines of the Tonkin Region* (1906):

“The bone ashes were used to concoct a sort of paste or enamel with which items of pottery were coated to give them the appearance of porcelain. The secret of this process was brought from China by potters who gave to Bát Tràng comrades the formula of this *men bát* or enamel. Unfortunately for this thriving industry, the mandarins quickly decided to tax it heavily; they themselves placed orders with the potters, for which they then neglected to pay, so much so that the craftsmen, disgusted, stopped making enamelled pottery, pleading that the few artisans who knew the secret had taken it with them to their graves. However, it is rumoured that a few old potters do indeed possess this Chinese recipe and still make vases, for their own personal use, which they use among themselves, during intimate ceremonies, and which they then smash just as soon as they have finished.”

COAL-DUST CAKES DRYING ON A WALL, GIANG CAO (BÁT TRÀNG)



## Etymological interlude

**Celadon:** what is the derivation of this term for a pretty glaze, green as a patch of sky, or blue as a blade of grass? (In Vietnamese, 'green' and 'blue' share the same address in the dictionary (*xanh*): you have to specify 'blue like x' or 'green like y'). The origin of the word 'celadon' is apparently a character from a French novel of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, at the time when these ceramics started to become fashionable in Europe. Celadon (despite being a male character, we should point out) has a habit of wearing green ribbons and appears in *L'Astrée*, an interminable, precious and excessively romantic novel (5,399 painful pages, totally devoid of Ugandan diplomacy) by Honoré d'Urfé. Celadon's never-ending adoration of his Astrée is once again in vogue: aging French auteur Eric Rohmer made a version for the cinema in 2007, with Andy Gillet beribboned in the role of Celadon, presented in the official competition at the Venice Film Festival.

**Dán:** this Vietnamese word for glaze or enamel has a much more contemporary usage.

If you look closely at the scooters of the youthful fast set in Hà Nội, you will notice that many of them are coated with a very thin film of protective plastic, which is sometimes also decorative. It is exactly the same principle as a glaze and is even applied using heat. Signs bearing this word can be seen at places that offer to install one of these films (with the help of a hairdryer), for example in Cao Bá Quát Street in Hà Nội.

BRICKS AND WALLS, BÁT TRÀNG



## Bát Tràng ‘Bricks’

In a very well-known Vietnamese folk song, a young man declares to the object of his affections:

*One day, I would like to marry you.  
I would buy Bát Tràng bricks to build our house,  
I would lay them lengthwise and crosswise  
And around a half-moon-shaped pond where you can wash your feet.*

One would be hard-pressed to find an equivalent serenade in contemporary English, where seduction of the loved one is attempted by promising to purchase her some plywood and have a Jacuzzi installed for her dirty feet, but this is precisely where the force and fascination of cultural differences reside.

No, the only problem here is that ‘bricks’ is a poor (but tenacious) translation: Bát Tràng bricks (and there have been lots of them) are nothing special; the song is actually talking about the square Bát Tràng tiles – once used several times over as saggars in the kilns (see p. 120) and thus hardened like stoneware and called ‘iron-skinned’. Although they were by-products, these tiles were much prized for building, paving and lining – including ponds for foot washing. They can be found used in the construction of pagodas, citadels and even in the tombs of emperors around the town of Huế. Under the Nguyễn Dynasty, inhabitants of Bát Tràng were even taxed in ‘iron-skinned’ as well as ordinary tiles.

We salute here the excellent research in a monograph entitled *Bát Tràng Ceramics* (Phan Huy Lê and al., 2004), which resolves the true meaning of the Bát Tràng ‘bricks’ in the song and a host of other mysteries related to the emblematic pottery village.

## Firing

We have already discussed the kilns. There remain a few other points of interest to be mentioned:

Items to be fired must be placed in such a way as to maximise the use of space and heat. They are also protected from the direct flames in the kiln by **saggers** (or saggars), once rows of simple, dried clay tiles (see **box** about Bát Tràng ‘bricks’ p. 119), today mostly cylinders of low-grade ceramic matter (that can be used about 20 times). In the past, guilds existed that were expert at filling kilns in Bát Tràng. Specialised teams came from two villages in Hà Tây Province where the dominant craft was this specific technique.

Traditionally, lighting a kiln was an important ritual, prepared with libations, conducted by a kiln master, who then watched over the whole process of firing, assisted by other members of his guild. Even though today a kiln batch still represents a significant investment of time, energy and money, the vagaries of firing have diminished (especially in a gas kiln) and this tradition is fast dying out. Firing can last from 48 to 72 hours, depending on the kiln and the items to be fired. For an ideal batch, the heat should rise at a regular rate until the maximum temperature is attained and then gently fall again in the same manner.

### THINGS TO SEE EVEN MORE CLOSELY

**The ceramics themselves:** In Vietnam, handcrafted ceramics have a deep cultural, historic and social importance and have for centuries played a significant role in the material and spiritual life of the people. The first articles were probably pot-bellied jars to hold water or alcohol, cylindrical jars for rice, kitchen utensils and lime pots used in making quids of betel leaves. These objects were once presented as wedding gifts and sometimes accompanied the dead in the afterlife, along with candlesticks and perfume-burners on the shrine to the ancestors. On the market stalls and in the shops and showrooms of present-day Bát Tràng, you will see many objects made of ceramics. Bowls, vases, pots of all sizes, cups, plates, platters, coasters, trays, tiles, teapots, ashtrays, animal statuettes, jewellery (bracelets, earrings), artistic works, articles in mixed media (for example, pottery and wickerwork) and many other things. In corners less frequented by tourists, you can find tools: spinners, crushers, weights for fishing nets and even the friction parts (made of ceramic material) on a potter’s wheel. There are some truly beautiful things to be bought here, at very competitive prices. For DIY enthusiasts, many artisans sell seconds for a song, often with only very minor defects; these items are often fine as they are, or can be used as raw materials for making mosaics or similar. A word in your shell-like ear, however: an accumulation of items can soon weigh very heavily in your suitcases – and on your wallet when the time comes to pay for excess baggage at the airport.

**A museum of ceramics:** At n° 253 Giang Cao Street, in a handsome traditional house, more than 360 ceramic pieces of a collection dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries are on display. The compact **Vạn Văn Museum** was founded by a private Hanoian collector, **Mr. Trần Ngọc Lâm**, who preferred to return his antique ceramics to their original context. It is open to the public seven days a week. In the little courtyard, bamboo chairs and tables are available for visitors who wish to have a rest or to enjoy a drink.

### THE ANNUAL FESTIVALS

The village’s spring festival begins on the **15<sup>th</sup> day of the 2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month** and lasts about a week. The festivities are preceded by a procession on the river (quite a common agricultural rite in Vietnam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia). A small boat sets out, carrying a jar made by a Bát Tràng craftsman. Once in the middle of the river, a descendant of Nguyễn Ninh Trảng (the village’s oldest family of artisans and notables) has the honour of filling the jar with water, using a copper ladle. This water is used for the symbolic washing of the sacred tablets kept in the sanctuary behind the communal house. Then, the founding families (beginning with the descendants of Nguyễn Ninh Trảng) make offerings of food to the other villagers. The festival continues with games of human chess (using “young and pretty” girls!) in the courtyards of communal houses (there are other, smaller ones, in each neighbourhood), *quan họ* singing and other traditional games. In contrast with many villages, Bát Tràng does not hold a festival for its craft ancestor. But this remains a very tightly knit community, as evidenced by the major role played by the ancient lineages and the persistence of certain craft guild traditions.





## You break it, you pay for it

A guide that prides itself on promoting sustainable development cannot avoid discussion of the environmental issues associated with village industries.

Before gas (LPG) ovens began to appear in Bát Tràng, the potters all used coal as fuel or, until relatively recently, wood. Laws and shortages have put an end to wood; use of coal persists. Every 1,000 kg of fired ceramic products can generate 1,400 kg of ashes, 800 kg of dust and 140 kg of solid waste. In recent times (*Traditional craft village in industrialization and modernization processes*, Trần Minh Yến, 2004), on an average day, Bát Tràng emits 1,470 kg of dust, 1,199 m<sup>3</sup> of CO<sub>2</sub> and a large quantity of coal ash into the environment, while broken ceramics are thrown into the river.

One of the direct consequences of this is that we know that children who grow up in Bát Tràng suffer more from respiratory illnesses than the average. Even before it is burnt in the kilns, coal poses severe environmental problems here. With a limited production area and more than 1,400 coal and gas kilns working almost continually (there is only an annual break for Tết, the Vietnamese New Year festival), the temperature in Bát Tràng is on average from 1.5 to 3.5 °C higher than in surrounding areas, higher even than in Hà Nội's city centre (Trần Minh Yến, 2004, *op. cit.*).

The good news, save for dogged lovers of the picturesque, is that despite the high installation costs, gas-fired kilns are progressively replacing coal-fired ones: as well as being more economical, heat is generated more uniformly, is easier to control and is potentially higher (up to 1,360°C). A modern kiln produces little pollution (to be nonetheless a tad pessimistic, it must be said that explosions do occasionally occur because of gas leaks!), less rejected items and eases the difficult conditions under which artisans work. A shiny new gas-fired kiln even boasts a closed circuit system, recycling the heat of the main chamber and making it easier to dry items before firing.

It would be a shame to see the traditional kilns disappear altogether: these typical and practical structures are an important part of Bát Tràng's heritage. In concert with the authors of *Discovering the potters of the Red River Delta: A cultural itinerary* (a handsome, richly illustrated work, published by the Royal Mariemont Museum in Belgium, 2006), one must however agree that:

“No kiln was ever built to defy eternity. Most of the time, archaeologists locate ancient production sites by finding piles of fragments from broken pottery and not by unearthing traces of kilns and even less the remains of workshops.”

Let us hope then that Bát Tràng potters and local authorities are in time to see the interest in preserving examples of traditional kilns as an integral part of village heritage, while welcoming the technological and ecological advances that enable Bát Tràng to move with the times and to respond to current and future preoccupations.

## A walk through Bát Tràng

A preliminary note: if you wish to spend more time in Bát Tràng and obtain further details on the sites and workshops to be visited, we recommend the excellent *Bát Tràng, Traditional Pottery Village. A Self-Guided Walk*, published at Thế Giới Publishers by the Friends of Vietnamese Heritage Foundation. In 47 pages, this little book can open many doors for the reader.

The entrance to the village that everyone wrongly believes to be already Bát Tràng is actually called Giang Cao (**see map, p. 123**). This recent extension consists principally of row upon row of 'concrete box houses' of several storeys, with the ground floors given over to 'supermarkets' of standardised ceramics. Some of these ceramics, made as subcontracted work in the workshops of the Delta's oldest ceramics village, give an erroneous idea of 'the real Bát Tràng', huddled on its outcrop of alluvia on the banks of the Red River. We suggest you leave visiting these shops until the end of your walk to better understand the many facets of these two villages with their contrasting histories.

Nevertheless, this first village, much more marked by the 'modernisation' of its housing and a more recent integration into the world of ceramics, is still worth a visit, even though traditional dwellings are now few and far between amid modern ones devoid of charm.

At the end of Giang Cao's main street, you will see the village's *đình* on your right, which despite its modest size is an appealing place that contrasts sharply with the buildings around it. Take the first road on the right, then the first alley on the left, and follow it down to the river, admiring as you go the vertical kilns and the many handprints on the coal patties drying on the walls. You will reach the pretty *nhà thờ họ* of the Nguyễn lineage and a temple that overlooks the river. If you go down to the river by turning left in this coal-begrimed alley, you will come to the coal landing stage. Here you can clearly see for yourself the grave consequences to the environment of this fuel and the tough working conditions of the endless chain of men and women who unload the grimy stuff onto their heads for 30,000 VNĐ a day.

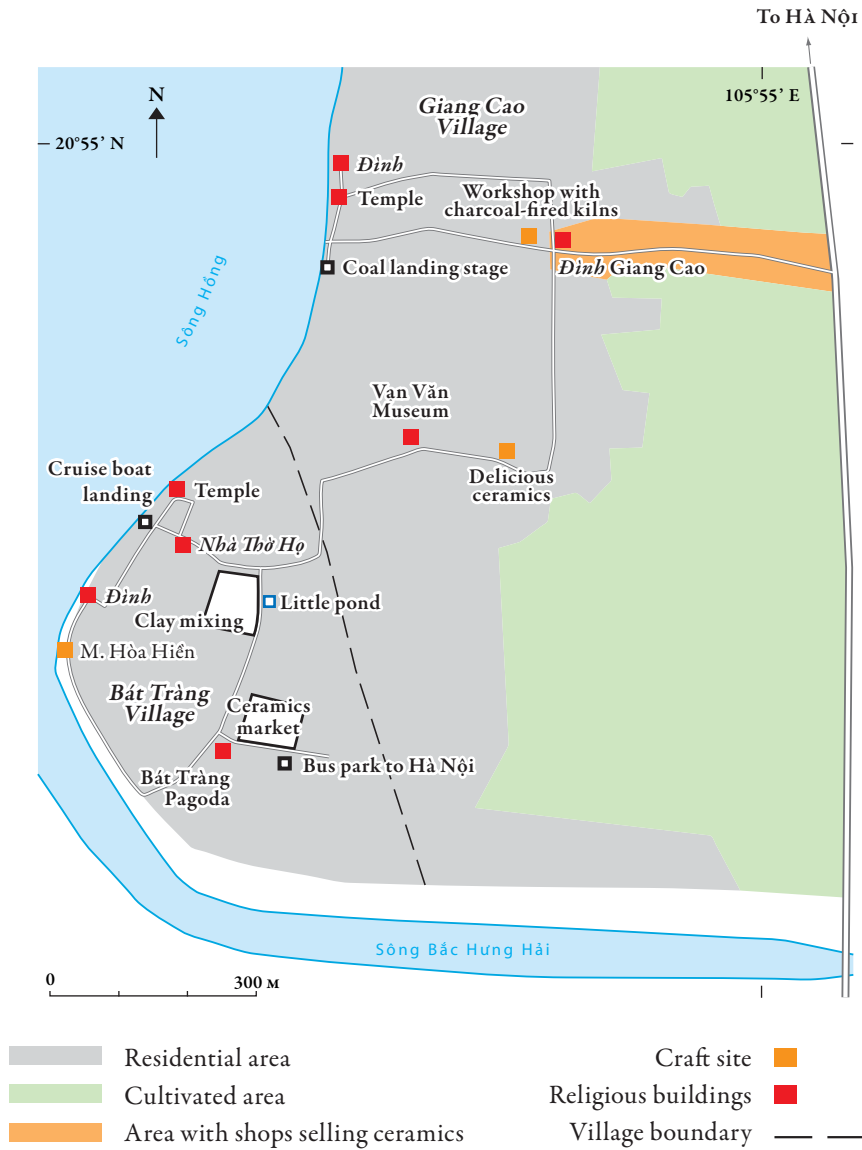
Go back to the *đình* (**see map, p. 123**), but not before admiring the huge, white jars drying in the back passages (wider in this village) behind workshops to the left of the alley. These workshops have specialised in a single product: jars. They cannot diversify within the same batches of ceramics to be fired, as they use coal, whose heat is difficult to control.

When you get back to the small crossroads opposite the *đình*, turn right and take the road full of shops that leads to Bát Tràng. Don't hesitate to 'lose' yourself in the side alleys, where a few vestiges of rural life and the odd ribbon of garden will help you catch your breath after threading through the ballet of motorbikes overloaded with pots of all sizes or breathing in the heady fug of the workshops.

An original potter, **Mr. Nguyễn Xuân Nguyên** at 'Delicious Ceramics', in his very nice (to Western tastes!) workshop-cum-shop at n° 227 of the street lined with shops, sells small plates, bowls and other objects of a very different design from those you will have seen up to now. Unfortunately, originality comes with its own price tag attached. A little further on, you can visit the Vạn Văn Museum (**see p. 120**) and at last have a drink in a very peaceful spot. We wish we could propose such a place for a mid-tour break in every village on our itineraries! Alas, this is yet another unique feature of Bát Tràng-Giang Cao...



# Bát Tràng



Source: Google Earth 2008, IRD Cartography Department

Follow the map and especially the bends in the road that will take you to the village of Bát Tràng (the real one). At the crossroads, leave the little pond to your left and plunge into the maze of tiny, twisting alleyways that lie before you. You would be hard-pressed to find passages narrower than these. It is not easy to get past workers carrying liquid kaolin in buckets tied to their balance poles. Watch out for those fancy shoes.

You will come out onto the riverbank, opposite the pier where the tourist boats come to land. By following the river upstream (to the right) towards the northernmost village limits, you can reach *Đền Mẫu*, the temple of the Holy Mothers. Originally, it was dedicated to a young village girl, who died aged 18 in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The gate has undergone recent renovation and the temple is of no particular architectural interest, but it offers a great view of the river and the reinforcements made to counter the ferocious erosion of the village's foundations. If Bát Tràng is flooded during your visit, this is the best place from which to watch the waters rise.

Retrace your steps and follow the river to the *đình*. This communal house that gives onto the river is a brand new building (finished in 2007), modelled on the one that was here in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (the perimeter wall is original), itself based on the famous *đình* at Đình Bảng (see **Itinerary n°1, p. 65**). It is located in the heart of the action, close to the river in the part of the village that juts out into the water.

Just behind the *đình*, there is the *Văn Chi* (Temple of Literature). Thanks to its craft, Bát Tràng has long been relatively affluent and its inhabitants able to attend to the education of their children. Many village scions passed the exams to become mandarins. The interior courtyard is paved with Bát Tràng 'iron-skinned' tiles and the temple is used as a small library and as a place for educational and cultural ceremonies.

Continue to follow the river's contour to your left. Before the bend, you can visit the workshop of **Mr. Hòa Hiên**, an original craftsman who makes black ceramics that imitate bronze, particularly the famous Đông Sơn drums. You can also find little tea containers and various objects that are easier to carry.

Then walk round the headland that marks the mouth of the Bắc Hưng Hải River, which enabled boats to enter the Delta. It constitutes the southernmost point of this village heavily subjected to the risks of river flooding. After about 200 metres, a road heads off to the left and leads to the market. Little danger of getting lost here, several signs point you the right way. On the right, the Kim Trúc Pagoda gleams. It is a recent construction. The original, which dated from the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century, was moved from its risky perch on the bank of the Bắc Hưng Hải River.

Finally, turn to the right where Bát Tràng's beating heart and commercial centre are now located: the ceramics market. Unfortunately, you won't find the nicest things to buy here, despite the presence of most village artisans. The bus stop for Hà Nội is opposite the market. To go back to Giang Cao and its many china shops, **consult the map, p. 123**.



TALL PORCELAIN JARS, GIANG CAO (BÁT TRẮNG)

ENAMEL GLAZE PAINTED ONTO CUPS,  
GIANG CAO (BÁT TRẮNG)







BEATING GOLD LEAF AT KIÊU KỶ

FINAL SEPARATION OF GOLD LEAF FROM  
DÓ PAPER, KIÊU KỶ





# KIÊU KỶ

There is an old saying that states:

*Alive is to be a Bát Tràng man;  
Dead is to be a guardian spirit of Kiêu Kỳ.*

Are the dead better treated than the living in Kiêu Kỳ? Maybe not, but it is true that the dear departed lead the good life here: you will soon see why...

## GETTING THERE

Kiêu Kỳ is about eight kilometres from Bát Tràng. As you leave the latter, backtrack along the same dyke road towards Hà Nội, then immediately turn right onto the road that leads to Đa Tốn. Just before leaving this commune, the road describes a wide arc to the right before making a 90-degree turn to the left. Then a few hundred metres further on, there is yet another very sharp bend to the right. Here, you come to a pretty country road that leads directly to Kiêu Kỳ. Traffic is rare: the roar of motors and the trumpeting of horns gives way to the lugubrious lowing of buffaloes and the metallic clicking of dragonflies. Next, if you are lucky, at the entrance to the village, this pastoral symphony will fade before the rhythmical and syncopated hammering of the goldbeaters.

## THE CONTEXT

Kiêu Kỳ has been for a long time now the only village in the Delta where there still exists the traditional craft of beating gold and silver to obtain gold or silver leaves. These leaves, made from pure precious metal, are produced to cover sacred statues (Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, saints...), to decorate religious objects (parallel and horizontal sentences) or to restore monuments (pagodas, temples and communal houses) and furniture, pictures and various lacquered objects.

To paint objects and even buildings, nothing is more costly than gold. According to a stele in the communal house of the famous village of Thổ Hà (see *Itinerary n°1 b, p. 105*), solely during the year 1692, the volume of gold used to gild the *đình*'s carved doors cost as much as the entire labour expenses for the building's construction.

Artisans who make gold leaf manually can still be found elsewhere in Asia, for example in China and in Burma. This ancestral craft has existed in Kiêu Kỳ for more than 250 years. Very hard and poorly paid, the work of transforming golden nuggets by beating them into leaves has an uncertain future. However, thanks to the revival in restoration of religious heritage, the craft is in better shape now than at the end of the American War: according to the magazine *Vietnam Cultural Window* (2006), about 50 families are still currently involved in making *quỳ*, or gold leaf, by traditional methods. According to other sources, 90% of artisans beat silver and tin (fake silver), the market for golden *quỳ* having become extremely limited. Imagine that to lacquer an average *bàn thờ* (a shrine to the ancestors) in real gold you would need 50 *quỳ*, or almost 50 million VNĐ!

By the middle of the 1970s, nearly all the villagers had turned to the other established craft in the village: making items from **leather** (and later, mainly from **imitation leather**), such as bags, suitcases, etc. This activity is still very well represented in Kiêu Kỳ, which is a national centre for the sector, and, still according to *Vietnam Cultural Window*, some 300 households are engaged in it.

## THE CRAFT

First mastered by the Egyptians five millennia ago, making gold leaf is long and arduous work. In Kiêu Kỳ, the first phase consists of preparing a type of ink made with soot, glue taken from the skin of buffaloes and pine resin. This preparation is difficult to make: the most skilful artisan only makes one mortar a day. The ink strengthens leaves of *dó* paper (see *Itinerary n°1*) inserted between the leaves of gold in order to stop them from breaking up or sticking together during beating. (Instead of strengthened paper, the Egyptians used pieces of cow intestine, but today, 'modern' goldbeaters in China use a synthetic substance, such as Mylar). Once coated, this preparation of *dó* paper (*giấy vò*)

is rolled up with some fabric and itself beaten until it becomes transparent. Then a tenth of a tael of gold (a weight used in the Far East, slightly less than 40 grams), is flattened using a mallet to form a sheet that is then cut into 20 smaller squares called *diệp*. Note that this gold (or silver or even tin) must be almost pure in order to be malleable enough for what comes next.

Once this nugget has thus been flattened and cut up into pieces about one centimetre square, they are then inserted between leaves of *dó* paper (four centimetres square) in batches of 500 and beaten on an anvil. Two hours later, the leaves – now burning hot – cover the entire surface of the paper. They are left to cool down, then they are separated, cut up into nine pieces and inserted between sheets of *dó* paper (*giấy quỳ*) of a higher quality. This cycle, punctuated by beating, is repeated several times until a very delicate, almost translucent leaf is obtained. With the sweat of his brow (and the cliché regains its full force when you see it being done), with thousands of sledgehammer blows, a good artisan can produce an incredible twenty square metres or so of *quỳ* (and as many litres of perspiration) from one tael (about 40 grams, remember) of gold.

The last phase requires as much (feminine) dexterity as the previous one needed (masculine) brute force: the final separation of the gold leaves from the *dó* paper and their packaging (in units or *quỳ* of 500). The gold leaves, now only about 100 nanometres thick, are extremely light and fragile! The person who carries out this task (it is indeed nearly always a woman, or a young and hence cheap labourer) usually does it inside a thick mosquito net, deployed as a protection against draughts. This person may even suck on a baby's dummy, a bizarre but effective way of minimising the danger of breathing upon the leaves being handled... It is also difficult to keep cool under a fan or a capricious breeze during the worst moments of the hot season, given the dangers of seeing all one's hard work blown away!

Once they are ready, most of the gold leaves are dispatched all over the Delta, the country – and as far as several other Southeast Asian countries, for occasional renovation and maintenance work on religious heritage sites, but also regularly to craft villages that use gold leaf in their trade. Examples include Hạ Thái, the lacquer village (see **Itinerary n°5, p. 193**), and Sơn Đồng, a woodcarving village (see **Itinerary n°9, p. 289**) specialised in religious statues.

If you wish to buy some gold leaf, some will probably be found for you, but careful! Don't forget that times are hard, that both silver and especially tin leaf are also produced in Kiều Kỵ, and that even if they don't have the warm, fiery lustre of gold leaf, carefully tinted with yellow and red dyes, they could easily fool a neophyte like you... Between fake *quỳ bạc* (fake silver, i.e. tin), real *quỳ bạc* and *quỳ vàng* (made of gold), prices range from 20,000 VNĐ, to 70,000 VNĐ... and to 950,000 VNĐ for the last one! In the light of these astronomical differences in price, depending on the various qualities of *quỳ*, one might suggest that the lacquered trays inlaid with 'gold' leaf on sale in the touristy parts of the capital for about 10 dollars each might in fact be inlaid with 'beer can' leaf (to translate tin into local slang), recycled and lightly tinted.

To find out whether you are buying a fake *quỳ vàng* at 950,000 VNĐ, take out your lighter (just as in the silk village, **Itinerary n°4, see p. 177**). If the gold leaf burns, then it's a fake: real ones don't burn!

## THINGS TO SEE

The metal-beaters work increasingly to order and it is sometimes difficult to see them active in their workshops, but the artisans are trying to save the craft and will be delighted to let you watch if there is anything to see. Here are the names of three of the most noted artisans: **Messrs. Nguyễn Anh Chung, Lê Văn Vòng and Lê Bá Chung**. The first lives in the second perpendicular alley that goes off from the main street to the right, at the end on the left (at the bottom of a little blind alley). Before you get there, you pass by the nearly brand new Kiều Kỵ metal-beaters' co-operative (opened May 2008), where Mr. Chung presides. The co-operative has been set up in the courtyard that houses the shrine dedicated to the craft ancestor.

Don't forget to have a look around at the shops and stalls selling leather and imitation leather accessories: this is the place to purchase them (you have to go back to the main road and turn right): here, you can buy almost at source!

To return to the saying quoted at the beginning of this section, not only do people in Kiều Kỳ busy themselves with beautifying and maintaining religious heritage items, but also there is no shortage of places to worship the dead here. The village houses a pagoda, which contains about 40 old statues (richly gilded ones, it goes without saying), a *dình* dedicated to its guardian spirit and a *dền* for worshipping spirits or genies (the religious site is located to the left of the entrance to the village). Kiều Kỳ has preserved 29 royal edicts from the Trần, Lê and Nguyễn Dynasties, awarding the title of guardian spirit of the village to General Nguyễn Chế Nghĩa, one of Trần Hưng Đạo's trusty officers who twice took part in the struggle against the Mongols.

The village festival takes place on the **12<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**, a major event, as this village has a large diaspora. Craft ancestors Nguyễn Quý Trị (end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century) and Vũ Danh Thuận (beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup>) are honoured on the **17<sup>th</sup> day of the 8<sup>th</sup> lunar month**, with a celebration in the *dình*.



USING INK TO PREPARE *DÓ* PAPER (*GLẤY VỎ*)

## A STOPOVER BEFORE HEADING TO NINH HIỆP:

# PHÙ ĐỔNG: THE TEMPLES DEDICATED TO THE SPIRIT GIÓNG

## GETTING THERE

Take the road towards Bát Tràng again. Cross the village of Lê Xá (Đa Tồn Commune) then, when you get to the village of Thuận Tồn, turn right. Go straight through the village. Cross a bridge that spans a small canal. Continue, then at the end of the road, turn right, and after a kilometre, turn left in the village of An Phú. For about two kilometres of windy road, you will travel through the villages of Trâu Quỳnh Commune and come out onto the Hà Nội-Hải Phòng motorway. This is one of the only ways to get to a junction that allows you to turn left (towards Hà Nội).

Once you are on this motorway, you have to get onto another one that goes to Bắc Ninh, the provincial capital, by turning right after a kilometre. You will cross over the Đuống River and on the far side, you can see for yourself the size of the area outside the dyke's protection. Once you get to the dyke on the Red River's left bank (having driven about five kilometres along this motorway), turn right immediately and leave the motorway. Take the dyke road that follows the river and after less than a kilometre you will come to Phù Đổng.

## THE SITE AND ITS FESTIVITIES

The village of Phù Đổng, situated in the commune of the same name, lies south of Ninh Hiệp. There are three temples there dedicated to the spirit Gióng, built during the reign of Lý Thái Tổ in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The Holy Mothers Temple, on the far side of the dyke, is dedicated to the worship of Gióng's mother and dates from the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Gióng was a legendary hero who once repelled the invaders from the North. His is celebrated and remembered from the **6<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> lunar month** with a series of processions, rites and shows. On the 6<sup>th</sup> day takes place the ceremony of carrying water from the Mother Temple to the Upper Temple. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day, flags are carried to the Mother Temple. The same day, offerings of boiled rice and salted aubergines are carried to the Upper Temple, a ritual that commemorates traditional rural fare. In another remnant of ancient practices, on the night of this same day, the young men and women play at running after each other on the Red River's dyke. In addition, on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, a water puppet show takes place in front of the Phù Đổng Temple. On the 8<sup>th</sup> day, 28 women are chosen to represent the generals of the Yin invaders.

The festival's climax comes on the 9<sup>th</sup> day. The flags are carried from the Mother Temple to the Upper Temple and sacrifices are made to the spirit. Artists perform songs and ritual dances and there is a show that mimes a tiger hunt... The battle against the Yin invaders is re-enacted and there is a solemn procession by the Văn Lang army. Finally, the two battles against the invaders at Đống Đàm and Soi Bia are symbolised by flag dances and victory feasts.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> day, the 'troops' are inspected and the invader-generals, after their defeat, make offerings to Gióng. On the 11<sup>th</sup> day, the ceremony of cleansing weapons with holy water is held. On the 12<sup>th</sup> day, a procession leads to the inspection of the battlefield. On this last day of the festival, tributes are offered to the gods of the heavens and the earth.



# NINH HIỆP

## GETTING THERE

Take the dyke road once again and go under the motorway. Continue towards the northwest for about seven kilometres and you will come to National Highway n°1A. Turn right and after two kilometres of suburbs and industrial parks, then some remains of fields, a war memorial and a little bridge, take the narrow road that goes off, once again, to the right. No, you are not going round in circles!

You will cross a few remains of paddy fields for two kilometres (you are right in the middle of a peri-urban area!) then you will see the extensions of a textiles market that dare not speak its name... You are nearly there. You go over a pretty bridge that crosses a canal and enter one of the most densely populated communes in the Delta, 227 inhabitants per hectare, or 50% more than the old quarters in the capital!

## THE SITE

Ninh Hiệp is not a craft village like others. Ninh Hiệp is not a village like others. In fact, Ninh Hiệp is not even a village. Ninh Hiệp is a commune of the Hanoian peri-urban area, made up of nine multi-craft and multi-disciplinary hamlets, with at once centuries-old and ultra-modern expertises, which is today a magnet for researchers in the social sciences, both Vietnamese and foreign.

In addition, Ninh Hiệp was one of the first communities to have a specialised craft co-operative during the collectivist era (or “the period of collectivisation under the mechanism of concentrated economy and state subsidy” to its close friends). There was a time in the north of Vietnam (the beginning of the 1960s) when, if you played football with a leather ball, it was more than a fair bet that it was made in Ninh Hiệp. A few years later (the end of the 1960s), a *bộ đội* (regular soldier of the revolutionary army) who was lucky enough to wear “socks resistant to attacks from terrestrial leeches” could also claim, without danger of contradiction, that they had taken their first steps at Ninh Hiệp.

There was another time in this commune, namely the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when many of the women were so busy spinning silk or cotton and weaving cloth on looms (including tributes destined for the Chinese Imperial Court), that they did not even know how to transplant rice (still seen today as essentially women’s work). It was the men who carried out this task in Ninh Hiệp. Someone (a woman, probably) even wrote a catchy little song about it:

*Cửi canh khuya sớm em lo  
Ruộng đồng tát nước be bờ phần anh  
Me, I'll look after the weaving loom,  
It's your job to finish the work in the fields.*

There was yet another time, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, when the Vietnamese kings exclusively consulted experts in traditional medicine from Ninh Hiệp. Their knowledge of medicinal plants and herbal remedies had no equal south of the Red River. Today however, the tombs of these great scholars and the sumptuous monuments dedicated to them at Ninh Hiệp are hidden by rolls of Nippono-Chinese cloth of questionable quality, spread out in front of the architectural finery to snag the passing punter on his Sino-Japanese scooter. The merchants have invaded the Temple and there ain't no Baby Jesus to tell 'em: “Leave my Father's house”...

The history of Ninh Hiệp is full of twists and turns, not all of them positive, but always most instructive: it is a tale worth telling (and, we hope, worth hearing).





ASSORTED HERBAL REMEDIES AND LOTUS SEEDS, NINH GIANG



## THE CONTEXT

Let us begin with some specifics. Originally, Ninh Hiệp Commune was made up of three villages:

- Phù Ninh (today divided into 7 *xóm*, hamlets, numbered from 1 to 7);
- Hiệp Phù (now *Xóm 9*);
- Ninh Giang (now *Xóm 8*).

Phù Ninh and Hiệp Phù were once specialised in spinning silk and fine cotton. The spinning craft is said to have begun here during the Lý Dynasty (1010-1225) and to have established Phù Ninh's reputation during the Lê Dynasty. There was also a very important market here, called Nành market, which supplied artisans who did not have their own sources of raw materials. Up against competition from textile mills established by the French colony, weavers could no longer obtain supplies of thread nor sell their cloth, henceforth considered too coarse (and at 40 cm in width, too narrow, because woven on small looms). The inhabitants of these old villages switched crafts to trading in medicinal plants, then at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century started working with leather. Ninh Giang is the birthplace of the craft of processing medicinal plants for traditional medicines. The names of famous Phù Ninh doctors are carved on the Pháp Vân Pagoda and evoke this village's great renown.

We will continue with a dose of mythico-historical founding narrative (or should that be historico-mythical?). The ancestors of the Commune's two oldest crafts, the one who is said to have introduced spinning of silk (and fine cotton) and the one who is said to have started the processing of medicinal plants for the preparation of traditional remedies, are purportedly one and the same person – and, to cap it all, a woman!

At the time when she arrived in Ninh Hiệp (which in fact wasn't called Ninh Hiệp at all at that period, but Làng Nành), this woman was known by the name of Lady Thái Lão. It is certainly not by chance that she is also said to be originally from Thanh Hóa Province. This region is a prodigious source of founding cultural narratives in the north of Vietnam: see for example (the builder of Đình Bảng) **Itineraries n°1 p. 67, n°3 p. 155** (the ancestor of the copperbeaters), **n°6 p. 233** (the post-ancestor of mother-of-pearl inlayers) and **n°8 p. 274** (the training of the ancestor of bamboo weavers). Note that Thanh Hóa contains the site of Hoa Lư, one of the first capitals and centres of civilisation in the north of Vietnam.

Lady Thái Lão settled in the village of Phù Ninh, where apparently a house was even built for her, so much did the locals want her to stay and share her multifarious skills and crafts. A document preserved in the village that tells her story claims that she “taught the villagers to weave silk to make them self-sufficient”. In truth, the origins of spinning and weaving in this neck of the woods seem so distant that one story is pretty much as good as any other.

Nonetheless, in our view, Lady Thái Lão has a more serious claim on the title of craft ancestor for the processors of medicinal plants (moreover, Ninh Hiệp Commune is not the only place where she is worshipped for this). So legend has it that she taught the villagers the rudiments of the southern (i.e. Vietnamese) pharmacopoeia. Despite the fact that she carried out her decoctions in Phù Ninh, today it is particularly Ninh Giang (*Xóm 8*) that is specialised in medicinal plants. She taught them to pick wild medicinal plants that grew in profusion in Quế Lâm Forest, which in those days started directly beyond the village limits. Lady Thái Lão then showed them the main methods for preserving these medical ingredients. Sadly, adhering to the axiom concerning physicians and their limited self-healing powers, she died young, some years later, on the **18<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month** of an unknown year (see the “**things to be seen**” **p. 138**). King Lý Thái Tổ, an admirer of the healing powers of her young wives' remedies, and clearly saddened by her untimely passing, solemnly declared her to be: “*Lý Nhữ Thái Lão được sự thần linh*”, which means roughly: “powerful spirit Thái Lão with miraculous medicines” and gave her the posthumous name of Lý Nhữ Thái Lão. This is how she has been known ever since.

## THE CRAFTS

We have already mentioned several of them, but in order to show the movement, the reactivity and the protean flexibility of this group of multiple-craft villages, during a period of entropic upheavals with exponential accelerations, let us sketch a general chronology of events, starting from the decline in spinning and weaving activities:

- **1930s/1940s:** the shortage of raw materials and the lack of markets, both precipitated by French colonial competition, seals the demise of spinning and weaving in Ninh Hiệp. Some artisans continue to work with textiles, putting their skills and contacts to good use to go into trade. Others switch to different crafts flourishing in the village – the old ones and the new.

Processing and trading in medicinal plants in Ninh Giang/Xóm 8 – the source of the increasingly flourishing practice of traditional medicine in Phù Ninh and Hiệp Phù (see p. 137) and then the emergence of a wider clientele (reached via markets and through intermediaries) – continues apace. It could even be stated that these activities increase in scale compared to previous eras and lift themselves permanently out of the category of being a secondary moneymaking occupation for underemployed rice farmers.

Given that raw materials have already become hard to find nearby (a few precious plants are grown in the commune, but space is very limited), during this period a certain number of villagers begin to travel further afield in the North (and even to China, often without papers) in pursuit of sought-after plants. Simultaneously, other people leave for the South to set themselves up as traders in medicinal plants in the bigger and smaller towns, like those for example who open up shop in Hà Nội in the 36 Streets Old Quarter, on Lãn Ông Street (still the best place – with Thuốc Bắc Street – to find these products in the capital), named after a great theorist and practitioner of traditional medicine of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: see box p. 135).

During this same period (still the 1930s/1940s), a brand new craft starts to establish itself in Ninh Hiệp: leatherwork. The origins of this craft go back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when some villagers were summoned to work in the French army's leather factories, including a certain Mr. Thạch Văn Ngũ. Some years later, he opens a shop selling leather items on Hà Trung Street in Hà Nội. Business is so good that Mr. Ngũ has to take on a whole series of young apprentices from his native village, some of whom then set up shop on their own account, not only in direct competition with him but also, in keeping with ruthless local commercial practices, on the same street...

- **1946-1954:** During the armed struggle for independence, many of those making leather goods in Hà Nội return to Ninh Hiệp while continuing their work and are soon supplying the Vietnamese army with very useful items. Meanwhile, medicinal plants also become part of the war effort: a patriotic movement promotes traditional Vietnamese science to the detriment of Western influences – and the army is forced to find ways of treating its wounded in the jungle, while sources of Western medical supplies rapidly dry up. Promotion of a local solution leads to national campaigns, encouraging the cultivation of medicinal plants, and from this period onwards, plantations of this kind can be found in national parks and in many villages, which also often boast a dispensary of traditional medicine.

- **1960:** A craft co-operative making leather items and tarpaulins is established in Ninh Hiệp. Out of leather, it produces hand-stitched balls of all kinds (footballs, volleyballs, basketballs...), sandals, suitcases, etc. From 1965, the co-operative works mainly for the army: rucksacks, tarpaulin shelters, cartridge belts, grenade holders, radio carriers, holsters and straps for pistols, rifles, or AK machine guns... This model of a co-operative working flat out to produce military supplies is a successful one: while urban production units are attacked, destroyed or evacuated, small-scale craft industries, dispersed in rural areas, demonstrate their value and are worth their weight in gold for the collective war effort. As early as 1973 (the signing of the Treaty of Paris), production is redirected to civilian needs: once more, the co-operative begins to make balls, bags, briefcases, gloves, bicycle seats, etc.





## The reluctant herbalist

Lân Ông (born Lê Hữu Trác in 1720) was an original and iconoclastic character of Vietnamese traditional medicine. Born with a pair of silver chopsticks in his mouth, he turned his back on a career as a mandarin, spending most of his life in the village where his mother was born, in Hà Tĩnh Province (Central Vietnam). He produced his masterpiece there, called *Treatise of Medical Knowledge of Hải Thượng*, setting out his observations and analysis of more than 700 native plants and herbs. He identifies 29 different drying techniques, each devised to preserve or to alter the properties of active agents contained by the plants. He presents advice for their use in traditional medicine, enriched with references to history, literature and philosophy. He was also one of the first to advise a more integrated approach between southern medicine (purely Vietnamese, using only local plants and with relatively simple preparations) and the northern discipline (with plants from mountainous regions and China in more complex and sophisticated preparations).

Invited to join the Royal Court by Crown Prince Trịnh Cán, whom he had previously cured of an illness, Lê Hữu Trác refused and retired permanently to the country to continue his research and his practice of medicine, until his death in 1791. By assuming the name Lân Ông ('Mister Lazybones'), he signalled his reluctance to exchange his simple lifestyle for the luxurious existence at Court, peopled by crowds of sycophants and hangers-on. He also indicated his refusal to get embroiled in the political struggle at that period taking place between the Trịnh and the Nguyễn lords. In the preface to his book, he wrote:

"Medicine is a human art that must seek to preserve life, attend to man's sorrows, rejoice in man's joys. A physician's duty is to bring succour to others without thought for riches or fame..."

Where are the doctors of yesteryear?

A MIXTURE OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINES AT A NINH GIANG HERBALIST





A WORKER MIXES LOTUS SEED HUSKS  
AND SPICES AT NINH GIANG

FINELY CHOPPED PLANTS ON A NINH GIANG DOORSTEP





An anecdote from this collectivist period that we cannot resist passing on. Some co-operative officials occasionally dabbled in some bartering or did a little bit of business on the side: they had the contacts and the freedom of movement, and did not always act solely for personal gain. In Ninh Hiệp, co-operative officials in charge of deliveries and marketing devised an original scam: they illicitly exchanged traditional medicines and textiles for state products, including thermos flasks (those that you still see everywhere in Vietnam today) and... monosodium glutamate! These treasures were sold to villagers who then went and swapped them in the mountains for more medicinal plants. The inhabitants of mountainous areas thus exchanged the ingredients for sophisticated and ancestral natural remedies in return for poor-quality, mass-produced thermos flasks, along with allergenic and possibly carcinogenic flavour enhancers...

- **The 1960s:** During this period, yet another craft begins to develop (especially in Ninh Giang/*Xóm 8*), already very familiar to villagers, but one that begins to take on a whole new semi-industrial scale: processing of lotus seeds and dried longan pulp. Longan pulp is renowned for its restorative powers; in terms of volume, it is principally lotus seeds that are processed – removing them from their black shells and detaching them from their brown membranes – to make them, once laid bare, into crystallised sweetmeats, or to use them for other traditional recipes. Once again, in Ninh Hiệp, there are neither ponds to house all these lotus plants, nor land to grow longans; but to process these products requires skill and experience (especially for the longans). The people of this commune have the know-how and buy untreated produce from all over the Delta, selling on the processed products in Hà Nội and elsewhere. You will see that this craft is currently blooming.

- **Since 1986:** economic liberalisation creates shock waves in Ninh Hiệp, like everywhere else. The leather and tarpaulin craft co-operative, abandoned to market forces, soon finds itself in operational difficulties and puts the key under the gates for good in July 1990, just in time for everyone to go home and watch the celebrations for the reunification of the two Germanys on the telly...

With the advent of *Đổi Mới*, the processors of medicinal plants steal a march on potential competitors by organising about 40 commando groups of roving plant collectors. But the opening of the Chinese border for trade once again modifies the situation: from now on, traditional Chinese remedies become available at unbeatable prices, even after export, and the craft of processing such products suffers a severe blow. However, Ninh Hiệp artisans know their trade and have contacts, so once again they manage to bounce back, this time as traders in specialised Chinese products. Later, the market for local products revives a little, helped in part by a Western enthusiasm for all Eastern traditional medicines, stimulated by a rejection of chemico-pharmaceutical allopathic drugs.

One final new craft, or a descendant of an old one rising from the ashes: dressmaking and trade in Chinese and Japanese cloth. Since *Đổi Mới*, this activity has boomed exponentially in Ninh Hiệp: no need to give you lots of figures, as you can't avoid the reality, even when you are looking for Phủ Ninh's pagodas, bursting with the tombs of illustrious doctors from a bygone age. It is not very interesting, or nice to look at, but it's everywhere: a decade ago, already one-tenth of all the commune's households declared themselves as dressmakers or tailors. Proximity with Hà Nội (which every year creeps a little closer to Ninh Hiệp) means that young city-dwellers come here on shopping sprees to find cut-price clothing.

Let us complete this gallop through the thicket of crafts in this uncommon commune by a quotation, taken from the conclusion of an excellent article about Ninh Hiệp, by Dương Duy Bằng (2002):

“The preservation and promotion of traditional technological heritage demonstrates once again the importance of its role in the development of craft industry in Ninh Hiệp. The richness of experience concerning processing of medicinal plants enabled the inhabitants of Ninh Hiệp to successfully develop the commodity chain for processing high-quality agricultural products. Technical skills acquired from making balls during the 1940s-50s created the basis for villagers to operate the leather and tarpaulin co-operative during the period 1960-1986. In turn, the members of this co-operative were able to put their experience to good use in the clothing industry that has developed very rapidly these last years. This explains why, in spite of inhabiting a similar environment, neighbouring communes have never managed, after the manner of Ninh Hiệp, to establish a co-operative specialised in leather, nor to develop the craft of making clothes or processing agricultural goods. It is therefore necessary to maintain and continue promotion of these traditional crafts and to grant them the attention that they deserve”.

## THINGS TO BE SEEN

Everything should be seen to be believed, of course, but especially the village of Ninh Giang/*Xóm 9*, for its display of drying and processing of exotic and sometimes mysterious products, as well as its sublime scents (**see our suggested walk through the village p. 140**). Don't forget that the festival for the crafts ancestor is held on the **18<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month** (the day of her death), and go and see the beautiful religious buildings, mainly concentrated in the large village of Phù Ninh (*Xóm 1 to 7*), including Điểm Kiều Temple, built to pay homage to Mrs. Lý Nhữ Thái Lão.





PREPARING GLAZED LOTUS SEEDS, NINH GIANG

## A stroll through time in Ninh Hiệp

The eventful and very dynamic history of this illustrious commune is visible everywhere in the streets. The French School of Far-Eastern Studies has counted more than 100 stelae bearing witness to the prestige of famous men and women from here, to their expertise and the very ancient prosperity of this commune, even if it is sometimes hidden by expanses of low-quality cloth. This walk will end amid curls of smoke from spices and suffused with the aroma of star anise and liquorice, bathed in the slanting, golden light of late afternoon sunshine.

We suggest you begin by visiting the architectural and religious heritage sites, so as not to be demoralised by the unrestrained invasion by the cloth market of one of the villages with the richest heritage in the environs of Hà Nội.

Once you have crossed the bridge, you will find yourself opposite two roads at a Y junction (see map, p. 141); take the one to the right and cross the street of traditional medicine without stopping, in order to keep the most calming part for last. Then stay on the road that runs along the paddy fields and follow the sharp bend to the east. Another 500 metres and you can park in the car park near the market.

Crossing the cloth market is tough going, both on mind and body: there are a lot of people and the spectacle of temples hidden by assorted cloth prints of Winnie the Pooh, Pokemon and Batman is hard on the senses!

Chùa Cả, or Pháp Vân Pagoda (also called Nành Pagoda, after Ninh Hiệp's old name): you can see nine stelae from the later Lê Dynasty that tell the story of some famous doctors, signs of the excellent reputation of this village for medical science. They are dispersed in the courtyard and in the main building.

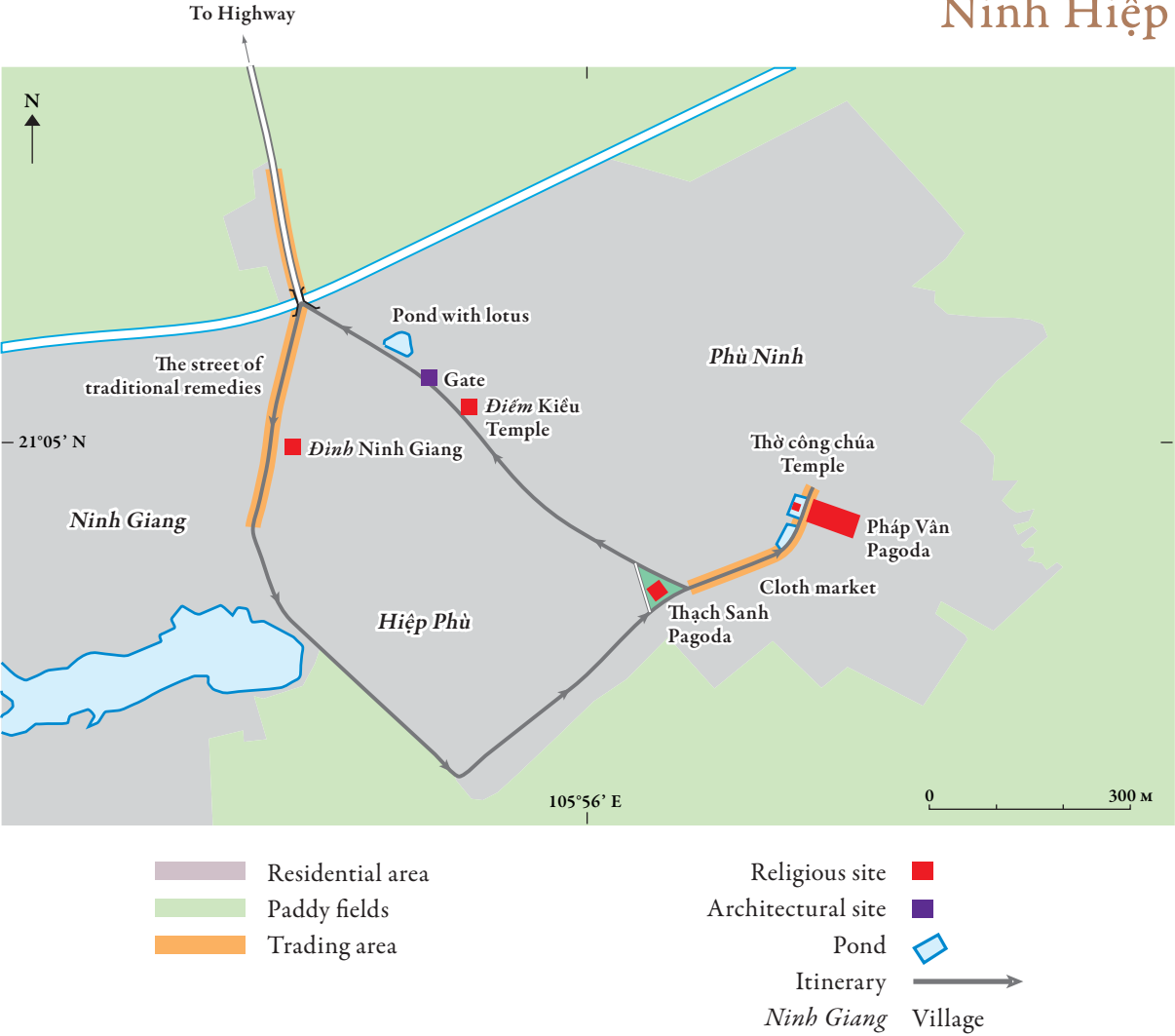
Opposite the pagoda, there is a smaller one on the water: *Đền thờ công chúa* is dedicated to Princess Lê Ngọc Hân (1770-1799), daughter of King Lê Hiến Tông and wife of Quang Trung (founder of the Tây Sơn Dynasty). After the death of her illustrious husband, she wrote a long poem in *nôm* (former Vietnamese writing system) entitled *Ai Tứ Văn*, expressing the pain of a young wife losing her husband, of a woman grieving for her lover, of a subject mourning her dead king.

A treasure hunt could be organised in this village to look for stelae, temples and other architectural wonders hidden by 'modernisation'. However, we will let you find them for yourself while crossing back through the cloth market.

In the small, triangular garden that marks the end of the market, a beautiful little pagoda houses the 'bed of stone' or *thạch sàng* used by A Đà La, the Indian monk who came to spread the Buddhist doctrine in 187, before making his way to Mãn Xá. Over there, he had a hand in the "birth of the four goddesses" of which you will hear more when you visit Dâu Pagoda (**Itinerary n°3, p. 147**). This building is a mysterious, sinister place where nobody wants to live. It houses, among other things, Phù Ninh's cultural centre.

Turn right into the shopping street where stalls of cloth alternate with shops selling traditional remedies. After about 300 metres, on the right is a small temple, *Điểm Kiêu*, built to pay homage to the craft ancestor for silk and medicinal plants, Mrs. Lý Nhữ Thái Lão, especially, as you will remember, on the **18<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**. It is a small building with a handsome wooden structure, which was reconstructed in the 1990s with private funding.

# Ninh Hiệp



Source: Google Earth 2008, IRD Cartography Department



As you get closer to *Xóm 8* (or Ninh Giang), traditional medicine activities begin to intensify: you will see several shops giving onto the street. A striking gate marks the separation between *Xóm 6* and *Xóm 7*. Then on the right, a small *đình* with a pink door houses a very fine stele. Opposite, on the left-hand side of the street, is Khánh Ninh Pagoda. Then a little further on, a small pond on the right with many lotus flowers in it is a reminder of the importance of this medicinal plant.

When you get to the end of the street, you will find yourself opposite the bridge giving access to the commune. Turn sharp left, and enter the street of traditional remedies that you crossed when you were setting out earlier. There, the noise fades and you can follow your nose. In the village of Ninh Giang (or *Xóm 8*), you can at last inhale the fragrance from liquorice and all kinds of spices in the relative calm, far from the hoards of motorbikes that zigzag between passers-by with mountains of cloth and clothes poorly attached to them.

All house frontages are used as places to dry aromatic barks, piles of sticks of liquorice cut into strips, heaps of turmeric. Girls slice up unidentified barks, chop up plants or sort through flat baskets full of lotus seeds. In front of shops, signs display the double originality of the village: the sale of both northern and southern medicine: *Thuốc Bắc* and *Thuốc Nam*. Several little monuments can be found in the maze of streets. You will see a very beautiful *đình* with orange doors and a very ancient canopy (with charming old gentlemen who play badminton outside, a chance to have a casual chat about the history of the craft and the origins of the *đình*...). There is no association of herbal remedy makers, but during a game of badminton, there must be some discussion of trade and of ancient recipes for making some magic potion or other! Homage is paid there to the founder on the **9<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar** month without much fanfare (no games as in the other festivals).





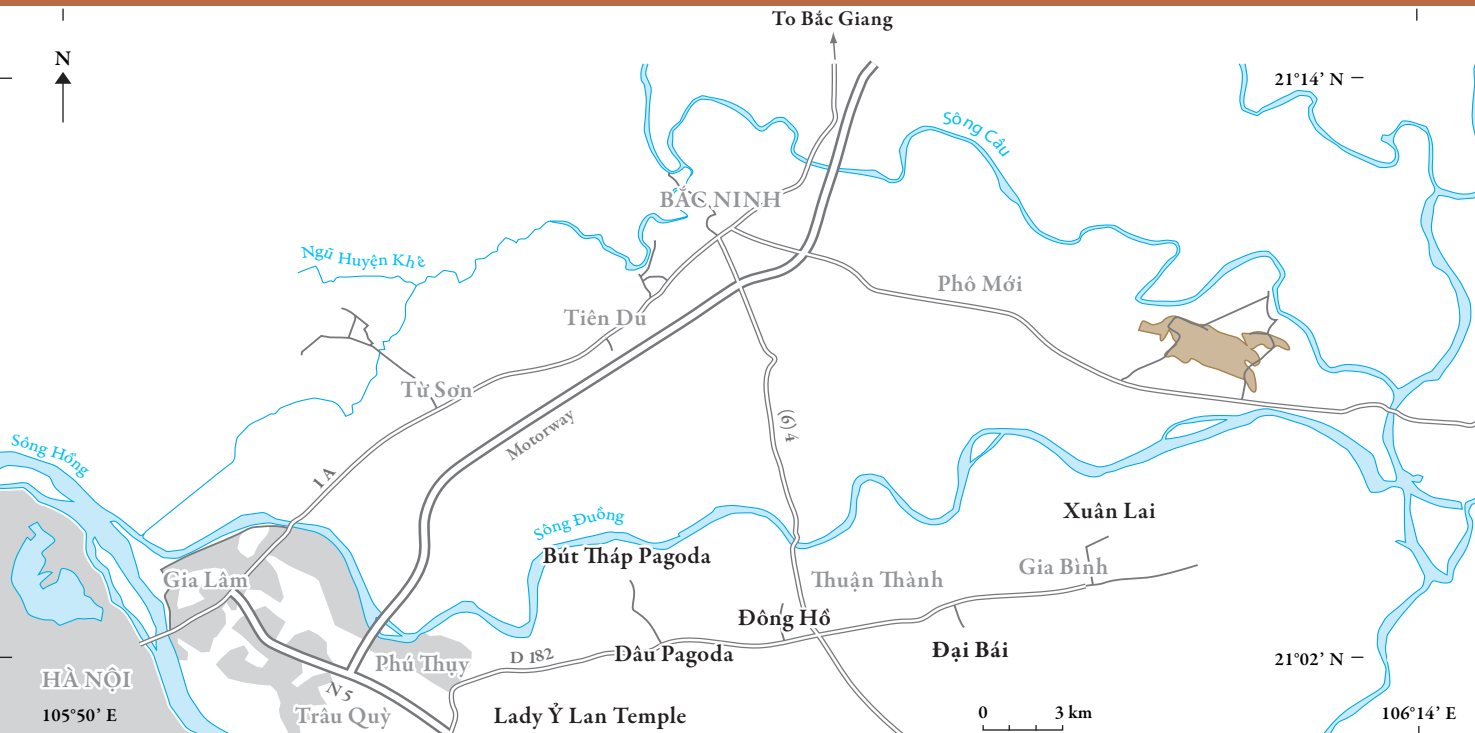
CONSULTATION WITH A NINH GIANG HERBALIST

HERBALIST'S SHOP NINH GIANG



## Itinerary 3

Prints, metalbeating & burnt bamboo (Bắc Ninh)



### Cultural and architectural heritage

The temples dedicated to Lady Ý Lan;  
Bút Tháp Pagoda;  
Đâu Pagoda;  
The *đình* at Đông Hồ;  
The *đình*, pagoda and mausoleum at Đại Bái.

### Craft villages

Traditional woodblock prints: Đông Hồ;  
Metal beating: Đại Bái;  
Burnt bamboo furnitures: Xuân Lai.



# LADY Ỡ LAN’S TEMPLE:

## GETTING THERE

Exit Hà Nội to the east via Gia Lâm. Go straight through the Nguyễn Văn Cừ / Nguyễn Văn Linh crossroads and turn right towards the motorway (National Highway n°5) towards Hải Phòng. Leave the motorway access for Bắc Ninh on your left and at about 11 kilometres from the Nguyễn Văn Cừ / Nguyễn Văn Linh crossroads, take the ramp signposted Đường Kiều Kỵ. At the little roundabout, turn left to get up onto the bridge that goes over the motorway. Follow signposts to Phố Sủi. You are on Road n°182. Two kilometres further on, you will arrive at the village of Phú Thụy (Dương Xá Commune), where you will find Lady Ỡ Lan’s Temple.

In Dương Xá and Phú Thụy Communes (Gia Lâm District), there are about 20 temples dedicated to Lady Ỡ Lan, the wife of King Lý Thánh Tông (11<sup>th</sup> century), born into a family of weavers and silkworm farmers. Both of these communes hold festivals in her honour.

In the political sphere, Lady Ỡ Lan, who lived in the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries, was an important stateswoman and first concubine to the king. She is worshipped by the Vietnamese in at least a hundred temples dedicated to her memory, especially in her native province of Bắc Ninh.

The pagoda, built by Ỡ Lan herself in 1115, bears the name of Linh Nhân. The temple dedicated to her worship dates from the same period. Among the historic relics preserved in the temple complex and in the pagoda since the 11<sup>th</sup> century are a stone staircase, Buddhas seated on two lions and another magnificent lion more than a metre high, also carved in stone.

There is a well where, according to legend, Ỡ Lan/Tấm kept a little magic fish, calling it to the water’s surface every day by singing to it. Far from being a mythical character, Ỡ Lan is an historical person. Her real name was Lê Thị Yến. She was a farmer’s daughter who lost her mother when very young. However, she is inextricably linked in the Vietnamese collective imagination to Tấm, the national Cinderella.

According to the Annals, King Lý Thánh Tông, who aged 40 had still not produced a male heir to guarantee the continuity of the royal line, made a pilgrimage to Dâu Pagoda (2<sup>nd</sup> century), via Dương Xá in order to ask for the Buddha’s assistance. Strolling in the fields, he noticed, in a thicket of mulberry trees, a beautiful girl leaning against a magnolia (*lan*). He approached her and was surprised to find that she was not in the least overawed and could answer his questions with aplomb and intelligence. He decided to bring her back to his court and gave her the title of “First Royal Concubine Ỡ Lan”, this name meaning: “she who leans against a magnolia”.

Unlike the other women in the harem, Ỡ Lan showed an interest in affairs of state and public life. She made an effort to study and become conversant with the people’s concerns. In 1069 her husband, setting off to do battle with the Cham, left her in charge during his absence. She reigned with wisdom and courage during troubled times. The grateful subjects called her Mother of Mansuetude and built a temple in her honour. In 1072, the King’s death caused a fresh national crisis. Once again, Ỡ Lan became Regent and ran affairs of state while General Lý Thường Kiệt repelled an invasion of the Chinese armies of the Song Dynasty.

# BÚT THÁP PAGODA

## GETTING THERE

Continue down Road n°182. On your right, you will see a very beautiful gateway. One kilometre further on, take the road on the right signposted Phố Keo market. Keo Pagoda is in the marketplace. Two kilometres further on, you leave Hà Nội Province and cross into Bắc Ninh. You will go past big brick kilns and an industrial park. Three kilometres from the border between the two provinces, to the right of the road, in the village of Công Hà, is Tồ Pagoda (*Chùa Tồ*). On the left, a road leads to Đình Tổ, a village where, after continuing for three kilometres, you will find one of Vietnam's most famous pagodas, Chùa Bút Tháp.

**Bút Tháp Pagoda**, (*Chùa Bút Tháp*) or Paintbrush Tower Pagoda, (in the village of the same name, Đình Tổ Commune, Thuận Thành District) is an architectural and sculptural treasure. The pagoda is a large but harmonious collection of 10 buildings of which several date from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, including two towers of five stories each, one of which is the striking, 13-metre-high tower that gives its name to this religious complex.

Among the things worth looking at here, there are several finely sculpted bas-reliefs and a plethora of polychrome statues. The most famous ones are the gigantic guardian spirits at the entrance, three very fine Buddhas at the centre of the Grand Hall and the highlight, to the side in this same room, is the very Indian-looking statue of Quan Âm, with her “thousand eyes and thousand arms”, the work of a sculptor named Trương, crafted in 1656 and symbolising the union of the beautiful and the sacred in Buddhist beliefs.

# DÂU PAGODA

## GETTING THERE

Return to Road n° 182. Leaving the village of Công Hà, you come to a crossroads, then a road full of shops and stalls. You are entering Phố Dầu in the village of Khương Tỳ, site of another of the region's very famous pagodas, Chùa Pháp Vân Tỳ or Chùa Dầu. A sign at the beginning of the line of shops announces that the pagoda is 200 metres further on, to the right.

**Chùa Dầu** (village of Khương Tỳ, Thanh Khương Commune, Thuận Thành District), its common name, or Pháp Vân Tỳ, its real name (or Chùa Diên Ứng according to some free spirits), is the oldest Buddhist temple in Vietnam. It was built around the beginning of the Christian era, at a place where several important trades routes intersect (and on the site of the administrative, military, cultural and religious centre called Luy Lâu by the Chinese, from where they dominated the whole of northern Vietnam). The first great Indian Buddhist missionaries to travel to Vietnam came here. A market that follows the Yin principle is held in front of this pagoda at dusk. They say that the souls of the dead return to do their shopping here!

The imposing Dầu Pagoda is at the centre of a remarkable geographical concentration of village pagodas (you will have already noticed that the Bút Tháp Pagoda is practically next door). Many of these places of worship are linked up when the pagoda holds its festival (see box p. 147).

With regard to the architecture of this site, the pagoda was almost entirely rebuilt in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and has undergone several other renovations since then. In the main temple, there are only a few sculptures remaining from the Trần and Lê Dynasties. There are several striking statues there, including the most famous, in the centre, representing Lady Dầu or Pháp Vân (the Cloud Goddess). Almost two metres tall, elegant and slender, seated on a lotus, this statue is considered a masterpiece of Vietnamese statuary (18<sup>th</sup> century).

Another of the pagoda's interesting features, also dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, built 17 metres high with plain bricks, Hòa Phong Tower can be seen from afar, even if there are only three of its (allegedly) nine original stories still standing. This tower was built to entreat the divinities to organise favourable weather for a good harvest. Inside are a bell and a gong, and in front of the tower, to the left, can be found a stone statue with an unusual subject (for Vietnam, at least): a sheep. Historians speculate (as is their wont) that it is a relic of the era of Chinese domination.





## Festival at the Dâu Pagoda

The pagoda's festival takes place on the **8<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> lunar month** (Buddha's birthday). Four other pagodas in the same district celebrate their festivals on this same day and the activities are closely interlinked by a whole skein of intertwined beliefs and traditions.

As the story goes, the Cloud Goddess had three sisters, the Rain Goddess, the Thunder Goddess and their little sister, the Lightning Goddess. At the culmination of lavish processions, the villagers reunite the (statues of the) three younger sisters to go and visit big sister Pháp Vân at Dâu Pagoda, and together, they pay a social call on their mother Man Nương (who was mysteriously – but accidentally – fertilised by a monk of Indian origin, called Khâu Đà La: see **Itinerary n°2 p. 140** (Ninh Hiệp) for more of his Vietnamese adventures) at Tổ Pagoda in the village of Mãn Xá.

It is easy to see that these divinities are closely associated with very ancient beliefs concerning fertility and water rites. It is a major and impressive festival, with many processions, contests, games, dances, (stick, turtle, lion and stalk dances), wrestling, chess games with human pieces and fireworks.

# ĐÔNG HỒ BLOCK PRINTS

## LET'S GO TO ĐÔNG HỒ!

Continue down Road n°182 and after five kilometres, at the crossroads on the far side of the village of Phố Khám, a road to the left leads, after about a kilometre, to the village of block prints and votive offerings made of paper: Đông Hồ.

Đông Hồ, (Sông Hồ Commune, Thuận Thành District) is a very ancient village about 40 kilometres east of Hà Nội, famous throughout Vietnam for making traditional woodblock prints on *dó* paper (see **Itinerary n°1** to discover the mysteries of this paper) and more recently, paper votive offerings.

Every year, a few weeks before *Tết* (the Vietnamese new year), a market of traditional prints takes place in and around the village's communal house (*đình*). Under the Nguyễn Dynasty, a competition for making votive offerings was also held in the *đình*. These events attracted artisans and clients from all over the sub-region and established Đông Hồ's reputation. Only a handful of craftspeople still make these famous "Đông Hồ prints"; most of their neighbours devote their energies to making votive offerings such as those sold on Hàng Mã (or Votive Offerings Street), in the Old Quarter of the 36 Streets in Hà Nội.

### THE CRAFT

In spite of the inevitable decline in sales of Đông Hồ prints, they remain a reference in traditional popular culture. They depict scenes of village life or spring landscapes, scenes taken from stories and legends, pictures featuring the animals of the Vietnamese horoscope (especially those of the upcoming and current lunar years). The prints are produced with pictures carved into wooden printing blocks. The paper is decorated and strengthened with a double coating of a pearly white paste made from mussel shells (*điệp*). The prints' five colours are of natural origin, the black being from charred bamboo leaves, the orange from gardenia flowers, the blue from indigo and so on.

Some historians locate the origins of this practice at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, under the reign of King Lê Kinh Tông; others (perhaps fonder of round numbers) say poppycock, Đông Hồers have been stamping on *dó* paper for 500 years (or 20 generations): take your pick... Whatever the facts of the matter, the craft's steep decline is undeniable: before 1938, 200 households in the village were still colouring in prints. Apart from the three last remaining ones, nearly all the other craftspeople have thus switched to making paper votive offerings, and it must be said that this activity is very successful.

### THINGS TO SEE

Đông Hồ's two crafts are interesting to watch. There are still a couple of workshops where one can observe the production of traditional woodblock prints, as well as a museum (see **box p. 151**). Simple, cheerful and amusing, the prints possess a definite charm, are not at all expensive (prices begin from around a pretty reasonable 3,000 VNĐ) and make presents that are easy to carry in a little cardboard tube or kept flat at the bottom of a suitcase.

Votive offerings and votive paper are made from recycled matter, which is collected and sorted in Dương Ổ, another Bắc Ninh village famous for its paper products (see **Itinerary n°1**). Here, the sheets of paper are coloured and decorated and, when the weather is fine, one can very often see a dazzling display of coloured paper drying in the sun.

The *đình* at Đông Hồ, where the village's guardian spirit is worshipped, is worth a visit, especially if you are lucky enough to be here just before *Tết* for the woodblock print market, (the 6<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> days of the 12<sup>th</sup> lunar month) or just afterwards, for the Đông Hồ village festival (**from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**), because since they have once again become popular, the competition for making votive offerings has been restored. It takes place in the *đình*'s courtyard, where the families of Đông Hồ display both their finest pieces of paperwork and the baroque scope of their imagination. These giant and extravagant objects are also paraded through the streets, there are games of Chinese chess, wrestling, cockfights: a typical village fête, if you like. The show's climax, which gives it an undeniably original touch, is the culmination of the competition in a ceremony where the winning objects are... you've guessed it, burned to a sooty crisp.



## Money to burn?

As if there weren't enough people in the house already, traditional Vietnamese beliefs place the dead firmly among the living, except that they simply exist in a parallel world. Now in this other dimension, one still needs to work and travel, to eat, clothe, house and even amuse oneself (sounds a little like hell, doesn't it?).

In order to keep showing due respect to their ancestors, and above all to ask for their continued benevolence, the living are expected to 'look after' the dead by, among other ways, sending them presents, via smoke signals, in the form of paper votive offerings. The most common of these inflammable offerings are fake banknotes (50,000 VNĐ or 500,000 VNĐ notes for villagers, 100 USD for urban *nouveaux riches*, often printed on one side only), which are burnt on several occasions, beginning with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> days of the lunar month. These dates are also moments for going to the pagoda and presenting offerings at the ancestors' shrine at home. If you rent a house in Vietnam, the lease will often include a clause guaranteeing the landlord (or landlady) access every fortnight to the shrine left in the house. The ghosts of former owners are apparently not keen on moving house – and moreover, their presence discourages other, mere tenant ghosts from setting up home there: property dealings in the next world are clearly as complicated as they are in this one.

The other important ceremonies where one puts a match to one's money and similar simulacra include ancestors' death anniversaries, the *Tết Trung Nguyên* festival (15<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> lunar month, the festival of wandering souls) and occasional rites to plead for little things like a good harvest, a child, peace... This practice is a symbolic extension of an ancient one, where the deceased was buried with money, clothes, rice and salt, his favourite betel box, even his tools. In the Central Highlands, some ethnic minorities still adhere to similar traditions, often adding old bicycles (badly damaged or at least broken: it'll be as good as new in the Empire of Shadows, so no need to waste a vehicle in working order).

After 1945, in an attempt to reduce superstitious observances, trade in paper votive offerings was forbidden. Decades of deadly war and famine followed, many young people died in the jungle and in their villages. Those who survived did not wish to live with their backs turned to their dead and these practices returned.

As can be easily observed in Hà Nội's Hàng Mã Street, trade in these objects is once again flourishing: tradition and modernity live side by side, since one can buy, all made entirely of paper or cardboard, those genuine fake banknotes, a mandarin's official robes, mythological animals, golden or silver trees, shoes, horses, bicycles, motorbikes, cars, houses – even flying saucers... Many of these objects are made in Đông Hồ and can be bought here. If you decide to buy some for your forebears, don't forget to bring along a box of matches, then you can send them off directly.

MONEY FROM THE BANK OF THE « DEAD »





MAKING VOTIVE INGOTS: A JOB FOR THE ELDERLY





## “Come up and see my polychrome etchings...”

Long ago, virginal village girls from Đông Hồ posed as highway sirens for passing travellers making their way up the dyke or sailing down the Đuống River:

*Dear traveller on your way,  
Stop to admire the view and end your sadness.  
Please buy our paintings, brightly coloured  
With cosy scenes of pigs and chickens.*

Makers of woodblock prints don't perhaps have the same marketing budget they once had, and these days it's mainly producers of votive offerings who have the prime high street locations, but the invitation still holds good: we particularly recommend the workshops of **Mr. Nguyễn Đăng Chế** and **Mr. Nguyễn Hữu Sam**. For 30 years, the former was a lecturer at the university of aesthetics and is credited with having revived the craft in his village. The latter was director of the old Đông Hồ woodblock print co-operative and owns a collection of some 600 woodblocks for making prints, some of which are antiques.

With a little luck therefore, you may see one or other of these craftsmen busily carrying out the various stages of woodblock print production: putting a wash of pearly paste on the pieces of *dó* paper, inking the prints coated with *điệp* to give the contours of the traditional subjects, then colouring them delicately by filling in the shapes with the five natural colours (white, black, pearly blue, gold and silver dust).

In July 2008, at the initiative of Mr. Nguyễn Đăng Chế, a Centre for Cultural Exchanges about Đông Hồ prints was opened in the village. This museum (let's call it that), is made up of three houses of traditional construction: in the first are displayed more than 100 woodblocks made of old wood representing various series of popular scenes and 170 different prints; in the second, one can look at prints made by Mr. Nguyễn Đăng Chế's family over the last 15 years or so, as well as restored pictures; finally, in the last house, you can buy prints, woodblocks and pearly *dó* paper, so that you, too, if the place has inspired you, can take up this ancient and... almost obsolete craft.





ALUMINIUM, YELLOW COPPER, RED COPPER... , ĐẠI BÁI



# METALBEATING IN ĐẠI BÁI

## GETTING FROM ĐÔNG HỒ TO ĐẠI BÁI

Get back onto Road n°182. Go through a major intersection leaving the road to the town of Bắc Ninh to your left. Keep straight on, travelling eastwards. After about five kilometres, on the right, the village of Đại Bái is mentioned on a sign: “*Cụm di Tích lịch sử văn hóa, Làng Nghề gõ đúc đồng ĐẠI BÁI*”. Access to Đại Bái Commune is through the village of Đoan Bái.

As you approach Đại Bái (Đại Bái Commune, Gia Bình District), here it is more your ears and nose rather than your eyes that will give you the state of play: you will be greeted by a deafening noise level, acrid vapours and thick smoke. You are among specialists in **metallurgy**: for more than 1,000 years, the inhabitants of Đại Bái have mastered the technique of **copperbeating**, and for even longer they have been **smelting**, subsequently supplying the metalbeaters.

Materials have evolved: the Vietnamese have been making bronze (an alloy of copper and tin) for perhaps 4,000 years (see the history of the craft's origins p. 155), brass (an alloy of copper and zinc) came later and aluminium arrived only this morning. Craftspeople also work with gold and silver in Đại Bái. Associated techniques have also changed: mechanised production of metal plates and bars, competition from plastics and stainless steel. However, the main craft has survived: metalbeating is an entirely manual activity, requiring few tools (and thus little capital investment), but a lot of skill and a large, well-trained workforce.

Đại Bái (also commonly known as Bưởi and formerly as Văn Lãng) is one of the best illustrations of the fascinating craft village paradox: in a very rural setting, well away from Hà Nội, you are about to experience an unusually high level of human promiscuity and semi-industrial craft activity. To echo the words of a fellow researcher: “They don't mess about making conical hats here... In Africa, there are casts of metalworkers, living in separate tribes; you feel something similar in Đại Bái.”

Since at least the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Đại Bái was made up of four hamlets (*xóm*), each one more or less specialising in a single kind of utensil:

- *Xóm Sơn* = copper bowls, religious objects;
- *Xóm Gĩa* = teapots, kettles, small pots;
- *Xóm Tây* = trays, bowls;
- *Xóm Ngoài* = big cauldrons for making alcohol.

Things have become progressively more complicated, interlinked, overlapping, with extensions to some neighbourhoods and the industrial park that has been added (in a semi-organised way...) and workers who specialise in the making of just one part of something (like kettle spouts: see box entitled “Mission: the Quest for the Holy Kettle” p. 162-163) – or in one aspect of the item's production, such as smoothing and polishing (after the beating and assembling). Note also that at least 40% of workshops are now mechanised to a certain degree. Then there are inevitably articles that nobody buys any more and new ones that pop up onto the market. Check our production map, or just follow your nose...

# The Interbellum Generation...

## A description of Đại Bái

Under French colonial rule in the 1930s, the geographer Pierre Gourou contended that:

“Of all the villages in the Delta, Đại Bái is perhaps the most significant one from an industrial point of view; it probably wins out through the value of its products over the pottery villages (see *Itineraries n°1 & n°1 b*) and over the big village for silk products, Vạn Phúc (see *Itinerary n°4*) near Hà Đông.”

And he proceeds to bash out a striking portrait of a strangely metallic village in what was such an organic (or non-mineral) society at that period that you could not yet find a single nail or screw used in a local construction anywhere in the Delta:

“A copper market is held in Đại Bái every five days. Under the roof of the narrow covered market supported by rough columns of grey limestone are piled a muddled heap of merchandise, both for sale and already sold, that the copper infuses with a red or yellow lustre. Not far from the finished objects are heaped the raw materials that the artisans will buy once they have sold their produce: wood charcoal in small pieces, scrap zinc, old copper; one can admire an interesting display of old boiler pipes, copper wire, perforated plates that were used to make opium boxes by the Saigon factory, cartridge cases; there is an extraordinary diversity of these, as if all the battlefields and all the shooting ranges of the world insisted on sending a few samples of their metallic waste to Đại Bái.”

The lie of the land has completely changed since the era of this description. The buildings of Đại Bái, a fertile breeding ground for nationalist warriors, were almost totally destroyed during the succession of wars that broke out barely 10 years later. Nothing new about that: previous wars had already razed Đại Bái several times over. (It is even said here that the village was voluntarily moved a few kilometres at least once, in order to escape the highly toxic water pollution caused by the copper).

Once again, everything was rebuilt, renovated, converted. Since the warring parties have buried the hatchet (post-1975) and economic liberalisation has come knocking at the village gates (post-1986), people have expanded and modernised: there are now brand new neighbourhoods, an industrial park, the river and several ponds filled in with gravel or covered over with concrete. In order to make it more accessible than it was in the dense, enclosed centre of the village, the market has also moved. Over the years, many people have left in search of an easier, more peaceful life. Some have returned, still others have left to start life afresh in Hà Nội or elsewhere. Meanwhile, through all this tragic tumult and upward mobility, the traditional activity keeps in shape and still packs a hammer punch. The profusion of metallic waste retrieved from the world's battlefields and rubbish dumps continues to arrive here by the skipload...



## THE ORIGINS OF THE CRAFT

Metalworking has indeed been going on for a very long time in Đại Bái. In 1989, 1,000 years of copper and bronze beating were celebrated in Đại Bái. The craft ancestor is said to be a certain Nguyễn Công Truyền, a military mandarin under the Lý Dynasty, born at the village in 989 (but, just to spice it up a little, 989 according to the lunar calendar). As usual, popular and oral history offers several explanatory versions of the occurrence of the craft in this village rather than in another one. The interest (because frankly, there isn't always one) in the divergences between these stories that the villagers tell lies in the two main variants:

This activity may have been inspired by and imitated from the Chinese (as has been ascertained in many if not most of the Delta's craft villages), with our hero bringing back and sharing the secret of a Chinese community where, as an emissary, he had to wait for letters of introduction, take shelter while having his horse exchanged, or recover from a bout of 'flu (Asian 'flu, of course, so especially virulent).

The other version gives a more nationalist spin to the origins of the activity.

During the formative years of the craft ancestor, his family may have lived in the hilly province of Thanh Hoá, which rises from the Delta to the southwest and is closely linked to **Đông Sơn**, an important Southeast Asian culture, generally accepted to be of homegrown Vietnamese origin. Now Đông Sơn culture is above all famed for its remarkable drums, made of... bronze. The Đông Sơn era actually coincides more with the Iron Age (c. 2,000 BC – 200 BC, just after the Bronze Age: the Dongsonianians also used iron), but it is their delicate bronzework that has given them a prominent place in Vietnamese cultural prehistory. Upon his father's death, Nguyễn Công Truyền gave up his position as mandarin and took his mother back to live in their native village. He then began to introduce the craft of copperbeating and to teach it to the other villagers.

The hammer-wielding mandarin is thus considered as the pioneer of metalbeating and is still worshipped during the annual festival, which is held on the **29<sup>th</sup> day of the 9<sup>th</sup> lunar month**, the day of his death. The specialisation of hamlets in the production of specific articles is also attributed to other retired mandarins from Đại Bái, five of them, who are said to have founded corporations of craftspeople in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, during a relatively peaceful period. These men are also worshipped as the craft's 'post-ancestors'.

This worship of craft ancestors is always a local and popular initiative, as in originating among the people: a village seeks to thank the perceived source of its prosperity. Formerly in Đại Bái, the most important official annual festival (*lễ hội*) was that of the village's guardian spirit (*thần thành hoàng*), Lạc Long Quân, or the Spirit of the Dragon, celebrated on the **10<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> lunar month**. These festivities have fallen out of favour, supplanted by the craft ancestor's festival (*ông tổ nghề*): since metals have been shaped and sold in Đại Bái for centuries and villagers are still at it hammer and tongs today, they feel indebted to and proud of their illustrious ancestor. This is a fine example of the flexibility and pragmatism that typify certain religious practices in Vietnam. The shift in local guardian spirit is tied to age - old local concerns that the market has empowered (**see first part p. 44 and 45**). Try to imagine the employees of a truck factory abandoning the Harvest Festival in order to celebrate the birthday of **Rudolph Diesel!**

## THE CRAFT TODAY

There are four types of artisans currently working in Đại Bái:

- Those who produce *objets d'art*: this is a familial workforce training others through apprenticeship contracts. They work to order and in particular for the Japanese.
- Those who produce religious objects for ancestor worship and pagodas (about 10% of the total). Copper and bronze production in these first two categories is mainly concentrated in Sơn hamlet. They sell their produce in the workshop-showrooms located along the main street.

- Those who make aluminium kitchen utensils (80% of the total). They are mostly small-scale producers who work either manually, or using simple machines. The majority of manual workers lack the means to mechanise their production. They even encounter difficulties in purchasing raw materials. Older villagers no longer have the energy to beat out large pots and cauldrons by hand. They can only shape smaller objects, such as saucepans.
- Those who smelt the copper or aluminium to sell it on to artisans: smelted aluminium that is sold to artisans who don't have the means to smelt their own metal, as they only need small quantities. These craftspeople use machines. They obtain supplies of salvaged aluminium from collectors. They smelt it and then make it into sheets. This mechanised activity pays better than metalbeating. However, it is limited by the poor quality of the electricity supply in Đại Bái (a long-standing bone of contention here).

It is clear that copper and bronzeworking is in decline: few people today prefer a bronze tray to an aluminium one: it's more expensive, it's heavier and it oxidises when left out in the air, requiring regular cleaning and polishing. Moreover, aluminium is definitely less dangerous to human health than copper and bronze, it is easier to work with and its production can be mechanised, if one has the means to do so.

60-70% (if it isn't 80%) of all activity in Đại Bái today therefore revolves around aluminium. Even the gates to one of the communal houses are in aluminium! The biggest exception to this general rule is the category of religious objects (including statues and bells): here, bronze objects are still preferred (more noble, but also nicer to look at) when they are intended for the pagoda, the temple, the communal house, or for the shrine to the ancestors (*bàn thờ*) which has pride of place in every Vietnamese home. In addition, on a more profane level, you may notice a few key cutters scattered through the village. During the wars meanwhile, Đại Bái often supplied precious items for the national cause: copper helmets, belt buckles, jerricans, spare parts for bicycles, etc.

Đại Bái is also an important centre for production of bronze gongs: gongs occupy a key place in the religious and social life of several Vietnamese ethnic minorities, especially those of the Central Highlands (Tây Nguyên). The Thái and Ede ethnic groups also buy gongs from Đại Bái, while many others are exported to neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. You can hear craftsmen busy testing and adjusting the sound of gongs that they are in the process of hammering into shape – an especially tricky and exhausting task (and another item to add to the list of noise pollution in the **box p. 158**). Look out for the workshop of the deaf (and dumb) craftsman who makes aluminium gongs (you won't find it...).

Aside from metalbeating activities, a very limited number of artists continue to make, in accordance with tradition, *objets d'art*, such as jars, pots, boxes made of chased copper or inlaid with gold, silver or copper wire. It's expert work for a gold or silversmith, to which some add decorative techniques with patterns or landscapes in natural colours produced by metallic alloys. The most well known craftsmen sometimes produce ornamental pictures to order with copper ideograms or even light fittings in smoked bronze. These artists run workshops in which they train young people, usually from their extended family, through apprenticeship. The market is very limited; since economic liberalisation, this sector has suffered greatly from the competition of Chinese products made of plastic and enamel. In addition, copper bowls, for example, are no longer used for reasons of hygiene.

Several master craftsmen have won prizes and Đại Bái has been the beneficiary of several cultural events within the framework of a development programme organised by the Japanese co-operation agency (JICA) and the Vietnamese government. Several craft shops attract tourists and tradespeople along the village's main street.

Let us not forget that this glamorous aspect of local production only concerns a small minority of the village elite involved in metallurgical activity. The ordinary worker continues to beat aluminium to make saucepans or ladles, to operate machines or to carry out a small part of a lengthy production line. These everyday objects are for the most part **sold by weight**: 60,000 VNĐ (roughly €3) for a kilo of saucepan and 90,000 VNĐ (€4.50) for a kilo of kettle. Once you know that the metalbeater buys the pre-cut aluminium sheets for 50,000 VNĐ (€2.50) a kilo, you can judge the effort expended, the risks involved and the meagre profit that may be trousered when making a kilo of saucepan...





SHEETS OF BRASS BEING CUT PRIOR  
TO BEATING OVER A FORM, ĐẠI BẮI

WORKSHOP MAKING COPPER KEYS, ĐẠI BẮI





# Going environmental

If you are reading this guide systematically from beginning to end, you may be not entirely normal, but you will certainly have noticed a leitmotif of concern linked to certain almost intractable problems, deriving from the very concept of a craft village: a place of residence with already restricted space, coexisting with a core of intensive production, sometimes fully industrial.

## Let's begin with some positive stuff

- **The recycling cyclists:** about a hundred women earn a living in the village by collecting metal (they often use a bicycle just to bear the weight of their booty, so to speak). To supply raw materials to the craftspeople, they collect a lot of metal waste from all kinds of sources: production waste, broken objects and used metals of many sorts, carefully sorted and rapidly recycled. People have been known to bring surreptitiously here the remains of heavy munitions from Laos, sometimes with... shattering consequences, but hey, let's hope that such things just never happen any more!

- **Aluminium foils future bronze age:** doubts persist about the long-term use of aluminium in contact with foodstuffs, but these worries pale in comparison with the undeniable damage done to humans by working with and using copper, an essential ingredient of bronze, brass, etc. Close contact with copper and with its fumes is associated with problems of sterility, embryonic malformations and even damage to the nervous system. If the boom in the use of aluminium has limited the use of copper in such a densely inhabited area, this can only be a good thing.

## Now for the less positive stuff

Pollution in Đại Bái comes in at least three main forms: water, air and noise pollution. The smelters can often be found near water, in order to make it easier to wash their produce clean of chemicals. This wastewater, containing acids and trace minerals, goes directly back into the countryside and since these pollutants are rarely biodegradable, the problem is unlikely to solve itself. In addition, these ponds are the favoured bathing spots of an armada of ducks, who finish life on a plate come feast days... (It should also be noted that the proportion of the commune covered with water is very high: almost 20%). The act of smelting metals produces fumes, often very toxic ones, and smoke from the charcoal used as fuel in the furnaces. Care should be taken to evacuate these pollutants with tall chimneys, ideally located far from where people live. We have already mentioned the noise of the metalbeaters in Đại Bái; let us add the automated machinery, the smelters, vehicles of all kinds, televisions, karaoke machines, mobile phones, mynah birds, cicadas, crickets... Deafness could sometimes almost come as a blessing in this village!

The dangers for the most vulnerable members of village society are many. You can see children playing among baths of acid and crucibles of white-hot metals, surrounded by the deafening noise of machines. Accidents sometimes happen. The young and the elderly in particular seem to be frequently victims of chronic respiratory infections, lung diseases, etc. The live-in workshops are often surrounded with visible piles of waste produce, also dangerous for the health of those who live there.



## A stroll around Đại Bái

The road that enters the commune is lined with the houses and shops of craftspeople from Đại Bái village who used to live off the beaten track in the village centre. You will get a good idea of the very wide variety of objects made in this famous village as soon as you visit your first shop: alembics, ladles, large copper and aluminium bowls, pots and pans of all sizes are displayed out front... To get a foretaste of the types of scrap metal used to make all the fine ritual objects that until last century made Đại Bái famous, we suggest that you have a look at the two scrap metal merchants located to the right of the road: a bric-a-brac, a real apothecary's list of shell cases retrieved from the Indochinese War (there is still a regular supply from Laos), buckled bicycle wheels, gas bottles, rusty bed springs, old saucepans...

500 metres further on, boutiques adjacent to art workshops display all sorts of decorative objects made of bronze and copper for shrines to ancestors, pagodas and temples: incense burners, phoenixes, Buddhas, pots, jars incised with gold, silver and copper wire, framed brass Chinese characters, sets of four pictures showing the seasons... Some workshops make very fine items to order for Hà Nội shops specialised in interior design. It is unfortunately not always possible to buy certain things, particularly those made of smoked bronze, as the copyright to these models is jealously guarded... A fast-vanishing practice in Vietnam! In contrast with your visit to Đồng Hồ, where the woodblock prints go for a song, this one to the boutiques of Đại Bái could cost you a lot more...

You can take a short break to count your silver in the café-shop on the left (**see map p.160**). There is a pleasant little harbour out the back, which opens onto a small pond. Before the bend in the road, on the left, about 600 metres from the entrance to the commune, we suggest you go into Đại Bái's first hamlet, *Xóm Sơn*. Most of the artisans, specialised in copperbeating, have their workshops and shops on the side of the road, but this hamlet with its narrow paved streets is well worth visiting. Firstly, a little *miếu* (or *điểm*) at the hamlet's entrance is dedicated to the cult of the guardian spirit that protects this western part of the village. Three *điểm* protect the other three compass points around the village. Women from the neighbourhood regularly burn incense here. An impressive number of *nhà thờ họ* lie hidden in the depths of this thousand-year-old village's alleyways (you can find about twenty in Đại Bái), of very old families: in that of the Nguyễn Văn lineage, a plaque made of... copper shows the family tree going back over more than 13 generations. If you visit this hamlet on a day of ancestor worship (**the 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of the lunar month**), you could request to visit one of them without difficulty. You will find an abundant quantity of ritual objects made of bronze, of course... If you stick to our very detailed map, drawn up by our two intrepid investigative architects, you'll find it difficult to get lost.

A little further on, to the right of the road, the shop of **Mr. Quang Tỹ** sells various kinds of gongs, cymbals and other musical instruments made of beaten bronze for Vietnamese ethnic minorities (Ede, Thái, etc.), who have nearly all lost their craft skills. He sells them by the kilo. He could even give you a demonstration of his prowess as a musician by playing oriental pentatonic scales, unless the metalbeaters in the neighbouring workshop are already preventing you from hearing yourself think...

At the bend in the road, a big company, the **Công Ty Đại Thành**, makes keys and locks in brass for a large state-owned enterprise. If you feel up to asking the guard permission to visit this mini-factory, you won't regret it. This will give you the chance to see with your own eyes the division of labour between the fifty or so Daibayers trained to work under one roof for a 'modern' industry (there are those who smelt the copper waste to make ingots, others who turn these into sheets, other still who cut up the sheets, who fill the moulds and then empty them before cutting the keys)... You will also witness the difficult conditions in which these workers operate.



Source: Google Earth 2008, IRD Cartography Department

You will see molten copper flowing into the moulds with the help of big ladles “made in Đại Bái”, machines cutting and shaping brass bars, and the waste from molten metal flowing out through a little opening into a pond from which the ducks have long since fled. Along this main road, it is possible to see many craftspeople busy working, hammering and engraving, seated on the ground in front of their workshops-cum-boutiques. Most of the work done by these craftspeople who produce copper and brass objects is carried out at their place of residence. The new industrial park built to the right of the entrance to the commune is left almost unoccupied.

Once you get as far as the large stretches of water that surround the groups of houses on every side, you enter the centre of this village atomised into hamlets: the *đình* Văn Lăng Mới on the right, place of worship of the guardian spirit Lạc Long Quân, father of all the Vietnamese people. Then on the left, the *đình* Diên Lộc, reserved for the worship of the founding ancestor of the metalbeating craft, Nguyễn Công Truyền, opens out onto a big pond. A statue of the ‘founding founding father’ is in the *đình*. However, it is difficult for foreigners to get to see it... its apparition is a heavily ritualised event. These two buildings have been entirely rebuilt, with a very contemporary aluminium gate for the former, following their destruction during the war.

The local market is to the right. A little farther on to the left, you come to the Nguyễn Thụ Pagoda. It was also completely rebuilt after the war. Behind the central building, a small temple is dedicated to the post-ancestor of bronzebeating, Nguyễn Công Hiệp. This mandarin (and eunuch), having travelled abroad as an ambassador to China, on his return to the village in 1647 (with his jam jar) apparently gave money to the villagers to build this pagoda and a bridge that straddled the river that used to flow through Đại Bái. On the **10<sup>th</sup> day of the 2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month**, anniversary of the date on which he left the village, a festival is organised. Copper objects of great value, including two swords, are said to be hidden somewhere in this building. This rich artistic heritage could be the subject of an exhibition in a museum, but in spite of appeals to the village diaspora scattered throughout the whole country since the war, it has not yet been possible to collect the necessary financial backing.

A treasure hunt in *Xóm Tây Giũa* will be a chance for you to understand the spatial and social organisation of the division of labour in this hamlet specialised in aluminium, and for you to discover a rich architectural, religious and... craft heritage (the furnaces throw long shadows here), amid the sometimes unpleasant emissions specific to metallurgy!



## Mission: the Quest for the Holy Kettle

Your mission, if you accept the challenge, will be to follow in the footsteps of our two intrepid apprentice researchers-cum-architects Lý & Sen in order to piece together the life cycle of a kettle. So let yourself be guided by this story and the clues given at the end by the assembly diagram. For sensitive souls, earplugs and gasmasks are recommended...

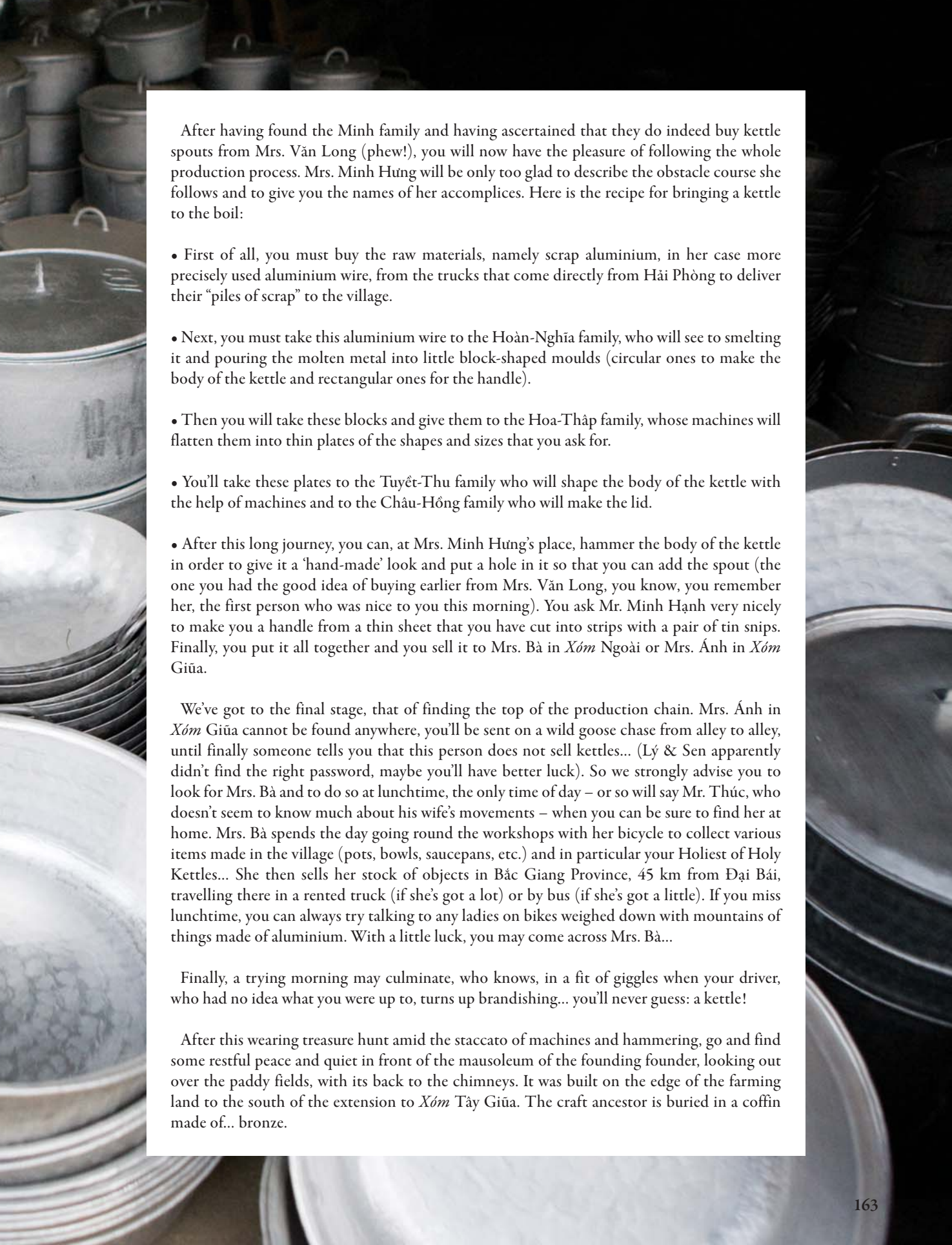
Curiously enough, it is a waste of time trying to follow the production process by beginning at the beginning, namely when the aluminium is smelted and made into blocks: the trail will soon go cold. Finding the furnaces is a piece of cake: just look over the top of your nose or simply let the latter guide you, you will soon find chimneys from which billow greyish, choking smoke. If you attempt to ask what is going on in these workshops, someone will reply (if anyone deigns to respond at all) that your clients come from all over, from other villages, that the produce is sold in Hà Nội or worse still that the furnace that you are watching in action and that, in ten minutes, will turn your lungs into those of a hardened smoker, is not a “real furnace”, it is only a temporary one.

In spite of everything, if you are extremely stubborn and you finally manage to find a workshop where people kindly agree to answer your questions, you're out of luck, because this one almost certainly only makes support stands for mosquito nets...Well, if you're still determined to follow the production line in chronological order, you can always move on to the second stage and look for workshops that turn the aluminium blocks into thin sheets of metal. This time, follow the deafening noise of the machines. You won't have any trouble finding these workshops at the beginning of the trail, near the road. However, to get answers to your queries, you'll need a loudhailer, because production won't be stopped just for you, and even if someone did answer you, you'd be regaled with the same very vague type of responses offered in the previous workshops, or possibly an old lady, convinced that you wish to purchase some blocks of aluminium and trying to be helpful, leads you back to the “mosquito net support stand” workshop... Grrrrrrrrrr!!!!!!

So, do you still fancy following this trail in chronological order?

In fact, the easiest thing to do is to look for the ‘finished product’, so long as frustrations haven't brought you to a falling-out with your fellow adventurer(s)... So anyway, Lý & Sen found a workshop that made kettle spouts. Mrs. Văn Long will give you some precious clues to help fit the pieces of the puzzle together. She buys scrap aluminium that comes by truck from Hải Phòng. Her husband, with whom she lives and works, smelts it down in a small furnace in their little covered courtyard that serves as a workshop, and then simply pours the molten liquid into a spout-shaped mould. Mrs. Văn Long takes care of sales in her house (50,000 VNĐ /kilo, or about 25 spouts), to clients who come from “everywhere”, naturally. If you press her a little, you will learn that most of her clients come from the same *xóm* (hamlet) as her (in this case, *Xóm Ngoài*) and if you press her still further, you will get the name of one particular client, the Minh family (Hùng and Hạnh). You will thank this lady sincerely and stop complaining when you learn that she gets up at four o'clock in the morning, day in day out, to earn three million VNĐ (or €140) a month...

ALUMINIUM POTS, PANS AND PLATES, ĐẠI BẮI



After having found the Minh family and having ascertained that they do indeed buy kettle spouts from Mrs. Văn Long (pew!), you will now have the pleasure of following the whole production process. Mrs. Minh Hưng will be only too glad to describe the obstacle course she follows and to give you the names of her accomplices. Here is the recipe for bringing a kettle to the boil:

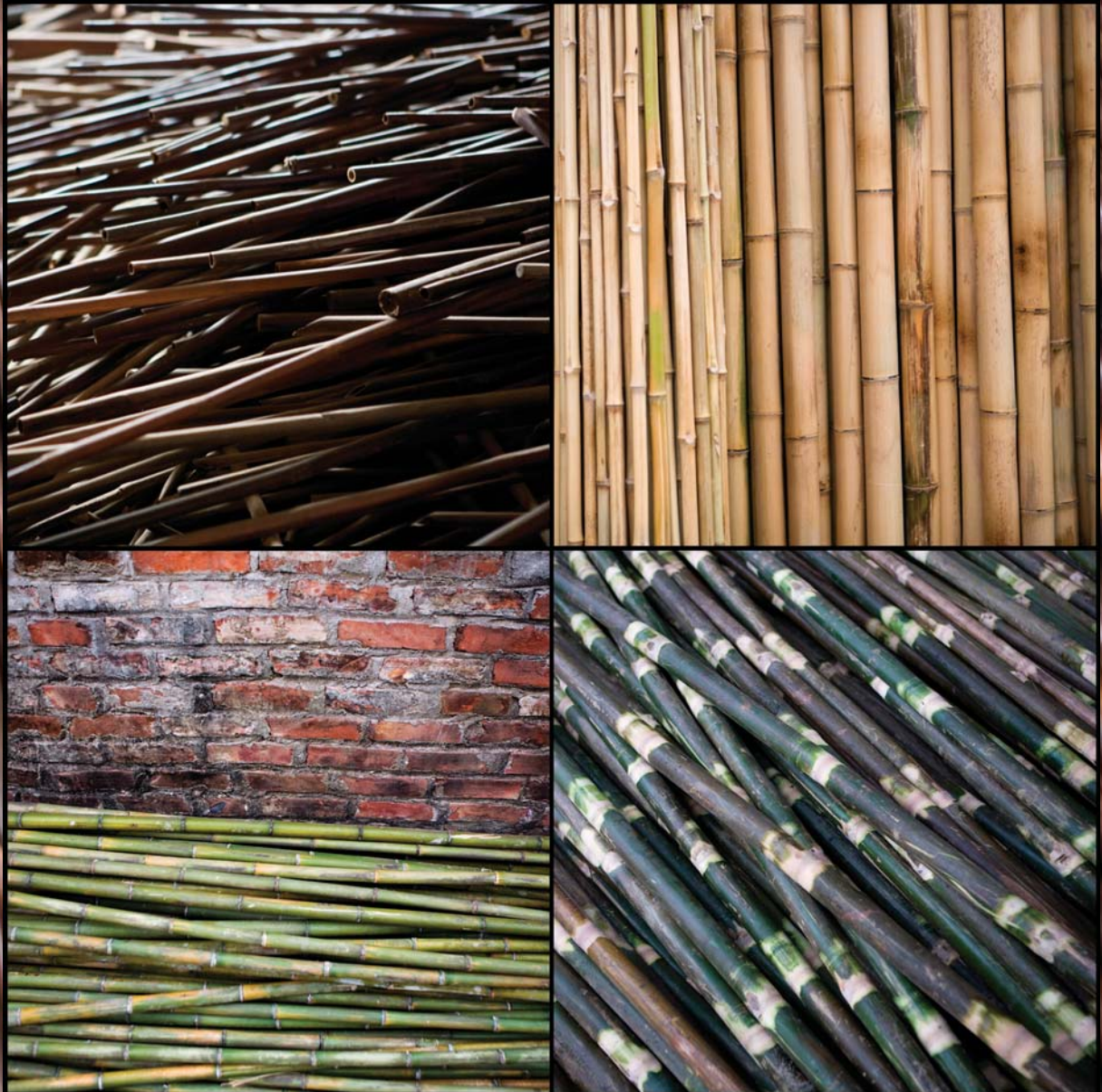
- First of all, you must buy the raw materials, namely scrap aluminium, in her case more precisely used aluminium wire, from the trucks that come directly from Hải Phòng to deliver their “piles of scrap” to the village.
- Next, you must take this aluminium wire to the Hoàn-Nghĩa family, who will see to smelting it and pouring the molten metal into little block-shaped moulds (circular ones to make the body of the kettle and rectangular ones for the handle).
- Then you will take these blocks and give them to the Hoa-Thập family, whose machines will flatten them into thin plates of the shapes and sizes that you ask for.
- You'll take these plates to the Tuyết-Thu family who will shape the body of the kettle with the help of machines and to the Châu-Hồng family who will make the lid.
- After this long journey, you can, at Mrs. Minh Hưng's place, hammer the body of the kettle in order to give it a 'hand-made' look and put a hole in it so that you can add the spout (the one you had the good idea of buying earlier from Mrs. Văn Long, you know, you remember her, the first person who was nice to you this morning). You ask Mr. Minh Hạnh very nicely to make you a handle from a thin sheet that you have cut into strips with a pair of tin snips. Finally, you put it all together and you sell it to Mrs. Bà in *Xóm Ngoài* or Mrs. Ánh in *Xóm Giữa*.

We've got to the final stage, that of finding the top of the production chain. Mrs. Ánh in *Xóm Giữa* cannot be found anywhere, you'll be sent on a wild goose chase from alley to alley, until finally someone tells you that this person does not sell kettles... (Lý & Sen apparently didn't find the right password, maybe you'll have better luck). So we strongly advise you to look for Mrs. Bà and to do so at lunchtime, the only time of day – or so will say Mr. Thúc, who doesn't seem to know much about his wife's movements – when you can be sure to find her at home. Mrs. Bà spends the day going round the workshops with her bicycle to collect various items made in the village (pots, bowls, saucepans, etc.) and in particular your Holiest of Holy Kettles... She then sells her stock of objects in Bắc Giang Province, 45 km from Đại Bái, travelling there in a rented truck (if she's got a lot) or by bus (if she's got a little). If you miss lunchtime, you can always try talking to any ladies on bikes weighed down with mountains of things made of aluminium. With a little luck, you may come across Mrs. Bà...

Finally, a trying morning may culminate, who knows, in a fit of giggles when your driver, who had no idea what you were up to, turns up brandishing... you'll never guess: a kettle!

After this wearing treasure hunt amid the staccato of machines and hammering, go and find some restful peace and quiet in front of the mausoleum of the founding founder, looking out over the paddy fields, with its back to the chimneys. It was built on the edge of the farming land to the south of the extension to *Xóm Tây Giữa*. The craft ancestor is buried in a coffin made of... bronze.





DIFFERENT TYPES OF BAMBOO AND A BACKGROUND OF BURNT BAMBOO FROM XUÂN LAI



## XUÂN LAI: BURNT BAMBOO FURNITURE

Not far from Đông Hồ and Đại Bái is the village of Xuân Lai (Xuân Lai Commune, Gia Bình District), specialised in making ‘burnt’ bamboo furniture, with a natural colour ranging from light brown to a shiny black. This village has been through some very lean times after economic liberalisation and the arrival of industrial products, such as “karaoke furniture” (the little, square armchairs and modular sofas upholstered with imitation leather, ill-suited to the Vietnamese heat and humidity, that one finds in the lobbies of budget mini-hotels – or in karaoke bars...). However, its lucky star is once again climbing over what’s left of the bamboo thicket.

### GETTING TO XUÂN LAI

Leave Đại Bái Commune and turn right onto Road n°182. Pass through the recently established administrative centre of the district, Gia Bình. This little town, with its wide avenues, contrasts sharply with the layout of the old village upon which it is built. Past the sign indicating the end of the village, about five kilometres from Đại Bái, you enter Xuân Lai Commune. Just after the offices of the communal People’s Committee, the Xuân Lai *Ủy Ban Xã* to the left, turn left. A dirt and concrete track heads north. Little more than a kilometre from the turning, you will come to a small intersection. The concreted road to the right is fortified with two bollards (to block the entrance to trucks and wider cars – 4x4s cannot get through). This road also leads to Xuân Lai. So if your car is too wide, you’ll have to follow the same route on the way there and on the way back. If not, you can reach the village from the north and come back by the southern route. Continue straight on (towards the north). On the right, you will see the gateway to Phúc Lai (another village in the commune, some of whose inhabitants do subcontractual work for companies in Xuân Lai). A little farther on, you will come to the dyke road. This dyke protects the area from flooding from an old meander in the Đuống River, isolated since the collectivist period. Follow it towards the right. You will see the vast expanse of water of the ‘dead’ meander to the left. You are looking down on the villages of Xuân Lai Commune to the right, with the sun glittering off the multitude of little ponds where the bamboo is being soaked. After about a kilometre, to the right of the road, you will come to a little yellow and red house. Just after that, a concreted path comes off the dyke to the right towards Xuân Lai. Turn right, a shady path leads you into the village: this is the northern access. Straight ahead towards the south, you will go through the gateway into Xuân Lai.

### THE CRAFT

Although the history of the craft seems to have been forgotten, this activity has apparently existed for several generations and probably for at least a hundred and fifty years. Originally crafted for villagers, Xuân Lai furniture is of simple construction, made in just the same way as all the other items of bamboo furniture in the Delta, except for this eye-catching finish in dark colours that gives them their unique look.

This village is easily identifiable thanks to its large pools of water in front of each house where the still-green bamboo is soaked over a period of several months in order to drown the parasites in it and to render it more flexible. Several companies here are specialised in cleaning, drying, and then scorching the bamboo. It must be cleaned, have the knots removed, be dried and then scorched. Lengths of bamboo ready for use are sold to the village artisans, but also to basketwork villages in Hà Tây Province (Phú Túc and Phú Nghĩa Communes, see **Itineraries n°7 p. 262 & n°8 p. 274**).

The bamboo used here comes from the mountainous regions of Lạng Sơn or Cao Bằng, up on the Chinese border. Where once people only made baskets for rice, beds, benches and tables, they now produce all kinds of furniture imaginable, often of amazingly sophisticated designs, as well as lamps, trays, screens, swings and decorative photo frames. Some craftspeople even produce bamboo pictures depicting Vietnamese legends, following the example of Đông Hồ with its polychrome woodblock prints on *dó* paper (see **p. 148**).

## A walk through Xuân Lai

The village is split into two by a road running about 800 metres 'north-west/south-east', from the gateway near the dyke road, to the north, to the narrow concreted road that links up by turning right with the intersection where, on your way in, you saw the two bollards blocking access to larger vehicles. The gentle stroll that we suggest here mostly uses this main road and the three side roads that will enable you to make incursions into the maze of streets that weave among the soaking ponds.

Once you've got to the northern entrance to the village, you will see from the dyke these numerous ponds used to soak the bamboo. As you enter the village, you will see a multitude of ponds and pools of various sizes that give this place a special feel. The craftsmen's capacity to work is determined by how much space they have, both underwater for soaking and above for drying.

Once you are on the main street, you cannot miss the numerous signs leading you to specialised workshops making 'burnt' bamboo furniture, which convey an impression of fevered activity. Most of the craftspeople work together in co-operatives (*Hợp tác xã*). However, only two 'real' co-operatives, which we suggest you visit, produce on a serious scale.

**Mr. Nguyễn Tiên Dung's** co-operative can be found on the main street, on the left, not far from the gateway into the village. In his living room, samples of the various kinds of furniture made in the village (tables, benches, shelves, etc.) are displayed and on the walls, there are scraped bamboo etchings, some of them quite naughty! Mr. Dung buys his bamboo directly from suppliers and treats it himself in the pools behind his showroom. The various parts of a piece of furniture are made by members of the co-operative or subcontractors, then are assembled in the workshop right next to his office.

**For each part of a piece of furniture, a particular kind of bamboo is required:**

- for the armrests of large armchairs, *luồng* from Thanh Hóa;
- for chairs' feet, *hóp đá* from Lào Cai;
- for chair backs, *trúc* (hollow) from Cao Bằng, or a bamboo of better quality, *tầm vông* from Tây Ninh.

Nearly all the action takes place in the heart of the village, near the soaking ponds. Along the main street, you can visit workshops that etch onto bamboo. They make pictures taken from popular images, landscapes, or Chinese characters. The artisans, mostly women, cut the burnt bamboo up into strips, assemble them, then etch onto them with a sharp tool a drawing that they will then hollow out. These workshops sell much of their work to passing customers for a song.

When you get to the first real crossroads, turn left. Go past a school, where during our explorations here, a bomb casing dating back to the Indochinese War was hanging from the sacred tree outside, acting as a bell. You will come to the village's biggest pool where hundreds of bamboo poles are being soaked. It's a very attractive place, with 'castles' of drying bamboo stretching into the distance. If you poke around a little in the labyrinth of blind alleys and pools, you will find:

- Lengths of bamboo everywhere, at all stages of processing: in ponds, along alleys, on the ground, in courtyards, in houses...
- The kilns used to produce a nice 'burnt' finish. They are made of clay and straw, and the only fuel used is straw. For too long, you have laboured under the misconception that there is no smoke without fire; the kilns of Xuân Lai are about to lift the scales from your eyes... Once the straw is alight, the bamboo is left sealed inside the kiln – for several days if a shiny black bamboo is sought – and lo and behold: when it emerges, it has taken on a dark and singularly smooth lustre.





BAMBOO STACKED TO DRY AFTER SOAKING  
IN THE LAKE, XUÂN LAI

A XUÂN LAI FURNITURE MAKER'S WORKSHOP

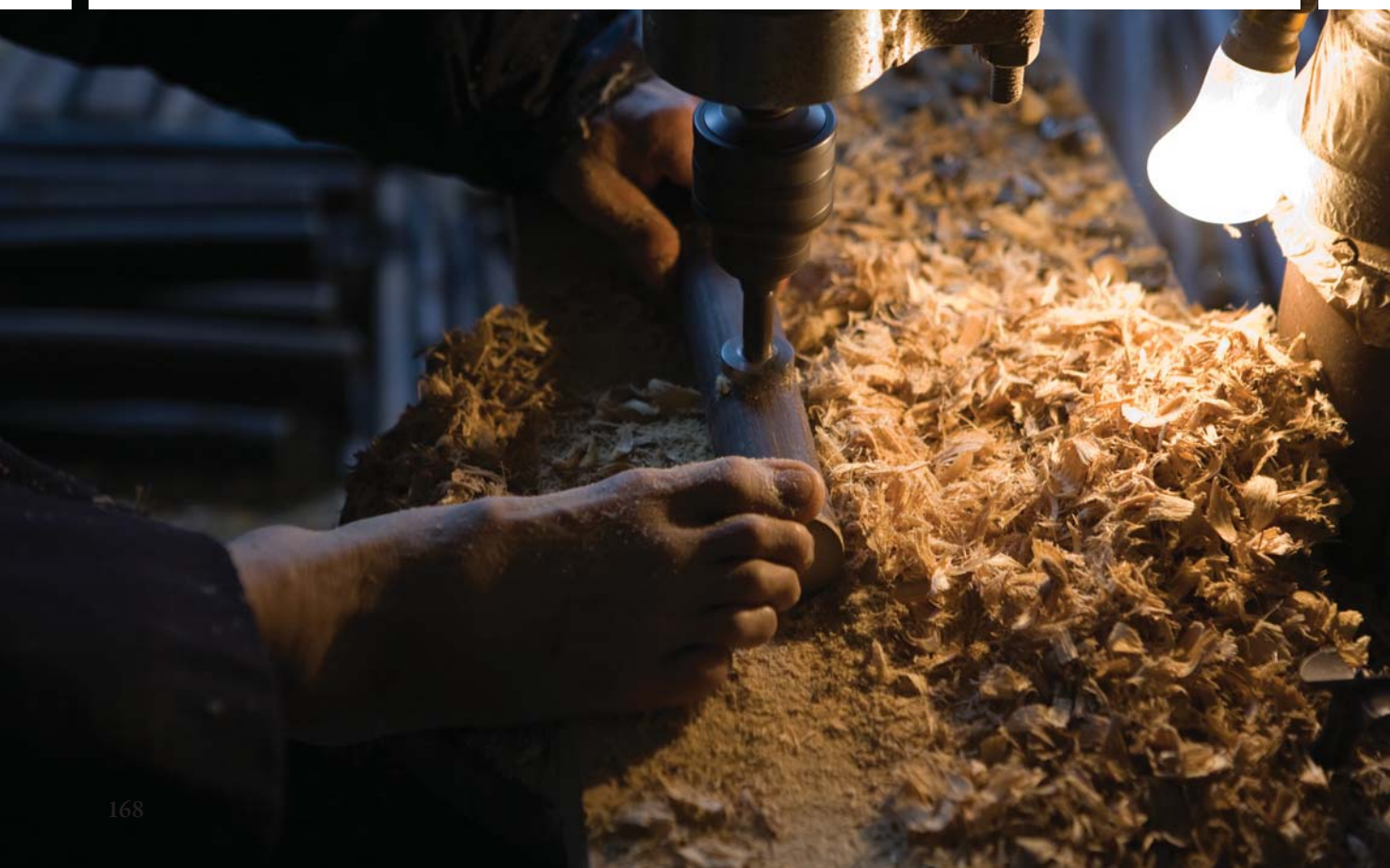






SEALING A BAMBOO KILN, XUÂN LAI

DRILLING AN EDGE MOULDING AT A FURNITURE  
WORKSHOP IN XUÂN LAI



To the north of this lake, on your left, there is a delightful *nhà thờ họ* belonging to the Nguyễn Đình family. One pavilion serves as a resting place. When we visited, in the middle of the rice harvest, this place was being used as a drying area by the inhabitants and was open. If you wish to visit it, it is possible to ask for the key from the head of the family lineage, Mr. Nguyễn Đình Hậu who lives next door. Inside, a stele tells the history of Nguyễn Quận Công, mandarin during the feudal era. When you leave here, to the right, by the pond, there is a little temple dedicated to the worship of the water spirit.

Backtrack as far as the road with the school and turn left, then immediately right. Another small *miếu*, built over a small lake, with a resting place, is accessible by passing over a small bridge. Once again, craft activity and religious observance are closely interwoven: the little lake is full of bamboo being soaked. However, to keep the bamboo underwater, sandbags are placed on top of them, which, it must be admitted, are a blot on the landscape, but do create somewhere for the children of the village to play!

To visit the other co-operative, that of **Mr. Lê Văn Xuyên**, go back to the main road, past the school with its war memorabilia... and turn left. Once again, you will see workshops-cum-boutiques specialised in making and selling bamboo pictures. At the first intersection, on the left, are the village's *đình* and pagoda. This small *đình* indicates the modesty of the village's affluence: bamboo is not a very lucrative activity.

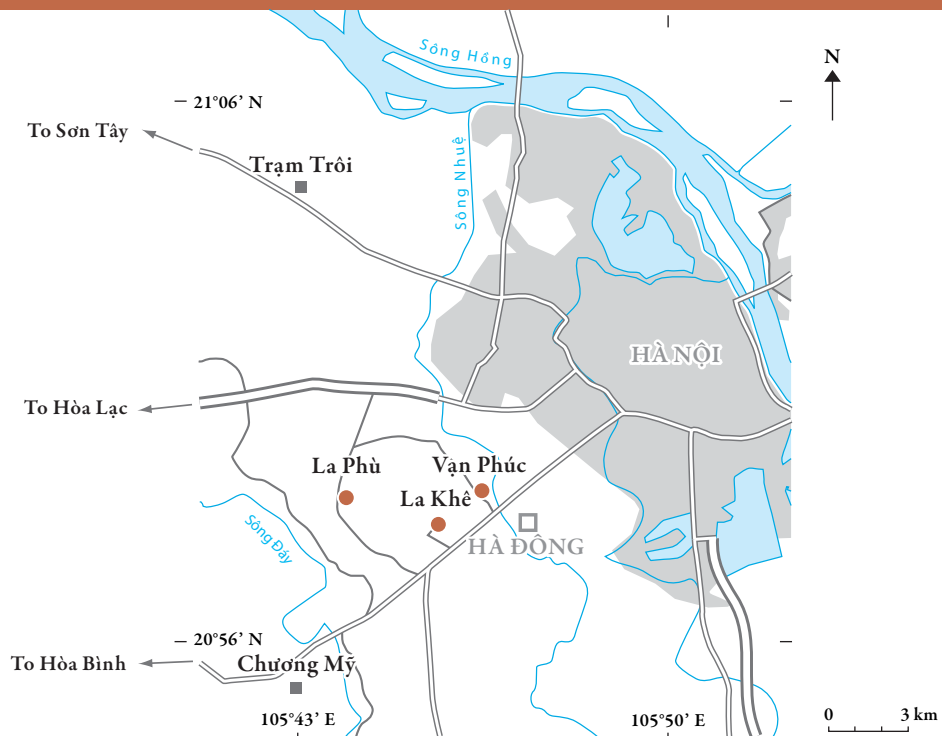
Turn left and after 50 metres or so, on the right you will see a sign indicating the way to the co-operative of Mr. Lê Văn Xuyên. This craftsman has managed to combine efficiency and aesthetical charm in one place: he has preserved his traditional house, tastefully renovated, and built a big workshop at the bottom of his garden, over a filled-in pond. His agreeably cool house is like a small museum of furniture made in Xuân Lai. A very fine *bàn thờ* in lacquered and gilded wood, framed by parallel sentences made of burnt bamboo, is an excellent example of the very pleasing marriage between bamboo (cheap and plentiful in Vietnam) and wood, a fast-disappearing commodity. In this living space, objects of modern design rub shoulders harmoniously with more traditional pieces of furniture. Bamboo proposes a large range of possibilities, at once technical, aesthetical and practical. In the garden, bonsais and sculptures make this a pleasant place to linger. We hope you are lucky enough to visit the workshop, where an impressive jumble of as yet unassembled chairs and furniture of all sizes is piled high. Behind, three pools have been dug to treat the bamboo: 15 days of total immersion in water with added chemicals here is sufficient to treat bamboo that needs six months in the big village ponds. Each method has its advantages and drawbacks, depending on whether the craftsman has the time and space to dry the bamboo or whether he wants high-quality materials.

The story of Mr. Xuyên, young entrepreneur in his forties, illustrates the extreme dynamism and the spirit of enterprise demonstrated by these young village artisans who have seized the opportunities offered by economic liberalisation and the government's incentive policies. To scale up from local production of bamboo ladders and poles to a full-scale co-operative, producing furniture for sale throughout the country and capable of exporting, you need imagination, contacts and a cool head for business, especially in a village like this one, with very limited access and located more than 60 kilometres from Hà Nội!

Retrace your steps as far as the *đình*, then turn left again towards the southern exit from the village. On your right, you will see a large well in front of the village's cultural centre. At the end of the road, turn right and after a kilometre or so, you will find yourself back at the crossroads with those bollards.

## Itinerary 4

### Textile villages around Hà Đông (Hà Tây)



#### The craft villages

Vạn Phúc, La Khê and La Phù.

#### Cultural and architectural heritage

Vạn Phúc: residence of Hồ Chí Minh, pagoda and *đình*, festival and village architecture;  
La Khê: Bia Bà Pagoda and *đình*.



## THE CONTEXT

For more than a millennium, perhaps even two, the inhabitants of the Red River Delta have made cloth and fashioned garments from it. They have managed to weave the fibres of many plants that grow in these latitudes, such as cotton, hemp, bamboo and even the banana tree, and Hà Tây Province, long famous for its textile tradition, maintains this activity in a certain number of villages. However, once the secret of making it was discovered around the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century, it is silk that became the most famous cloth from this part of the country. The fertile soil of areas in the Delta outside the dyke, consisting of constantly renewed Red River alluvia, just happens to be the habitat favoured by mulberry trees. Silkworms, tireless little spinners of silk yarn, love to eat the leaves of these shrubs, to the exclusion of any other sustenance. Naturally enough, producers of silkworms (sericulturists or sericulturists) and weavers specialised in this cloth go hand in (silken) glove together.

The founders of the silk craft in the region were women. Such an initiative was rare, or even without precedent at a time when Confucian and Buddhist ideologies dominated Vietnamese society. Two famous craftswomen, natives of the province, were the two Trưng sisters (Hai Bà Trưng), Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị, warriors and martyrs hanging tough against the Chinese invaders in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, today worshipped by town planners up and down the country (try to find a Vietnamese conurbation that does not have a Hai Bà Trưng Street). Better still, the terms *trưng trắc* and *trưng nhị* signify “first hatching” and “second hatching” in sericulturist jargon.

During the long periods of Chinese domination, the invaders did not fail to notice local prowess and silk was a logical choice when this colonial power demanded tributes. A side effect of this demand among weavers of the vassal nation was that silk-making techniques became very elaborate and items produced very diversified and sophisticated: motivation with an enemy sword in your back is a remarkable thing.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, the feudal Đại Việt regime took hold in the north of Vietnam; the country experienced a degree of economic development and reconstruction after 1,000 years of Chinese domination. Under the Lý Dynasty, traditional crafts were ‘restored’. King Lý Thái Tông (for a more precise dynastic chronology, see **Itinerary n°1 p. 67**) decided to use only Vietnamese brocade (or brocaded silk). This exclusion of imported products stimulated the development of quality weaving, particularly in Hà Tây Province.

The former province of Hà Đông, later Hà Tây (recently integrated into Hà Nội), is thus a traditional centre of sericulture and silk weaving (mention is still made of “Hà Đông silk”). Very close to **Vạn Phúc**, the first village on this itinerary, is the canton of La (**La** means **silk** in **Chinese**), made up of seven villages (La Phù, La Khê, La Nội, La Dương, La Cả, Đông La, Ý La), all of them once – but only one of them today – specialised in silk weaving.

## Sericulture for starters

The necessary conditions for raising silkworms are as follows:

- Lots and lots (and lots) of mulberry trees (these worms couldn't care less about a balanced diet, but they do eat like horses. Well... locusts, anyway).
- An optimal temperature: not less than 25 – 28°C.
- A good stock of antibiotics: these worms get sick easily, like all youngsters that stay cooped up at home all day.
- Patience and an assiduous presence. About 10 days after the female moth lays 300 to 700 eggs, the clutch of little greedy-guts will hatch. Having consumed their own shells, the worms must eat mulberry leaves every four or five hours, night and day, and this for about 35 days. Thus swollen to 10,000 times their weight at birth, the gluttons then spend two or three days weaving their silk cocoons, each secreting one continuous thread up to 1.5 kilometres long, and begin to turn into a chrysalis inside.

This is the moment to intervene, before it is too late: if you wait until metamorphosis, the new moth pierces a hole in this protective silk shell with a chemical weapon, cutting the beautiful thread up into lots of little weakened bits. Having previously put some lucky ones to one side, spared to engender the next generation, the rest of the worms/chrysalises must be nipped in the cocoon. The usual method is to scald them, which also melts the sericin, the glue that maintains the thread in the shape of a cocoon, while producing a dainty boiled morsel inside. The precooked chrysalises, with optional spices as added flavouring, are sold at Vietnamese markets (ask for *nhộng*), as they are elsewhere in Asia. The chrysalis is an important by-product, rich in proteins, easy to digest and delicious (well, less disgusting than one might be led to believe), but if you are suspicious of GM foodstuffs, perhaps you had better give it a miss (**read on**)...

The moth of which the silkworm is the caterpillar is called the *Bombyx mori*, or silkmoth. It is perhaps the most highly domesticated animal on the planet: none of the variants of this productive species exist in the wild, it being a pure production of selective breeding (genetic manipulation, in short) by sericulturists (beginning with the Chinese and going back as far as 5,000 years, according to some sources). Of course, there are still moths in the wild that are distant cousins, which produce silk cocoons, but nothing like these yarn factories on legs: the *Bombyx* cannot fly, the female cannot even walk any more, her abdomen is so voluminous, and the silkmoth eats no food during its short adult life. There are modern cocoons that are so thick and tough that the silkmoths that made them would remain prisoners inside without help to escape: this moth is maybe the battery chicken of the insect world.

Back to the larvae. Once the chrysalises have been boiled alive, the silken thread is spun off the cocoon, a preparatory stage that requires a lot of work and keeps entire specialised villages busy within this silk-producing area. It is done by hand, or with a machine (a reel). Villages that spin silk off cocoons buy them from sericulturists and resell the half-finished product to spinning villages, who in turn pass this on to a fourth group, the weavers. An important detail should be mentioned here: since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, each weaving village has begun to specialise in one or two kinds of silk (and there are lots of them). Yet another example therefore of a very fragmented activity with a high level of specialisation and interdependence of villages in this cluster of silk-producing communities.

Let us now take a look at the landmark weaving village in the area:

## VẠN PHÚC

### GETTING THERE

Situated at the edge of the urban area of Hà Đông, itself an extension of Hà Nội, Vạn Phúc is a very accessible peri-urban village, 11 kilometres south-west of the capital's city centre. You must leave Hà Nội by the road to Hà Đông, capital of Hà Tây Province (or at least until it was absorbed by Hà Nội). Cross the town and continue straight on towards Hòa Bình, on National Highway n°6. After the bridge over the Nhựê River, turn immediately right. After a kilometre, you will see the entrance to the village on the right: its gate to welcome visitors, its pagoda and its pond.

### A STITCH IN TIME

At the entrance to this very ancient village, these words appear on parallel sentences:

*At the break of dawn, when the cocks crow and the dogs bark, the looms whirr.*

This is as true today as it was yesterday – save that the whirring has become a more strident sound that carries further, since manual and foot-operated looms have given way to electric ones, firstly to old French machines, now to modern Behemoths with 2,000 needles each and an output of industrial proportions.

Legend has it that Vạn Phúc was the birthplace of Vietnamese sericulture and silk weaving (9<sup>th</sup> century). Legend also has it that there was a founder of the craft, called Mrs. Lã Thị Nga. Artisans still worship this patron saint as the village's guardian spirit. In the *dinh*, the village's communal house where this worship takes place, a tailor's instruments are on display: a lacquered basket, lacquered measures, scissors, etc.

Many villages in Hà Đông specialised in weaving silk, but Vạn Phúc is where this industry really flourished. The village was one kilometre from the Residence (the seat of power during the French colonial era) and close to the Hà Đông – Sơn Tây road, thus long since accessible in all seasons to rickshaws, carriages and cars. Hà Nội's rapid expansion has brought Vạn Phúc much closer to the city, and it finds itself today only a few kilometres from the capital's first suburbs.

The inhabitants of this famous and still prosperous village have for many hundreds of years been weaving transparent silk, or *the*, for traditional Annamite dress, as well as, much more sporadically (see box entitled “Weaving: a story”, p. 175), brocades or brocaded silk: *gấm* for the ceremonial attire worn by Vietnamese kings and mandarins. Vạn Phúc silk is particularly prized for being woven with very fine yarn (*tơ non*), producing a delicate cloth that is also remarkably robust.

In its heyday (the early 20<sup>th</sup> century), more than 200 looms were constantly at work in Vạn Phúc. But production slowed significantly before the end of the 1920s, following the arrival in Vietnam of fine cotton fabrics from Europe and sadly (doubtless in reaction to these fabrics), the early advent of artificial silk (see p. 176). During the 1930s, there were only 100 looms or so still active in Vạn Phúc (Hoàng Trọng Phú, 1932).

Then came the period of political and social turbulence and tumult already described in other itineraries of this guide, followed by the collectivist era. Unfortunately, Vạn Phúc struggled to adapt to centralised control of the means of production and distribution, since its pre-established business model was one of an activity highly specialised from village to village and even from weaver to weaver, with quite substantial individual investments in machinery.

Vạn Phúc is in this respect unusual among most Delta craft villages, with production systems that are essentially capitalist in nature rather than family and village industries. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, artisans from Vạn Phúc, sensing an opportunity, had even set up a trade school. Attempts are currently being made to repeat this experience.



Three other factors had some bearing on the specificity of commercial organisation during this first golden age of Vạn Phúc, compared to traditional rural conservatism and conservative Confucian traditions.

The first factor was the use of a salaried workforce: hiring employees with specialised skills contrasts sharply with family operations or with hiring temporary, unqualified workers for specific and highly repetitive tasks.

The second factor was the acquisition of Jacquard silk looms by several artisan entrepreneurs. Joseph Marie Jacquard initially designed these extremely efficient and futuristic French looms for the silk industry in Lyon, France's second largest city (in the Lyonnais dialect, this loom is called a *bistanclaque* (*pan*), an onomatopoeia for the noises it makes). His initial intention was to curb the use of child labour in the city's workshops. Alas, these machines actually ended up generating unemployment (in France, at least) and Mr. Jacquard regretted the social consequences of his invention for the rest of his life. Later though, some people even saw a precursor of the computer in this loom, which was easily 'programmable' with perforated cards to produce several different weaving patterns, and the production of silk in Vạn Phúc doubtless survived in large part thanks to the introduction of these sophisticated machines.

A third factor was the control from Vạn Phúc of highly developed commodity chains, spreading well beyond domestic markets, however noble these might be. The artisans of Vạn Phúc had already been selling their cloth in Asia (China and Japan mostly) for a long time. Then French colonisation gave access to new, very important markets: some weavers even managed to show examples of their work at the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris.

However, a contributing factor to Vạn Phúc's success at home and abroad in this period has been somewhat overshadowed, as Michael DiGregorio (2001), researcher and expert in village industries, points out. Following a viral epizootic that spread like the plague through silkworm farms in France at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the French silk industry, which was already booming (particularly in Lyon), was desperately seeking other sources of raw materials. Vietnam clearly fitted the bill. Be that as it may, few Delta craft villages have such a history of global contacts and dealings as Vạn Phúc.

The collectivist era, by integrating craft activity into the agricultural co-operatives, contributed to the decline in silk-making. The first signs of a craft renaissance did not appear until the 1980s, after the end of the American War. Since *Đổi Mới* (1986), there are only a few villages in Hà Tây Province (there were once also some in Bắc Ninh Province) where the craft has been restored. In Vạn Phúc, this began with the electrification of the looms: after Reunification, artisans from the village travelled south to Hồ Chí Minh City to buy up French electric machines in order to modernise their workshops and increase production. Their old looms had about 100 needles; these new ones had 900; the machines that you will see in Vạn Phúc today have 2,000.

However, as the price of silk is high and this cloth is beyond the means of the average Vietnamese consumer, it is mainly medium- or even poor-quality mixed silks that are produced today. In Vạn Phúc, you can buy so-called 'silk' for less than 100,000 VNĐ per m<sup>2</sup> (see p. 176). In fact, in most weaving villages today, artisans use yarn imported from China and Japan. Large quantities of this cloth are made for export.



## Weaving: a story

The origins of weaving brocaded silk date from the reign of Tự Đức (19<sup>th</sup> century). In Vạn Phúc at that time, there lived a worker called Đỗ Văn Sáu, who wove transparent silk (*the*) and other silken sundries. This craftsman, who was a talented one, had the idea on the king's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday of presenting the monarch with a panel of a new kind of silk, of his own devising. He also wove beautiful palanquin tops. However, the brocaded silk industry (*gấm*), barely born, wasted away after its inventor's death.

In 1912, at a time when great efforts were being directed towards development of family industries in the province, one of Đỗ Văn Sáu's descendants was found living in Vạn Phúc. A simple labourer without craft or fortune, his only inheritance was a small bundle of tools left by his ancestor at the bottom of a rotten old trunk, tools for weaving brocaded silk. He received encouragement and sponsorship to help him revive this industry. After much trial and error, he managed to weave a few scraps of brocaded silk and the craft was reborn, since then going on from strength to strength.

CHIÊN THỌ SILK RE-USED BY MR MÃO OF VẠN PHÚC

## MILKING SILK AND ITS ILK

There are very few artisans who make cloth from 100% silk in Vạn Phúc: only one or two. Vạn Phúc is now specialised in *vân* and *the*. No more *gấm*: the market for high-grade silk has almost disappeared in Vietnam and the market for pure silk is very small.

Synthetic silks have been around for more than a century: the first were successfully developed before 1890, made with plant fibres (cellulose) and known as viscose, art silk (artificial silk) or, from the 1920s, rayon. (The very first commercially viable synthetic silk, created in 1884 by Count Hilaire de Chardonnet, was later patented as Chardonnet silk and nicknamed, owing to its highly flammable nature, “mother-in-law silk”...). The commercial use of the terms “synthetic silk” or “imitation silk” are not permitted in Europe: textiles must be labelled as “viscose”, “rayon” (essentially the American trade name for viscose), “nylon”, etc.

As indicated a little earlier, at least some Vạn Phúc artisans started using synthetic silks as early as the 1920s. Since this period, silks have also been successfully imitated with polyesters and mercerised cotton (treated chemically in order to make it stronger and shinier). Over time, the mixtures with real silk and even the ‘pure’ imitations have become more successful, harder to distinguish from genuine silk.

In the 1990s, Vietnam at last emerged from a succession of wars and a period of commercial ostracism. With China opening up considerably to the Vietnamese, trade became much easier. Artisans from Vạn Phúc and other weaving villages began to buy and use synthetic yarn, especially viscose, in large quantities. In fact, nearly all the silk made in Hà Tây craft villages today is a mixture of natural and synthetic silk. – Why is this?

- Viscose yarn costs 60,000 VNĐ a kilo and 30 metres of cloth can be produced per day. One person can look after three electric machines at a time.
- Natural white silk yarn costs 600,000 VNĐ a kilo and three metres of cloth can be produced per day/artisan.
- Natural silk yarn with added colour costs 800,000 VNĐ a kilo and three metres of cloth can be produced per day/artisan/machine.
- Natural silk yarn with added colour and sophisticated designs is already expensive; and an artisan can only produce two metres of cloth per day.

All this is therefore a question of cost and profitability. And why not, if consumers in turn benefit from a wider choice of products? There is a market for pure viscose, sold at 13,000 VNĐ a metre by the producer, 25,000 VNĐ by the shopkeeper: a budget option for those who nonetheless crave the sensation of silky cloth against the skin. In theory, a customer who is more particular, prefers ‘natural’ fibres or simply likes to spend money can opt for a mixture in the proportions of her or his choice, with pure silk being the ultimate category.

The problem is that since making pure silk is not profitable and that there is no institution capable of controlling quality, many artisans (including the ones in Vạn Phúc) produce mixed silk, claiming that it is 100% pure silk. Other artisans condemn this deception: particularly in Vạn Phúc, some denounce this practice as one likely to inflict untold damage on the reputation of the village and permanently injure the good name of “Vạn Phúc silk”.

The same disquiet is expressed in other villages, but the example of Vạn Phúc gives a good illustration of the problem. Such a reputation is as precious as it is fragile and if there is neither control nor guarantee of quality, it can melt like dragon fruit sorbet on a hot Hà Nội afternoon, with dramatic consequences for a community where 85% of the population still practise this craft in their residential workshops. The local market for luxury products should grow significantly with the ongoing increase in disposable income. Meanwhile, Thai silk has a good international reputation and its producers are well established with solid financial backing; the Japanese market is lucrative, but demanding and fickle...

One of the strengths of Vietnamese society, very apparent in craft villages but discernable everywhere around you, is its highly developed capacity to react and adapt. In the village workshops, it has been understood that there is a potential problem with the commercial wellbeing of the craft, even if mixed silks in their current forms continue to sell quite well – for the moment.



– What is the solution, then? In 2001, the silken brethren of Vạn Phúc founded a craft village association to encourage producers to be honest and provide information about their produce. The snag is that no punishments can yet be applied, or else producers simply won't join the association... In 2004, the village co-operative officially requested a trademark for "Vạn Phúc Silk" from the National Office of Intellectual Property. This was duly granted. Rules and regulations must now be drawn up so that individual producers who wish to use the trademark can be inspected for the quality of their work.

Four quality criteria need to be addressed:

- weight/m<sup>2</sup>;
- weaving errors/m<sup>2</sup>: a figure must be fixed beyond which a cloth cannot receive the trademark;
- colour: to see whether the dye holds fast at up to 70°C with various types of soap (a burning issue, in the personal opinion of the authors, owners of numerous pink, once-white items of clothing);
- the percentage of natural silk (an essential declaration of integrity, given the differences in price mentioned above).

For the moment then, the village has the trademark, but doesn't use it, as it doesn't yet have a quality control service with teeth. Better this temporary hitch than the opposite scenario, illustrated by the Indian model, where anything of value is already accompanied upon purchase by a handsome certificate of authenticity, a document that often needs its own certificate of authenticity – and indeed sometimes even has one.

An association for self-regulation exists, but cannot administer punishments yet. Sooner or later, the next steps will certainly be taken and Vạn Phúc will once again adapt to the conditions of the new millennium – and in one form or another, this silk village will survive. That said, and while we're waiting for that day to come, what you want to know is whether this pretty little dress you're holding (bit pricey, though, isn't it?) is really made of silk, and nothing but *the* silk...

So here are three simple tips to help you check whether a piece of material that someone wants you to buy is actually genuine or not – and to give you some valuable thinking time.

**1) Rub it!** If you rub real silk vigorously, you should feel some heat generated: synthetic silk will remain cool to the touch. Ideally, always wear (or better still, ask a companion to wear) 100% silk underwear, in order to have a point of comparison close to hand.

**2) Burn it!** Cut off a small piece from the dress (if you are forcibly prevented from doing this, then they were clearly scared of what the test results would show...) or ask for a sample of the same cloth (compare them closely). When you set light to it, be careful not to smell the smoke from the match (better still, use a lighter). Real silk burns rapidly, makes tiny globules, smells like scorched hair (it's a similar protein) and leaves black, gritty ashes; if it's rayon or a similar substance, it will smell like burnt paper (most papers – and all matches – are made of cellulose) and the ashes will be powdery and chalky. This test has the advantage of putting on a good show and making people believe that you are a connoisseur; all the same, avoid setting fire to the whole shop – unless of course you really know what you're doing...

**3) Dissolve it!** This test requires a modicum of preparation, organisation and scientific rigour, but you can handle it. Prepare a solution of 16g of copper sulphate (CuSO<sub>4</sub>) in 150cc of water. Add 10g of glycerine, then caustic soda (NaOH) until the solution clarifies. This mixture will dissolve a small sample of pure silk. If it happens to be mostly mercerised cotton, rayon or nylon, the sample will sit sullenly at the bottom of this cocktail, in silent – but eloquent – reproach to the silken-tongued trader who would pass it off as something else.

## THINGS TO SEE

It is easy to visit Vạn Phúc from Hà Nội and you will find one of the most developed craft villages in this guide, in tourist terms. This takes absolutely nothing away from the interest of the trip, however. It's a unique little community, which has long been highly specialised and prosperous: an alpha Delta village...

Don't miss the chance to browse through the craft textile products in the village's numerous retail boutiques. You can find fine silks in plain colours, or with patterns such as butterflies, phoenixes, cranes, roses, daisies, peach blossom, etc. on backgrounds such as banana-green, red with a yellow sheen, mauve or bronze. There are also a limited number of master craftsmen, who continue to make high-quality silks, and whom it is possible to visit. Naturally, you can also buy their wares. Otherwise, as usual, we invite you simply to stroll around the village, with your eyes open, looking for workshops and seeing what's going on inside, following our map.

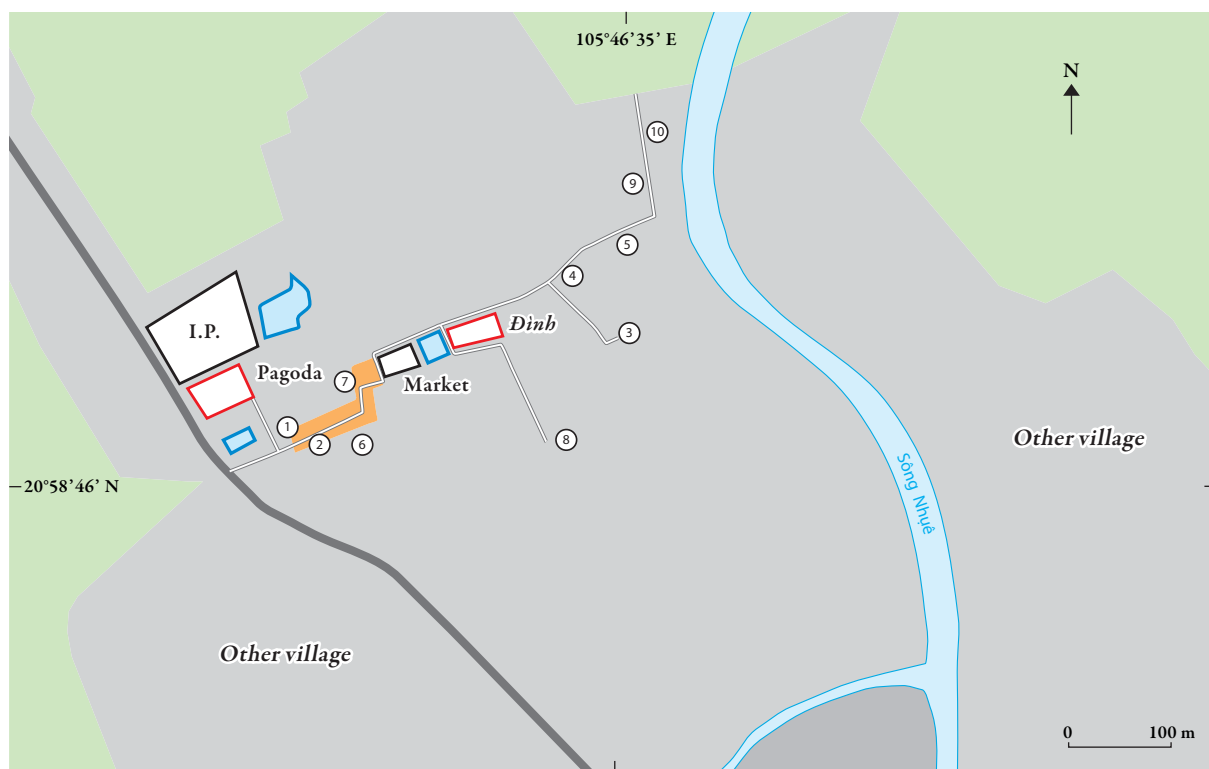
The Vạn Phúc **co-operative** gives onto the square at the entrance to the village. Its boutique is at the corner of the square and the shopping street. You can find a wide variety of silk items here: 100% silk, taffeta, silk blended with viscose, *dũi* or raw silk of lesser quality. It's the only shop where the prices and the percentage of natural silk are marked. No need to get your lighter out here.

**Mr. Đỗ Quang Hùng** is one of the rare makers of real silks (100% silkworm yarn). He is the scion of a long line of master craftsmen. His grandfather took part in trade fares in France during the colonial era. His company "Hùng Loan" is set up in his house behind the *đình*. It is possible to visit his workshop and see the various production stages (winding coloured yarn onto bobbins and weaving). The yarn is dyed in another workshop. He sells several kinds of very colourful cloth with various designs at relatively high prices compared to his neighbours (about 340,000 VNĐ in 2008 for a metre of multicoloured cloth). Silk yarn is very expensive (**see p. 176**); dyeing yarn is more expensive than dyeing cloth (mixed cloths are dyed once they have been woven). Weaving high-quality yarn (he mixes up to seven bobbins of different-coloured yarns) needs more care and requires one artisan per machine (the width of the cloth needs to be checked systematically with bamboo rods, and knots and other defects must be avoided), in contrast with synthetic and mixed yarn (one person for three machines). He has some clothes for sale off the peg and also makes silk ties.

In addition to weavers, you will see some dyers at work: the dyed yarn or cloth (people dye one or the other, according to the kind of silk or other textile) gives a splash of colour to otherwise rather drab interiors. You can visit the workshop of **Mr. Minh** (he lives behind Mr. Hùng's place, **see map p. 179**). Not so long ago, you could admire long strips of multicoloured silk drying in the sun in his garden. Now, due to lack of space, all the dyers get this done mechanically in two workshops located on the edge of the village. An environmental caveat: dyeing requires a lot of water, and the wastewater greatly pollutes the village's waterways and indeed those of all textile-producing villages. As for the steam dryers, they are fired by coal, with an extremely negative impact on air quality.

Once you have gone through the superb gate that marks the entrance to the hamlet that houses Mr. Minh's workshop, keep straight on and turn left at the end of the alley. This neighbourhood, perfused with the staccato beat of looms, is specialised in the production of synthetic silk. If you go into a workshop, usually small but chock-a-block with machines, you will see female workers hard at it around the machines beneath neon lamps and swamped with a deafening noise. Carry on a bit further, and on the right-hand side of the alley, you will find one of the two workshops specialised in drying freshly dyed cloth. You will also see dyers working less manually than at Mr. Minh's place.

## Vạn Phúc



- Residential area
- Paddy fields
- Commercial area
- Religious site
- Pond

- ① Co-operative and shop
- ② Mr. Mão's workshop and shop
- ③ Mr. Hùng's workshop
- ④ Mr. Minh's dyeing workshop
- ⑤ Very fine hamlet gate
- ⑥ Sơn Hải Silk Shop
- ⑦ Silk thread dyeing workshop
- ⑧ Mr. Hoa's very fine house
- ⑨ Artificial silk workshops
- ⑩ Mechanised dyeing workshop

Source: Google Earth 2008, IRD Cartography Department



## CULTURAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE IN VẠN PHÚC

But it's not all silk undies and window-shopping in Vạn Phúc: there was also a time when this was the village that Uncle Hồ (the future President Hồ Chí Minh) called home. It was here that he wrote "The call to national resistance", on the 19<sup>th</sup> of December 1946, at a time of high tension between the French colonial power and the nationalist movement. It is an historic text that underlines the Vietnamese leader's desire for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Alas, to say that his wish was not granted would be an understatement: at his passing, 23 years later, his country was still being put to fire and the sword. The house he inhabited during his noted stay of just a few months in Vạn Phúc has been restored. It combines the characteristics of French and village architecture and is a pleasant place to visit.

### Other things to see

A pagoda erected at the entrance to the village (to the left) contains numerous stelae and statues dating from the Lê Dynasty (17<sup>th</sup> century).

The village architecture bears clear traces of the presence of craft activity and includes a large number of prestigious residences (see map p. 179). The approaches to the village are decorated with gates where parallel sentences sing the praises of silk weaving.

The craft ancestor, Lã Thị Nga, is worshipped every year in the communal house (on the **13<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**). Legend has it that she was a young woman of great rectitude and almost depressing virtue who advised her village to divide its work: the men in the fields, the women with the silkworms and by the looms. Her counsel was heeded (silk is women's business) and supplications have often been offered up to her during periods of war, famine and foreign invasion.



## A workshop to visit: a helmsman among weavers

The company of Mr. Triệu Văn Mão (in his seventies) is at the entrance to the village, opposite the co-operative. Mr. Mão's ancestors have been making silk for several generations. During colonial times, his family members worked with four or five manual looms and they sold their silk to the French.

He has undertaken the revival of old kinds of material, made of 100% silk (*chiến thọ*) and of hemp. He has asked elderly people with old smocks to lend them to him and he makes copies. He sells his products to affluent city-dwellers and in his shop. For several years now, he has been weaving hemp for a Japanese company that makes shoes. Pieces of hemp cloth have been discovered in ancient tombs and he has attempted to copy them.

He rents premises from the co-operative, with which he was formerly involved, as its manager. He would like to upgrade and renovate these premises to create a silk museum, restore old looms and install new machines, but he has not yet obtained permission to do so. He has bought looms in Nam Định, which he then converted for use in weaving silk.

HOOKS SUPPORTING WARP THREADS ON A LOOM, VẠN PHÚC





DYEING MIXED SILK FABRIC, VẠN PHÚC

THE PAINSTAKING WORK OF QUALITY SILK  
WEAVING, VẠN PHÚC





## LA KHÊ

*Even if you're a millionaire, don't choose a wife from La!  
If you do, you will eat putrid soy sauce and mouldy aubergines.*

This cheerful old ditty alludes to the social prestige acquired by the women of La (the cluster of silk weaving villages all around Vạn Phúc). As traditionally they alone wove silk and brought home the *bánh trưng*, they left to the men the task of preparing the soy sauce and pickling the aubergines (staple ingredients of rural fare), with predictably disastrous results.

Today however, almost nobody weaves silk in La Khê and the aubergines are impeccably pickled. So what happened to this close neighbour of Vạn Phúc? Inquiry, explanations, secrets, rumours and lies...

### GETTING THERE

Leaving Vạn Phúc, go as far as the big Quang Trung Avenue along which you came and turn right. When you get to n°412, turn right into Đường Lê Trọng Tấn. After about a kilometre, a red sign (hidden in a tree!) indicates to the right the way to Chùa Bia Bà, the village's famous pagoda. La Khê is integrated into the urban area of Hà Đông. The remaining 200 hectares of agricultural land have been taken from the farmers to build a residential development, a little further on, either side of Lê Trọng Tấn Street.

### A CRAFT HISTORY

According to legend, 10 Patron Spirits (*tiên sư*) of silk, also geomancers in their spare time, passing one day in front of the village of La Khê, they noticed a piece of land in the shape of a shuttle (not from space, but from a loom). Accordingly, they settled down awhile and taught the local populace to weave. They are still honoured today at the communal house as the village's guardian spirits. According to another version, these 10 were Chinese master weavers who trained La Khê artisans to make more complex and better-quality kinds of silks. This is why they are considered a little like craft ancestors or rather, post-ancestors.

La Khê was once specialised in making *the* silk, a very light cloth, flowery and transparent. These materials were made for the Imperial Court. Artisans worked on pedals looms 80 or 90 cm wide.

During the colonial era, in the "Catalogue of Tonkinese Artisans" of 1942 (with a preface by Marshal Pétain exhorting colonial subjects to work hard...), 18 artisans are counted in the village of La Khê, compared with a mere 17 in Vạn Phúc, which demonstrates the importance of the former within the silk cluster at that time.

The decline in silk weaving began, as in Vạn Phúc, during the collectivist period. The merging of the craft co-operative with the agricultural co-operative 'killed' the craft: the villagers no longer put their hearts into the craft industry, since they only received meagre rations as payment in kind. In addition, the state dictated production, wilting the blooms of village initiative. Artisans slowly began to leave the craft. Multiple activities limited the possibilities for development of a craft that required heavy investment in machines, technical improvements and training.

So in short, the villagers lost their craft. They also lost their agricultural land: La Khê didn't have much to start with, like most villages in Hà Tây (a very densely populated province), but La Khê has been gradually integrated into the urban area of Hà Đông, with the local authorities expropriating farmers of what land they had left. It is now a much-urbanised village, tightly packed around the complex that contains its famous pagoda, Chùa Bia Bà, *đình* and a *đền* (temple).

What way then have the inhabitants of La Khê found to stave off hunger these days, tangled as they are in the tentacles of the urban octopus?

They have traded weaving *the* silk and transplanting rice for trading in pagoda tea and a living a life of (relative) leisure. Many villagers have some activity linked to the religious sites. The temple bazaar always does good business. Many others though, if they had any land left, have sold it and, for the time being at least, live off the fruits of these transactions. Will they find a way to adapt in a sustainable manner, they and their descendants, to the new order? Only the future can answer that.

There is however some small hope of a craft revival: to get it started again, a craft co-operative was founded in 2005 by the People's Committee, the agricultural co-operative and with the help of village artisans, in particular Mr. Nguyễn Công Toàn. He is technical advisor to the new co-operative. He intends to reproduce old types of material that once clothed La Khê in glory. He invents weaving designs with the help of big sheets of graph paper, which he then converts into perforated strips of card that are placed on the looms.

## THINGS TO SEE

In the vicinity of the *đình* and the pagoda, there are many 'miracle' merchants. Here, you can buy anything that can be used as an offering to the guardian spirit, the Holy Mother or the Buddha: expensive seasonal fruit (mangosteens, lychees, or sugar-apples), plates of rice cakes and boiled chicken with their legs in the air, fake dollars and real small *đồng* bills, all this wreathed in incense smoke. There is also a legion of scribes for hire (*người viết sớ*), who will write messages and requests for Buddha in a language known only to themselves. This religious complex of 8,000 m<sup>2</sup> is very colourful, peaceful and pleasant to look at, with a lake in the middle, "symbol of the village's dragon eye".

The pagoda is on the left, behind the merchants. Once you're through the gateway, opposite you is the *đình*, which houses the two guardian spirits and on the left, the temple.

The *đình* was built under the Lý Dynasty, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The kings came here regularly to organise rituals and seek some support from the spirits to avoid being slain in battle (or an even worse fate). Imprecations were also made to the gods here to bring rain. All this must have worked in its day, because the *đình* has a good reputation and receives a steady stream of visitors. Early in the morning, there are already people aplenty here, while the impassive temple guard watches Manchester United strut their stuff on TV. *Nơi hoá vàng* (ovens for burning votive paper) are placed in the corners of the compound, and smoulder away constantly, proof of the tireless votive activity of pilgrims who come respectfully to request assistance from the spirit masters of the house before they sign a contract, buy a piece of land, sit an exam or go into business.

The annual festival at La Khê's communal house is organised on the **15<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**. Long ago, an interesting ritual took place during the closing night of this spring festival at the *đình*: all sources of light were extinguished for a few minutes, during which boys and girls were permitted to indulge freely in any joint activity they chose to. This practice was closely associated with ancient fertility rites (and not with blind man's buff) and was supposed to stimulate crops and weaving over the course of the new year ahead.



SYNTHETIC SILK MANUFACTURE, VẠN PHÚC

CHECKING THE WIDTH OF QUALITY SILK FABRIC,  
VẠN PHÚC





# LA PHÙ

## GETTING THERE

You might think that connections between villages of the same cluster would be made easier by their numerous exchanges, but no. At the time when the said exchanges existed, roads were rare; dealings took place by way of rivers, canals and other waterways. To get from La Khê to La Phù, only three kilometres apart as the crow flies, you have to make a big detour via Vạn Phúc. There is no road suitable for motor vehicles between La Khê and La Phù.

You must therefore go back down the road to Vạn Phúc. Continue straight on, but be aware that the road gets worse. Go through the villages of Đại Mỗ and La Dương. When you cross a railway line, you know that 500 metres further on, you have to turn left. You can check the names of the places you're driving through by reading the signs on shop fronts.

## LA STORY

La Phù is an ancient silk village from the imperial era, in the big old bunch of villages around Vạn Phúc. Today, it is specialised in knitted textiles and to a lesser extent, confectionery. A large market is also held here.

La Phù is a big, densely populated village (more than 11,000 inhabitants), which in addition attracts a multitude of workers and artisans from the surrounding countryside to work in its knitting workshops. Almost every morning and afternoon, the lanes of La Phù are saturated with cars, motorbikes and bicycles. People converge on La Phù to deliver raw materials, to receive finished products or to work.

The village's surface area is limited and the villagers lack the room to build workshops. There are no expanses of water left, because all the ponds have been filled in to gain more production space, but the houses are even too narrow to install knitting machines. Residential space is invaded by piles of unassembled knitwear.

### From silk to knitting, cheap sweets and market forces

La Phù is one of the villages around Vạn Phúc where, as in La Khê, the silk craft did not survive the collectivist era. In 1959, a craft co-operative was created. Towels, woollen clothing, socks and carpets were made there. To begin with, workers worked in the co-operative. Then the state handed over the production plans and allowed artisans to take the machines home to work and obtain help from other members of the family.

Aside from weaving activities, the households of La Phù made noodles, vermicelli, malt, sweets, alcohol, starch and did a little trade. The artisans of Cát Quế Commune (see **Itinerary n°9 p. 292**) sold the cassava flour with which La Phù artisans made maltose to produce biscuits. Since *Đổi Mới*, knitting synthetic woollen yarn has developed rapidly in La Phù and artisans have abandoned the production of maltose (they only make sweets and biscuits now; it's in Dương Liễu and Cát Quế that people produce the maltose).

In the 1990s, La Phù artisans started to buy machines from the south of the country and set up business on their own. They had to find buyers for themselves: in 1992-1993, exports began to Russia, East Germany and Ukraine. These markets stem from the old commercial contacts that the co-operatives had with Eastern European countries at the collectivist era. They also managed to break into new markets. For some time now, they have exported to the United States. In winter, the La Phù workshops make woollen clothes of very average quality for the domestic market in the north of Vietnam, where cold snaps in winter can be quite severe.

The most dynamic entrepreneurs who also had the means to invest in machines (in general old soldiers or family members of management at the former co-operative) have stopped making foodstuffs to devote themselves entirely to textiles, which are more lucrative. Many entrepreneurs traded in cloth with the south of the country before starting to produce it themselves. This is how they forged links to textile makers and have been able to buy machines.

In a context where state enterprises were still omnipresent, it was not easy to break into this market. Entrepreneurs diversify their textile production to avoid very strong competition for certain products. They combine trade in yarn



KNITTING: SYNTHETIC WOOL READY  
FOR USE AT LA PHÙ

MACHINE-KNITTED JERSEY COTTON, LA PHÙ



or finished goods with mechanised production of textiles. The difficulty lies in the fact that whenever they change products, they have to change machines, at a very high cost. Those who have contacts with intermediaries from the south can innovate more easily and launch into production of less common textiles, such as T-shirts (only three companies currently make them in the village).

### Frenzied activity: the fevered effervescence of La Phù

La Phù is a typical example of a village that has become industrialised with market liberalisation. With annual receipts of 221 billion VNĐ in 2001, of which 140 billion from exports, La Phù is one of the villages with the highest export volumes in Hà Tây Province. It has received a Medal for Most Efficient Industrial Work, from the Secretary General of the Communist Party.

There is enough electrical power in the commune to operate all the machines. This is not the case in other heavily industrialised craft villages (see **Itinerary n°3 p. 156**). Here, households clubbed together to build a electricity substation.

Basic knitting and weaving involve 1,000 households. The final stage of completing clothes requires technique and know-how; these specialised skills are the prerogative of a select handful of companies. A few workshops for dyeing yarn remain in the village, but many others have already been driven out, due to emissions that are extremely unpleasant and doubtless harmful to public health.

70% of the workforce from elsewhere emanate from other villages in Hà Tây Province. 7-8,000 people from outside the commune work for companies in La Phù; all these people must find a place to sleep in or around the village, but unsurprisingly, such places are hard to find. A building belonging to the army serves as a shelter for many workers. Others find beds in neighbouring communes.

There is a clear division of labour in this commune and in those around it. Some households concentrate on woollen garments, others on socks, still others weave cloth for making T-shirts. Somebody has counted 600 machines for making socks. However, sock production currently appears to be in decline. But the next time the world has cold feet, La Phù will be ready! The main activity has generated other marginal ones, also carried out by specialised households:

- producing and selling wrapping paper;
- selling woollen yarn: big companies on the roadside import yarn directly from China;
- printing flowers onto textiles;
- dyeing yarn;
- sewing;
- making plastic bags.

The nerve centre of La Phù is its big market, right next to the *dinh*. We invite you to follow our suggested route to see some architectural features (not really presented to their advantage, unfortunately) while soaking up the inimitable atmosphere of this action-packed village.



## A stroll from soft clothing to hard candy

Don't be put off by the rather forbidding air of the village entrance: the new industrial park serves mostly for the moment as warehouses and shops for confectionery and biscuits of all kinds, until the textile companies get around to setting themselves up here properly. This is not really La Phù. You can try to visit the two biggest knitting companies, to your right, which employ several hundred workers.

Once you've crossed the railway line near the village, textiles begin to come into focus. Observe the ballet of motorbikes overlaid with pullover sleeves, socks and limbless woollen garments. Everything is made separately here: each artisan has only one machine and makes a single part of a garment, often pullovers: you have to choose between doing raglan sleeves or straight pullover torsos. The motorbikes provide the link between the subcontracting and the 'ordering' companies.

A main street runs through La Phù from north to south. Once you have negotiated the anti-truck gate placed in the middle of the street, to the left there is a small temple, *miếu*, in the shade of a banyan tree, as a reminder that the sacred is always present, despite the manifest domination of the profane: trade, industry and the incessant shuttling back and forth of the motorbikes. Turn left towards the pagoda, *chùa*, set in the middle of a garden.

Next, we suggest that you accept the challenge of getting lost (a tall order) in the maze of streets, but keep heading south, in order to end up back at the *đình* and the market, the centre of the village. Amid these narrow streets and the jumble of workshops set up in houses and courtyards: sweets, biscuits, socks, plastic film, evil-smelling dye workshops, woollen sleeves... and a few small gardens with bonsais in them, hidden among ancient houses, at the ends of alleyways. Piles of woollens await their motorbikes to be returned to sender.

It is a shame that this village is rather unkempt, but it is easy to forget this as you explore an alleyway, where the sweet smell of biscuits, sweets or caramel fills the air not far from the chatter of knitting machines and the fumes from some dye workshops that haven't yet been forced out of the village. There are rare mixtures of sound, light and smell here for a Delta village that simply revels in being a real melting pot of rural and urban, old and new.

When visiting the 'ordering' companies that put work out to contract, you will notice piles of brightly coloured woollen garments. Not too difficult to guess that pink must be the new black in Eastern Europe these days... If you don't want to get completely lost, take one of the last east-west streets to the right to get back to the main street. **An important reminder:** don't forget to watch out for motorbikes here!

You will find the *đình* in the south of the village, opposite a pond: the building is moderately sized and it is surrounded closely on all sides by the market and the village itself. This point of architectural interest would benefit from better presentation. One of the gates from the *đình*'s courtyard leads directly into the covered market. The smell of biscuits and cakes leads you by the nose: yet another neighbourhood of confectionary makers!

Continue through the south of the village: by **nose**, you will find several artisans who make confectionery, in sometimes questionable conditions of hygiene. By **ear**, in the side alleys, you can locate a profusion of knitting workshops. Here and there, by **eye**, you will also notice some very beautiful houses.



LOOSE COMPONENTS AWAITING ASSEMBLY  
IN A LA PHÙ FACTORY

THE MOTORCYCLE: THE WORKHORSE OF LA PHÙ



## THE ANNUAL VILLAGE FESTIVAL

We couldn't leave La Phù without mentioning its annual festival, which takes place on the **13<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**. If La Khê once had its bestial goings-on with the lights out (at its annual festival two days after this one), La Phù refuses to be outdone: it still has its candlelit procession with a pig.

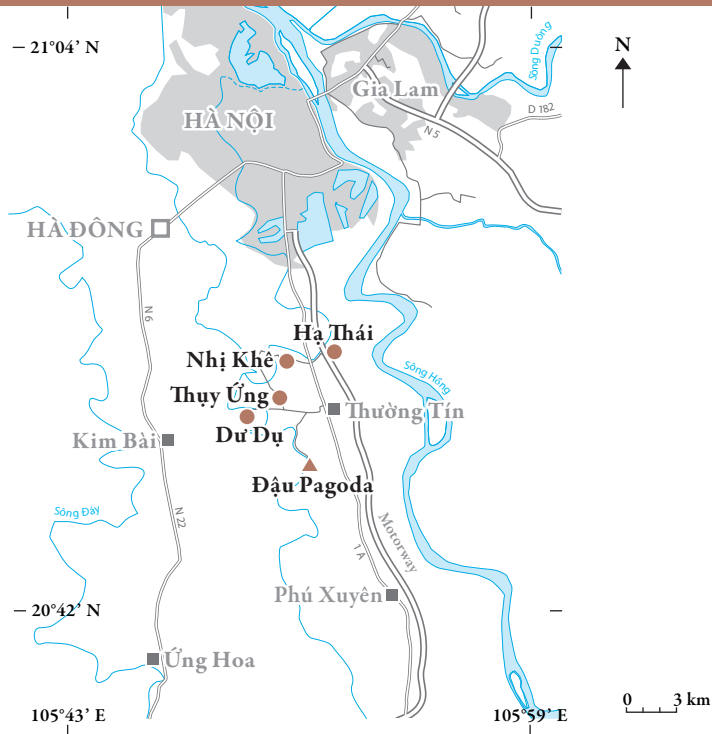
That evening, some village elders, as well as 32 young people (or 16 slim maidens and as many sturdy boys, as they put it so elegantly in the tourist brochures) march to the *miếu*, the temple, behind a pig (already bloodless and scalded, with his snout outrageously decorated with make-up). The reason for this unusual procession? Apparently, La Phù was protected several times from the northern invader by a general and his troops. Praise of the general, sung by royal proclamations in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, can be admired, since they are displayed in the temple that was later built in his honour. When the enemy was rampaging round the region, the villagers prepared a feast of pork and sticky rice for this general and his men in order to give them some heart for battle. If they returned victorious, they were invited to reseat themselves for a second helping.

These days, invaders have got all picky and refuse to be fobbed off with a tub of lard and a bucket of offal, but the tradition of the pig paraded through the village endures, a fine beast fattened with care for a year or more, up to 120-200 kilos. If you are lucky enough observe these celebrations, you can return to the city content in the knowledge that today, you have made it all the way from a silk purse to a sow's ear...



## Itinerary 5

Lacquer, wood & horn (south of Hà Nội)



### Craft villages

Lacquer: Hạ Thái;  
Woodturning: Nhị Khê;  
Carving and making items from horn: Thụy Ứng;  
Woodcarving: Dư Dụ.

### Cultural and architectural heritage

Temple and festival at Nhị Khê;  
Đâu Pagoda (Nguyễn Trãi Commune).

This itinerary, between lacquer and carving wood and other materials, will reveal to you the origins of many beautiful things that feature prominently in Vietnamese life, past and present, as well as elements of a rich heritage, both sacred and profane.

## HẠ THÁI

### GETTING THERE

To get to Hạ Thái, a village much famed for the art of lacquer, you must take National Highway n°1A that leaves Hà Nội to the south, running alongside the beginning of the railway line that leads without interruption (on a good day) all the way to Hồ Chí Minh City. You will still be in the suburbs when you will be given the option of turning off towards the motorway, which lies further to the east. Resist this temptation: the motorway does indeed go through Hạ Thái, but without any provision for getting off or stopping, so stay on the old road. At kilometre 17 from Hà Nội, there is a bridge that crosses the Tô Lịch River (today a polluted and partially dried-up quagmire, once the natural access route to these villages). Turn immediately left onto the little road to Hạ Thái. If you see a sign on the right of the National Highway for the village of Nhị Khê, then you've already gone past the road for Hạ Thái. (Nhị Khê will be our second village on this itinerary).

The road to Hạ Thái follows the meanders of the grubby Tô Lịch River, with glimpses of the industrial park on the other bank: here workers produce coca-cola and Singaporean beer to quench the cosmopolitan thirst of the capital. Go past the busy trading village of Phúc Am, which is mainly to your right, on a road at a right angle. Go under the motorway and immediately take the road that heads off to the left. Here you rapidly leave behind these visions of Vietnam industrialising and globalising and soon arrive in Hạ Thái, a picturesque village that seems to have a much more traditional feel (we say "seems to" because since September 2008, a craft park has been built and houses the biggest companies).

Immediately on the left, you will see the buildings of the Duyên Thái Communal People's Committee, at the bottom of the new craft park, and on the right, the village proper begins. The village divides into two parts: one on the right of the street, divided into several hamlets, and another, *Xóm Phố*, situated along the river, to the north of the new craft park. Discovery on foot is strongly recommended from here on: the village is very well kept, with narrow, twisting alleyways. The workshops, which are outside the houses, hide behind garden walls.

Individual village hamlets were once closed off with gates: symbols of village and ancestral self-sufficiency. On the gate of each *xóm* (hamlet), there are inscriptions in Chinese characters. These gates bestow a distinctive charm on a village that is gradually being invaded by workshops ever more insatiable for space.

### THE CONTEXT

Some say that lacquer has been used in Hạ Thái for a little over 200 years; others locate its advent even longer ago, while still others claim it arrived more recently. The inhabitants of Duyên Trường, in the south of the commune, also work with lacquer. There was a time when the village of Bình Vọng (Thường Tín) was very famous in the Delta for its lacquered handicrafts, but for at least 50 years now, the inhabitants of this village have ceased production. What we can say without fear of contradiction is that people have not worked with lacquer for such a long time in Hạ Thái; but that, even today, the village lives relatively well from it – but of late by adopting, let's say, a flexible loyalty towards the raw material of its traditional craft.



## My favourite matter just has to be lacquer...

### What is lacquer?

In a nutshell, it is a sort of natural plastic. In addition to Vietnam, several Asian countries and regions have a long tradition of vegetable lacquer, including China (birthplace of lacquerwork about three millennia ago), Japan (where many experts consider that the art of lacquer reached its peak), the Korean Peninsula, Thailand and Myanmar (Burma). There are variants in the trees used and the quality of the lacquer obtained, but Vietnamese lacquer is one of the most prized, both for its relative transparency and its flexible and robust finish.

In Vietnam, traditional lacquer (the 'real' stuff: we will discuss synthetic and industrial lacquers later) is made from the milky sap procured by tapping the lacquer tree, *cây sơn* (*Rhus succedanea*), often (but wrongly) confused with the *sumac*, a Chinese cousin. This tree is mostly found in what are now the provinces of Phú Thọ and Vĩnh Phúc (north of the Delta). Resin is collected in the same way that latex is taken from rubber trees (or the way that sweet sap used to be extracted from sugar maples): incisions are made in the trunks of the trees with containers attached beneath, which must be emptied regularly. The natural resin is then decanted, purified and can be tinted. Lacquer thus obtained (before colours are added) is either black (*sơn đen*), or brown (*cánh gián*: cockroach's wing). By-products of purified lacquer are used to waterproof baskets and caulk boats, as well as for preparing mastics, in turn used for smoothing surfaces to be lacquered.

### Lacquer what?

Lacquer adheres to many surfaces, including wood (notably bamboo, even when woven or smoked), rattan, leather, copper, ceramics, stone, palm leaves, papier-mâché, dried earth, teeth (see p. 199) and even human skin...

### Lacquer why?

Lacquer provides a high degree of protection: it creates an airtight, waterproof and attractive skin around an object. This protective layer is at once astonishingly flexible, robust and very resistant to the deleterious effects of water, acids, alkalis and abrasion. It protects organic matter from insects (such as termites, wasps or woodworm), and from moulding or rotting. Wood, the most commonly lacquered surface, resists better when thus treated to humidity and heat without swelling, warping or splitting. In addition, the colours of natural or prepared lacquer only fade very slowly under the influence of light and ageing. A lacquered object, be it matte or shiny, has a pleasant appearance that is hard, smooth and elegant.

LACQUERED VESSELS READY FOR A SECOND RUBBING DOWN, HẠ THÁI



### Lacquer how?

**With precaution:** real traditional lacquer, despite being of purely vegetable origin, is very toxic: it contains a cocktail of phenols, highly irritant chemical compounds. Contact between skin and fresh lacquer can result in dermatitis and serious allergies. These reactions are insidious: they never occur upon initial contact, only after repeated exposure. Asian lacquerers of antiquity treated their terrible allergies with seafood; today, oysters are good, but a better bet is to wear plastic gloves, avoid touching lacquer directly or use less toxic substitutes. We should point out however that, once dry, lacquer poses absolutely no danger: eating with lacquered chopsticks on lacquered plates is a lot less risky than cooking with aluminium saucepans...

**With preparation:** lacquer already contains water; in very rare cases, it can be diluted with just more water, but usually, turpentine is added (or a similar substance), making it much easier to use. Coloured lacquers must be mixed before use.

**With patience:** lacquer must be applied slowly and carefully, in thin, successive layers. The first step is meticulous preparation of the surfaces of an object to be lacquered, taking care when sanding them down that all bumps are smoothed out, all dents and cracks filled in with mastic (which must be left to dry and then sanded down again). The next stage is a cycle of applying lacquer, waiting for it to dry and more sanding down. This must be repeated at least 10 times or so in order to produce a good finish (and can exceptionally be repeated up to 30 times for a high-quality lacquer). All this can take a very long time (several months) and the drying period is both considerable and variable: a particularity of lacquer, which can appear paradoxical, is that it dries more quickly (by oxidation) in surroundings that are warm and above all, humid. Traditionally, activity among Vietnamese lacquerers peaked in the clammy spring, the ideal period for productivity. It is also possible to leave lacquered objects to dry in closed boxes, surrounded by damp cloths.

**With additions:** various colouring products (of mineral or vegetable origin) are added directly to lacquer before applying it, for example: cinnabar vermilion (one way of producing red lacquer, a 'royal' colour in Vietnam), yellow arsenic sulphur and blue indigo. Lacquer is also inlaid with eggshells or mother-of-pearl, has gold, silver or tin leaf applied to it at various stages (see also **Kiêu Ky, Itinerary n°2**), and decorations can be executed with a fine paintbrush.

### Lacquer what, exactly?

If lacquer was initially the prerogative of the nobility or reserved for religious objects, its use has widened and become popularised with the passing of time. Here are some things that can be found coated with lacquer:

Beams, pillars, gates, doors, furniture of all kinds, statues (lots of statues), thrones, altars, palanquins, parallel sentences, side panels, candlesticks, books, coffins, screens, oars, shields, spear shafts, horse bridles, water puppets, rickshaws, boxes, trays, plates, bowls, chopsticks, paintings, jewels, pillows, lampshades, flower vases, chessboards, jam jars, teeth and mummies of monks (see box "the return of the Mummy", p. 217).





## Lacquer and the Fine Arts

Lacquered paintings have been produced for centuries in Vietnam, mostly rural or purely decorative scenes. The use of lacquer for painting received an important boost in the 1920s and 30s through contact with Western art, introduced during the French colonial era with the foundation in Hà Nội of the Fine Arts School of Indochina in 1925. This was in large part thanks to Victor Tardieu, a French artist much enamoured of Vietnam, whose famous fresco, recently restored, still dominates the amphitheatre of what is now the National University (formerly the University of Indochina), 19 Lê Thánh Tông Street in Hà Nội.

A modern Vietnamese art, expressed in part through the medium of lacquer, saw the light of day. Experimenting technically with superimposed layers of different colours, sanded and reworked, adding gold and silver leaf and inlaying various things, a new aesthetic emerged from lacquerwork.

The Hà Nội school of lacquer painters was born, including several students from the Fine Arts School who became famous lacquerers. Since its beginnings, artistic lacquer has undergone a remarkable expansion: some Vietnamese painters working with lacquer have sold paintings (as well as work in other media) on the world art market and others have followed, while foreign artists and decorators have started to flock to Vietnam, wishing to learn lacquer techniques.

Hữu Ngọc (2006), a well-known chronicler of Vietnamese culture, wrote these interesting lines about this artistic movement.

“Modern Vietnamese lacquer, stemming from a tradition several millennia old and the fruit of several acculturations [particularly Chinese, French and Japanese], could give an example of loyalty to the national cultural identity, a loyalty one might call dynamic and flexible.”

A way of appreciating the quality of this cultural identity might perhaps be to feel the quiet strength, impervious as lacquer to any moral equivocation or cognitive dissonance, of an ethic of belonging, expressed as a “dynamic and flexible loyalty”.

LACQUERED PLATES AND BOXES ON A DRYING RACK, HẠ THÁI

## THE CRAFT

Hạ Thái enjoys a great reputation (which goes beyond the Delta and stretches abroad) for the quality of its work and has fruitful and long-term dealings with several other specialised villages, particularly those of woodcarvers and wood turners (see p. 202), those of mother-of-pearl and eggshell inlayers (see Itinerary n°6 p. 233) and, of course, with the regions at higher altitude around the Delta where lacquer is tapped from trees and where bamboo and other wood is found. In keeping with the country as a whole, Hạ Thái is changing and getting rapidly richer, to the fully justified satisfaction of its inhabitants. However, things are not quite as they seem...

Let us explain: synthetic lacquer has moved into Hạ Thái (at least a dozen years ago, in fact) and nearly everything that is lacquered in the village is now done with these new products. The attractive lacquered items (at unbeatable prices) that you have already seen on sale everywhere in Hà Nội (and that doubtless come from Hạ Thái)? They are lacquered with synthetic substances: often nice to look at, but they offer no guarantee whatsoever of quality or durability. If someone offers you much more expensive items, then it is not totally impossible that they are truly lacquered with real local lacquer and according to tradition, but there is nothing to prove they are either (we'll come back to this in a moment).

There are several different qualities and therefore prices for synthetic lacquer: the cheapest is *son diêu*, then comes *son diêu công nghiệp* (twice as expensive) and, finally, *son nhật* (a resin, called "Japanese", and very similar to the natural resin, but produced industrially, and sold for 10 times the price of the *son diêu*). As for real vegetable lacquer, *son ta*, it costs about 300,000 VNĐ a kilo, or 15 times the price of the cheapest form.

We have already described the waiting, the hard work and the skill required to apply *son ta*; an object that would require six months of work and drying to be lacquered with *son ta* will be ready in six weeks if it is only lacquered with synthetic resin. If time is money and that time is at a premium, an artisan who also markets his or her own wares may well be tempted to take short cuts.

Traditionally in Hạ Thái, the art of lacquer was in the hands of great experts and talented artisans. With the economic liberalisation of the country, mass production of lacquered products exploded; these days, workers with minimal training add layers of lacquer and sand down items on a production line without much heed for craft or quality.

Another problem: currently there is no quality-labelling. How can you tell if lacquerware marked as "real" is really real? It's a little like the stories of silk said to be "100%" (see Itinerary n°4 p. 176), save that we don't have an easy test to suggest to you this time. Enthusiasts say that good lacquer can be spotted with an attentive and experienced eye (for example, synthetic lacquer is more opaque, more homogenous and less shiny than *son ta*), but the immediately obvious differences can be subtle (and sometimes deliberately disguised). Some artisans use different types of resin on the same object, the final layer having the distinction of being with 'Japanese' lacquer to make it look real!

Above all, it is the inexorable **test of time** that will indicate whether it is real lacquer properly applied – or not. Synthetic lacquer will have a limited life: its colours will fade and it will blister on poorly dried wooden or bamboo objects. We should also mention here that utensils coated with synthetic lacquer are not suitable for use with food: they can expose the user to risks of contamination that do not exist with vegetable lacquer (once fully dried).

Such a shift to lacquer simulacra throws a spotlight on the thorny paradox of Hạ Thái... This village was once famous for its expertise working with a material used to preserve religious objects and works of art, prepared amid worship and asceticism; a material mixed with gold and silver, that was once used to mummify monks in spiritual ecstasy and to beautify the teeth of girls in the first flower of womanhood... – What then of all this today?

Although a few scattered master craftsmen and women still insist on working with *son ta* (we will give you some addresses), the vast majority now only use a synthetic substance that no longer preserves the objects thus lacquered, especially when it is applied hurriedly by workers who are often under-trained and poorly-motivated.



For the moment, those who have taken this route are turning a tidy profit. But the historic reputation of the village is fading, not unlike the lacquer of doubtful quality on many products made essentially for export and the tourist trade. In the medium and long term, without credible guarantees of quality or an organisation of lacquerware producers that can facilitate regulation, this village lacquerware, even if it is cheaper, will soon suffer from comparison with, for example, the equivalent Thai or Japanese products. In these countries, it must be said that synthetic lacquer is very widely used, but in general, there is more regulation, so more care is taken, there is less counterfeiting and standards are higher.

And if it really wants to find a niche with this curious concept of cut-price ‘disposable lacquer’, Hạ Thái and villages like it will have their work cut out to steal a march on some northern neighbours: Chinese industrialists produce lacquered objects in huge quantities, and of all qualities imaginable...

One consoling thought, amid these reports of decline in craft industries: in marked contrast with a slump in silk skills, the art of lacquer painting is alive and well, thanks to courses at the School of Fine Arts in Hà Nội (which has always maintained firm links with the lacquerers of Hạ Thái: many artisans have taught lacquerwork at the School, many villagers have studied fine arts there). The survival of the lacquerware craft industry in Hạ Thái will perhaps depend upon the fostering or strengthening of these contacts and upon the development of a system of quality-labelling to guarantee quality.

#### Lacquer artisans who still use *sơn ta* (traditional lacquer)

##### In Hạ Thái:

**Mr. Đỗ Văn Thuận**, director of the Mỹ Thái Company, who uses *sơn ta* for paintings and very occasionally for a special order. He says that these days, only a third of his employees (the oldest ones) know how to work with *sơn ta*.

**Mme Nguyễn Thị Hối**, former director of the Association of Lacquerwork Producers.

##### In Hà Nội:

**Mr. Phạm Kim Mã (Kima)**, producer of lacquered objects for sale in his shop, 11 Thi Sách Street, in the Hai Bà Trưng neighbourhood of Hà Nội. He has taught at the Fine Arts School for 20 years and was the only lacquerer in Vietnam who participated in the “UNESCO Seal of Excellence (2004-2006)”.

## “My heart longs for the lass with lacquered teeth...”

For at least three millennia in Vietnam (and elsewhere in East Asia), many men and women had their teeth irreversibly blackened. This practice was always more common in northern and central Vietnam and among mountain-dwelling ethnic minorities. In 1938, the French researcher Pierre Huard estimated that 80% of peasants in “North-Vietnam” still had “lacquered” teeth. These days, you would be hard-pressed to assemble even a small handful of men with a coal-black smile, and almost no women under the age of 65: this ideal of beauty has been reversed within the space of a generation or two.

### Why did people lacquer their teeth?

- The most simple and subjective reason is that people found it attractive, especially for women (as shown by the above quotation, taken from a popular song).
- According to popular belief, it preserved teeth from caries (possible, but very questionable, especially given that the natural enamel coating on teeth had to be removed in order to apply lacquer).
- There are theories associated with the chewing of betel quid, a practice loosely linked to that of lacquering teeth (apart from in Japan): the decolouration of teeth brought about by this gentle stimulant is apparently concealed by lacquering, or alternately lacquering mimics this decolouration, a sign of social prestige.
- There was a time when it is possible that the Vietnamese lacquered their teeth in order to look different from the Chinese.

**Why don't people lacquer their teeth any more?** Maybe because people don't find it attractive any more; the sometimes normative influence of globalisation even finds its way into consumers' mouths. The traditionalist image and the irrevocable aspect of lacquered teeth seem to put young people off it. Teeth thus treated require a lot of upkeep: the lacquer must be reapplied and polished every two or three years...

Contrary to what one might conclude from the large dental diaspora in places such as France or North America, there are plenty of Vietnamese dentists consulting in their own country, and with the steady rise in living standards, dental hygiene is becoming more of a priority. It is now known that some substances used for blackening teeth are toxic and that nothing promotes rude health in teeth and gums better than investment in a decent toothbrush.

**But is it really lacquer?** We're very glad you asked that question. In fact, blackened teeth are not the result of any unique technique: each region, each ethnic group goes about it in its own way with the means at their disposal. However, the principle of applying some kind of varnish onto teeth that have first been stripped of their natural outer layer remains the same.

**A little anecdote** (from a forgotten source): During the French colonial era, a Vietnamese military officer is invited to a dinner dance. At the end of the evening, one of his French counterparts, his face flushed, asks him:

- “Well, old chap? What do you think of our French women?”

The Vietnamese officer bows slowly, cracks an embarrassed smile and replies:

- “They are very beautiful... But their teeth are white like those of dogs!”

## A stroll between lacquer and places of worship

Knowing all this, now go for a walk round the various hamlets of the village with your eyes wide open! It remains a truly fascinating place and a hive of craft activity.

When you enter Hạ Thái hamlet, to the right of the road (**see map p. 201**), you can explore a street lined with several workshops conducting very varied activities. One artisan has even specialised in lacquered paintings of President Hồ Chí Minh, produced to decorate local authority offices. Next door, **Mrs Nguyễn Thị Hôi (n°1 on the map)** offers a wide variety of objects with various kinds of lacquer and inlaying in her workshop. She is one of the first to have reinstated the practice of inlaying eggshell into lacquer. You can buy such things from her.

On the left-hand side of the street, two very fine gates in succession lead to a maze of streets that can be fun to explore. Through these gates, you can visit a large number of workshops housing various activities. You will see that the workshops carry out one stage in the production process (making bowls and plates from strips of bamboo, applying lacquer, inlaying mother-of-pearl or eggshell, etc. – but also making things from synthetic resin composite, papier-mâché and plywood), before passing items on to other workshops in the village.

By taking the alleyway that heads into this part of the village, continuing straight on you will come to the spiritual centre of the village: the *đình*, on the left, reflected in the waters of a large ornamental pond. On the right is a chapel (or small pagoda) on the water, reached by a little stone bridge and housing a big stele, and in front of you stands the village pagoda.

This imposing group of historical buildings illustrates the glorious past of this village of many crafts. Listed as a cultural village by the relevant ministry, it is reputed for the morality of its inhabitants (a criterion for being awarded the status of cultural village), its cleanliness and its respect of family planning laws (you will see several signs exhorting people not to have more than two children for the good of the family!).

The other part of the village particularly worth a visit is *Xóm Phố*, a very picturesque hamlet to the north of Hạ Thái, down by the Tô Lịch River. To get there (**see map p. 201**), go back up the village's access road (near the People's Committee), go along the side of the craft park and then skirt round it to the left. Several big workshops on the right can be visited – including (**n°4 on the map**). Before you get to the river, an alley heads off to the right and enters *Xóm Phố*.

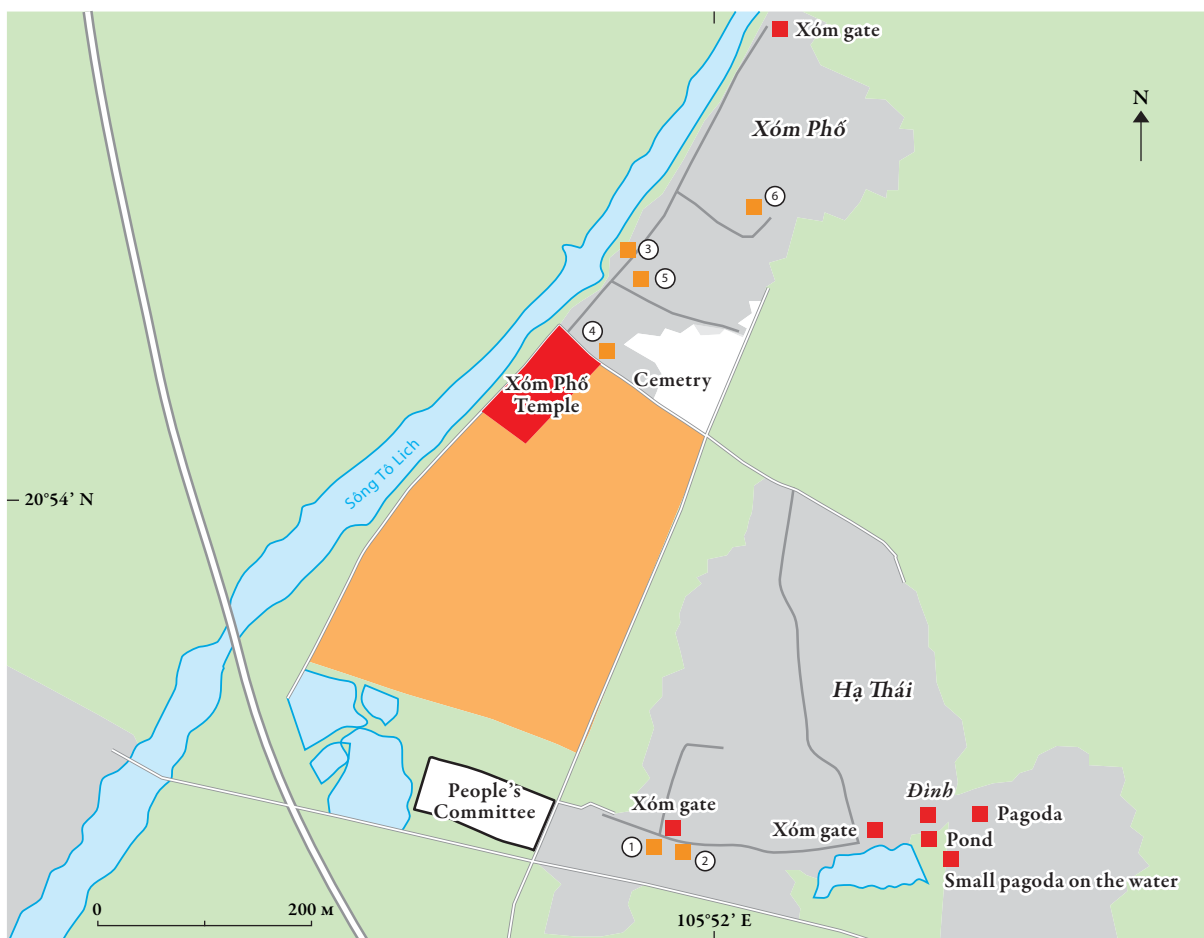
If you have set off walking towards the north by the big alley that divides the first hamlet visited in two and starts from the second gate opposite the pond, when you get to the end, turn left. Just keep going straight on, and you will come out opposite the craft park.

*Xóm Phố* contains some very beautiful old houses, nestled deep in a skein of alleyways, including the home of a very well-known craftsman and teacher at the Fine Arts School in Hà Nội, **Mr. Đinh Vũ Lịch (n°6 on the map)**, who revived the craft in the 1950s. Craftwork is manual and small-scale in this hamlet: religious objects, such as lacquered wooden incense burners or candlesticks, trays, items of all kinds (**n°5 on the map**). Apart from lacquerware, several elderly people make votive ingots with strips of poor-quality wood that they cover with paper. Hạ Thái was once a village of multiple crafts, and the production of votive objects has been preserved: turning a corner in an alleyway, you may find yourself shoulder to shoulder with a pack of wooden horses decked out in coloured paper.

Retracing your steps, you can rest in the garden of a very sober temple, some distance from any houses. It looks out over the river, along a new road built to provide access to the craft park.



# Hạ Thái



- Residential area
- Cultivated area
- Craft area
- Cultural and religious sites
- Craft site
- River and pond
- Alley
- Street

- ① Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Hồi
- ② Picture-maker
- ③ Hòn Ngọc Viên Đông Co.
- ④ Mỹ Thái Co.
- ⑤ Maker of wooden, lacquered objects for pagodas
- ⑥ Mr. Đinh Vũ Lịch's house

# NHỊ KHÊ

## GETTING THERE

You must take the road signposted to the right, on the other side of National Highway n°1A from the road for Hạ Thái and just a little further to the south. The road winds for about a kilometre, but there are no real side roads, apart from the road leading to the village of Văn Xá on the right, lost amid vast expanses of water during the monsoon season. When you get to the last intersection, you turn left: an impressive old gate indicates that you have arrived at Nhị Khê.

## THE CONTEXT

Nhị Khê, (Nhị Khê Commune, Thường Tín District), a village that has existed for 800 to 900 years, is specialised in woodturning. For several centuries, the village artisans have produced decorative objects designed for religious uses (perfume burners, incense burners, candlesticks, fruit bowls, pedestals) or for the musical arts (in particular *mỗ*, or temple blocks, a 'musical' block of wood, hollowed out and decorated with carvings (**see box p. 203**).

But Nhị Khê is also known for another reason: this is village of **Nguyễn Trãi**, a great man of the 15th century, known nationally for his diplomatic and political exploits, his humanism and his ultimately tragic destiny (**see biography p. 204**).

## THE CRAFT

The woodturners of Nhị Khê maintain close links with lacquer villages (such as Hạ Thái) and those of mother-of-pearl inlayers (Bối Khê, Chuôn Trung and Chuôn Ngõ, **see Itinerary n°6 p. 233**). When market liberalisation came, the artisans had to diversify their production beyond traditional objects and mechanise some manufacturing stages (for example, pedal lathes have disappeared in favour of electric ones). The artisans make curtains and car seat covers from wooden beads, balusters, blinds, vases, stone chess sets and little statues.

Production is mainly family-based and individual. Each workshop makes only one type of item owing to the specialisation of machines. In this commune, the woodturners make up 50% of village artisans and rice wine distillers another 20%. There are about 200 households working for a state enterprise that makes soldering irons.

There are five villages in Nhị Khê Commune, of which two are specialised in working with wood, ivory and bone. The village along the National Highway, Trượng Đình, produces *bánh dày*, a rice cake filled with meat or a sweet paste.

During the collectivist era, Nhị Khê artisans made grenade handles for the Ministry of Defence and vases that were then lacquered in other villages. When the co-operatives closed, they continued to produce trays, candlesticks and lamp-stands that were then lacquered in Duyên Thái. Today, only a few households still produce these religious objects.

There are artisans making bracelets and other jewellery, working with bone and ivory, shaping precious stones, stone bowls or pieces for chess sets on the lathe and some even work with plastics. Artisans imitate Chinese products and try to adapt to the market.



## Sacred and profane xylophony

The *mỗ* is a temple block ('a non-tuned wooden percussion instrument') usually of small size but variable, partially hollowed out and carved, often in the form of a real animal (frog, fish) or a mythical one (dragon). By striking it with a beater, the musician produces a rich (and woody) sound that resonates quite astonishingly.

The origins of the *mỗ* are lost in the mist over the paddy fields: probably for as long as there has been a domesticated water buffalo, he has had a couple of *mỗ* tied around his neck, acting as cowbells whenever they knocked together. Before announcing news and events, town criers of old banged on a *mỗ* in order to attract the attention of passers-by. *Mỗ* are still played today during Buddhist funerary rites, various festivals and religious ceremonies, water puppet shows and performances of *chèo* (popular sung theatre).

The best *mỗ* are made of wood cut from the heart of a jackfruit tree that grows high in dense mountain jungle. Before being carved, the wood is dried in an oven. Then the artisan begins to shape it, regularly checking the development of the sound that the piece of wood produces.

A craftsman in Nhị Khê, **Mr. Dương Công Bôn**, is a specialist in *mỗ*-making, maintaining a family tradition several generations old. He has already produced *mỗ* in the shape of fish, 1.6 metres long and 30 centimetres high! A fellow artisan, **Mr. Nguyễn Bảo**, who introduces himself as a descendent of Nguyễn Trãi (and why not), makes *mỗ* of various sizes in his courtyard.

In Hà Nội, Tổ Tịch Street (formerly Reed Mat Street, then latterly inhabited by woodturners from Nhị Khê), not far from the northern end of Hoàn Kiếm Lake, is famed for musical instruments in general and sells many things made back in the village.

An address: 13 Tổ Tịch Street (in Hà Nội, remember), the home of **Mrs. Dương Thị Nghinh**, who left Nhị Khê 60 years ago. She sells *mỗ rồng* (dragon-shaped *mỗ*), accompanied by a cute little cushion as a base, covered with colourful Chinese material.

**MỠ, OR TEMPLE BLOCKS, CARVED FROM JACKFRUIT WOOD, NHỊ KHÊ**



## NGUYỄN TRÃI, THE TONKINESE TALLEYRAND

Nguyễn Trãi (1380-1442) was a great diplomat, strategist and man of letters. He helped the chief of a popular uprising, Lê Lợi (later made king and the founder of a new dynasty), to organise resistance against the Chinese invaders of the Ming Dynasty.

A fierce war of independence, which broke out in 1417, dragged on for at least a decade. After the invasion and conquest of the north of Vietnam in 1406, the Chinese pursued a relentless policy of systematic sinisation, forcibly removing the intellectual elite (and even the pick of skilled artisans) to Beijing, destroying Vietnamese cultural heritage and preparing for a big military push towards the south. Vietnamese historians present this conflict in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century as a turning point, when the destiny of the nation – and indeed the whole region – was in the balance. (Meanwhile, in Europe at almost exactly the same time (1415), England's King Henry V led a small, bedraggled band of archers and men-at-arms against the massed French forces at Agincourt...)

Nguyễn Trãi was one of the undisputed heroes of this successful campaign of resistance. He became a very close adviser to Lê Lợi and was the uprising's propagandist. In a series of letters to the Chinese commanders, he sought subtly to undermine their determination and negotiate an advantageous peace agreement.

In his writings, Nguyễn Trãi demonstrates great humanity, often showing concern for the sufferings of enemy soldiers and sympathy for civilians on the opposing side. He summed up his strategy as giving priority to the political and moral struggle, itself a source of the collective and unshakeable conviction necessary to triumph through military action, should it become inevitable – even against an adversary vastly superior in numbers and weaponry. His war cry: “It is better to conquer hearts than to conquer citadels.”

The comparison with another armed struggle, when a global superpower threatened to “bomb the Vietnamese back into the Stone Age”<sup>\*</sup> has not escaped the attention of the Vietnamese, who continue to revere Nguyễn Trãi as a patriot and a scholar.

It was Nguyễn Trãi again who drew up the peace terms signed with the generals of the Ming Dynasty, who thereby saw deep cracks appear in their expansionist projects to the south. His victory proclamation is still considered a seminal text. Having successfully canvassed for peace, the diplomat and military strategist became Lê Lợi's Minister of the Interior in his new royal court. However, upon the death of the warrior king, court intrigue deprived Nguyễn Trãi of any further position of power. He retired to the country (a house on Mount Côn Sơn) to devote himself to a life of meditation and literary composition (he was also renowned as a poet).

Alas, his final days were far from peaceful. The young king, Lê Thái Tông (Lê Lợi's son), after an extended visit to his father's old friend, fell suddenly ill and died a few days later.

Probably the victims of a conspiracy, Nguyễn Trãi and Nguyễn Thị Lộ were accused of regicide by the nobles at Court. They were tortured and executed, along with all their families, to the third generation, in accordance with the thorough custom of the time. 20 years later, the great King Lê Thánh Tông, son of Lê Thái Tông, washed Nguyễn Trãi's escutcheon clean of any blame for his father's death.

Nguyễn Trãi is worshipped at an annual festival (on the **16<sup>th</sup> day of the 8<sup>th</sup> lunar month**) at a temple, *đền*, in Nhị Khê dedicated to him. Among other interesting exhibits, the visitor can admire a portrait of the great man painted on silk, for which he is said to have posed in person. In 1980, UNESCO organised celebrations for the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth.

<sup>\*</sup>This statement was made in 1965 by the American Air Force General (and unsuccessful Vice-Presidential candidate), Curtis E. LeMay.

## A walk through Nhị Khê

Located just far enough from the madding crowd, Nhị Khê is a delightfully calm place to visit. Cars are forbidden and motorbike traffic is slight. Once you have gone through the entrance gate, a cemented street enters the village. On both sides, you will hear the 'soft' sound of saws, sanders and planes of all kinds coming from small workshops in courtyards. These workshops make a wide variety of objects: handles for knives, hammers and... sickles, wooden beads for car seat covers, items for ancestor worship (pots, incense burners, trays). Even the sawdust is sifted for resale to incense producers (probably the ones in Quảng Phú Cầu, **Itinerary n°7**). Within the enclosure of an old house on the right, once you've gone through the porch, you come out into an ancient courtyard, thronged with artisans chopping, sawing, or sanding. The family history is inscribed on a stele dating from 1936.

To the left of the street, a shop sells original sculptures from several villages in the area. Then a bigger shop on the right displays very beautiful items belonging to **Mr. Nguyễn Bảo**. You can watch *mô* being made in his yard and even purchase one, if you ask nicely.

A little farther on, on the left-hand side, in a small garden, stands the statue of the village's most famous son: Nguyễn Trãi (see p. 204 about his life with details of the temple that is dedicated to him). There are other well-known writers that came from here, including Dương Bá Cung (early 19<sup>th</sup> century) and Lương Văn Can (early 20<sup>th</sup>). In fact, Nhị Khê is nicknamed "the writers' circle".

Opposite the statue, an old house has been renovated. Then you shouldn't miss Nguyễn Trãi's temple, which gives onto a pretty half-moon pond. It can be visited, and the paved courtyard is quite delightful.

The market for everyday goods keeps many traders-cum-artisans busy: while awaiting customers, they cut up wood. The craft insinuates itself into every corner of this village: tree trunks, sawdust or bead off-cuts are stored on the side of the road: the workshops are too cramped. Once the market is behind you, turn left: a large gate marks the beginning of another hamlet. At festival time, a big sign here welcomes visitors.

On the right, a very sober *đình* receives the many festival-goers who come to worship Đoàn Tái, the patron saint of woodturners. A big annual festival takes place around the temple in his honour on the **25<sup>th</sup> day of the 10<sup>th</sup> lunar month**, celebrated as the anniversary of his death, according to legend, in his hundredth year. On the left, there is a temple for the worship of said ancestor where highly codified rites take place, involving offerings and prayers. An amusing detail: Đoàn Tái was actually a native of Khánh Vân, the village opposite, on the other side of what's left of Tô Lịch River, the once-sacred waterway... Đoàn Tái, who clearly preferred the folks opposite to his immediate neighbours, turned his wood in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, during the Lê Dynasty. If you get as far as Khánh Vân Pagoda, you can see a statue of the patron saint with the tools of his trade, all carved from a bluish stone.

Continuing down the street, a gate on the left opens onto an alley humming with workshops: this is where you'll see the most mechanised craftwork. Meanwhile, you might try to find the home-cum-workshop of **Mrs Trần Thị Tiên** and **Mr. Dương Công Hải**. This couple live in a big, tastefully renovated traditional house, embellished with fine furniture inlaid with mother-of-pearl (see **Itinerary n°6**). They produce wooden and stone items, including frogs and turtles for making music, stone chess sets, mirrors and all kinds of little wooden and stone statuettes.





TROWEL HANDLES, MADE IN NHỊ KHÊ

TRANSPORTING LEFT-OVER WOOD FROM BEAD-MAKING,  
NHỊ KHÊ





# THỤY ỨNG

## GETTING THERE

To get to the village of Thụy Ứng (Hòa Bình Commune, Thường Tín District), you have to make a detour of several kilometres, because the dyke road is not passable. If you follow our directions to within 100 metres of accuracy (reset your trip counter!), you won't get lost. Leave Nhị Khê and turn left (leaving the road that leads to the highway by which you came) and after some 600 metres, cross the bridge over the Tô Lịch River. Go straight for about 500 metres until the Đầm market crossroads. Then go left on a road at right angles and follow it for 800 metres through paddy fields. At the first crossroads, go left on the road at right angles that also crosses paddy fields. After 400 metres, it bears off slightly to the right. After another 900 metres, you come into the village of Đỗ Hà through the market. Cross the Tô Lịch River again. Turn immediately right, then left. Then 800 metres through paddy fields and bingo, you've arrived in the famous horn-carving village.

## THE CONTEXT

The inhabitants of Thụy Ứng have made items out of horn (combs, various sculptures, etc.) for more than four centuries. With the competition from things made of plastic, particularly for combs, the artisans (95% of village households) have diversified their production towards more artistic and decorative items, mainly exported to Japan and Europe.

## THE CRAFT

What you should know straight away about combs is that there are two kinds in Vietnam. Firstly *lược bó*, fine combs made of bamboo, used to get rid of dandruff and nits (and simply to clean hair during times before or without shampoo) and secondly *lược thưa*, combs with big teeth made of horn, tortoiseshell or wood, for general use in brushing hair.

Converting horn into a comb (or into other things) takes time and know-how. Once the horn has been separated from its buffalo, it must be treated, in particular by drying it over a fire. The horn must then be flattened and cut up, before being shaped. Some artisans only complete these preparatory steps and sell the horn on to others who only shape it.

In Thụy Ứng, in addition to combs of all sizes, artisans make bowls, beakers, spoons (salad spoons, teaspoons and so on), knives and forks, little dolphins, ducks, belt buckles, handbags and wooden devices for giving massages. Many objects are also decorated with mother-of-pearl. With the advent of plastic items of all shapes and colours, it was necessary to diversify, carve out market niches and concentrate on exporting good-quality craft products. As the artisans have machines for sanding, cutting and chopping, they can as easily work with horn as with wood. Nhị Khê is not far away and the woodturning craft has spread to neighbouring villages. There is also diversification into poor-quality items, such as simple chopsticks for serving food.

## THINGS TO SEE

As usual, we recommend that you walk around as much as possible, in search of real live craft activity (doors are rarely closed) and items for sale at very modest prices.

When you enter Thụy Ứng after that rally through the rice paddies, nothing particularly special is visible from the road. In fact, you have to find the right alley to get inside this village. Still keeping an eye on your vehicle's trip counter, calculate about 400 metres. On the left, you will see a very beautiful house that gives onto a large pond. Skirt round this house to the left. You'll be on course if you can see a handsome *đình* on the right-hand side of the street, sadly disfigured by commercial excrescences. This building is also worth visiting.

Once you have gone round the beautiful house, take the road to the left that after 100 metres or so will lead you to a big pond with a pretty little one-pillar pagoda by it, which serves as a place of worship for villagers. On the right of this alley, you will have the opportunity to visit several workshops working with horn, cutting and shaping it to make a host of items. As some workshops are specialised in preparing only horn, some courtyards are piled high with the stuff,





DIFFERENT KINDS OF HORN AT THỤ ỨNG

which is rather strange, it must be said. A gentle fragrance of aniseed floats over the village. It is possible to buy items and, while you're there, to visit workshops that are all installed in courtyards of houses. When you get to the end of the lake, turn right. There is a temple to the left: this is where the craft ancestor is worshipped. A festival in his honour is held on the **12<sup>th</sup> day of the 8<sup>th</sup> lunar month**. Somewhat strangely, it would seem that inhabitants have forgotten the name of this ancestor.

After this, you can take the first alley on the left and follow the maze of streets. You can find many workshops, not always visible from the road as they lurk behind walls. If you were planning to make an eclectic collection of horn combs, now's your chance. The extremely reasonable prices (10-20,000 VNĐ) make it all very worthwhile.



# DƯ DỤ

## GETTING THERE

To get to Dư Dụ (Thanh Thùy Commune, Thanh Oai District), the final craft village on this itinerary, leave Thụy Ứng by the road heading south (you came in from the north), which joins the little road that links Dư Dụ to National Highway n°1A. At the junction, turn right and continue for 2.2 kilometres towards the bank of the Nhựê River.

## THE CONTEXT

As you enter the village, on the left you can see several shops-cum-workshops specialised in making smiling potbellied Buddhas, phoenixes taking to the wing, scowling spirits, austere Chinese saints and a few fat little pigs. These workshops were only set up recently.

Go into the village by taking the first alley to the left, in order to admire the beauty of this village full of old houses, with inscriptions in Chinese letters, ensconced in a labyrinth of little alleys lined with bricks. The calm here is only broken by the sound of chisels chipping away at wood.

## THE CRAFT

Traditionally, Dư Dụ is specialised in objects carved in wood, horn and ivory for religious rituals, especially Buddhas and the four sacred animals (dragons, eagles, lions and turtles). Since the 1960s, artisans have assimilated techniques from Japanese and Taiwanese sculpture.

A wood market is held in the village three or four times a month, depending on the needs of artisans. Different qualities of wood are used for different orders. *Pó mu* and *xà củ* are medium-quality woods both from Vietnam; they are used mostly for the domestic market, for making puppets or lacquered statues. For the international market, carvers tend to use wood imported from Laos such as *trác* or *bát xanh*.

Artisans say that each statue, each Buddha, each carved saint has its own history (see box entitled “Divine idols, p. 213”). There is a repertoire of the Buddha types that artisans habitually produce. The one carrying a bag is a symbol of wealth; it’s a very popular model these days. Clients come from China, Korea or Taiwan. Some, such as the Koreans, travel to the village to monitor progress with their orders: eagerly awaited wealth is a serious matter. Others let middlemen do this work.

People in Dư Dụ say that long ago, many artisans left for Huế to carve pagoda Buddhas (probably during the period when the king requisitioned the most talented artisans for his own needs). Some stayed down there and created another woodcarving village, called Làng Túc (the former name for Dư Dụ). In Dư Dụ today, there are only about 10 artisan-sculptors left, specialised in Buddhas, statues of saints and various assortments of other statues (water puppets, pigs, mythical animals and the 12 animals of the lunar calendar). The others have abandoned this craft in favour of making mats and car seat covers with wooden beads (as people do in Nhị Khê).

The market for religious sculpture, in spite of its Asian dimension (China, Taiwan...), is not very profitable and targets a limited clientele: a Buddha 60 cm high, made of good-quality wood like *trác* (mahogany imported from Laos), sells for about 1.6 to 3 million VNĐ. These same statues are resold for double, even triple the price in Hà Nội shops. Shopkeepers make a relatively easy extra profit at the expense of the sculptors.

Workshops that make wooden mats (to put on beds) and wooden bead car seat covers have a growing market: you only have to observe the new middle class who now drive on four wheels around the capital and enjoy a much more leisurely life than not so long ago. There is a steady demand and poor-quality wood can be found within Vietnam, so there is no difficulty in finding supplies. Another motive for switching activities: woodcarving requires techniques that few artisans possess. Anybody can assemble identical wooden mats.



SANDING DOWN THE FIGURE OF A LEGENDARY HERO, DƯ DỤ









## Divine idols

An important part of Vietnam's religious heritage is composed of statues to be worshipped, important elements in religious rites, especially Buddhist and syncretic ones (worship of the Holy Mother, etc.). These statues are the fruit of collaboration between woodcarvers and lacquerers (no need to remind you of the symbiotic proximity of Dư Dụ, Nhị Khê and Hạ Thái, among other villages concerned).

The traveller in Asia is probably already familiar with the close links between followers of various religious affiliations (Buddhists, Hindus, etc.) and the sacred statues erected in their temples. These effigies are often washed or even bathed, clothed in fine robes, carefully restored (this is called *tô tượng* in Vietnam), and are at the centre of other special rites. They are ritually touched, have gold and silver leaf stuck all over them, are brought large quantities of offerings (money, fruit – even beer and cigarettes in Vietnam), receive personal messages and are addressed directly by people imploring their intervention in various aspects of human life.

At first sight, Vietnamese statues appear to be quite simply made, without much detail or individualisation (save for some notable exceptions: see examples at the Bút Tháp Pagoda, **Itinerary n°3 p. 146**), but the close observer will notice subtle differences and even quite distinct personalities among certain carved figures. In the gentle half-light of a pagoda or temple, a statue gently assumes the patina of centuries and takes on an air of mystery, as if a soul had quietly entered into it...

Traditionally, artisans considered it a great honour and a sacred task to carve these objects destined for worship. They prepared carefully with asceticism, following a strictly vegetarian diet and praying to Buddha for several days before commencing work. Once statues were carved and lacquered, ceremonies were organised to invite gods to enter the statues and to assume their shape.

WOODCARVERS MAKING STATUES AT DƯ DỤ

## THINGS TO SEE

It is very easy to visit the woodcarvers' workshops, and understandably the possibility of selling a buffalo-shaped water puppet, a pig with a corkscrew tail or one Buddha or another renders the artisans most welcoming.

At the corner of the road and the first alley on the left is the workshop of **Mr. Nguyễn Văn Huy**, a young water puppet maker who used to work for the famous Water Puppets Theatre in Hà Nội. He has been back in his village for a decade. He continues to do business with his former employers, who order puppets from him: buffaloes, princesses, dancers, etc. that he creates in large numbers. He has seven or eight people working for him that he trained or who were already specialised in woodcarving. Together they make mythical Chinese characters, potbellied or austere Buddhas, various sacred and mythical animals – and even unicorns with horns made of horn!

There is a very pretty little *đình* at Dư Dụ, giving onto the Nhựê River overgrown with water hyacinths. It is to the west of the village on the right-hand side of the road. It's a good place to rest and watch the water hyacinths floating in the breeze.

On the **4<sup>th</sup> day of the 5<sup>th</sup> lunar month**, a festival is held here in honour of Lỗ Ban, the craft ancestor. At the back of the *đình*, there is a statue of him in a separate room, hidden from the eyes of the uninitiated. If you wish to make an offering to the statue (a few thousand VNĐ will suffice), you must give it to the *đình*'s guard who, dressed in sacred robes (he also hides the bottom part of his face), will make the offering on your behalf. You will probably hear the bell ring out and there will be a few moments of prayer and contemplation – perhaps even a surreptitious shot of *ruợu* (rice wine) –, then you'll see the guard reappear... There is also a little *miếu* near the *đình* where the guardian spirit of the village is worshipped.





1925

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山尊并騰於海外



## ĐẬU PAGODA

The last important stop on this itinerary, 24 kilometres from Hà Nội, is Chùa Đậu (Đậu Pagoda, Nguyễn Trãi Commune, Thường Tín District). From Dư Dụ, you have to take the little road to the east towards National Highway n°1A, going past the road that goes back up towards Thụy Ứng, and about 1,500 metres (or a mile) further on, turn right and follow this road (which after a kilometre runs along the Nhựê River) towards the south and then to the bitter end, in the hamlet of Gia Phúc.

This pagoda, (its official name is Thành Đạo, and it has several other popular monikers), probably one of the oldest in the country, was build on the riverside, according to popular legend, by a Chinese governor, Sĩ Nhiếp, in or around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. (It must be said however that this version is contested by a stele that dates the construction of the pagoda at the time of the Lý kings, in the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries). It is dedicated to Pháp Vũ, a rain goddess. It was an historic centre for Zen Buddhism (*thiền*) in Vietnam, imported from China and widespread in the Delta as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

We should remind you that alone among Southeast Asian countries, under Chinese influence, Vietnam clambered aboard the “Big Vehicle” of Mahayana Buddhism, of which Zen constitutes an important school. (Be this as it may, any Buddhism in Vietnam today is greatly diluted in a syncretism of all-embracing religious doctrines: these include ancestor worship, guardian spirits and historical heroes, Confucianism, Taoism, Catholicism...)

The beauty of this site charmed King Lê Thánh Tông (17<sup>th</sup> century), who gave it the title of first “picturesque site of the country of Annam” (this was before the Ministry of Tourism’s time). Originally, this pagoda was reserved exclusively for kings (and the odd lord) and was only open to the common people for three short days a year, during the annual festival.

Among the pagoda’s treasures is a bronze book (only ten pages or so, but all of them made of bronze!) that dates from the earliest era of the pagoda, that of Sĩ Nhiếp. This precious book tells the story of the pagoda’s construction and the introduction of Buddhism into Vietnam, between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries. (These facts and dates are all disputable and are indeed all disputed, but this simply imparts a rich polyphony and, at times, the appearance of a fluid storytelling tradition, to history in general – and to Vietnamese history in particular).

Access from the riverside is through a fine portico composed of three gates: above the middle one is a two-storey bell tower, eight metres high and topped with two four-way roofs each sheltering a bell cast in 1801. It is flanked on either side by a simple gate. This bell tower gives onto a courtyard from which rises a giant banyan tree with an enormous trunk, which will afford you some welcome shade in hot weather.

The pagoda’s sanctuary is made up of three juxtaposed rooms: the Hall of Ceremonies (Tiền Đường) where the faithful gather, the Chamber of Perfume Burners (Thieu Hương) and the Upper Sanctuary (Thượng Điện) where the statues of the Buddhist pantheon are kept.

The walkways on either side of the Hall of Ceremonies house statues of arhats or arahants (*la hán*), ‘saints’ who have laid down the burden of terrestrial life and who are “free from all the fermentations of defilement”, according to followers; you’ll certainly have to admit that they look very Zen... On a lower plane much closer to earthly existence, there are also five stone stelae, one of which is inscribed with the number of paddy fields belonging to the pagoda.

The Chamber of Perfume Burners (Thieu Hương) is in the middle of the courtyard. Inside, you can see two bronze statues: a Buddha standing on a lotus flower and Pháp Vũ, the rain goddess, who is seated.

The House of the Patriarchs (Nhà Tổ) is set aside for the worship of monks who have lived in the Pagoda. On the altars, they are represented by statues. Among these, you can see the star turns of Đậu Pagoda: the lacquered mummies (or are they only copies of the lacquered mummies?) of two monks from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, called Đạo Chân (real name: Vũ Khắc Minh) and his nephew Đạo Tâm (Vũ Khắc Trường): **see box p. 217.**

# The Return of the Mummy

Mummifying the bodies of monks who have died while meditating is a rare occurrence in Vietnam, but not unique (see *Itinerary n°1 p. 88*). However, this very particular method of making statues (*tượng táng*) remains shrouded in mystery.

These two monks led irreproachably ascetic lives, which earned the uncle (Vũ Khắc Minh) the rather unflattering nickname of “the cabbage monk”: he followed a strictly vegetarian diet. He was also known as “the burning monk”, an allusion to an extreme technique of seated meditation, where the worshipper attempts to master a mysterious corporeal energy that will make his own body burn from the inside outwards. By passing away in this manner, a monk manages to maintain a pose of religious ecstasy after death, his corpse releasing only a gentle, pleasant odour without rotting away (*toàn thân xá lợi*).

## Tomorrow, I'll burn the top...

The story of these two monks who apparently mummified themselves goes like this:

“One day, they informed their disciples of their intention to retire to a chapel to pray and meditate and they asked not to be disturbed for 100 days. After this time, and if no more prayers could be heard coming from inside the chapel, the disciples could reopen the doors. The monks shut themselves up and entered into a meditative trance”. (Another version of the story suggests that the nephew only imitated his uncle's actions after the older monk's death).”

“100 days came and went and the disciples, hearing no more prayers, opened the chapel and found the monks lifeless, sitting in the lotus position, but their bodies had not decayed. The years passed and their clothes rotted away, but the remains of the monks dried up without giving off the slightest unpleasant odour. Their disciples then decided to lacquer them red and gold, in order to dress, honour and preserve them”.

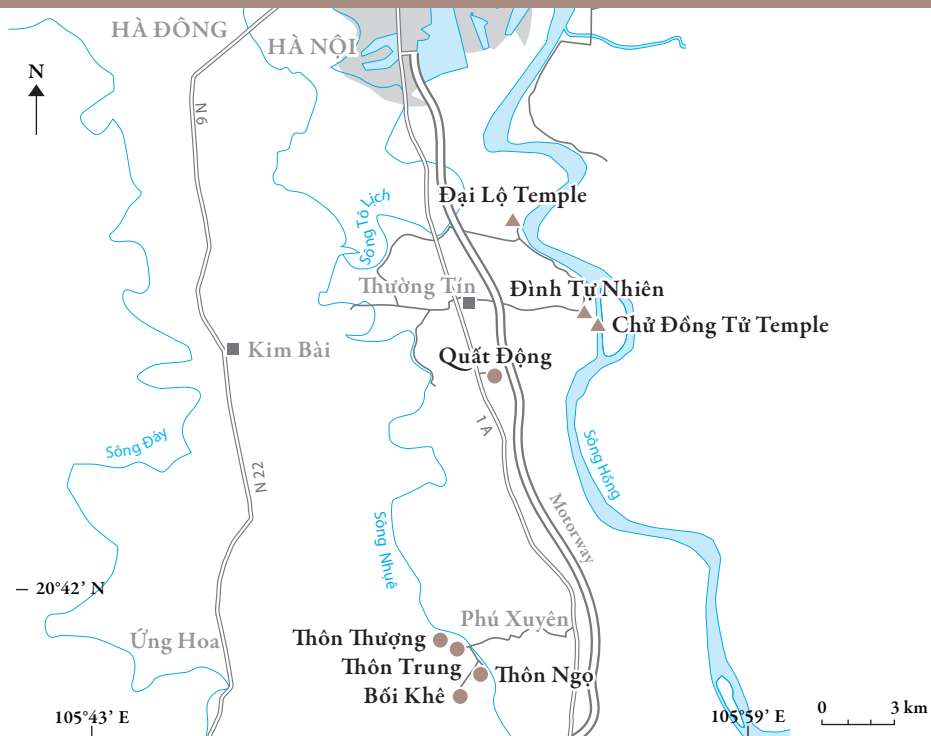
In 1983, scientists took these two creepily lifelike statues to Hà Nội to study them with the help of scanners and X-rays. Firstly, the presence of human skeletons inside the statues was confirmed. The skulls were intact: proof that the brains had not been removed prior to embalming, if any embalming had taken place. To turn a corpse into a mummy, it is normally necessary to carry out several procedures that leave indelible marks on the body; but the statues showed absolutely no signs of these procedures. From a scientific perspective, the mystery of this transformation remains intact.

## Next century, I'll take off the bottom bandages...

According to their followers, the monks had arrived at the ultimate level of meditation, employing the *tâm muội*, this inner fire that consumes alive the entrails of those who reach this state of spiritual ecstasy and who no longer have any use for their merely mortal shell. These mummies, now almost four centuries old, are at last beginning to disintegrate, puzzling scientists who have tried to determine the causes of this in order to find a way of preserving and restoring them. Again according to Buddhist beliefs, it is only the monks themselves who can decide for how long they remain mummified, so who knows, maybe this time is coming to an end...

# Itinerary 6

## EMBROIDERY AND INLAYING (SOUTH HÀ TÂY)



### Cultural and architectural heritage

Đại Lộ Temple, Chữ Đồng Tử Temple;  
The *đình* at Tự Nhiên;  
The temple and festival at Quất Động.

### Craft villages

Embroidery: Quất Động;  
Mother-of-pearl inlaying: Thôn Trung, Thôn Thượng, Thôn Ngô and Bối Khê (Chuyên Mỹ Commune).



# ĐẠI LỘ TEMPLE

Before discovering the craft industries on this itinerary, we begin with the temples. The first, Đền Đại Lộ, (in the village of Đại Lộ, Ninh Sở Commune, Thường Tín District) is dedicated to the worship of the Holy Mothers, in order to protect boats and traders on the Red River.

## GETTING THERE

The route is initially the same as for Hạ Thái (**Itinerary n°5 p. 193**), but once you have gone under the motorway bridge, continue straight on (in fact, it's a tight little right-left) eastwards. You follow a narrow, tarmac road for about two kilometres to the village of Bằng Sở. Once through this village, go left and then immediately right. You come out opposite the dyke. You must get onto the dyke road by a track that goes up to the left. Go left along the dyke and over two kilometres from this vantage point, you can admire the area outside the dyke and in the distance, to the right, the Red River. On the left, the villages are tightly gathered behind the dyke that shields them from flooding.

After these two kilometres, a sign on the right indicates the Temple (Đền Đại Lộ) in the area outside the dyke. Come down off the dyke and follow a track to the left for about 200 metres; another sign announces Đền Đại Lộ. (To avoid possible confusions, be aware that you can also find a pagoda and another temple in the village of Đại Lộ...).

## THE CONTEXT

Đại Lộ Temple was built at the end of the Trần Dynasty (1280 is a popular date) and has been restored many times, including in 1925, then in 2003, thanks to the contributions of villagers. It is well preserved and has retained its original architecture. It also contains many original items (statues, bells, decorations, etc.).

According to legend, during the occupation of the Song Kingdom by the Mongols, the royal family committed suicide by throwing themselves into the sea (no doubt to avoid a fate worse than death); only the bodies of four women, carried by the current towards southern shores, were returned by the waves. They were given the name "Holy Mothers" and a temple was erected and devoted to worshipping them because, it was believed, they protected trading boats. They are worshipped in other temples dedicated to them on the banks of the Red River. Other goddesses associated with traditional local beliefs are also worshipped at Đại Lộ Temple, such as Lady Liễu Hành.

The temple of the Holy Mothers has close ties with the Red River and is located close to it: Vietnamese and foreign tourists go there regularly by boat. There are tours on the river that go to the potters' village of Bát Tràng (**see Itinerary n°2**) before stopping at several 'river' pagodas.

## THINGS TO SEE

The numerous offerings made here are eclectic, symptomatic of changes in mentality and above all of the youth of many supplicants. You will notice mountains of Coca Cola Light on trays, piles of pot noodle soups, and of course, from more traditional temple-goers: plucked and basted chickens, fruit, confectionery, bottles of Đà Lạt wine (the Beaujolais Nouveau of the Central Highlands), etc. All this is brightened by large paper votive objects, such as red, yellow and green horses, or mandarins perched solemnly on their thrones.

The temple is much frequented by Vietnamese of all origins, because it has the reputation of actually granting many of the wishes that are made there... Merchants come here to do good business, students to pass their exams. You see many young women in tight jeans and high heels who, once they have parked their fashionable scooters, slightly dusty after the trip down from Hà Nội, lose themselves in the spiritual fervour of the place.

You will probably see monks at the temple, but they are in fact *thầy cúng*, animist priests of a sort (different from pagoda monks). They make special prayers for the faithful, who pay them for this service. The village has its own *thầy cúng*, but worshippers can choose to bring their own. This is a very Taoist place.

The *thầy cúng* accompany their prayers by beating on *mõ* (temple blocks, or ‘musical’ blocks of wood carved into shapes of dragons, fish or frogs: **see box entitled “Sacred and profane xylophony...” in Itinerary n°5 p. 203**). These *mõ* make a rather monotonous and intoxicating “glock... glock...” sound, no doubt designed to soothe the souls of ancestors.

Many *đình*, pagodas and temples were destroyed during the war of independence against the French or during the “cultural revolution”, the new communist regime waging its own war against religions, dubbed “pollutions of the spirit”. Đền Đại Lộ survived relatively intact, even during the American War, when the village was badly damaged by bombs. During the war period, then the collectivist era, religious monuments were not much frequented. The *đền* was used as administrative offices and boats plying up and down the Red River were repaired here. It is only since *Đổi Mới* that people have reinvested these places.

A big festival is held at the temple over a 10-day period from the **1<sup>st</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the 2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month** (with a peak in activity on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> days). This festival is also a chance to witness a very interesting ritual: *lên đồng* séances, when a medium becomes possessed by spirits (**see box about *lên đồng* p. 221**). Thousands of people converge from all over the country on the festival and pilgrims’ motorbikes and cars back up as far as the dyke. There is usually a big ceremony at the temple about once a month.

## CHỦ ĐỒNG TỬ TEMPLE (AT TỰ NHIÊN)

This little temple, near the village of Tự Nhiên, (in the commune of the same name, Thường Tín District), dedicated to the worship of a famous local couple (**see box entitled “Kind hearts...” p. 223**), is listed by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, as is Tự Nhiên’s *đình* (**see p. 222**) and Đa Hòa Temple (in the village of Đa Hòa), just opposite on the other bank of the Red River, where the same couple are also worshipped.

### GETTING THERE

When you leave Đại Lộ Temple, retrace your steps. Take the dyke towards the south and go past the village of Bằng Sở that you came through before going up onto the dyke on your way out. Follow the dyke road for about four kilometres. The dyke follows the meander in the Red River and you can see the river far off to the left. A sign points to the Hồng Văn jetty 200 metres distant to the left, which provides access by ferry to Đa Hòa Temple opposite, on the river’s left bank, dedicated as we said to the same couple of guardian spirits (but that temple does not feature in this itinerary).

At the place where there are white bollards to limit access to cars on this narrow dyke road, and a few metres after the intersection from where the road to the right leads to the administrative sub-centre of Thường Tín District, turn left to get off the dyke, then immediately left again. A few metres further on, the road turns sharply to the right. Go through the village of Tự Nhiên. The road then makes another sharp turn left, running alongside sandbanks.

A few tens of metres further on, you arrive at the *đền*. From one season to another, the landscape is very different: during the monsoon, the sand is under water and the Red River licks away at its banks. In the dry season, the sand is all exposed. People grow maize here at this time. In September, there is an expanse of sand in front of the *đền*. Tourist boats coming from Bát Tràng (**see Itinerary n°2 p. 110**) stop there.

The place is remarkably peaceful and little frequented (it’s especially the main Đa Hòa Temple on the other bank that receives visitors). This temple is quite small and has bonsais everywhere. In the well-maintained little garden, many very original statues allude to the story of princess Tiên Dung. The temple overlooks the edge of the river (giving a very fine view of it), but it has already been flooded when the river is in spate (as in 2002). It is very restful here after the effervescence of Đại Lộ Temple. Mr. Đăng Quang Thự, delegated by the Ministry of Culture, guards the temple and lives there. Pilgrims worship the spirit couple here to obtain luck, happiness, success: in their own couple or elsewhere. Most of the time, this temple is only visited by people from the village or the province. However, at festival time, a host of worshippers beat a path here from all over the north of Vietnam. Later, they take the ferry to Đa Hòa Temple opposite (which holds its festival at the same time).



## *Lên đồng*: the medium is the message

*Lên đồng* is a very ancient form of pre-Buddhist shamanism peculiar to Vietnam, linked to the worship of the Mother Goddesses. Like all religious and superstitious practices, this activity was not well regarded during the post-revolutionary era, but since *Đổi Mới*, a growing tolerance, associated with social upheavals that foster soul-searching and uncertainties, have spawned a spectacular revival of these practices.

*Lên đồng* means: “climbing onto the medium”. It is the spirits that ‘do the climbing’, taking complete control of the medium’s words and actions. This possession of the medium’s body enables the living to communicate with those who have already departed for the Empire of the Shadows.

These ceremonies, usually quite discreet, take place irregularly and the mediums are mostly women, even though star *lên đồng* mediums are often male, for the occasion of major ceremonies or pilgrimages to remote temples.

The action begins with the medium entering into a trance, accompanied by special music and songs (in theory, a trained ear can even recognise the identity of the spirit possessing the medium from the melody), played by musicians called *cung vãn*. The medium is also helped by assistants, known as *hầu dâng* (often young men), who prepare and dress the medium with various clothes, headaddresses and other accessories (offering, for example, lighted cigarettes to male spirits).

Next, the faithful put questions to the entranced medium. They ask the spirit about the future, request news of their loved ones in the afterlife and seek remedies for illnesses. The medium ‘receives’ several spirits in turn, with different characters and contrasting behaviour. Employing ritual gestures, the medium bestows a special value to offerings brought by the faithful for the dead, and once symbolically ‘consumed’, these offerings are redistributed among onlookers, according to a pre-established hierarchy of the faithful.

If you are lucky enough to witness a *lên đồng* séance, don’t pass up the chance: associated with extremely ancient indigenous rituals (it is suspected that there were once rites of human sacrifice of mediums possessed by evil spirits), it is a unique experience, both joyous and musical. The French ethnologist Maurice Durand (1959) called *lên đồng* a “bowdlerised throwback to a primitive shamanism”, but this ceremony clearly fulfils a social function – and we can attest personally to the charm and welcoming atmosphere of these occasions.



The festival takes place on the **10<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> days of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**, and even if most of the festivities take place at Đa Hòa over on the left bank, the most interesting ritual is also celebrated symmetrically from here on the right bank. During the morning of the 10<sup>th</sup> day, a procession, accompanied by dragon dancers, leaves the temple for the edge of the river. They carry with them a large jar to be filled with river water, which will be used to “wash princess Tiên Dung” (see box entitled “Kind hearts...” p. 223) for the coming year.

Everybody – including the dragons – hops aboard little rowing boats and they go out to the middle of the river where a circle is made round the boat carrying the jar, while the village elders fill it. This is in itself a feat of navigation on a river much feared for its fast-flowing waters and its treacherous currents. The jar full of water is brought back in triumph to the temple. In fact, this water will be used at the temple all year long, and these ceremonies echo water rituals practised for millennia by farmers whose survival depends on its continued presence, in manageable quantities.

At the temple, various popular entertainments follow, including cockfighting, traditional wrestling, unicorn and fairy dances, and an interesting custom called *múa bông* (dance with a kind of small drum) or more exactly *con đĩ đánh bông* (“brazen strumpets banging on bongos”). It consists of one or two pairs of men, dolled up to the nines, wearing strap-on breasts and revealing evening gowns, who execute a dance that can be astonishingly elegant...

## TỰ NHIÊN ĐÌNH

Another site linked to worship of the couple – and of a third saint – can be found in the village of Tự Nhiên: it’s the *đình*, where the statues of the guardian spirits are housed, the couple and another person. When the couple ascended to the firmament, there was a village girl, Tây Sa by name, who happened to be nearby (well, so went the story husband Chử Đồng Tử told his wife Tiên Dung) and this young person went up with them. It was clearly her fate as well! She is nonetheless considered Tử’s second wife, for whom a fallen princess apparently did not suffice. This third spirit is also worshipped at Đa Hòa, in the main temple just over the river, demonstrating that even among immortals, the notion of the couple is complex and fluid, and can give rise to this kind of *ménage Đa Hòa*.

Three billion VNĐ were spent on the construction of a cement road, solely to link the temple at the edge of the river to the *đình*, which is further inland. To get to the *đình*, you must take this road perpendicular to the river. Go straight up, cross over a small, tarmac road and continue straight on along the purpose-built cement road. Go through the market and after a first left, you can see the *đình* in the distance.

Inside the *đình* are three statues completely covered with coloured material, three big gilded palanquins and an altar. In fact, the *đình* is made up of two buildings, because there were once two villages in the commune that each had a *đình*. The villages are now merged into one single administrative structure. The statues and the palanquins are in the left-hand building. In front of the two *đình*, you can admire a large garden with well-tended ponds. In front of the right-hand building, some stelae recount the lives of village benefactors.

During the festival, which is held on **the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> lunar month** (but only one year in four), the spirits’ statues in the *đình* are uncovered and carried on palanquins by young village people, first to the little temple Chử Đồng Tử at the water’s edge and then, in a reconstruction of the legend of the fisherman and the princess, to the alluvial plain, where the statues are surrounded with curtains and bathed in river water, along with much joy and hilarity. This ceremony exists since at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century and a host of people come to visit this site and bring offerings.

## Kind hearts and coronets (and nothing else)

Once upon a time, there lived a fisherman and his son, **Chữ Đồng Tử**. The time in question was near the end of the semi-mythical dynasty of Hùng kings (there are supposed to have been 18 of them, who all lived and died before BC became AD, and according to our calculations, they must each have reigned – on average – for 146 years). Chữ Đồng Tử and his father lived in the village of Chử Xá, on the left bank of the Red River. These poor river folk only had a single loincloth between the two of them, which they took it in turns to wear when taking fish to market. On his deathbed (if he had one), the father begged his son to keep the tattered sarong, but the latter, a boy of great filial piety, made of this versatile garment a winding-sheet for his deceased genitor. From that day forth, Chữ Đồng Tử remained until dusk half immersed in the river's waters to clothe his nakedness, trading his catch with passing boats. He only emerged, cloaked in darkness, to rest for the night among the reeds.

One fine day, while he was fishing, he noticed a flotilla of richly appointed boats coming down the Red River with music drifting over the water. He fled to the shore and dug himself into the sand. It was the flotilla of Princess Tiên Dung, daughter of the king (King Hùng Vương XVIII, according to the annals). The young woman, charmed by this stretch of the river, gave the order to moor her boat so that she might refresh herself.

Her ladies-in-waiting put up a kind of open-air shower stall on the shore and brought her some water. The princess disrobed and, humming gently to herself, began to bathe. But the water from her intimate ablutions, washing away the sand at her feet, exposed Chữ Đồng Tử, who had burrowed his way down like an eel into a mudflat. The surprise of the virginal princess was equalled only by the embarrassment of the young nudist fisherman. Fearing for his life, he begged her to pardon him and blurted out his sad little story. Touched by his tale, Tiên Dung replied: "I had sworn never to marry, but our meeting shows that such was not the will of the Gods and it is therefore our duty to obey". The king, her father, learning of his untimely acquisition of a fishy commoner as a son-in-law, became angry and refused to see his daughter ever again. The newly-weds resigned themselves to a life in this remote backwater.

Under a woman's galvanising influence at last and wishing to keep his wife in a manner a little closer to the one to which she was accustomed, Chữ Đồng Tử began to travel and do business. However, somewhere on a mountain path, he met the young monk Phật Quang (Buddha's Light), who proceeded to teach him Buddhist doctrine. A year later, the monk presented his disciple with a conical hat and a pilgrim's stick. Back by the Red River with his wife, Chữ Đồng Tử in turn informed her of Buddha's teachings. Together they set off, in search of the Way.

Returning one evening towards their home and overtaken by nightfall, they camped on the Tự Nhiên alluvial plain (right next to the future site of the little temple that would be dedicated to them). Before going to sleep, Chữ Đồng Tử planted the monk's stick into the sand and put the hat on top of it. When they woke, the couple found themselves surrounded by a whole town, filled with buildings and people, which had miraculously materialised during the night (another version of the story describes them surrounded by an emerald and jade palace, full of servants and soldiers). Rapidly informed of these extraordinary events and fearing an uprising, the king sent an army against his daughter and son-in-law. Almost immediately, a holy storm broke out, sweeping the town/palace, inhabitants, fisherman and princess up into the heavens, leaving behind only a swamp, now called the "One-Night Swamp". Chữ Đồng Tử and Tiên Dung are still worshipped at several places in the region, on both sides of the river, according to one version or another of this legend.

# QUẤT ĐỘNG

## GETTING THERE

Leaving the *đình*, turn left towards the south. A road on the right enables you to get back up onto the dyke road by which you came. Turn right onto the dyke, then immediately left, due west, towards National Highway n°1A. Go through the village of Vĩnh Lộc in Thư Phú Commune and after six kilometres, you come to the administrative centre of Thường Tín District.

When you get to National Highway n°1A, turn left. After about three kilometres, at km 21 (a milestone tells you the distance from Hà Nội), there is a sign (not very visible, it must be said) on the left-hand side of the road announcing Quất Động. Take this narrow road on the left for 500 metres into an attractive little village of about 2,000 inhabitants, where close to 100% of households are involved in embroidery.

## THE CONTEXT

When you enter this discreet community, empty of the piles of raw materials that clog up public space in so many other craft villages, you could for a moment wonder whether you have come to the right place. Only skeins of thread for embroidery, freshly dyed and left out to dry along the highway (opposite the village of Nguyễn Bi) indicate to the visitor that there is craft activity going on nearby.

It is by strolling through the streets, looking (respectfully) through windows and doors and by exploring among the back alleys that you will find many people busily engaged indoors with embroidery. There is a feeling of the European Middle Ages about such a community of slow, manual and collective work that imparts a very special and agreeably calming atmosphere to this village.

## WHY IS SO MUCH EMBROIDERY DONE IN QUẤT ĐỘNG AND IN THE SURROUNDING AREA?

There are indeed more than 20 villages grouped around the parent one that have embroidered or made lace for more than a century. The main reason for this is that the village workforce is underemployed with agricultural tasks. As in many communities in Hà Tây Province, which is a very densely populated region (and as in many craft villages), the villagers of Quất Động own very little cultivatable land, on average 1.3 *sào* per farmer. The average in the Delta is five times as much. To put this into perspective, a *sào* represents 360m<sup>2</sup> in the north of Vietnam (but 500m<sup>2</sup> in the south!), a surface area that can produce approximately 180kg of rice a year.

Like bamboo weaving for example (see **Itinerary n°8**), embroidery is on the whole a poorly-paid activity for artisans with little training who simply fulfil orders (mostly for export) put out to contract by big businesses (some businesses employ more than a hundred contract workers in Quất Động). These artisans essentially sell their labour, but they do not require specialised or costly machinery, can easily alternate this activity with odd farming jobs and greatly contribute to the quality of life of their households (40% of village income).

Let us return to the history of Vietnamese embroidery... Initially, embroidery was used in very precise circumstances:

“Embroidery, far from being a decorative art, fulfilled a social function (to honour a superior or a divinity) or illustrated a religious and philosophical idea. Its inspiration was therefore essentially ritual and ceremonial. Apart from parallel sentences of which there existed printed anthologies, the emblematic figures most often reproduced were mythical animals (dragons, unicorns, turtles and phoenixes); the five ‘happinesses’ (wealth, longevity, health, tranquillity, a good death, represented by five bats flying in close formation); the eight precious objects: the two coupled flutes, the guitar and the *khánh* (polyphonic wind instrument), symbolise music; the flower basket symbolises youth, the blossoming of nature and the visible pleasures; the fan, feminine beauty and temperate grace; the book, science and wisdom; writing tablets, literature; the calabash, abundance.” (P. Huard and M. Durand, 1954).



## A stitch in plenty of time

The man worshipped in Quất Động as the craft ancestor is **Lê Công Hành** (not his real name, which was perhaps Bùi Quốc Khải, Trần Quốc Khải – or Bùi Công Hành), a mandarin for one of the kings of the Lê Dynasty, during the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (the story itself is more important than the details: an observation that could be extended to Vietnamese historiography in general). Sent to China as an emissary, towards the centre of regional power and oriental culture, our hero soon found himself put to the test by individuals at the Imperial Court who looked down on these ambassadors from countries at the fringes of the Middle Empire.

As soon as he arrived at Court, Lê Công Hành was invited to climb by a ladder up to an isolated pavilion several metres from the ground. The ladder was then removed, making him a prisoner. He found himself in a single room, furnished with a statue of Buddha, flanked by two *long* (large, sacred parasols, richly embroidered) and, in a corner, a jar filled with water. There was also an inscription embroidered with Chinese characters that read: “Buddha is in your heart”. What was to be done? How to escape, or survive in this place without sustenance? Lê Công Hành thought about it at length, passing the time by learning the secrets of embroidery, undoing and redoing the threads decorating the objects that surrounded him in his elevated prison. Finally, he found the answer. The inscription also meant: “Buddha is in your belly”. Examining the statue more closely, he realised that it was made of rice flour. By mixing it with water, Lê Công Hành obtained an unprepossessing but life-saving gruel that enabled him to assuage his hunger.

As the edible Buddha waned, so waxed his knowledge of Chinese embroidery. However, nothing in this world being permanent (according to the teachings of the Enlightened One himself), there was no other choice but to try to escape from this prison, once stores of powdered rice were exhausted. One evening, the astute emissary, observing the flight of bats, devised a plan. While the air still rose towards the sky from the ground, warmed all day long by the sun, he threw himself from the door of the pavilion, fancying himself as a proto-Mary Poppins, holding a parasol in each hand in order to break his fall. With both legs instantly shattered, all that was left for him to do was return to his native village, and embroider there by the window until he finished up a stitch short of a row.

Another version of the story (far less realist but much more popular) recounts that miraculously, he successfully floated down from the pavilion, demonstrating a technique worthy of a seasoned parachutist and, barely limping, was acclaimed by the Chinese Royal Court for his exploits. He lacked no more for Chinese buffets (or imperial rolls) until his return to Vietnam.

Lê Công Hành taught embroidery and parasol making to people in his village. Later, he was made a “medium category spirit” by royal patent, a slightly strange title, but meaning that he is worshipped everywhere where groups of embroiderers originally from Quất Động live and work. During the craft ancestor’s festival (see p. 229), worshippers avoid presenting offerings made of green soy beans or sticky maize: still according to legend, this wily mandarin secreted about his person seeds of these vegetables still unknown in Vietnam in order to smuggle them home from China (probably in his plaster casts).

### Stitched up?

A coda in a minor key however to this pretty tale of diplomatic doings: there are several indications that embroidery may have been practised in Vietnam well before the time of Lê Công Hành. For example, the Vietnamese royal annals note that in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, during the Lý Dynasty, Vietnam sent in tribute to the Chinese Imperial Court 850 pieces of silk brocade, richly embroidered with dragons...





A QUẤT ĐỘNG WOMAN EMBROIDERING AT THE WINDOW

© Tessa Bunney.



## A description of embroidery, late 19<sup>th</sup> century

“The master craftsman is responsible for receiving orders, arranging the drawings and combining the colours. The cloth is stretched over a bamboo frame. The patterns are drawn onto a sheet of fine, soft Chinese paper. This sheet is placed on the cloth and held into place by tacking it down. The master then divides the work up according to the skills of each worker, giving information about the colours and the appropriate working methods for each drawing. The workers sit round the frame and begin their task. They embroider on the paper covering the cloth so that their hands do not directly touch the material [...]. Having finished the embroidery, they carefully remove any scraps of paper that are not trapped between cloth and thread.”

(Hocquard, C.H. 1999)



Embroidery was therefore only used to decorate pagodas, temples (and *tuồng* theatre), along with the clothes of the royal family, nobles and mandarins. The techniques were simple and only five colours of thread were used: red, yellow (golden), blue, green and mauve. Then, over time, embroidered items became seen as artistic objects and were marketed as such.

## THE CRAFT

A book of geography, written by local boy, great diplomat, strategist and man of letters, Nguyễn Trãi (see p. 204 in *Itinerary n°5*), tells us that in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, shops selling parasols and various embroidered items, mostly produced in Quất Động and in other villages of Hà Tây Province, were well-established in the neighbourhoods of Tăng Kiếm and Đường Nhân (where Chinese traders lived), in Thăng Long citadel (now better known as Hà Nội).

It should moreover be noted here that the dynamics of this craft have for a long time been driven by the links that Quất Động maintained with the guilds of embroiderers in the 36 streets of Hà Nội's "Old Quarter", particularly in Hàng Trống Street. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the northern part of this road was called Hàng Thêu (Embroiderers' Street), since people from the village lived there. There are still shops there that sell articles "made in Quất Động". It is also these links with the capital that have enabled artisans to survive major economic upheavals (for example, finding markets after the closure of the co-operatives).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, embroidered articles were exported to China and became one of the merchandises marketed by the artisans of Quất Động and the 20 or so villages in the cluster. During imperial times, the village's embroiderers mostly made religious items for pagodas such as banners, parasols, altar curtains and parallel sentences. During the period of French colonisation, embroiderers worked on household linen for the French with very fine silk thread mixed with French threads. Sometimes, artisans were asked to embroider golden thread onto white cloth imported from France.

To satisfy their own needs and to profit from market outlets, the French introduced new tools, new raw materials and techniques suited to the embroidery of sheets, pillowcases, tablecloths and various textiles. It was a period of reciprocal acculturation, since exchanges took place between traditional local techniques and those of Western lacemaking. Fresh subject matter was also introduced: old stories, imitating traditional woodblock engravings and popular imagery from Đông Hồ (see *Itinerary n°3 p. 148*), landscapes and portraits.

The years 1975-1989 are considered to have been the golden age of embroidery in Quất Động: a co-operative was created in the village to export a multitude of very diverse items to Eastern Europe (handkerchiefs, towels, tablecloths, sheets, pictures depicting landscapes or animals). Embroidery classes were given to villagers by the best embroiderers and the craft spread to neighbouring villages within the context of the co-operatives. However, the modest skills acquired by many apprentice embroiderers trained up rapidly (three months of guidance are not enough to train a worker) resulted in a slump in quality. This market then collapsed with the dismantling of the Soviet bloc.

Quất Động had to diversify its production to articles such as flags (also made at previous times), modern clothes (embroidered jeans for girls are still very fashionable!), handkerchiefs, bags, soft cases for mobile phones, etc. All require the accomplishment of various stages: cutting, stitching and embroidering. This form of production must be regularly reorganised and new markets be sought (mostly in East Asian and Western European countries).

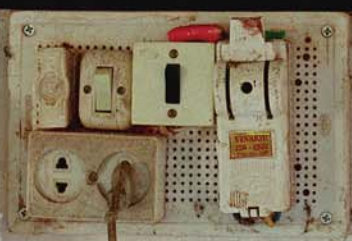
Quất Động has a familial production process: all the members of the extended family are mobilised, from the oldest to the youngest. Children go to school in the morning and during the afternoon, they help their parents with embroidery at home. Youngsters often complete the easiest parts of pictures, namely backgrounds of a single colour, learning the trade as they go from their elders.

## THINGS TO SEE

As usual, it is now a little up to you to explore the village as the fancy takes you. This is really not difficult in Quất Động, where many people will probably welcome you with open arms, even though, it must be said, this is often in the hope of selling you a few embroidered items.

It is a small village (about 700 metres north-south), very calm with several traditional houses, so not yet invaded too much by 'modernity' and its matchbox houses. Architectural heritage here is fairly limited, proof of the modest incomes of the inhabitants. There is no *dinh* in the village, but well worth visiting is the very charming temple where the craft ancestor is worshipped (**see box entitled "A stitch in plenty of time", p. 225**). All you have to do, when you enter the village, is to take the only cemented alley to the right. After about 250 metres on the right, you will see a courtyard, a temple and a pond, in keeping with the customary trinity.

You can also visit the founder's mausoleum. It is at the opposite (northern) end of the village from the temple: retrace your steps. Just after the temple, on the left, there is a large well, covered with plants, which once served to wet the collective village whistle. It is no longer used. Go past the intersection on the left that gives access to the highway, and continue for about 80 metres. On the left, you will find the mausoleum that looks out over a pretty pool. A festival in honour of the craft ancestor is held in the village on **the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the 6<sup>th</sup> lunar month**.



EMBROIDERY IN THE HOME OF A QUẤT ĐỘNG ARTISAN

© Tessa Bunney.





## Needle time: an old embroiderer still looks sharp

The official master-craftsman of embroidery in Quất Động is called Mr. Phạm Viết Định. Born in 1932 into a large family of embroiderers who claim to retrace their lineage in an unbroken thread all the way back to Lê Công Hành (the legendary embroidering ancestor), he survived turbulent times tilling the land in Nghệ An during the American War. He then returned to Quất Động and began to work as an embroidery quality advisor and inspector during the collectivist period. Having become famous for his art, Mr. Định has completed several ambitious projects, including recently the magnificent illustrations for a children's book, called "Ten Mice for Tet!", published in the United States (where it has won several awards): <http://www.chroniclebooks.com/>

Today, Mr. Định personifies Quất Động's living craft memory. Although 'retired' since 1990, he lives and still embroiders with all his family in a very beautiful old house that is to the east of the village. At his house, you can be sure of buying good-quality embroidery.

When you enter Quất Động, go past the first intersection, and continue straight on. Go past ten houses or so and take the first real alleyway to the left, then the second to the right. Go to the end of the alley. If you get lost, show his name to a villager who will guide you.

«Phạm Viết Định has spent more than 30 years of his life in the craft. He has concentrated on embroidered portraits for the last ten years or so. His house is filled with pictures of landscapes, like Hạ Long Bay, the One-Pillar Pagoda, the covered bridge in Hôi An, etc. In 1996, he embroidered a portrait of Hồ Chí Minh, which he considers his masterpiece. He and his brother Phạm Viết Khàn are trying to make a series of traditional popular imagery from the village of Đông Hồ. 'As I'm old, I cannot do farm work', says craftsman Phạm Viết Định. 'I don't want to be useless, though. Embroidery suits me. The most difficult thing to do is to embroider portraits. They require not only time, patience and precision, but also dexterity and a knowledge of the harmony and disposition of coloured threads. A single poorly executed stitch may distort the features of a portrait, causing whole days of work to be wasted. The embroiderer must always be attentive, especially when creating the shape of the face'.» (*Le Courrier du Vietnam*, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2002)

### In stitches

**Mr. Thái Đức Duy** (village of Nguyễn Bi). This experienced craftsman embroiders many portraits. In 1999, working in the workshop of another artisan, he did most of the work on a large picture of President Hồ Chí Minh that made the owner of this workshop famous.

**Mr. Duy** has also made a noted portrait of Saddam Hussein. This portrait measured 1.2 metres by 1.8 metres (sold for US\$ 6,500) and cost more than one million VNĐ in silk thread. It took M. Duy two months of stitching with 17 trusted workers, who worked in shifts in order to finish the job before the deadline fixed by the customer.

The craft industry is more visible in Thăng Lợi Commune, south of Quất Động (beyond Nguyễn Bi), more recently admitted into the circle of embroidery initiates: the most dynamic artisans here are well-established and have set up shops along the highway. They accost visitors, entreating them to step inside and admire the needlework wonders on display. However, the villages of Thăng Lợi Commune are more specialised in landscapes and do not possess all the embroidery techniques of the master-craftswomen and men of Quất Động, the birthplace of the activity, according to Mr. Phạm Việt Định (see box about artisans: “Needle time...” p. 231). The two communes compete fiercely for custom.

As we have already pointed out, embroidery is an activity practised in parallel with farming. However, by its very nature, farming has to come first: sowing before sewing, if you like. Therefore, should you wish to visit the embroiderers' villages, don't go during the rice harvest or the planting season that follows (June and October): at these times, if people embroider, they only do it in the evening. (There has only been electricity in Quất Động for about 10 years: before then, when the shadows lengthened, artisans bent over their work to the dim glow of paraffin lamps).

Finally, embroiderers only work to fulfil orders, often from abroad, or placed by local textile entrepreneurs, such as those in Vạn Phúc (see *Itinerary n°4*). Artisans are much affected by the unpredictable weather of the economic climate and sometimes, for lack of orders, embroiderers are ‘unemployed’. So don't imagine Quất Động and neighbouring villages are in a permanent state of feverish activity.

Nevertheless, there are some great master craftsmen and women in these villages, who are capable of reproducing all sorts of models and who specialise in high-quality and sophisticated work, with orders from rich clients (mostly Japanese: photos to be copied, kimonos to be decorated...) and for sums of several million VNĐ. Embroidery is a fragile craft, with little chance of survival in the long term, giving it, to our thinking, an added and rather poignant grace.

# CHUYÊN MỸ

## GETTING THERE

Go back to the highway. Go left towards the south. You follow the Hà Nội – Hồ Chí Minh City railway for 14 kilometres. Go through the administrative centre of Phú Xuyên District until km 35. Before the signpost marking the end of the town, another signpost on your right announces “Chuyên Mỹ, village of Khâm Trai”. Turn right and cross the railway line.

The road winds through several villages for about five kilometres; you must cross two small bridges over canals. Then you come to the village of Đại Nghiệp on the Nhệ River, an important waterway along which lies Chuyên Mỹ Commune with its specialised villages. The bridge is recent (2006) and now allows artisans to get wood across without loading and unloading all the time.

Chuyên Mỹ Commune contains a string of seven villages specialised for several centuries in preparing and inlaying mother-of-pearl in lacquered wood (furniture, decorative objects, pictures) and (since much more recently) in ‘inlaying’ eggshells in lacquer. Of the seven villages in this cluster, we suggest that you only visit three or four of them (even if it looks like there are many more on the following list):

- **Chuôn Ngọ**, called Thôn Ngọ on the map and sometimes also called Ngọ Hạ, since Thôn Ngọ and Thôn Hạ – another village in the commune – were once grouped together. You might also bump into old-timers who call this village Chuyên Nghiệp or even Chuôn, but, let us remind ourselves, it is usually called Chuôn Ngọ...
- **Chuôn Trung**, called Thôn Trung on the map.
- **Thôn Thượng**: mainly specialised in processing shells.
- **Bối Khê**, called – amazingly – Bối Khê by everybody.

## THE CONTEXT

Chuôn Ngọ (well, Ngọ Hạ at the time) is said to be the cradle of the mother-of-pearl inlaying craft, from where it spread slowly into the neighbouring villages of the commune. The one who popped the baby into this cradle, that would be Trương Công Thành, worshipped as the village’s guardian spirit. The village elders say that during the time he was a monk, Mr. Trương Công Thành travelled far and wide. He learnt the art of inlaying mother-of-pearl on these voyages (but not in China this time, it would seem), then taught it to his descendants and to the villagers to help them improve their lot in life. A temple in the village is dedicated to him, also named as craft ancestor. Chuôn Ngọ being located on the Sông Nhệ, one may be permitted to think (and people certainly do think so in the village) that in the craft’s early days, inlaying was done with shells straight from this local source. However, owing to the very laborious nature of the work, this activity did not develop rapidly. Later, during the reign of King Lê Hiến Tông (1740-1786), a craftsman named Nguyễn Kim, originally from Thanh Hóa Province, sought refuge in Chuyên Mỹ during troubled times (the Tây Sơn revolt). Also a mother-of-pearl inlayer, he taught his secrets to the villagers. He is considered a craft post-ancestor.

Then, half-way through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some of the commune’s mother-of-pearl inlayers migrated to Hà Nội – specifically to Cừu Lâu, a former constituent village of Hà Nội, which bordered on the southern end of Hoàn Kiếm Lake. Cừu Lâu had a *đình*, long since disappeared, where Nguyễn Kim was honoured as the patron of inlayers. Cừu Lâu in part became Hàng Khay Street. *Khay* means ‘tray’, but by extension (inlaid trays were one of the most sought-after objects thus decorated), the road was known as that of inlayers. During the French colonial era, a section of Hàng Khay was destroyed and replaced by the Haussmannian Paul Bert Street, where the inlayers unfortunately failed to make it stick, so to speak. This same boulevard is known today as the Hanoian Fifth Avenue: Tràng Tiền, which shines and sparkles between the Hà Nội Opera House and Hoàn Kiếm Lake.

The artisans of Chuôn Ngọ (Ngọ Hạ) once produced objects for the royal court in Huế to adorn temples and pagodas. They made parallel sentences and horizontal panels, religious objects, wardrobes, beds, water pipes for smoking tobacco, lacquered dishes for betel-chewing, inlaid with mother-of-pearl drawings showing traditional images of Chinese inspiration. Under colonisation, they made many things (usually more soberly inlaid) for the French.



Then came the collectivist period, with the search for fresh markets and the creation of several co-operatives in the commune, some of which merged, others splitting into separate sections over the years. It was at this time that some artisans began to work for villagers in Đồng Kỵ (see **Itinerary n°1 and box on the Đồng Kỵ Connection, p. 238**), who supplied them with wood and ordered work from them.

When the socialist co-operatives stopped working at the beginning of the 1980s, artisans began to work for themselves. Only the Ngõ Hạ Co-operative (see **section “A walk...” p. 239**) has maintained production, becoming a ‘private’ co-operative, even if the province gives it a certain amount of support. After the decline of co-operatives, there were only a few families left in the commune’s three villages that practised the craft. Access to raw materials – shells with mother-of-pearl in them – and to a ‘luxury’ market was difficult in this period of economic transition, once the Eastern European markets were lost. In order to redress the situation, incentive policies were introduced: training for local labour dispensed by the best artisans in the village of Ngõ, access to lines of credit, etc.). These initiatives, combined with liberalisation of markets, got this activity going again between 1993 and 1996.

## THE CRAFT

The division of labour between villages was once very marked. With the still recent liberalisation of markets, workshops try to oversee the whole process of production and have more capital to invest in raw materials. However, there is still a certain specialisation of villages (within individual villages, some families are very specialised):

- **Thôn Ngõ:** is the hub of the craft. Specialised in making high-quality furniture and in inlaying with mother-of-pearl.
- **Thôn Trung:** is a Christian village with a church, which has practised the craft for a long time. This village’s artisans also make objects for religious use: crucifixes incrustated with mother-of-pearl, Christian-style altars to the ancestors, heavily decorated with mother-of-pearl. They also make big pieces of furniture (wardrobes, mirrored wardrobes inlaid with mother-of-pearl) and small wooden objects.
- **Thôn Thượng:** is mainly specialised in processing shells, preparing and selling mother-of-pearl, but not inlaying. There are about ten workshops processing mother-of-pearl. Some artisans offer their services to process shells and prepare mother-of-pearl in the workshops of other inlaying artisans. Most artisans in this village don’t know how to inlay. This craft has existed for several generations in the village, but it has developed enormously since halfway through the 1990s. It is interesting to see technically and to observe the division of labour, and you can buy buttons and all kinds of pieces of mother-of-pearl...
- **Bối Khê:** a little apart from the inlaying villages along the river, has a different history. The lacquerers here were once itinerant ones, who went to restore and lacquer *objets d’art*, religious furniture and pagoda sculptures. The women worked at home and lacquered items there. Recently, a certain number of artisans have started to ‘inlay’ eggshells onto lacquered objects.

## WHAT IS WORK WITH MOTHER-OF-PEARL LIKE?

First, the shells must be flattened (they arrive in big bags that smell like the dustbins outside a seafood restaurant) by putting them into a vice, after having immersed them in water. Sometimes, the mother-of-pearl breaks. Workers cut up the shells into pieces and separate the flat parts from the sides, then polish them. Over a period of 24 hours, the polished pieces are fined down in a vice submerged in water, tightening it by one turn every 15 minutes.

Next, the traditional method is to stick pieces of mother-of-pearl onto a model drawn on paper of the design to be carried out and to cut them to size with a tiny saw, followed by a file. The fragments of mother-of-pearl thus shaped are placed on the wooden surface to be decorated and their outline is carved with a pointed tool. Then, with a chisel and a mallet, a piece of wood is hollowed out of exactly the same shape and volume as the piece of mother-of-pearl that will replace it. If the hole made in the wood is too big for the mother-of-pearl, it must be filled in with mastic made of lacquer and wood shavings, but the inlayer's art consists precisely in avoiding recourse to this remedial measure, which significantly diminishes the quality (and of course the value) of the inlaid item.

As in many craft villages, skills and trade secrets are actively protected: if a woman from the commune marries elsewhere, she cannot continue to practice her craft, because the Chuyên Mỹ mother-of-pearl traders will refuse to supply her – and she may even have her electricity cut off in her new village if she persists in inlaying!

In the workshops, the work is divided between artisans and workers, each carrying out a part of the task: cutting wood, polishing, cutting up the mother-of-pearl, inlaying, polishing, lacquering. Artisans have to contend with large fluctuations in the mother-of-pearl supply. The job of cutting up and filing down the small pieces to be inlaid occupies a large workforce. Workshops have become specialised in this activity and sell pre-cut pieces. Some of these are sold at the mother-of-pearl market in Đồng Kỳ (see *Itinerary n°1 p. 74*) or at the village shops in Thôn Thượng. Small pieces of low-quality Vietnamese mother-of-pearl, ready for use, sell for 60,000 VNĐ a kilo.

## WHAT KINDS OF OBJECTS ARE INLAID WITH MOTHER-OF-PEARL?

- Good-quality wooden furniture (wardrobes, tables, Chinese-style beds), heavily encrusted with inlaid details. These items generate a lot of profit, but have high production costs.
- Religious objects made of wood (for example, *bàn thờ*, or shrines to the ancestors), on which are inlaid illustrations from legends, with mountains, trees, mythical animals, etc. Mother-of-pearl boxes and sword sheaths, and parallel sentences or horizontal panels inlaid with letters in *nôm* (the old Vietnamese writing system).
- Since *Đổi Mới*, artisans have begun to make small wooden objects inlaid with mother-of-pearl for export and for the tourist trade (boxes, ashtrays, card cases, jewellery cases or toothpick holders). These objects are usually of mediocre quality and earn small amounts of money, but require less investment than furniture. Some artisans have also specialised in making buttons, beads for necklaces, and decorative objects made of mother-of-pearl, such as boats and pictures resold to tourists in seaside resorts.
- Large mother-of-pearl pictures: these are prestigious items for a new class of wealthy domestic customers.

## WHERE DOES THE MOTHER-OF-PEARL COME FROM?

If the local source of river shells has dried up, artisans have found several new ones, of variable qualities and costs:

- Big, heavy, spiral shells from Singapore, which cost US \$200 apiece. They have a very striking iridescence. According to the angle of viewing and the light, the mother-of-pearl designs change colours. However, this mother-of-pearl is only used for the most expensive items of furniture, or at least for part of the designs.

- Flat shells from Taiwan, which cost 30,000 VNĐ each and are less iridescent.
- Flat shells from Vietnam or China, which cost between 5,000 and 10,000 VNĐ each.

To buy mother-of-pearl, depending on the origin, artisans use middlemen (Indonesia, Singapore, Japan) or club together to rent a 20-tonne truck and go and buy it themselves (at the Chinese border in Lạng Sơn for low-quality Chinese shells). Traders from the commune have set themselves up, especially in the south of the country, to devote themselves to importing mother-of-pearl (from Singapore or Indonesia). They also take care of exporting finished products.

## WHAT IS 'INLAYING' EGGSHELLS IN LACQUER?

Bối Khê is specialised in lacquer and 'inlaying' eggshells into lacquered items. Artisans work in several different ways: either they go to Đông Kỵ (see **Itinerary n°1**), to Nhị Khê, the village of wood turners (see **Itinerary n°5**), or to Hà Nội to lacquer furniture, or people bring them smaller pieces to be lacquered at home. In fact, there is only a vague link with the real (mother-of-pearl) inlaying in the other villages of the commune. During the collectivist era, there were two co-operatives in this village. The first made mother-of-pearl items and worked with Mrs. Vui (see **section entitled "A walk through Chuyên Mỹ" p. 239**), the other produced lacquerware. This was how the villagers started inlaying.

Workshops work to order for export, decoration of hotels and the tourist trade. They 'inlay' eggshells into lacquer. They seek to diversify production: lacquering with eggshells on bamboo or wooden objects, on Malayan agglomerated cardboard, on plastic and ceramics: artisans have links with ceramists in Bát Tràng (see **Itinerary n°2**) from whom they order items. Thanks to these innovations, you can find some strange objects on sale here: if you dream of procuring a ceramic heart inlaid with eggshells, then you've come to the right village.

## WHAT ARE THE LIVING AND WORKING CONDITIONS OF MOTHER-OF-PEARL INLAYERS LIKE?

Not very good... Most artisans work in the courtyard or main room of their homes. Their living space is invaded by their activity. Everything is done in the house, including finishing, painting (highly toxic) and packing. You do wonder where the family actually lives...

Environmental problems for artisans specialised in preparing mother-of-pearl are particularly acute:

- Noise: shells must be cut and polished, using electric machines that make easily enough noise to waken the ancestors...
- Waste and dust from the shells: when pieces of mother-of-pearl are cut, cleaned and polished, they give off a very harmful dust. Many people suffer from pulmonary complaints in the commune, particularly in the villages specialised in mother-of-pearl preparation, like Thôn Thượng. Most artisans from this village work at home and have to wear masks. They are waiting for the construction of an informal industrial mini-park by the river, which is already heavily polluted with industrial wastewater from Hà Nội. Work with mother-of-pearl also causes inflammations of the respiratory system.
- Lacquered paint, which gives off harmful vapours.





CHUYÊN MỸ INLAY WORKER SAWING UP TINY  
PIECES OF MOTHER-OF-PEARL

DIFFERENT STAGES OF INLAY WORK ON CARVED PANELS





## The desertion of the village by artisans and the Đồng Kỵ Connection

The quality of work by artisans from this commune is renowned. However, the lack of insertion into commercial networks limits their capacity to develop their traditional craft. Artisans have trouble living from their activity: the cost of raw materials is very high and it is difficult for them to tie up capital for any length of time. About 1,000 people have gone elsewhere to practise their craft. At the beginning of the year, many cars come to pick up village artisans and take them to the centre and the south of the country: to Huế, Hồ Chí Minh City or to the seaside resorts of Nha Trang, Hội An and Đà Nẵng, where they make poor-quality items for tourists. They usually only come back for Tết.

In contrast with the Chuyên Mỹ inlayers, the Đồng Kỵ cabinetmakers (in a village famous for its fine furniture: **see Itinerary n°1**) are very active in the trade and promotion of their activity and employ many artisans originally from Chuyên Mỹ to decorate their furniture. There is a big mother-of-pearl market in Đồng Kỵ, mainly run by artisans from Chuyên Mỹ. Some of these artisans travel constantly between their home and their new, adoptive village more than 60 kilometres away; others live a temporary and precarious life around Đồng Kỵ. The communities of the Chuyên Mỹ villages suffer from this, adverse effects on children's education being an example.

Worse still, the Dongkinese are themselves beginning to learn to inlay ('stealing' the craft, as artisans from Chuyên Mỹ would say) and are looking for other sources of raw materials in order to escape the monopoly of their suppliers from Hà Tây Province. The sustainable future of Chuyên Mỹ's thousand-year-old craft, which is already hard and not particularly lucrative work, currently appears to be compromised.

LACQUERED BOX LID WITH MOTHER-OF-PEARL INLAY



# A walk through Chuyên Mỹ

## Two parallel routes by which to visit these villages:

On the way out: the road that runs through all the villages; on the way back: the dyke with its porticos that give onto the villages, but a less picturesque road than the first because this is behind the scenes for the champion pollutant workshops facing the river.

We suggest that you start your walk with the Ngô Hạ Co-operative. Cross the bridge over the Sông Nhựt, and take the dyke road to the left. Follow the river for about 300 metres. It has lost its romantic character much serenaded by the bards, and carries along the blackened waters of the Hanoian sewers to the sea. There are some ponds on the right. A street heads down from the dyke road to the right. After 100 metres, take the street to the left. 50 metres down on the right, a sign tells you that you have at last arrived at the house of **Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Vui** in the village of Thôn Ngô.

This is a 'private' co-operative, set up in a very beautiful traditional house, which can be visited. There you will see the various stages of production of wooden objects inlaid with mother-of-pearl. A shop offers visitors a wide variety of wooden and lacquered craft items. This co-operative, sole relic of the collectivist era, is ruled with a rod of iron by Mrs. Vui. As well as providing work for 100 or so workers and apprentices and selling the products of several village families, she organises training classes in the art of lacquer and inlaying mother-of-pearl for apprentices of between 15 and 20 years old and young disabled people from the province. She even has a project to keep children of war invalids in work. Hers is the only formal company in the commune to be legally authorised to export.

Now we suggest you go to Bối Khê: turn right as you come out of the co-operative and make your way to the centre of Thôn Ngô. After about 300 metres, an alley heads off right, a little at an angle, and leaves the village. You go through paddy fields for a little over a kilometre, crossing a bridge over a canal and passing several ponds full of ducks.

In the village of Bối Khê, you will find many workshops specialised in the art of lacquer, the inlaying of eggshells, makers of chopsticks inlaid with mother-of-pearl... You may well see baskets of eggshells drying in the sun! It is possible to buy prettily decorated items at the house of **Mr. Trương Sinh**. If you are lucky enough to be invited into one of these fine old houses, you will have the chance to admire the beauty of sacred lacquered furniture. Bối Khê was famous for its itinerant lacquerers who, from Hà Nội to Huế or Hồ Chí Minh City, maintained the furniture of the royal court or affluent households, before collectivisation put an end to this politically incorrect market.

To continue the visit, you must go back to Mrs. Vui's co-operative. From there, you can find the temple dedicated to Trương Công Thành, named craft ancestor in the village of Thôn Ngô. Continue straight up the road for 50 metres from the co-operative and there, set back behind a garden, is the temple. It is this road that goes through four of the villages of the commune and that you are going to follow during your exploration between mothers-of-pearl and cabinetmakers.

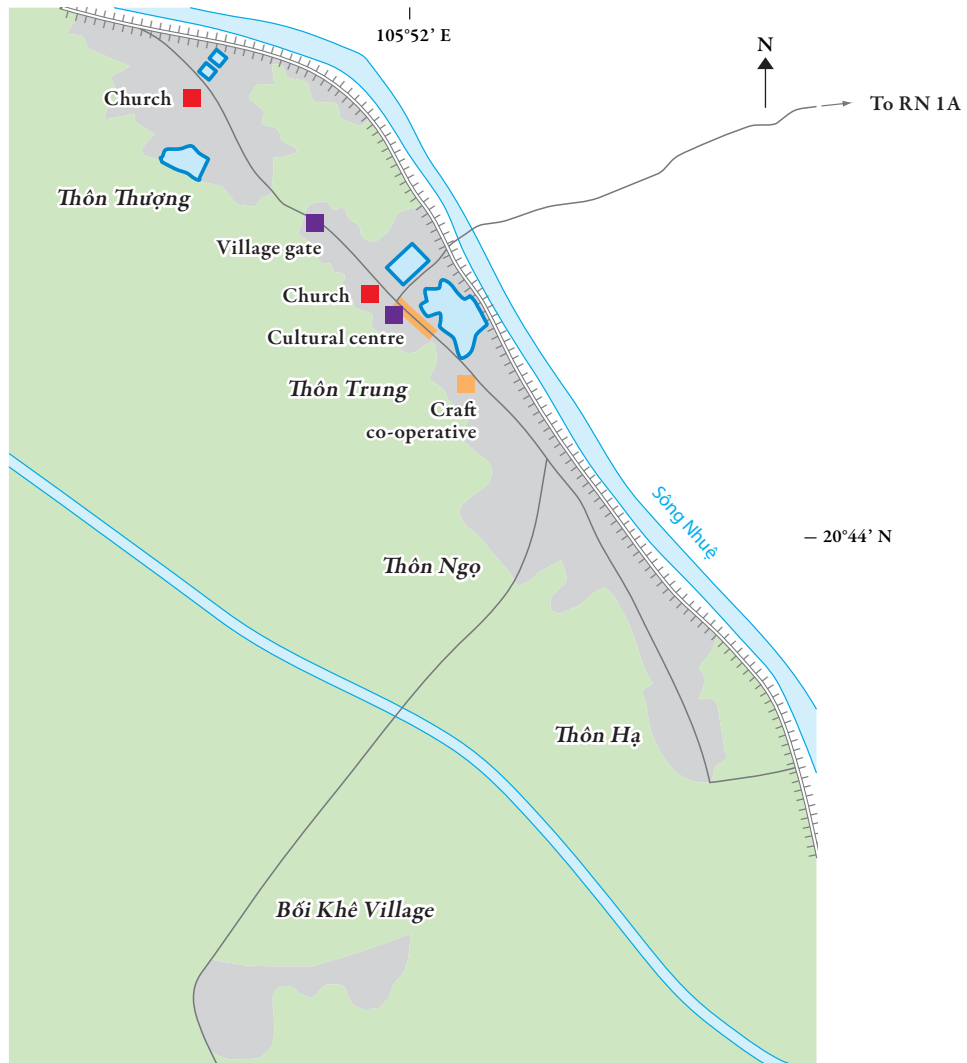
This part of the tour is spread out over a kilometre: the first village to the north of Thôn Ngô is Thôn Trung, announced by a very fine old gate, then Thôn Thượng, specialised in the preparation of mother-of-pearl (**see map p. 241**). These two villages each have a church. The one in Thôn Thượng, more monumental, opens out onto a wide esplanade.



From the street, it is possible to see the artisans and their workers preparing mother-of-pearl, inlaying amid clouds of choking dust. Many shops sell pieces already cut up into all shapes, and into buttons for clothes. In the cross alleyways, there are more imposing workshops with courtyards invaded with raw materials and buzzing like beehives to the sound of jigsaws, drills, sanders, etc. In Thôn Thượng, whitish water emerges from the workshops and flows into the irrigation canals. More industrial than Thôn Trung, this last village is interesting to observe techniques employed there.

You can finish this tour, after a little break in the garden of the church in Thôn Thượng, by taking the dyke road that follows the river and takes you back to the bridge over which you arrived.

# Chuyên Mỹ

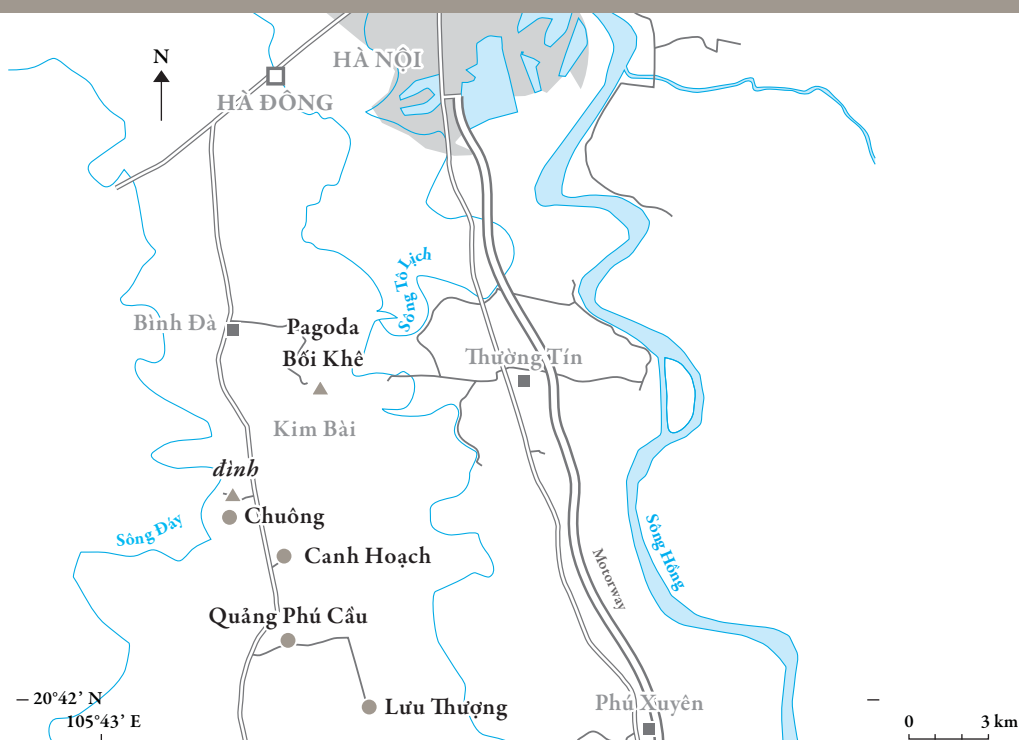


- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px; background-color: #cccccc; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Residential area | <span style="display: inline-block; width: 10px; height: 10px; background-color: #4b0082; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Architectural site |
| <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px; background-color: #90ee90; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Paddy fields     | <span style="display: inline-block; width: 10px; height: 10px; background-color: #ffa500; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Craft site         |
| <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px; background-color: #ffa500; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Trade area       | <span style="display: inline-block; width: 10px; height: 10px; background-color: #add8e6; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Pond               |
| <span style="display: inline-block; width: 10px; height: 10px; background-color: #ff0000; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Religious site   | <span style="display: inline-block; width: 20px; border-top: 1px dashed black;"></span> Dyke road  |

Source: Google Earth 2008, IRD Cartography Department

# Itinerary 7

## Bamboo & wickerwork (southwest Hà Tây)



### Craft villages

Conical hats: Chuông;  
 Fans and birdcages: Canh Hoạch;  
 Incense sticks: Quảng Phú Cầu;  
 Wickerwork: Lưu Thượng.

### Cultural and architectural heritage

The market and *đình* at Chuông;  
 Bối Khê Pagoda.



# CHUÔNG: THE KINGDOM OF THE CONICAL HAT

## GETTING THERE

Leaving Hà Nội, take National Highway n°6 towards Hòa Bình. Go through the town of Hà Đông, the administrative centre of the former province of Hà Tây. As you leave the town, turn left onto National Highway n°22: a sign points the way to the famous Perfume Pagoda, Chùa Hương. Continue for 12 kilometres. You will pass through the town of Kim Bài, administrative centre of Thanh Oai District. Continue along this road: after 2.5 kilometres, you will see carpenters' workshops and big tree trunks on the verges. These are the new workshops in the village of Mã Kiều (Phường Trung Commune). A sign on the right announces that you have arrived at *làng* Chuông, the conical hat village.

## THE CONTEXT

The village of **Chuông** (Phường Trung Commune, Thanh Oai District) has specialised for a very long time in making hats, known as *nón lá*, from the leaves of an endemic species of latan palm tree. Today, the official name of this ancient village's commune is Phường Trung, but everyone still knows it as *làng Chuông* (village of Chuông), inextricably linked to its famous *nón*, so ask for it like that, should you have any trouble following our excellent map. It is a village with a distinct charm, about 30 kilometres southwest of Hà Nội, next to the Đáy River (a distributary of the Red River), straddled over the dyke, with the area liable to flooding made up of scattered inhabitations surrounded by orchards and vegetable gardens.

## U OR NON-U?

The conical hat is, of course, an emblematic accessory in Vietnam, its simple and classic form instantly recognisable among many other hats made of plant matter worn in Asia and elsewhere. It is part of the attire universally considered as traditional among Kinh women. The Kinh or Việt, the people of the plains and the Delta, are the ethnic majority group in Vietnam (about 85%). And the Kinh woman wears her *nón* whether she's working in the rice paddies or out for a Sunday walk in her best *áo dài*, the famous long, close-fitting tunic, split to the waist, worn with light and flowing trousers by Vietnamese women of all ages.

**“Symbol.** With the *áo dài* (tunic with two flaps taken in at the waist), the *nón lá* (conical hat made of latan palm leaves) has always contributed to the charm of Vietnamese women. In addition, it is a prosperous activity for the village of Chuông, west of Hà Nội.

Chuông lies about 40 minutes by motorbike from Hà Nội, in Hà Tây Province. In this village, at the heart of the Red River Delta, far from the bustle of the city, don't forget to bring your camera to snap scenes of people at work, the old houses with porticos covered with moss and especially the market in the communal house's courtyard. In the winter light, the village of Chuông is draped in vivid colours: the golden sunshine, the rows of green areca palms and bamboo hedges, the pure and immaculate white of the yards of drying leaves”. *Le Courrier du Vietnam*, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2001: “Conical hats bring prosperity to Chuông village”.

It is easy to smile upon reading this somewhat idealised presentation with its rather one-dimensional tone, aimed at the tourist trade. Nevertheless, the last time we dropped by at least, Chuông was indeed a charming little village, where the annoyances of the city are left far behind, where there is little visible poverty and, above all, where one can easily and freely observe a very ancient community craft activity that is still successfully maintained to this day.

It is difficult to remain indifferent to the charm and specificity of such a collective manifestation of skill and instinct for survival so ingeniously put to good use. This still very rural village, with its traditions and customs, has weathered war, famine and the severe social turmoil of recent centuries. Yet can it survive unscathed in this current era and ride out the wave of barely-controlled urbanisation, rocketing economic development and all-embracing globalisation?



MAKING NÓN AT ƯỚC LỄ

© Tessa Bunney.



## A folkloric hat-trick

*Passing by the bridge, I tilt my palm-leaf hat to look at it.  
The span of the bridge is a measure of my sorrow.  
Passing by the đình, I tilt my palm-leaf hat to look at it.  
The number of tiles on the roof is a measure of my love for you.*

[Traditional folk song]

The village itself has also gone down in Vietnamese folklore with its headgear: another song hummed in the Delta gives this advice:

*If you want to taste really good rice and fish,  
If you want to wear an excellent palm-leaf hat,  
Come to Chuông!*

Tradition once dictated that a boy present a hat made of whitened leaves as a token of love to the object of his affections. This *sine qua non* of gallant demeanour had all the more symbolic impact because the young man was supposed to have made it with his own hands... Once you know that even a skilled hat-maker cannot make more than two or three hats (of good quality) a day, it is easy to see that this custom belongs to an age different from that of 'speed-dating' and progressive promiscuity between young people on scooters or on-line...



Since 1<sup>st</sup> August 2008, the Vietnamese authorities, in search of breathing space in order to manage the growth of the capital, have officially incorporated Hà Tây Province into Hà Nội Province within this new urban area, thus creating a fresh peri-urban zone around the extended city limits. This development plan will irremediably alter the lives of many villages similar to Chuông. Those closest to the centre will disappear altogether as distinct and rural entities; those furthest away will run into the suburbs of the new, enlarged city and inevitably traditional crafts will disappear in favour of various business activities related to the inexorable force of attraction exerted by the Delta's metropolis, drawing the periphery in towards the centre.

## THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH

In fact, if we wanted to insist on an attempt at historical precision, (which would be sadly lacking the polyphony of the past, as is often the case with Western chronicles), if we really had this tiresome wish, we could have pointed out that the *áo dài* was originally an adaptation of a Chinese item of clothing worn by both sexes, called the *cheong sam*. It was only at the beginning of the 1930s that a certain Nguyễn Cát Tường, Vietnamese writer and fashion designer in his spare time, created the *áo dài* that we know and love today. Progressively tightened and brightened up by Saigonese tailors, the garment fell out of favour with men and became the 'traditional' dress of women throughout Vietnam.

Pursuing this avenue of epistemological and emblematic nit-picking, if we look closely at the *nón lá*, the hat made of leaves is indeed typical of southern Chinese-influenced cultures (not only in Vietnam), but in fact, the 'classic' conical hat was once worn essentially by men. Women sported flat, wide hats, as shown by photographs from the French colonial era – confirmed by Gourou (1936), then Huard & Durand (1954). In disagreement with the claims of Chuông's hat-makers, this latter source also claims that the best palm-leaf hats do not come from the north of the country, but the centre. Since the beginning of the collectivist period with its clothing similar to that of revolutionary China, identical for both sexes, one must admit that it is rare to see a man wearing a conical hat. As usual, however, history has a tendency of repeating itself, since a 'new' androgynous tradition has taken hold, both in the city and the countryside, down in the Deltas and high up in the mountains: the baseball cap...

Why then these shifts in interpretation and this appropriation of emblems that are very visible but, when all is said and done, without great fundamental importance? Perhaps because a country with such a long, narrow territory, a cultural diversity from one Delta to the other and tenuous communications like those of Vietnam, a society that has borne so much turbulence and uprooting, a nation militarily and ideologically rent asunder and only recently reconstituted, such a country rising from its own ashes might perhaps have a natural need to (re)generate itself through federating myths, unifying symbols and nationalist emblems; however simple these might be.

Be all that as it may, even if the *nón* is now perceived by young, city-dwelling women as *nhà quê* (unsophisticated, peasant-like: 'red-neck' doesn't quite work...), it nonetheless remains a working tool of considerable value for women in a rural environment. It is at once a constant protection against the sun and the rain, an efficient fan, a charm accessory and a makeshift container for grain, seeds, fruit, vegetables, chicken livers – and even for refreshing drinks (non-alcoholic ones, of course...).

They have been making hats out of latan palm leaves in Chuông since forever, or at least for very nearly as long as that. Village elders claim that once, this vegetable headgear was reserved for the Royal Court. Times change, the details of the origins are lost, but the tradition remains. Until the 1940s at least, coats were also made here out of latan palm leaves. These coats, which are no longer produced today, apart from a small quantity for export to Japan, were once very popular in the Delta and offered protection from both the cold and the rain. They had the added advantage of being made with the tips of latan palm leaves not used by the *nón*-makers. Pierre Gourou gives us a vivid description of them (1936):

"These bushy coats, as far removed as possible by their unmodified vegetable appearance from the idea that one usually conjures of a garment, concealing those who wear them and making them blend with their surroundings, with the dried leaves, a stack of straw, or the thatch of village huts."

At that same period, there were still about 50 variants of hat styles. They were (pointed, flat-topped, with a metallic crest, etc.) for mandarins, for monks, for soldiers... Today, these hats are only made to order by the very rare artisans still capable of mastering the techniques required. One kind that can still be seen being worn sometimes are the *quai thao*, big, flat hats with decorated chinstraps, under which you find the charming female singers of *quan họ* folksongs at festival times (see box, **Itinerary n°1 p. 89**). However, almost all the other styles have disappeared forever and it is the *nón* that comes out on top: the ‘classic’ conical hat, derived in fact from a hat that originated somewhere near the town of Huế. According to Chuông artisans, the Huế *nón* are less resistant and not waterproof, since they don’t have bamboo leaves inserted between the latan palm leaves, which appears to be true.

Another *nón* variant drawing its origins from Huế but found in Chuông is the *nón bài thơ*, or ‘poetic conical hat’: if the hat is placed in front of a light source, inside, you can see the silhouette of shapes or ideograms cut into a leaf inserted between the palm leaves. A touch of individual frivolity discreetly integrated into an everyday practical item.

## NON MULTUM, SED MULTA

Out of about 3,500 households in Chuông, 85% make *nón*. 3.5 million *nón* are made annually here. If one makes a rapid (and imprecise) calculation, that clearly makes more than three hats per household per day, every day of the year. It is almost exclusively women who do this work regularly, bearing in mind that the elderly, as well as the young (even schoolgirls) are expected to do their part. Moreover, the figure of two or three hats a day given earlier only refers to *nón* of the highest quality; with a justice as poetic as the occasional conical hat (all things being relative), Vietnam exports a significant quantity (one or two containers a day: not bad!) of poor-quality *nón* to... – To where? You’ll never guess... Yes, to China!

Making hats with leaves is the ultimate manual labour: there is little chance that this can be mechanised one day, it requires a certain dexterity (but not much strength) and needs above all lots of time. An inhabitant of Chuông once defined it like this: “it’s a craft that stops you starving”. Like many crafts (if not all) in the Delta’s villages, it is indeed originally a stopgap activity, a way of occupying the sporadically under-employed agricultural workforce in a temporary and profitable manner, providing (once the produce is sold at market) a source of ready money for inevitable expenses, meaning anything that does not grow in the earth around the village. The raw materials are not costly; the few tools required are simple and cheap (a knife and a needle, in fact). The financial returns are low: to make a *nón* that will be sold on average for 12,000 VNĐ, you must first spend 3,000 to 5,000 VNĐ, depending on the intended quality, but all that needs to be invested on top of this small sum are manual labour and time.

Production of *nón* is subjected to seasonal fluctuations in demand and therefore selling prices are affected as well. Preparation and storage of raw materials are a problem for some, and the use of toxic chemical products in order to fumigate these plant hats against mould is a potential danger for everybody.

We should add one further comment about production: without the extraordinary organisation around this activity, in spite of the modest investments required, it would be far from profitable. If a hat-maker had to go several kilometres to buy a twig of wicker here, or three latan palm leaves there, in order to make an item that sells for so little, she could not make a living. There are remarkable complementarities among a group of villages with Chuông at its centre, each specialised in preparing or making just one of the component parts (see: **“Non-stop production” p. 248**). This extended production space is very well organised – mainly by women, just as it is mainly women who make the *nón*.

## NON-STOP PRODUCTION

To make a *nón*, you need five ingredients:

**The crown (*khuôn*)** or working frame, made of bamboo, around which you are going to make your hat. It is conical (surprise, surprise) and is made from Hòa Bình bamboo (the best) and was surely assembled in the village of Vác (or Lua), the only *khuôn*-producing village in the province, three kilometres from Chuông in Dân Hòa Commune (where you will probably be going very soon (same itinerary, look for fan-makers). In Huế, they make wooden *khuôn*, but not here. Making *khuôn* is a craft in its own right (the bamboo must be soaked lengthily before bending it, etc.), but since each *khuôn* can be used on average for 10 to 20 years, potential markets seem to be quite limited.

**Bamboo hoops (*vòng*)** that make up the hat's skeleton: 16 in Chuông compared with 20 in the central provinces (Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, Hà Tĩnh...), carefully polished, delicately tied and kindly supplied (in exchange for a small consideration) by the village of Đôn Thu (still in Kim Thư Commune: don't worry, it's not far). You place the concentric circles on the *khuôn*.

**Latan palm tree leaves (*lá co* or *lá nón*)**, which once came from Hòa Bình (probably the best and only 50 kilometres away) or from **Quảng Hòa**, but now travel by lorry from Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, or even from Laos. You will have to dry them in the sun for two or three days, then flatten them with a hot iron (or ploughshare). This is the most delicate operation of all.

**A layer of bamboo (*mo*)**, which comes from Hải Giang, and is placed between the palm leaves.

**Nylon thread:** most of it comes from Hồ Chí Minh City (now that really is a long way!). The threads were once made from wicker fibres from the village of Lưu Thượng nearby (see p. 262). We have everything we need now to proceed with assembling and stitching.

If you want to avoid all these errands, hurry up and do what everybody else does: get down to Chuông market (see the section "A walk in Chuông" p. 250), where you will be lucky enough to find these supplies in a single place. After a few years of apprenticeship and a few weeks of unstinting labour, you should have a little stock to take and sell at the same market...





CHEAP NÓN FROM CHUÔNG, DESTINED FOR CHINA

NÓN QUẠI THAO HANGING IN THE ĐÌNH AT CHUÔNG



## A walk in Chuông

Leave National Highway n°22 to the right and enter the commune. This is made up of agglomerated villages, which give the impression of a certain unity; the houses stand so closely together on both sides of the road that leads to the dyke. Once you have gone past the carpenters' neighbourhood, the canal, then the communal People's Committee on the right, houses are even more tightly packed. The street crosses a neighbourhood fairly busy with trade and craft activities: you can see a certain number of hat-makers hard at work. A visit to Mr. Cảnh (see box p. 253 and n°4 on the map p. 251) is not to be missed.

Go and lose yourself in the maze of streets on the left (in mauve on the map) where you can see, by peeking over walls, women and girls busy mounting hats or stitching them. When the girls come out of school, they get together at the house of one or another to stitch the *nón* that their mothers will have put together in the morning.

You can see the workshop-cum-shop of **Mrs. Hoàng Thị Sang** on the left (n°8 on the map). This hat-maker has found the winning line: the poor-quality *nón* made for Chinese peasants. Nobody makes them in China any more.

The nerve-centre of *làng* Chuông is the raw materials market lodged in the heart of the religious buildings complex made up of a *đình*, a pagoda and a temple. This heritage site of great quality backs onto the dyke that protects the whole of Hà Tây Province from the former violence of the Đáy River. This dyke now serves as a drying space for palm leaves and as a dynamic trade route in this area where craft villages and markets abound.

Chuông hosts a very large market selling hats (obviously it deals mainly in *nón lá*) and – as you already know – the raw materials to make these items. The market is held in the centre of the village, in front of the *đình*. It has been there for at least 200 years, is very interesting to visit and attracts all the artisans from neighbouring villages whose work is linked to the craft. The produce sold here is sent to other provinces and exported to China, Thailand, Japan, Europe, etc. The most important markets take place on each date of the lunar calendar that finishes with a "0" or a "4": the 4<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> days. If you are lucky enough to be in Chuông on one of these days, look also for novelty hats, such as those made of Vạn Phúc silk (see Itinerary n°4) and less pointed *nón*, aimed at the Japanese market. Note also: a smaller market takes place several times a month here: officially, the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> days of the lunar month, unofficially... good luck: if you arrive early enough, we remain optimistic: you will see some action in this very attractive specialised market.

To get a great panoramic view of the market, try the little pavilion or belfry without a bell (or walls, for that matter), just next door (see map p. 251). During the morning rush hour (you must get here early: everything begins to close down from about 9h), a dazzling forest of whitened palm leaves, stitched together to make bunches of *nón*, waves in the village square. To see the palm leaves drying in the sunshine, you have to go a bit further into the village, to the dyke, the spot favoured by artisans who don't have enough space at home.

Chuông also has a very fine *đình*. Find the market and it is just opposite. Beware of the dog that bites and guards the rear courtyard. The hat-making craft ancestor is buried in a mausoleum just in front of Chuông's pagoda. For the craft festival, his ashes are carried out of the pagoda and taken to the *đình*. This building serves as a place of worship for a general who protected the local youth who, because they had wanted to see the face of a queen who came to the village, had been condemned to death by the king. This champion of youthful indiscretion is also worshipped at the *đình* in Quảng Bá, an affluent suburb of Hà Nội.

If you are looking for colonial hats made of palm leaves, a souvenir favoured by nostalgic Frenchmen, call upon **Mrs. Tạ Thu Hương**, a little further south, near the dyke (see n°6 on the map).

# Chuông



- |  |                                   |  |                    |                        |
|--|-----------------------------------|--|--------------------|------------------------|
|  | Residential area                  |  | Conical hat market | ① Đỉnh                 |
|  | Residential area outside the dyke |  | Pond               | ② Pagoda               |
|  | Cultivated area                   |  | Canal              | ③ Mausoleum            |
|  | Hat-makers' neighbourhood         |  | Cultural site      | ④ Mr. Cảnh's workshop  |
|  | Carpenters' neighbourhood         |  | Dyke road          | ⑤ Pagoda               |
|  | Space for drying leaves           |  | Tân Dân Village    | ⑥ Mr. Hương's workshop |
|  | High street                       |  |                    | ⑦ Temple with garden   |
|  |                                   |  |                    | ⑧ Mrs. Sang's workshop |





AT THE HOME OF A HAT-MAKER, ƯỚC LỄ





## Mr. Cảnh and his “craft that stops you starving”

Located near the entrance to the village (see map p. 251) is the small house of **Mr. Trần Văn Cảnh**, nearly 80 years old, a one-legged military veteran (he lost the other leg around the time of Điện Biên Phủ) and a great craftsman of leaf hats.

Mr. Cảnh and his family have specialised in making conical hats from long ago, from ethnic minorities and of all shapes (flat, pointed, with decorations, etc.) that are used for theatrical performances and folk dances. Among other styles, he knows the secrets of these hats:

- the *nón quai thao* (for female *quan họ* singers in Bắc Ninh Province, see Itinerary n°1);
- the *nón Chóp Dứa* (big hats for medium-sized mandarins);
- the Hong Kong *nón* (no, they're not made of plastic...);
- the *nón ghép* (a local variant).

Mr. Cảnh's speciality is the *nón quai thao*, very fine flat hats for singers, with a chinstrap decorated with silk tassels. This is skilled and expert work: the inside is delicately decorated with flowers or other patterns; a little vanity mirror is positioned inside the headband. If you are lucky enough to see him in action, you will appreciate the difficulty and intricacy of the task. Such a hat requires 1,600 stitches and two whole days of work. Mr. Cảnh is known and respected by the villagers for his expertise and passion for the craft, which he helped to revive upon his return from the war. He continues to train apprentices in the hope of seeing this traditional activity maintained.

You can buy various models of rare hats directly from Mr. Cảnh or his family, if there are any available, of course.

## CANH HOẠCH

Canh Hoạch (Dân Hòa Commune, Thanh Oai District) is a village specialised in making paper fans and bamboo birdcages. On the outskirts of the village, there remain a few makers of balance poles (the bamboo beams that support suspended loads and rest on the shoulder).

### GETTING THERE

Leaving Chuông, take National Highway n°22 to the right. After about two kilometres, you will come to the Vác crossroads, south of which begins the village of Canh Hoạch, once called Vác. Along the road on the left, you will see many purple paper fans left out to dry. You have arrived.

### THE CONTEXT

Before the 1990s, the village mostly busied itself with making paper for firecrackers sold in Bình Đà, a town once famous for its firecrackers that you came through on the way from Hà Đông. Only a few artisans made fans and birdcages, since these items didn't sell as well as paper.

In 1994, the government banned the making of firecrackers (see **explanation in Itinerary n°1 p. 74-75**) and artisans turned to fans and birdcages. Since 1995, they have been produced on a larger scale.

The French researcher Pierre Gourou mentions five villages making fans in the Delta during the 1930s: today, only Canh Hoạch and Chàng Sơn (Hà Tây) remain. It is not a very lucrative activity and is mostly carried out by women. As we are in the area specialised in bamboo and wickerwork though, access to raw materials is much easier and enables households to make some extra income.

However, we should also point out that with the spread of electrification, people use electric fans (less tiring for the wrists) and the paper fan market has consequently slumped. It is mostly the elderly and itinerant saleswomen who use them today. Old people like to settle down outside their front doorstep and watch the world go by in the street, with a Canh Hoạch paper fan to keep cool.

### THE CRAFTS

Birdcages and fans are two of the nicest craft products in the region. You can see very fine birdcages, often with tenants in them, as the Vietnamese love to keep caged birds, both in Hà Nội and in the countryside. (There are also Buddhist rituals that entail people buying caged birds in order to free them, which obviously boost demand). Canh Hoạch fans, simple but well-made, are harder to find in Hà Nội amid all the bigger and more brightly-coloured Chinese imports.

Making cages requires intricate work with bamboo. The stalks are curved for aesthetic reasons by means of prolonged immersion in water before being bent into shape. You can find cages of many shapes and sizes, and at very reasonable prices.

A fan consists of a frame made from slats of bamboo (three years old) and paper (traditionally brown or deep purple), attached to the frame, in the past with a sticky paste made from persimmons (a local fruit) that gave off a nauseous smell while the fan was still new. Today, artisans manage to reproduce precisely the same effect, but with more modern and chemical products. A fan made in this way is completely different from the rather tacky items mass-produced in China: it is a fine piece of craftwork, sober and discreet. (Note that the folding fan was born in Japan around the 10<sup>th</sup> century, in contrast to all the legends that attribute to China the paternity of most Vietnamese arts.)

However, fan-makers are businesspeople, and if asked, they can produce fans as advertising space, to which a company logo or other promotional content can be added. In addition, they can also replace the paper with silk, which can also carry images or slogans. "A magic slip of paper that casts a spell can be incorporated into the fan, designed to visit misfortune upon the person being fanned with it" (Huard P. & Durand M., 2002). Sometimes, very big fans are produced, up to a metre wide, decorated with landscapes, pictures, poems or songs.



One of the older village artisans, Mr. Trần Văn Độn and his brother (see map p. 259 and section: “A walk in Canh Hoạch”) still produce fans with a traditional refinement, of which he and his family are perhaps the last to know the secret: viewed closely, one can see an intricate decoration, made with a needle, creating shapes from little pinpricks of light. Such a fan was once the ideal accessory for an amorous moonlight tryst. The father of these fraternal craftsmen even had the signal honour of making a fan for Hồ Chí Minh, today displayed at the museum devoted to the first president of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

According to tradition, the purchase of a fan falls, like many other activities, within the purview of superstition, here in the domain of Vietnamese numerology. Note this explanation from Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, a journalist with the newspaper *Annam nouveau*, the edition of 10<sup>th</sup> June 1934:

“The number of the fan’s slats must be a multiple of four; it can, at a pinch, have one or two extra slats, but never three. The superstitious buyer, before purchasing a fan, counts the slats, reciting in order the following words: *người* (man, people), *ta* (me), *ma* (evil spirits), *bụt* (Buddha); the count must never conclude with an evocation of evil spirits.”

There are numerological concerns almost identical to those for fans in other domains, for example when building a house. If it hasn’t happened already, you will soon stumble upon a staircase (not literally, I hope) with a first or last step much bigger or smaller than the others: this is to avoid finishing up with a total number of steps that would bring misfortune upon the inhabitants of the house...

The background of the page is a photograph of several purple paper fans (quạt giấy) laid out to dry on a light-colored stone ledge. The fans are partially open, showing their light-colored wooden or bamboo slats. The scene is set outdoors, with a stone pillar visible in the upper left corner.

## Fanning the flames of desire

Here are a few lines of poetry about a fan, written by one of the best-known Vietnamese poets, Hồ Xuân Hương. This exceptionally cultivated woman (for her time), who died in about 1822, was orphaned at a young age, and then was twice a “wife of second rank” (second wife of a – legally – polygamous civil servant), and twice widowed. As they put it so elegantly in literary anthologies, “poetry was for her the means to give vent to ardent aspirations in her nature that life did not fulfil.” Leaving to posterity about 60 poems in a compact style of disarming simplicity, she managed to infuse landscapes and everyday objects with an eroticism of disconcerting frankness, while also making an impassioned plea for the equality of women within the couple and castigating the hypocrisies and injustices of the inflexible structure of the Confucian society in which she lived.

Note how the first line of the poem echoes the activity recounted by Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh of counting the fan’s slats – or is the speaker guessing the age of a young woman...?

### The Paper Fan

*Seventeen or eighteen, is it?  
Let me cherish you and keep you close  
Thin or thick spreads your triangle  
Narrow or wide glides the tenon.  
The hotter it gets, the sweeter your coolness  
Nights are not enough, I need you in the day  
Pink like cheeks with sticky persimmon juice  
Kings and lords just love this thing!*

CANH HOẠCH PAPER FANS DRYING

## A walk in Canh Hoạch

It is best to start this walk at the *dinh* that is a little way south of the Vác crossroads, on the left. A sign points the way to this historic and popular tourist site set on the far side of a pond.

You can visit this very fine *dinh* with an imposing courtyard behind it. Ask for the key from the guard if it is closed. Inside, a huge painted fan on the wall is dated 1760, which shows how far back this craft goes. You will see palanquins and all the necessary paraphernalia employed to bring out the craft ancestor during the festival.

Leaving the *dinh*, take the alley on the left that goes into the village. On both sides, you will see workshops of birdcage builders. An activity that doesn't take up too much space, it fits comfortably into the courtyards of private houses. The village can be roughly divided into two parts: the south generally makes cages, and the neighbourhood north of the church mostly makes fans.

The first street to the left cuts north-south through the village. A few tens of metres distant, a large square opens up in front of the church. Here again, you will see busy workshops with artisans cutting up little strips of bamboo, rounding them off and assembling them to make cages of all shapes and sizes. To produce the curves of the cages, the bamboo is softened by boiling it. Then it is shaped inside a round metal mould: the mould is filled up with slats of boiled bamboo. Simple cages fetch about 40,000 to 50,000 VNĐ. A family can produce ten of them a day. Some artisans can make very fancy cages that sell for 150,000 to 500,000 VNĐ.

North of the church, if the weather is fine, by walking around the narrow streets, you will probably come across a courtyard filled with a phalanx of fans drying in the sun. They are spread out anywhere there is room for them: courtyards of houses, the precincts of the very charming *nhà thờ họ* that you will see on your right, by the side of the road: is all very picturesque. You can buy them nearly everywhere: fan is (*cái*) *quạt* in Vietnamese, not to be confused with *quạt máy* ('fan-machine'), which means (logically enough): 'electric fan'. Opposite the *nhà thờ họ* is the house of a fan-maker, where it is possible to see women at work. You will also see cages made in this courtyard, an activity practised only by the men of the family.

Going on up the street, on the left ask for the workshop of Mr. Nguyễn Văn Nghê. The superb bamboo lamps covered with *giấy dó* (hand-made paper: see **Itinerary n°1 p. 83**) that you find in chic Hà Nội boutiques for a cool 800,000 VNĐ are sold at a quarter of that price here. Well, you do have to dust them off before you choose one. His workshop-cum-shop is a real Aladdin's cave (fancy birdcages, lamp stands, various wickerwork and bamboo items, baskets, etc.). He only works to order but keeps a host of things in his showroom that he sells to visitors. He is one of the village's only artisans to have diversified production and subcontracts work out to several families.



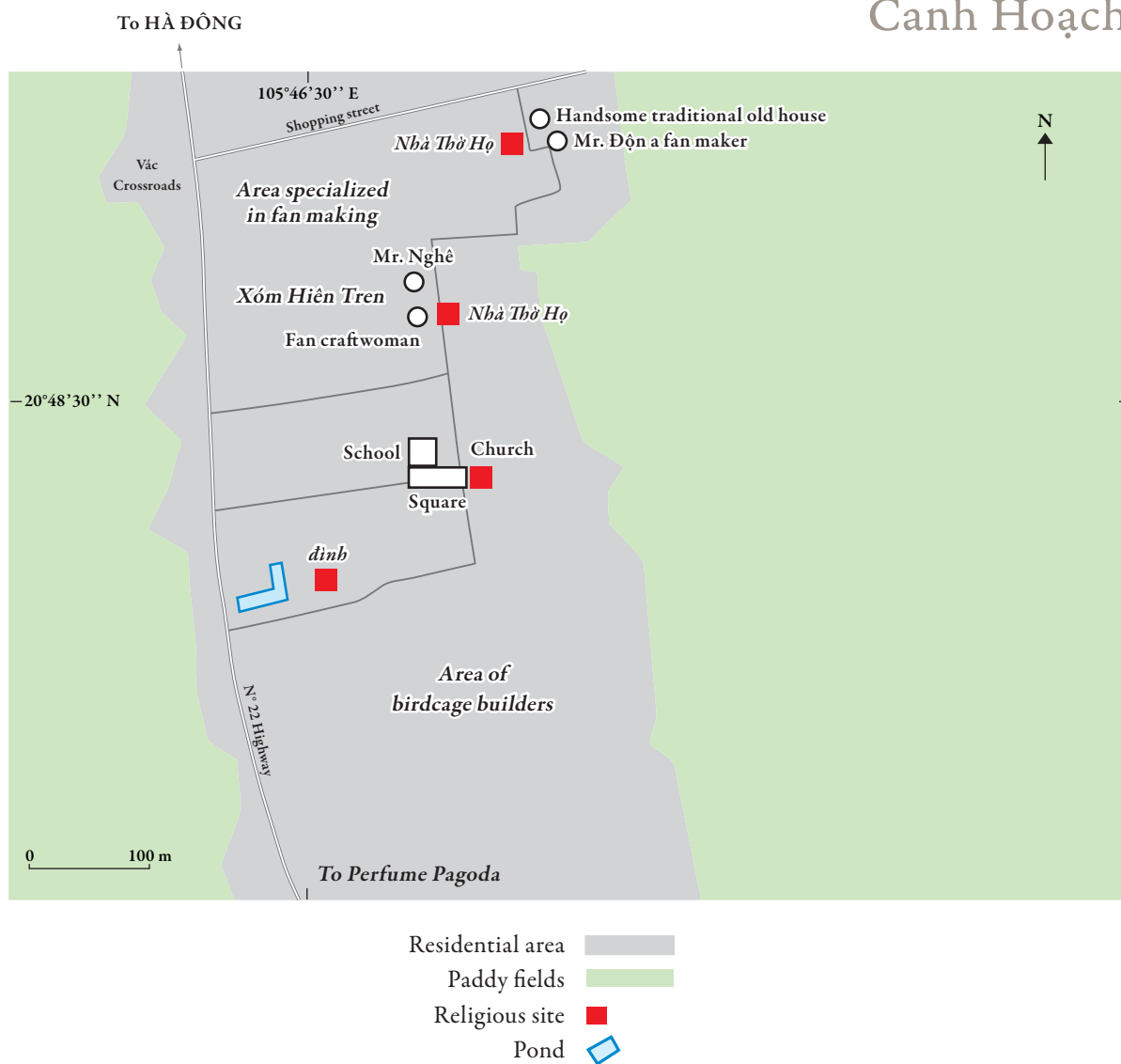
In this former hamlet, *Xóm Hiên Tren*, you will meet women pushing 'hand bicycles' (bicycles converted into carts) loaded with packets of slats of bamboo, ready to have purple paper stuck on them by the women specialised in making fans. There is a strong division of labour between workshops, which are usually very close to each other.

The high point of the walk is a visit to **Mr. Trần Văn Độn**, last but one in a long line of specialised makers of 'luxury' fans. To get through the maze of alleys to the house of this craftsman, use our map, but don't hesitate to ask the way – it's complicated –, as everybody knows him. This elderly artisan (he was 91 in 2006) has passed on his craft to his son and daughter-in-law who make superb purple paper fans, and, since recently, red ones, into which they prick out drawings of dragons, other mythical animals or flowers, which let the light through. It is possible to buy them in all sizes, of various qualities (the handles are sometimes made of buffalo horn) for very modest prices (10,000 VNĐ for the small ones with bamboo handles, up to 100,000 VNĐ for big, more sophisticated ones).

This family's traditional old house is very handsome and has been renovated without too much bad taste. Behind the house, the *nhà thờ họ* of the Trần lineage was recently refurbished in 2006. Inside, two shrines to the ancestors are flanked by paintings representing, as in the *đình*, fans. Behind this again, but on the right, is a very fine house belonging to Mr. Độn's brother.

It is possible to get back to the highway by going down the shopping street, which you take to the left when you come out of the alley. This road leads to the Vác crossroads. For the next part of the itinerary, take National Highway n°22 to the left.

# Canh Hoạch



Source: Google Earth 2008, IRD Cartography Department



AN INCENSE STICK MAKER'S WORKSHOP, CAO BAO KHÊ (HƯNG YÊN)





## QUẢNG PHÚ CẦU

The villages of Quảng Phú Cầu Commune (Ứng Hoà District) make bamboo incense sticks (*hương thề*). These sticks are votive offerings for the pagoda, the temple, the *đình* and the home. In keeping with popular belief, coils of incense smoke are the only viable means of communication between the world of the living and that of the dead. Accordingly, there are villages all over Vietnam that make these carriers of messages to the other side. Production is a very colourful activity, but it is excessively toxic for those (mostly women) who are exposed to it daily.

Use of incense is very widespread in religious ritual. Lighted sticks are placed regularly on the shrine to the ancestors found in every house. At festival time in temples and pagodas, the smoke can be intense. One of the authors, visiting a famous pagoda on the eve of *Tết*, observed an old man responsible for removing barely-lit incense sticks in order to make room for fresh ones; to work in this smoke-filled environment, he was wearing a diving mask (without a snorkel) to protect his eyes... One sometimes hears it said that monks and Vietnamese-style 'church mice', by dint of breathing in all this very harmful smoke (much worse than tobacco), fatally damage their lungs, just as the Amerindians of cold regions did by spending the winter huddled over a bonfire in order to survive until the spring.

### GETTING THERE

Once you're at the Vác crossroads, take Road n°22 again to the left and go past the *đình*. Continue straight on for about two kilometres. You go over a small canal and enter Ứng Hoà District. At least another kilometre and you go over another canal. 500 metres further on, you turn left down a little street and enter directly into Quảng Nguyên, one of the villages of Quảng Phú Cầu Commune. You can stop in this village or one of the next two, Đạo Tú or Cầu Bấu, which are all three specialised in chopping up bamboo and making incense sticks. Space on the side of the road is mostly taken up with drying for these activities. You will see all the stages of making these items, from the chopping up to the dipping into a mixture of glue, incense and bamboo sawdust.

# LƯU THƯỢNG

Lưu Thượng (known traditionally as Giàu Tể), a village of Phú Túc Commune (Ứng Hoà District), was the birthplace of wickerwork (with *tể* grass) many centuries ago.

## GETTING THERE

Once you've gone through the village of Cầu Bấu, continue straight on along the canal that you crossed before getting to this last village. After about a kilometre, on your right you will see a big company, the Phú Ngọc Handicraft Export Co. Ltd, managed by Mr. Nguyễn Văn Ngọc, one of the first artisans to have opened up the village to the international capitalist market. You will see many wicker baskets drying along the roadside near his business. Then, turn into a little road on the right. Another kilometre and a half and you have arrived in Lưu Thượng. The village gate is to the left.

## THE CONTEXT

Local legend has it that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the hamlet of Giàu Tể was invaded by wild grasses. A man settled there and began to weave these grasses to make articles used in everyday life. He taught the inhabitants the techniques of this craft. After his passing, people called him Nguyễn Thảo Lâm, which means "plant of the forest", and gave him the status of patron saint of the village. Every year, homage is paid to him at Lưu Thượng's temple. The usefulness of this grass was a great discovery, as it exists in abundance all over the place in mountainous areas and is not expensive to buy. Bamboo or rattan can easily be replaced by wicker: *tể* grass.

## THE CRAFT

To begin with, the villagers made mostly wicker baskets and bins, as well as bags made with the fibres of this miracle plant. Up until the 1980s, plastic utensils were scarce and expensive in Vietnam. Village artisans noted with surprise the success these simple and rustic items found with the first foreigners to return to Vietnam and reacted accordingly. Since 1988, with the liberalisation of markets, production of wicker items has diversified.

In order to meet the growing demand for woven goods, the inhabitants of Lưu Thượng began to make more frivolous and novelty products: small baskets and bins shaped like animals, retro-style suitcases of all sizes, playful and decorative shapes, etc. Another critical event for the development of this activity was the decision, after much reticence and hesitation, to share weaving techniques with the seven other villages of Phú Túc Commune. Following this, 40 production groups were established to go and find the grass in sufficient quantities in mountainous regions. As weaving *tể* grass requires some specific know-how compared to weaving with bamboo and rattan, Phú Túc artisans enjoy a monopoly in this field.

This craft has become a flourishing industry. Several companies set up in this commune now export all over the world. You can see workshops that go from the most rustic to a semi-industrial production.

A historical link connects Giàu Tể/Lưu Thượng to Chuông, the conical hats village on this same itinerary. Until about 20 years ago, fibres teased from wicker stalks were used to stitch the latan palm-leaf hats: those who prepared them in Giàu Tể went to sell them at Chuông market (recommended earlier). Since that time, nylon threads have replaced wicker fibres, but meanwhile, the *tể* grass weavers have found ways to use the whole stalk.

There is also a current connection between the villages of Phú Túc and another commune on this same itinerary, namely Quảng Phú Cầu, where they produce the incense sticks. These fragrant smoke technicians do business with small artisans from Lưu Thượng and other villages, subcontracting out the tiresome work of chopping up the bamboo sticks, while retaining for themselves the potentially lethal (but more profitable) work of coating them with incense.





AT THE HOME OF A BASKET WEAVER, LƯU THƯỢNG

© Fassi Buitrago





ROPES DRYING IN THE OPEN AIR, LƯU THƯỢNG



## THINGS TO SEE

Walk around Giau Tễ/Lưu Thượng: it's quite an urbanised village, with several external indications of relative affluence, such as the high, modern houses that line the main street. On one side is the *dinh*, the communal house and the cultural centre of the village. It is very old and well preserved, with a duck pond nearby. On the other side of the main street, follow some of the side alleys: the further you go into the village, the more you will see beautiful old low houses with tiled roofs and courtyards often filled with craft raw materials.

If you visit this village on a day when they offload trucks filled to bursting (and then some) with big bundles of *tễ* grass picked in the mountains, you will realise to what extent this raw material can in a few hours occupy all the public space of this little village with narrow streets and the effervescence that it generates among the throng of buyers and sellers. At times other than this rush hour, so to speak, you can see in the alleyways, or by slipping into courtyards, the many operations to separate the various types of wicker (the rigid stalks and the flexible ones) from their outer envelopes. Like witches' hair, these fibres are put out to dry everywhere.

You can also buy wicker items at very competitive prices: – are you short of a frog-shaped bin to equip your guest bathroom, or a miniature squirrel with a basket on its back as a mark of affection for your brother-in-law? Look no further. Go to the house of **Mr. Nguyễn Văn Tuấn** and **Mrs. Kiều** who live in the first alley on the left after the *dinh*. You'll see mountains of bug-eyed frogs left out to dry and all sorts of other animals, it all depends on the current fad or fashion. There are also some very fine wickerwork trays, trunks and boxes of all imaginable dimensions.

## BỐI KHÊ PAGODA, ONE LAST STOP

Bối Khê Pagoda is in the village of Hưng Giáo, (Tam Hưng Commune, Thanh Oai District).

### GETTING TO THE PAGODA

Going back towards Hà Nội on Road n°22, just before the sign announcing Bình Đà (a village), take the road that goes to the right. A big sign points to Thanh Thù, a craft village specialised in metallurgy. After 2.5 kilometres, you come to the village of Song Khê. In a bend in the road, right in the middle of the market, a road goes off to the right. After 500 metres, you arrive at the heart of the village of Hưng Giáo and on the left is Bối Khê Pagoda.

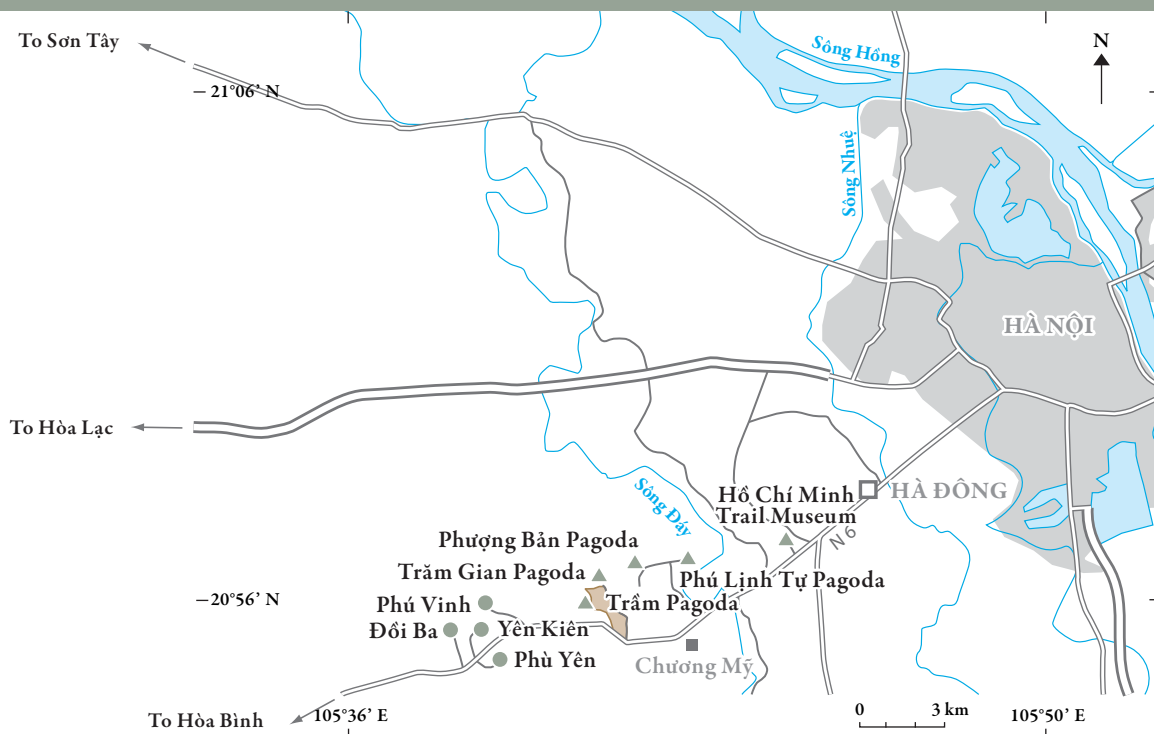
This pagoda was first built during the Trần Dynasty, in or around the year 1338. Since then, it has undergone numerous additions and renovations – for example in 1453, 1573, 1628, 1694, 1701, 1766, 1783 and 1923, if you really must know...

Once you have gone through the pagoda gate, you cross a little bridge over a stream. In front of you is the bell tower. Behind it is the main part of the pagoda, divided into two. Note in particular: the Upper Sanctuary, placed on rows of wide, short pillars; this is perhaps the only wooden structure dating from the Trần Dynasty still standing today. It is all richly decorated and carved with shapes of fig leaves, flowers, dragons and a Garuda (deity of Hindu origin, half-man, half-bird).

Bối Khê Pagoda organises its annual festival on the **13<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**, with games of human chess, competitions, music, etc.

# Itinerary 8

## Bamboo and rattan (west Hà Tây)



### Cultural and architectural heritage

Hồ Chí Minh Trail Museum;  
 Phú Linh Tự (or Phú Ninh) Pagoda;  
 Phượng Bản Temple;  
 Trăm Pagoda, Trăm Gian Pagoda (Pagoda of the Hundred Bays).

### The craft villages

Rattan: Phú Vinh;  
 Bamboo : Đồi Ba, Yên Kiên and Phù Yên (*giang*).



To begin this itinerary, you should leave Hà Nội on the road to Hà Đông, the previous capital of Hà Tây Province. Go through the town and continue straight on towards Hòa Bình, on National Highway n°6.

## HỒ CHÍ MINH TRAIL MUSEUM

### GETTING THERE

To get you off to a flying start, we suggest a little visit to the Hồ Chí Minh Trail Museum (Bảo Tàng Đường Hồ Chí Minh), which is in Phụng Châm Commune, Chúc Sơn, district capital of Chương Mỹ. After leaving Hà Đông, turn immediately right after a small industrial estate. Follow an avenue lined with white-painted trees until you reach the barracks at the end; turn right and go on another 200 metres, where you'll find the museum and surrounding garden.

Opening hours are 7.30 to 11 am and 1.30 to 4.30 pm and the admission fee is reasonable. In the ground-floor exhibition hall, you can follow the three decisive phases in the history of the Trail during the American War, illustrated through photographs with captions in Vietnamese and English. The Hồ Chí Minh Trail, made famous in the West in several (mostly) anti-war protest songs, was originally a narrow path for transporting weapons and supplies, widened at subsequent times. The hidden trail zigzagged for 1,100 kilometres over mountains, valleys and rivers, passing through Laos and Cambodia.

You will see that the visit is by no means irrelevant to the subject of bamboo, our main theme on this itinerary. To complete the Trail, bridges were built, often from bamboo, along with rope and bamboo ladders, as well as stairways, small boats, and baskets for carrying on the back (also in bamboo), and as the Trail advanced, it was protected over hundreds of kilometres by arbours of woven bamboo, built to prevent American Air Force radar from detecting the lorries laden with arms and goods as they passed beneath.

Various military artefacts are displayed, including maps, weapons, tools, and everyday necessities for soldiers in the field (e.g. metal objects fashioned from recycled weaponry: teapots, trays, cups, musical instruments). There are clothes, rubber-tyre sandals, reports, logbooks, poems, radios, and other items. Look out for bombs hidden in a mock jungle as you go up the stairs!

The Trail symbolised Việt Minh resistance against the Americans and their allies. Thousands of bombs were unleashed over it, and the Americans knew that as long as the Trail existed, they could not win the war. The museum is built on a site where young soldiers mustered before heading off to the front and it is dedicated to the many who never returned.

## THE PAGODA TRAIL (AND ONE TEMPLE)

You are now en route to discover the cultural treasures of Phụng Châu Commune (Chương Mỹ District). There are a number of religious sites here thanks to the area's excellent topography according to the precepts of Chinese geomancy. The key elements are here – water, mountains, open vistas – and we have to agree, the disposition is quite magical. It is interesting to imagine this landscape before the Delta was formed, when the ground beneath your feet would have been open sea, dotted with precipitous islets (the karst formations here are the same as the islands of Hạ Long Bay). Alluvial matter carried down by the Red River settled in the valleys, created the plain, and forced the sea back over a hundred kilometres.

### GETTING TO PHỤNG CHÂU

From the museum, take Highway n°6, heading right towards Chúc Sơn, district capital of Chương Mỹ. Follow the Đáy River dyke for a few hundred metres. Cross the bridge over the Đáy, then just before the sign indicating the Hà Đông District exit, take a small road to the right and after about two kilometres you come to a T-junction: the perpendicular road is the dyke road (right bank of the Đáy); opposite is a medical dispensary. Take the road to the right, which leads you into the village of Phụng Nghĩa. From the elevated road, you have a good view of the surrounding lowlands. The surfaced road soon becomes a dirt track as rugged as the nearby Hồ Chí Minh Trail, and after about 500 metres, it brings you to the Phú Linh Tự Pagoda, on your right, below the dyke road level. (N.B. the pagoda is also known as Phú Ninh or Phương).

## PHÚ LỊCH TỰ PAGODA

Standing in the village of Phụng Nghĩa, Phú Lịch Tự is an imposing presence: with its 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century carved stelae, a bell dating from the Tây Sơn Dynasty (17<sup>th</sup> century), 40 lofty stone columns, finely-wrought statues and carvings and 12 bas-reliefs rich in folk art (sadly stolen not long ago), this is a village pagoda par excellence. Few tourists, foreign or Vietnamese, venture here.

A footnote: the other pagodas that you will see nearby are managed by the state, which provides funds for renovation. Here, the villagers pay a subscription to ensure the pagoda is kept in good order.

After 1945, as the war raged against the French, the local people hid Việt Minh militants, soldiers and even a cannon in the pagoda. When French troops destroyed the village gates, the Việt Minh fired back with artillery rounds. The Đáy River became the demarcation zone: beyond lay Hà Nội and its surrounding areas and the road out to Hải Phòng, all occupied by the French; in the rear, Việt Minh territory (for an outsider's perspective of life in the countryside under the Việt Minh, read the excellent novel *A Quiet American* and the war diaries by British novelist Graham Greene).

The various temples and pagodas in this area, along the banks of the Đáy beyond the dyke, all played their part in the war against the French, providing valuable hideouts for communist militant groups.

In the garden next to the pagoda, surrounded by lush vegetation, you will see the stupas of the monks who lived here, along with three Taoist goddesses. The goddesses can help the worshipper to acquire wealth and bring joy to the family (remember that even today, tradition demands that a young wife be under the watchful tutelage of her mother-in-law until the latter dies – preferably of natural causes).

The garden is a good illustration of the syncretism of Buddhism-meets-Taoism. Inside the pagoda there is more syncretism in the heavy-handed restoration treatment of the main altar – perhaps better described as Spanish patio-meets-outdoor swimming pool – but it's a magical, peaceful place all the same. Here you can watch as the village folk make their offerings and murmur their lamentations.

## PHƯƠNG BẢN TEMPLE

### GETTING THERE

Go back the way you came and take the surfaced dyke road across the village, passing, on your left, the link road to Highway n°6 along which you came when you arrived. At the edge of the village, a few hundred metres on, a dirt road goes off to your right, leading to the village of **Phương Bản**, which is stretched along the shore of a very large lake. In the distance, the karst formations of the nearby mountains can be seen.

You will come to a large courtyard on the lakeshore, made up of several buildings. At the end on the left is the main temple, with its stelae dedicated to the cult of Phùng Hưng, a resistance hero from a time of Chinese invasions. In 1972, during the collectivist period, this ancient structure (at least three centuries old) was used as a rice store in the wake of the 1971 floods.

Opposite there is a Taoist temple for the prosperity cult, and on the left a large stele; there is a lodge at the entrance for receiving visitors, and a large banyan tree in the centre. The four other buildings forming this group have been destroyed. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism has designated the site as a national monument, and with the lovely view of the lake, it is indeed a charming spot.

## INTO THE KARST COUNTRY

There is a legend that tells how, long ago, the red star Tử Vi fell from the sky. Five mountains, called the Ngũ Nhạc Sơn (Mountains of the Five Musics), rose up from the earth. The best known of these was Mount Tử Trâm. Around here were the Bút Mountains (quill holders): Vô Vi, Thập Tự and Trạo. Close to the foot of these mountains, there are ancient ox-bow lakes, vestiges of the nearby Đáy River (the Trâm Lakes). Pagodas and temples were built on the mountainsides or mountaintops and there were also a great many caves, cutting deep into the limestone clefts, which were also used as places of worship (and hideouts for revolutionaries). There is an immensely rich heritage here, and Mount Tử Trâm is the most famous of its sites. We are going to show you two of the most interesting temples, the first of which is indeed inside a cave.

### GETTING THERE

Leave Phương Bản by the same road; go back to the banyan on the right. Leave the village to join the surfaced dyke road, heading towards the karst mountains, which are on the right. You go past a small pagoda on a hill, then take a left. At the edge of a broad lake stands the Long Tiên Pagoda, at the foot of the mountain, and inside the cave is the **Long Tiên Động**, or **Hang** (cave), or **Trâm Pagoda**.

## TRÂM PAGODA

At the foot of Mount Tử Trâm is a cave known as **Long Tiên Động**, in which a pagoda has been built. There is a collection of 17<sup>th</sup>-century statues, 48 in all, dating from the Lê Dynasty, representing the virtues of the Buddha and of the warrior. They are assembled here amid glistening stalactites and stalagmites beneath magnificent natural vaults. Poems carved into the stone extol the beauty of the place. In front of each of the statues there is a small altar; plumes of incense rise from a finely carved incense burner. Gongs, bells and drums hang from the walls. At the cave entrance, you will see a stone tortoise with a poem in Chinese characters carved into its shell. Left of the Buddha altars, there are more caves receding in *enfilade*, including the Cave of the Dragon with its Dragon Brook and Well of Jade. According to legend, the female Dragon's breasts produced a milk that could cure all manner of ills, but since logically anyone who managed to get close enough to suckle was instantly consumed by fire, the elixir must have been practically useless.

A more contemporary and rather better documented story recounts how the future President Hồ Chí Minh came here to collect his thoughts and light some incense sticks. Apparently, in the early days of 1947, at the very start of the resistance struggle against the French, the Voice of Vietnam (national radio) broadcast his call to arms from inside this very cave.



# THE TRĂM GIAN PAGODA (“PAGODA OF THE HUNDRED BAYS”)

## GETTING THERE

After leaving the Trăm Pagoda through the cave, retrace your steps and take the tarmac road to the left. A sign points the way towards **Trăm Gian Pagoda** as you navigate the dry expanse of ocean: ten cables to the ponant, me hearties (in other words, two kilometres west)...

Encircled by magnificent trees several centuries old, and perched on a hill known as *Núi Chùa* (the Mountain of the Pagoda) in the attractive village of Tiên Lữ (Tiền Phương Commune), you will find Quảng Nghiêm Pagoda, otherwise known as Tiên Lữ, or, more evocatively, Trăm Gian (Pagoda of the Hundred Bays). According to certain documents<sup>1</sup>, the pagoda was built around 1185 around the reign of King Lý Cao Tông, but it has evidently been restored many times.

The popular name for the pagoda comes from the fact that, if we consider the space between four columns as equal to one bay, we can count a total of - well, 104 actually, but 100 sounds better. These “hundred” bays are shared among three different building groups. The first of them is a pair of pavilions: one is used to stage the human chess games playing during festivals; the other - the *Giá Ngự* - (“garage” in modern parlance) is a parking place for the imperial coach. It faces the lotus pond; from this spot, Saint Bối’s ‘statue’ can watch, as it were, from the comfort of his palanquin, the water puppet shows performed at festival time. There are numerous stelae, with horizontal and parallel sentences, including one (15<sup>th</sup> century) richly inlaid with mother-of-pearl (see **Itinerary n°6 p. 233**).

You now have a few hundred steps to climb to reach a courtyard of venerable trees, where you will find the second architectural group, including a double-decker bell tower with eight roofs. One of the region’s finest, the tower dates from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Have a look at the carpentry, richly carved with dragons. One or two blue stone steps will lead you to the third ensemble, that of the main pagoda itself: the ceremonial hall, incense hall and upper sanctuary.

Hanging from the altar of the patriarchs, you will observe a drum one metre across and a large, 18<sup>th</sup>-century bronze gong. All around the temple there are statues, over 150 of them, mostly in lacquered wood, though some are in terra cotta while others, wrapped around with lacquered cloth, are woven in rattan (we will see plenty more rattan in the villages to come). The statue of Saint Bối lives here, in his wooden casket (see **box p. 271**).

Another of the statues is identified as that of Đặng Tiến Đông, a general of the Tây Sơn revolt, who besieged and “liberated” Hà Nội (Thăng Long, as it was then).

But enough historical tittle-tattle! Let’s go and see what goes on in the villages in these parts...

<sup>1</sup> « According to certain documents... »: this turn of phrase and the date it validated are taken from an interesting book, *Chùa Việt Nam / Buddhist Temples in Vietnam* (i.e. pagodas), by Hà Văn Tấn, Nguyễn Văn Kự, and Phạm Ngọc Long, (see **bibliography**). The beauty and power of this phrase stem from its wise and thoughtful air, coexisting harmoniously with a complete absence of references or objective corroboration.



## The Meteorological Monk, or the Revenge of the Mummy

During the Trần Dynasty (14<sup>th</sup> century), there was a monk named Nguyễn Lữ, or (Nguyễn) Bình An, and later known by the name of Đức Thành Bối, or Saint Bối. He lived and officiated at the Trăm Gian Pagoda. He was also venerated at Bối Khê Pagoda, in the eponymous village not far from here in Thanh Oai District (see end of **Itinerary n°7 p. 265**). Legend says that he possessed superhuman powers and could, at will, command the rain to fall or the wind to blow. In the main pagoda at the top of the hill, you can admire a statue of Saint Bối (in a wooden display case): allegedly, it consists of his mummified and lacquered remains. (See also **Itinerary n°5**, the box entitled “**Return of the Mummy**” p. 217).

It is said that in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese invaders torched the pagoda and put its worshippers to the sword. The spirit of the supernatural monk awoke, stirred from his slumber in the Kingdom of Shadows by this act of desecration from the Middle Kingdom's henchmen. He conjured a torrent of rain, red as blood, which battered the area of Núi Chùa for three days and nights. The Ming soldiers sank into the mire (bogged down in an unwinnable conflict, you might say).

## GETTING TO THE BASKETWARE VILLAGES OF CHƯƠNG MỸ DISTRICT

Go back the way you came as far as the *đình* in the village of Tiên Lữ, which is also used as offices by the Communal People's Committee, and turn right. After 2.5 kilometres, you are back on Highway n°6, where you turn right for the commune of Phú Nghĩa (Chương Mỹ). Go past the big industrial area of the same name on your left, well hidden behind a gigantic fence and identifiable by the somewhat futuristic sign. At the 25 km mark, you will see on the right the entrance to Phú Nghĩa Commune. There are several villages in the commune, the most interesting being **Phú Vinh**, roughly one kilometre after the commune sign (see walk p. 283).

## CHƯƠNG MỸ: ALL THE EGGS IN ONE BASKET

Beneath the hills west of the Delta lies a little area of specialist rattan or bamboo basket weavers. Of the district's 32 communes, 18 are involved in the weaving of natural vegetable fibres - a total of 54 craft villages. The industry employs over 35,000 artisans. The villages are organised into small clusters. The biggest cluster is in the communes of Phú Nghĩa (over 4,000 artisans) and Đông Phương Yên (nearly 3,000 artisans), the latter a more recent convert to basket-weaving. Two communes on the far side of the highway, Trương Yên and Trung Hòa, also specialise in basketware.

The basket trade is a relatively recent arrival. In 1936, French geographer Pierre Gourou only mentioned two villages specialising in rattan work – Phú Vinh, home of the local basket trade (now in the modern commune of Phú Nghĩa) and Nghĩa Hào. Another village, Yên Kiên, specialised in bamboo craft.

These villages are changing rapidly. In 2004, there were still few of the big basketware firms that now line the edges of Highway n°6. The bulk of the production was carried out in the homes and yards of the local villagers. Since August 2008, the province has been gradually absorbed into the greater Hà Nội Province, shedding its old name and succumbing to the real estate frenzy. Industrial parks have sprung up along the highway. Hidden in shapeless hulks, hundreds of little hands labour away on behalf of these large concerns: weaving, sanding, varnishing, cutting and adding the final touches before products are sent for packaging. This is 'modern' industrialisation, and in its quest for standardisation it spells the end of the road for the contract labour that once employed thousands and was, for centuries past, the mainstay of cottage industry in this province.

Fret not, for you can still visit some village workshops: the big companies cannot yet do without the small basket weaver entirely, although they are trying their best to be rid of him. But there is a palpable sense of decline, hovering in the air like a whiff of burnt bamboo. A few years ago this place was a hive of activity. Today you may hear a few muffled sounds from beyond the low walls of village dwellings, but the buzzing has stopped. Production is fragmented. During the rice harvest, you may as well not bother visiting: houses are empty and handicraft suspended. In the shadow of the big factories, production goes on - but behind locked gates, patrolled by security men.

We have chosen three communes to visit, each with its own speciality:

- **Phú Nghĩa**, and the village of Phú Vinh, home of the basket trade (rattan);
- **Đông Phương Yên**, and the villages of Đới Ba and Yên Kiên (various kinds of bamboo);
- **Trương Yên**, and the village of Phú Yên (*giang*, a type of thin bamboo).



## CONTEXT

### The home of rattan: a basket case in the making

In Hà Tây Province, a little over 200 craft villages out of a total of 500 are engaged in basket-weaving (with bamboo and rattan). Chương Mỹ District is where the industry is mainly concentrated. Fashioning the everyday objects of rural life, the craft was mostly a local affair providing modest income. The exception was Phú Vinh, linked to European markets since colonial times, where basket-weaving developed as a true art form at the hands of a dozen or so master craftsmen producing extraordinarily fine decorative items.

Prior to this, basket makers practised their trade while working as farmers. Specialised as they were, their trade was a manual one requiring little real expertise. Unlike the guilds created around the figure of a founding “master”, whose prestige had to be ritually renewed by articles of faith on an annual basis, basket making was a low-status profession. For Pierre Gourou, observing peasant life in the Delta in the 1930s, every villager was a basket-weaver to some degree and could fashion containers for his own use during the low season.

Collectivisation brought a shift in scale and scope; hundreds of craft workers were drilled into service by co-operatives, under the guidance of the best weavers, turning out basketware on a mass scale to satisfy the markets of Eastern Europe. Relatively simple objects were manufactured in series by a large number of contract workers, but they were paid little and given no creative licence.

The new buyers that followed were scarcely concerned by such issues as quality and cared still less about whether the newly trained craft worker was being given room to develop and innovate. Then, plastic containers from China more or less killed off the trade in basketware for household use. Additionally, bamboo and rattan craft were, and remain, not exclusive to Vietnam: in Southeast Asia, major producers of bamboo objects include the Philippines, Myanmar and especially Indonesia; these countries make better quality items and offer a better life for their artisans. Now there is talk of inviting Indonesian competitors in to raise the level of qualification among the basket weavers of Phú Vinh. Out of 2,000 basket workers in Phú Nghĩa, only 220 can be said to be qualified to handle the full process of production and to work with rattan (a more difficult material) as well as with different types of bamboo.

What little experience and skill the others possess can only be traded for a monthly wage of less than 700,000 VNĐ, or just 300,000 VNĐ at apprentice level. Mass production by an army of poorly paid, low-skilled workers is not the most convincing strategy for a nation trying to access countries with tough manufacturing standards and a keen eye for ‘good quality’ (in the sense in which we speak of ‘good’ governance). Many countries in the West steer well clear of anything manufactured by child labour.

Since 2005, productivity in the Phú Vinh cluster has been shrinking. The challenge of opening up goods to very demanding markets like Japan, France and the USA will not go away. Demand is growing rapidly, but this poses different problems: thwarted by new environmental regulations, Japanese businesses have been coming to the Delta villages looking for food containers made from vegetable fibres; but the hygiene standards they require are hard to apply in Vietnam.

The tradition of contract labour is another handicap: each artisan obtains his own raw materials, and works with no real supervision; however well trained he is, he makes mistakes. It’s a difficult time for the industry: businesses are fearful of new orders, unable to raise the quality of the merchandise, and struggling to meet production deadlines, since labour is still contracted out within a rigidly hierarchical system. Should an order come in at peak rice harvesting time, the deal can’t be honoured.

A few zealous craftsmen like Mr Trung (see **box p. 279**) are pinning their hopes on improved quality and training. He has opened a village craft-training centre with Danish development support. He plans to select the best pupils to work for him. Other firms are steering more towards diversification and mass production.

The much more commercially-oriented firms dealing in bamboo and rattan wares from all over Vietnam have joined the real estate frenzy and set up shop along Highway n°6. They are in debt up to the eyeballs, have made enormous capital investment and employ an unqualified workforce (mainly young women, who are cheaper), training them on the job to service large orders and work on product finishing and packaging. The pool of recruits continues to widen (Hoà Binh Province).

These companies benefit little from the skills of the more gifted craftsmen. Such people are too expensive and in any case, like Mr Trung, they have their own businesses to run. But the bigger firms do contract out a share of their orders to the smaller tradesmen at home in the villages, lending flexibility to the system and allowing them to adapt to the ups and downs of the market.

Phú Nghĩa commune faces another big problem: 350 ha of farmland have been appropriated for the construction of a large industrial park on Highway n°6. Only one third of its units have been designated for use by basketry firms, with the rest sold off to big businesses in other sectors, from Hanoi or overseas (e.g. China and Taiwan). Half the firms are from outside the district; the others are local company bosses from the commune, but fewer than 12 specialise in rattan.

These large enterprises are polluting the commune, as the wastewater drainage from the factories is not separated from the mains water system. They won't be hiring local folk, not well suited to this kind of work. In any case, once they pass 30, they are no longer taken on. The many peasants whose land has been expropriated (the average farm is just half a hectare) are no longer certain to be self sufficient in rice and for a great number their craft activity is not enough to compensate. There is a risk that for the more fragile artisan households, things may become still more perilous. With falling orders and rising competition between them, the future looks bleak.

## PHÚ VINH

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

#### Where it all began: the distant origins of bamboo craft

"Once upon a time, among the craggy karst, where rugged pagodas hang over the boggy plain, a ragged rustic with magic fingers twiddled his thumbs in the high bamboo..."

The craft of bamboo weaving in Hà Tây Province is said to date from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and alleged to have started here at Phú Vinh. It all began with Nguyễn Văn Sôi, who in 2008 was formally recognised as craft ancestor by the local People's Committee. The story goes that this ancestor, who was born here in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, learned how to make bamboo artefacts while travelling in Thanh Hóa Province with his father, a distinguished mandarin<sup>1</sup>. Upon returning to *Xóm Thượng* (a hamlet in Phú Vinh, "place of the white storks") he practised the trade within his family, passed it on to his children and taught it to his younger clansmen. Phú Vinh and the other villages around lay in a lowland area dotted with little karst crags, and at that time were frequently flooded and therefore rich in shrimp and fish. The people had great need of bamboo tools for fishing (traps, baskets) as well as for domestic purposes and agriculture. They also needed other livelihoods, as rice farming was not well developed due to the awkward topography.

At first, the ancestor's descendants supplemented their income by making objects from bamboo, natural fibres and grasses that grew by the roadside, selling the surplus to neighbouring villages. They even made hats from stork feathers. But the ancestor's descendants wanted to keep the methods secret to conserve a monopoly on the industry. However, the market grew, from local towns to the Đồng Xuân market in Hà Nội and, through Chinese middlemen, out to neighbouring provinces. Production grew with it and the clan was obliged to pass on the craft to others in the village.

<sup>1</sup>It was roughly 1,000 years ago in the villages of Thanh Hóa Province (150 kilometres south of Hà Nội) that bamboo craft emerged in Vietnam. Not far from these villages was the site of Hoa Lư, one of the ancient capitals of Vietnam and a centre of gravity for artistic production, especially of bamboo and rattan work.





BAMBOO BASKETS DRYING IN THE FORECOURT  
OF A LARGE FACTORY

MAKING RATTAN RING CURTAINS AT PHÚ VINH





In the early 1700s, bamboo became the material of choice for works of art. In 1712, a work in four panels representing the plants that symbolise the four seasons (apricot, pine, chrysanthemum, *moso* bamboo), made by craft workers in the village of Phú Vinh, was offered to the King. (The work is today in the Ethnology Museum in Huế.) Phú Vinh became famous for the quality of its bamboo products and at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was a major manufacturing centre making bamboo articles traded across northern Vietnam.

### The modern era

In French colonial times (1858-1945), bamboo craft in the village retained considerable notoriety. Under King Tự Đức (1848-1883), nine artisans from the village swore allegiance to the King and vowed “never to teach their trade to people from other localities”. Villages began to diversify and craftsmen began making items in rattan for the French market (rattan is made solely for export: it cannot be used in the tropics because it tolerates neither humidity nor termites). In the village, a group of French traders monopolised the purchase of bamboo and rattan items and their export to France.

By this point, the basket makers were really branching out: the years 1936-1940 were the most prosperous in the village’s history, with 80% of households involved in craft activity. They also worked with *giang*, a short, solid type of bamboo used to weave little plates and trays for rich families. The French traders bought what was produced up until 1943, when they stopped because of the war. After the war came a period of recession, with agriculture often not able to provide food for the villagers.

After the First Indochina War against the French, the villagers improved their water system and upgraded farm production. Bamboo and rattan manufacturing returned. In 1957, the commune of Phú Nghĩa saw its first agricultural co-operatives come into being. In March 1963, a village craft co-operative was founded and 400 villagers joined it, most of them artisans from Phú Vinh. They gave up their land to the farming co-operatives, and were paid in rice vouchers by the state, like other workers and officials.

### The collectivist interlude

The creation of the craft co-operative heralded the start of the centrally planned economy that made its mark on many of the craft villages we have explored. However, the master craftsmen of Phú Vinh clung on to their special status, transmitting their savoir-faire through the training of other co-operatives and retaining their monopoly on rattan weaving, a more difficult art than bamboo craft (*giang* or *núa*). As the years went by, the trade was kept alive and even prospered as Vietnam, now locked behind the Bamboo Curtain, found new export markets in the territories enclosed by the Iron Curtain. But once again, this approach to labour organisation had mainly negative consequences for craft expression and originality, operational flexibility and general manufacturing quality; the results took their toll when collectivisation and its structures fell apart, well before the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

The craft co-operative was officially dissolved in 1991, but already it was unable to sell its products. The co-operative was handed over to the communal People’s Committee in its entirety. In 1993, after land redistribution reforms, the former members of the craft co-operative recovered their old lands, but most of them rented these out to farmers and continued their weaving crafts.

Despite all the ups and downs of trade and labour, the fame and prestige attached to the village of Phú Vinh went from strength to strength, and the widening of the home and overseas markets under the liberalising reforms of *Đổi Mới* helped set Phú Vinh back on its feet.

### Relations between villages, division of labour and the master-craftsman’s workshop

Until collectivisation, the craftsmen of Phú Vinh were unwilling to pass on their techniques to nearby villages. But Phú Vinh has now done this: 20 communes out of 30 in the district practise the craft. In Trương Yên Commune (especially at Phú Yên, another stopover on the itinerary), the villagers were formerly farmers and woodworkers. Now they have belatedly embraced bamboo weaving.

The villages of Phú Nghĩa are more skilled in rattan craft, a more difficult art form, while in those of Đông Phương Yên (another commune on our itinerary), artisans are more specialised in high quality bamboo work. In other villages, people work essentially with bamboo only, with less refined techniques. As basket making is strictly a manual task, it is not possible to produce on a large scale. The work is spread out, a little here, a little there: one homestead weaves the base of the basket, another the sides, a third the lid.

In recent times, ten master craftsmen have made names for themselves in Phú Vinh (four have since died) and after the French Indochina War, many artisans fled to the South, introducing the craft there. The most active and best-known exponent still working is Nguyễn Văn Trung (**see box p. 279**), now in his fifties, of *Xóm Thượng* (a hamlet of Phú Vinh).



CRAFTSMAN CLEAVING A RATTAN CULM, PHÚ VINH





## Nguyễn Văn Trung: the rattan king of Phú Vinh

Though stricken with a disease affecting his leg while in his teens, Nguyễn Văn Trung became, in spite of (or perhaps because of) his disability, a great expert in rattan weaving. He has in fact given courses on the subject at the University of Industrial Arts. He is a seventh-generation maker of rattan objects and was head of the group of technicians at the Phú Nghĩa co-operative, creating dozens of successful new designs. Before moving into teaching, Mr. Trung travelled extensively on expert missions: to Angola, to Cuba (where he plaited Fidel Castro's beard in 1976), and to France and Poland to participate in exhibitions. His son, who is about 20 years old, has already woven a large portrait of President Hồ Chí Minh. Returning to his village from the University in around 1990, Mr. Trung realised that Phú Vinh would have to adapt, or lose its ancient craft. He founded a private company of 25 artisans, making bamboo and rattan items. Six years later, after a rocky start in the tough world of business, he opened his first shop. There were further obstacles, but when foreign tourists started to come here in growing numbers, sales went up and he began to export directly. In early 2006, he founded a new, bigger firm with a 300 m<sup>2</sup> workshop and jobs for 25 trainers and 100 permanent employees. But Mr. Trung does not intend to rest on his laurels. His latest scheme is to create a large training and information centre on the basket-weaver's art, with workshops, machinery, classrooms and accommodation for students, aiming to train up 100 fully-fledged artisans per year – a qualified, stable and motivated workforce to guarantee a future for himself and other producers like him.

## ORGANISATION OF THE CRAFT

The main units of organisation are:

**Small businesses** (different from the retailers and their noisy, dirty units on Highway n°6). These businesses subcontract artisans throughout the district, and indeed the province, and possess a number of advantages to buyers: an established, permanent presence; direct export capability; defined legal status (the latter is more reassuring for foreign customers, who know what a limited liability company is all about).

**Producer groups:** collectives not (yet) crystallised into formal companies or firms; there are still eight of these in the commune.

**Family workshops (1):** most families do contract work at home. It is difficult to separate home from workshop, as the work is seasonal and householders are both farmers and artisans. The whole family is involved, with each family member assigned a specific task. The easiest bits are done by the children. Proper companies cannot hire these family units to work in their factories.

**Family workshops (2):** certain families specialise in preparatory work: for some, this means bamboo cutting (10 kg per day by hand as opposed to 150 kg per day by machine); for others it means chemical treatment of raw materials. The latter involves either soaking bamboo culms or hanks of rattan in acid for a few hours to whiten them (acid is afterwards tossed into the ditches to float off towards the rice paddies!), or laying the fibres under a cover in a corner of the yard and burning a bowl of sulphur with them for four days (a rustic form of fumigation: we won't mention the environment again; just spare a thought for the children of the commune – and bring your own bottle of water).

**Apprentices:** spare another thought (indeed, perhaps the same thought) for those at the bottom of the professional ladder, about 600 of Phú Nghĩa commune's 2,000 artisans are apprentices. They earn very low wages (as we have already mentioned, they start at around 300,000VNĐ a month), but they are the ones who are leaned on the most when a big order is on the books...

**Tools and equipment:** The simplest tools of all are used: feet, hands, a knife to trim the bamboo and rattan and a 20 cm ruler to measure the length of fibres for cutting. Furthermore, basket-making requires relatively little space in the home.

## RAW MATERIALS AND CRAFT CHARACTERISTICS

In Phú Vinh, a wide range of materials is used, especially rattan and a wealth of different bamboos, to make an equally vast array of varied objects (furniture, sofas, shelves, small baskets, coasters, lamps). Materials include:

- *mây* (rattan);
- *trúc* (or ivory bamboo, thin bamboo with closely-spaced nodes);
- *giang* (spindly type of “clump-forming” bamboo), less flexible;
- *song* (thin bamboo from Đa Năng);
- *guột* (thin bamboo from Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, near China);
- *cói* (rushes from Ninh Bình);
- *tre* and *nứa* (large bamboos from Hòa Bình, Thanh Hóa).

At one time, there were many bamboo plants growing close to the village, but today they have to be obtained from further and further afield, even central and southern Vietnam. There is a market from 6am to 9am every morning at Phú Vinh, where the bosses and team leaders go to stock up.





## An example

Subcontracted workshops are paid a piecework rate: in 2004, one family interviewed earned 2,500 VNĐ for weaving three rows of rattan around small plates. The task took 30 minutes per plate and they did 10 plates a day. Subtract 10,000 VNĐ for raw materials, and the result is **15,000 VNĐ** per day (less than 1 US dollar).

BAMBOO AND RATTAN BASKETS DRYING AT PHÚ VINH



Phú Nghĩa is particularly diverse in materials and products compared to other communes. But as the big retailers establish themselves along the highway, a tide of factory-superstores selling products from all over Vietnam is closing in. The commune is in danger of losing its unique characteristics.

### The problem of export: 95% of Phú Nghĩa products are sold overseas

The sizeable orders and short delivery times demanded by buyers in developed countries are forcing producers to think in terms of mechanisation. In basket-making however, mechanisation is a costly and difficult affair (as the mixed results from the collectivist era showed). To start with, it requires considerably more workshop area. Incidentally, possible job losses (even if those who keep their jobs might be paid a little better) hardly seem to be of any concern. Mr Trung (see box p. 279) thinks the first stage in production (cleaning and cutting of bamboo) and the last one (polishing and varnishing) could be mechanised. But the weaving would always have to be done in people's homes, because to do otherwise would require too much investment.

Besides, foreign clients prefer the handmade over the machine-made every time: the appeal of the unique, the handcrafted, the non-standardised, the non-uniformly finished item is a powerful selling point. At the same time, these customers generally abhor any kind of worker exploitation (or at least, any overt exploitation), and will not touch anything noticeably produced by child labour, yet they are unwilling to pay more than the lowest possible price. With only rattan, bamboo and a knife, squaring this kind of circle is a tough proposition.

The order cycle for the export market does not respect the natural cycle of planting and harvesting that keeps a large proportion of the workforce on its toes.

In Indonesia, for instance, artisans earn three or four times the wage of their Vietnamese counterparts. The workers of Phú Nghĩa sometimes export items to Indonesia, where a *Made in Indonesia* sticker is attached before the goods are sold on overseas. What is the right course of action in such a situation? The remedy is perhaps, first and foremost, an improved export-sales structure, better management and enhanced marketing so that capital gains from manufacturing flow in directly at source. An American NGO recently helped several groups of producers in the province to build a website, improve their sales strategy and source foreign partnerships.

# A stroll through the basket village of Phú Vinh

A reminder: when you are on Highway n°6, you pass by on your left the large Phú Nghĩa industrial area, well hidden behind a gigantic fence and somewhat futuristically signposted. At the 25-kilometre point, there is an entrance on the right to Phú Nghĩa Commune. There are several villages in the commune, but the most interesting is, of course, Phú Vinh, which is around one kilometre from the entrance. The little road going into the commune travels first of all through Khê Than (on the left), the village that is home to the commune's People's Committee headquarters. On the right, behind a large pond, stands Quang Châm village, a charming place with its houses and large courtyards used as drying compounds. In the afternoon, it is possible to see the villagers at work. In this village, artisans mainly work as individual subcontractors from the privacy of their own homes. There are no small entrepreneurs running busy little factories.

Follow the road in a north-westerly direction. On your left you pass the market, and then the building of the former craft co-operative, also on the left in the village of Phú Hữu, recognizable by the sign saying “*Hợp Tác Xã*”, where a producer group has installed itself. In the morning, you will see large baskets drying. It is possible to visit the showroom belonging to **Mr. Trần Văn Cửu**, where various specimens of export items are on display. In his workshop, he has three young artisans devising 300-400 models every year. He even has a catalogue in Japanese! Now and again, Mr Cửu sells the few unsold articles he has in the workshop over the counter.

A little farther along on the left, there is a little lane disappearing into the hamlet of *Xóm Thượng*; leaving Phú Vinh village you will see the sign pointing the way. On the right hand corner of the street, there is a very fine wooden house, with a small café-bar/restaurant where you can cool off. On either side of this new lane, there are workshops run by small entrepreneurs: you will see their wares drying outside in the yard. Artisans at work within are putting together orders destined for Europe, mainly baskets of various shapes and sizes. You can visit the workshops, where you will see everything done by hand – no machines.

A few metres further down is a handsome banyan tree under which local women weave rattan in the afternoons. Go straight on and you will emerge into a pretty square, at the far end of which stands the house of **Mr. Trung**, one of the village's most active and best known basket-weavers (see box p. 279). You can visit his little museum, where his finest works are on display, and admire the large rattan tableaux he has woven, representing Uncle Hồ and his Cuban comrade, Fidel Castro. The delicacy of the objects on show contrasts with the simple baskets you will see drying in the courtyards. There's no mistaking that this is the home of an artist: the walls are covered with various prizes and photographic mementoes; there are lamps, vases, large vessels, boxes finely worked from strands of coloured rattan... Unfortunately, it's not possible to buy objects like these; Mr Trung makes only to order. In the workshop at the back, he has a few lower grade items on display, which he might sell you for a token sum.

As you leave Mr Trung, you will see on the left of the square a very fine doorway opening onto an old house. You can also visit the workshop of **Mr. Đo** (behind **Mr. Trung's**), who, when we last visited, was making curtains from little rings made from tiny strips of bamboo. In the workshop, which is in the courtyard facing a lovely pool, we saw a sharp division of labour among the 20 or so women who work here: some cutting the bamboo strips, others fashioning the rings with remarkable dexterity, others assembling the curtains, and still others cleaning off waste fibres with a gas torch. Here again you can buy from an assortment of baskets of different shapes, little rattan carrying cases, and other remaindered items.

Next, retrace your steps, across the front of the banyan, but instead of going back to the commune entrance, go to *Xóm Hạ*, another hamlet attached to Phú Vinh. Turn left and immediately right and you will come out into an open area where, on the right, in the second house along, you will find the magnificent workshop of **Mr. Hàn Hạnh**. His lovely home is small in size, but charming, with its fine sculpture and olde worlde craftsmanship. Inside is an Aladdin's cave of bags, lampshades... everything finely wrought in coloured rattan fibre. The prices are quite high, but not over the top for such an inventive and skilful maker – he has exhibited at numerous fairs in Hà Nội and elsewhere. His wares include items combining rattan with ceramics. You will find his creations on sale in tourist shops in Hàng Trống Street (Hà Nội). Across the road, there is yet another beautiful house for you to visit.

# ĐÔNG PHƯƠNG YÊN

## GETTING THERE

To get from Phú Nghĩa to the commune of Đông Phương Yên, head back towards Highway n°6 and, after exiting Phú Nghĩa Commune, turn right towards Hoà Bình. At the 28-kilometre mark, turn right, and under the gateway welcoming you into Đông Phương Yên Commune.

Đông Phương Yên is sleepier than Phú Nghĩa, the commune being more seriously affected by the decline in orders from Europe. Since 2006, the pace of production has slowed considerably and the machinery rumbles rather less than it used to.

In colonial times, there were just a few homesteads here specialising the fabrication of baskets for washing rice or vegetables, which the villagers sold in Hà Nội. One or two families worked for the French, at the Phú Vinh workshops, making dolls' house furniture (for French dolls, obviously). With collectivisation, alongside the artisans of Phú Nghĩa, people learned how to diversify production through training courses run by the craft co-operative. Between 1976 and 1983, artisans here made blinds from *giang* (the short, solid species of bamboo) for the East European market. With the *Đổi Mới* reforms, many abandoned their trade due to a lack of outlets, leaving only those who were already well established during the collectivist period (especially those at management level) to make the best of it.

The basic difference between the artisans of Đông Phương Yên and their comrades at Phú Nghĩa is that the former mainly worked with bamboo, especially *giang*, and were not well skilled in handling rattan (which is more difficult to work). When the craftsmen of Phú Nghĩa received orders for *giang* products, they passed them on to their counterparts in Đông Phương Yên who did the same for them with rattan ware. Some workshops started dividing up the production process, specialising in the cutting of bamboo, especially *trúc* (fine bamboo) and *tre*. They acquired machinery – a saw, drills – and serviced other workshops. They hired young women from nearby communes and paid them a day wage.

Đông Phương Yên produces trays, wastepaper baskets, round baskets, baskets for bonsai trees, magazine racks, all in bamboo. Different types of fibres or bamboo canes are used depending on the part being made. A tray, for instance, comprises:

- *trúc* for the edges of the tray;
- *song* for the handles;
- *nứa* for the base of the tray;
- *mây* (rattan) to bind the various parts together.

Artisans in this commune trade with other craft villages in the Hà Nội hinterland: baskets are sent to Quất Động for raffia-work embroidery (see **Itinerary n°6**); ceramics are bought from Bát Tràng (see **Itinerary n°2**) and decorative borders woven around the rim. There are problems for the craftworkers of Đông Phương Yên in terms of international sales networks: some Eastern European countries like Hungary and the former Czechoslovakia, one-time clients at the co-operative with whom the artisans have maintained links, force themselves upon producers as intermediaries with their consumers in the capitalist world. We end our visit among basket weavers with a stroll around Đông Phương Yên Commune, taking in two villages: **Đôi Ba** and **Yên Kiền**.





MAKING BAMBOO BASKETS AT ĐỒI BA

BAMBOO DRYING IN ĐỒI BA







WOMEN GATHERED IN A YÊN KIẾN PAGODA TO WEAVE THEIR BASKETS

## Đôi Ba, Yên Kiên and Phù Yên

Entering the village of **Đôi Ba** you may see villagers at work on the doorstep or in the yard, making goods to order. When we were here, all the artisans along the main street were making the same baskets, no doubt for the same boss. The village has no special charm, but if you slip into some of the side streets you will get a glimpse of the thousand and one ways of weaving different varieties of bamboo and the multitude of objects the craftsman's hand can produce.

The villages in this commune are not especially rich, and the architectural heritage does not match the splendour of Bắc Ninh or the other villages on the banks of the dyke along the Đáy River.

Continuing along the little road, you come to the village of **Yên Kiên**. There is a somewhat rustic pagoda here, almost three centuries old, with stupas in the courtyard. It is well worth a visit. The monk who lives here is very hospitable and he might open the gate for you. The women of the village bring their work here in the afternoons, to weave and talk together. Behind the pagoda, the interesting *đình* is also worth taking a look at.

On the opposite side of the national highway, there is one last stop: the village of **Phù Yên**, in the commune of Trường Yên.

Go back towards Phú Nghĩa on Highway n°6. On your right, a dyke follows the road in surprising fashion. After the 28-kilometre mark, a little street cuts across the dyke and goes on to the village of **Phù Yên**. At one time, this village specialised in furniture making, switching to basketware during the collectivist period. A little co-operative had been established, but few people worked there because only the best artisans were selected. Twenty or so businesses have moved out along the roadside because of pollution and lack of space. In the village, only women home-workers on contract for basketry companies are left (the men tend to be woodworkers and furniture makers). Most of the women we met are making little baskets from sticks of *giang* about 40cm long, fixed with *mây* fibres, bought in the market at Đông Phương Yên. Daily wage: about 15,000 VNĐ.

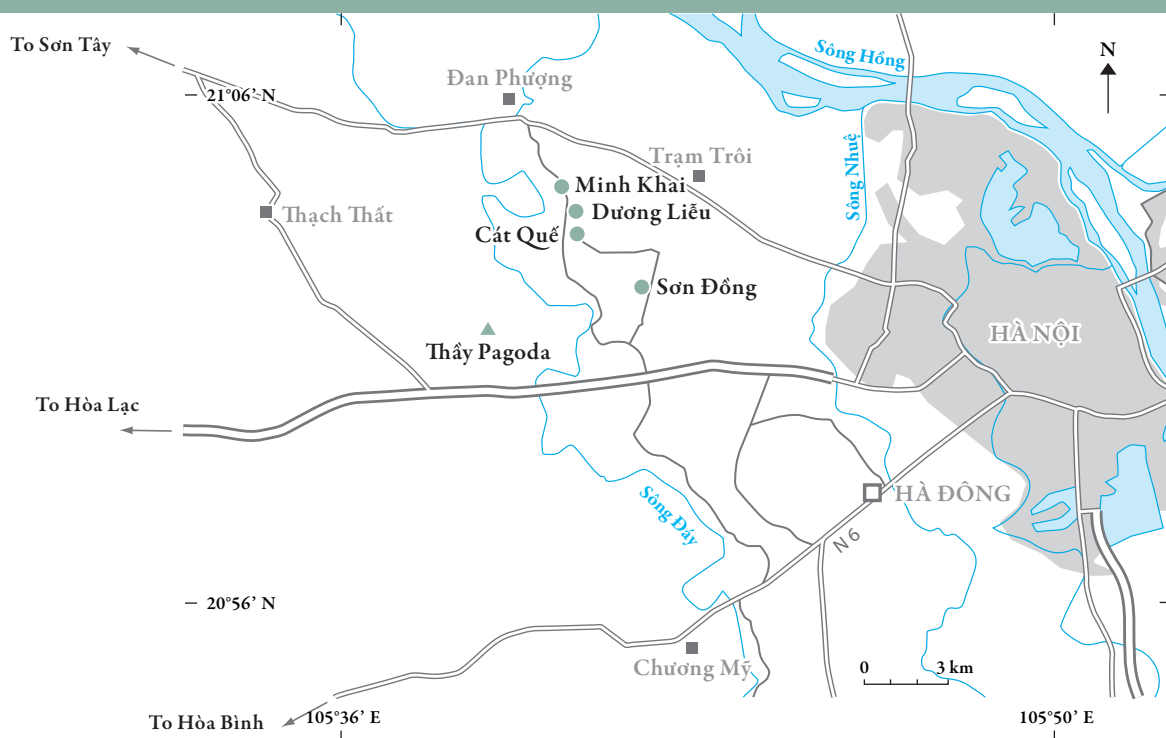
The village is not large. Go straight on and you will come to the *đình*, facing a little pond. If you have done things in the right order, this will be your last moment of peace and quiet before you hit the road and get back to the crush of Hà Nội.

These basket-weaving villages are quite peaceful and pleasant places to visit because the area is still predominantly agricultural. Crafts tend to be practised at home, behind closed doors, with almost all the big companies now out along the state highway. Village life here is a far cry here from the hubbub of Bắc Ninh or La Phù.



## Itinerary 9

### Food-processing villages (west of Hà Nội)



#### The craft villages

Lacquered wooden statues: Sơn Đồng;

Food processing and processed foods: Cát Quế, Dương Liễu and Minh Khai.

#### Cultural and architectural heritage

Chùa Thây or Pagoda of the Master.

An itinerary devised by our guest contributor, Dr. Guillaume Da, specialist in the food-processing industry.

## SƠN ĐỘNG, THE BUDDHA SCULPTORS' VILLAGE

On the road leading to the cluster of food and agriculture villages lies Sơn Động. The village, renowned for its wooden Buddhas and *bàn thờ* – ancestral shrines richly decorated with lacquer and gold leaf – is well worth a visit. However, what you find there could be very different depending on whether you arrive in 2009 or at the end of 2012: Sơn Động Commune, along with those of Cát Quế, Dương Liễu and Minh Khai, is about to change radically. Between now and then, over 3,500 hectares of farmland in Hoài Đức District are to be redeveloped as housing and industrial parks. The Láng – Hoà Lạc motorway, passing through the satellite town of An Khanh, will be linked to the north of the province by wide highways. Sơn Động Commune will hand over three-quarters of its farmland and in return become a major communications hub and home to the big urban housing development of *Khu Đô thị Sơn Động*. The other villages on this itinerary will also see large parts of their territory gobbled up by another urban scheme, the *Khu Đô thị Hoài Đức*, an extension of the present district capital, Trại Trôi. Although villagers on this itinerary earn three-quarters of their living from handicrafts, rice farming provides a vital supplement to keep households financially afloat. The loss of food security at local level, although a staple of farming policy in Vietnam as a whole, is likely to take its toll on the less well-off artisans.

### GETTING THERE

Go out as far as the International Conference Centre west of the capital and take the Láng – Hoà Lạc road (at the time of writing (late 2008), this road was in the process of being widened to form a giant 150-metre-wide motorway). Continue straight for about four kilometres, then turn right onto the road heading towards Nhổn: Đường Tây Mỗ in the Từ Liêm District (that is, assuming it's still possible to leave the road at this point). After three and a half kilometres, you will reach the crossroads-village of Kim Hoàng. Here you turn left towards Sơn Động, about four kilometres further on.

### CONTEXT

According to Hữu Ngọc (2006), Sơn Động was famed for its large number of scholars and laureates at the triennial examinations, but it was also known for its woodworking skills, used in the manufacture of statues and artwork in lacquered wood and handed down from generation to generation over hundreds of years. Craftsmen also create statues representing divinities and other Buddhist figures (Buddha of the thousand eyes, arhats, sky spirits – Ông Thiện and Ông Ác, etc.), celestial animals, shrines, etc. A number of these works can be seen in religious buildings, such as the Pagoda of the Master (Chùa Thầy) in Sơn Tây, at Đố Pagoda in Hải Phòng, and at the Văn Miếu Temple (Temple of Literature) in Hà Nội, as well as in the citadel at Huế and elsewhere. If you visit the Chùa Thầy Pagoda or the Perfume Pagoda, you might come across craftsmen from Sơn Động recarving a lintel or unveiling a new statue.

Today, Sơn Động is a busy centre for religious sculpture, with over 300 specialist firms together employing over 4,000 workers and artisans. However, things have not always been so thriving. Collectivisation and conflict delivered a hard blow to the age-old woodworking traditions of the village; for a time the hammers and woodworking tools fell silent. The renaissance came in the 1980s when the village master craftsmen Mr. Nguyễn Đức Đậu (Fine Arts teacher), Mr. Nguyễn Đức Tường (specialized in making Buddha statues) and Mr. Trần Đình Thúc (specialized in lacquer painting), re-started the industry, opening training centres to ensure skills were passed on to younger generations. After 18 months of training, 30 apprentices won their laurels, and 25 years on, they comprise the village elite, the die-hard exponents of a once diminishing craft.

Among them are Nguyễn Chí Quảng, Nguyễn Viết Thắng, Trần Đình Cường, Nguyễn Hồng Việt, and Nguyễn Viết Tạch. All are now in their forties. **Nguyễn Viết Tạch** became an entrepreneur in 2005, specialising in gold-or silver-plated wooden objects. His creations have been shown at the Vietnamese Antiques Export Fair in the USA, Europe, and Southeast Asia. He now has three workshops and a complement of 40 craftsmen. He carves large statues from jackfruit wood, including Buddhas several tonnes in weight. You get a sense of the scale of this endeavour when you visit his new workshop, situated a hundred metres along the road bearing right from the village crossroads. On our last trip, we saw visitors greeted by an immense, three-metre-high smiling Buddha. Such sculptures require a team of five or six, labouring over three or four months, using the wood from no less than 10 trees. Other craftsmen,

like Nguyễn Chí Quảng, create high-quality lacquerware. Nguyễn Việt Thắng, grandson of Nguyễn Việt Tạch has opened three workshops in the village and employs nearly 30 highly qualified workers. As well as traditional sculpture, these craftsmen have been involved in the restoration of the ancient capital of Huế. Artisans have specialised, either in particular products (small statues, ancestral altars, mythical birds, Buddhas, etc.), or in particular stages of production (carving, lacquering, finishing, assembly, sales, etc.).

There has even been collaboration with a pottery village (Bát Tràng, **see Itinerary n°2**) to develop “*Gốm phu*”. Launched in October 2005, *Gốm phu* brings together Bát Tràng porcelain with one or more layers of Sơn Đồng lacquer, producing a gorgeously rich finish, much appreciated for votive objects.

With economic growth, a rising middle class endowed with the means to purchase sumptuous ancestral shrines (gilded specimens may cost 30 million VND), and spirituality once more in favour after the lean years of collectivism, a bright future would seem assured for Sơn Đồng. All this, as Nguyễn Hồng Việt Anh, proprietor of one of Sơn Đồng’s workshops, proclaims on the village website ([www.mynghesondong.com.vn](http://www.mynghesondong.com.vn)): “We are grateful to the Buddha and religious effigies, because thanks to them, we can earn our living and make a profit!”

Nonetheless, artisans here face one real problem: a lack of raw materials. Jackfruit wood, known for its flexibility and longevity, is becoming harder to find and has to be bought and brought in from Laos and Cambodia.



The background of the page is a close-up photograph of an antique lacquered panel. It features intricate, raised gold leaf floral and foliate motifs on a deep red lacquer background. The motifs include stylized flowers, leaves, and scrolling vines, typical of traditional East Asian decorative arts.

## Sacred art meets ‘saucy’ animistic ritual

The village festival, on the **6<sup>th</sup> day of the 2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month**, is a reminder of ancient fertility rites that formerly held sway at Sơn Động. In the words of the folk song:

*For the Sơn Động festival, wrapping bamboo in spathes of areca palm, we grind  
our dầy and cuốn cakes to offer to our friends.*

Hữu Ngọc (2006) recalls how the cake-making ritual unfolded: sticky rice was laid out on a winnowing tray and beaten with regular blows from a wooden pestle wrapped in the spathe of an areca palm (evoking the sexual act). The flour obtained was used to make round, flat cakes (*bánh dầy*), and elongated, sausage-shaped cakes (*bánh cuốn*), resembling male and female organs.

According to tradition, another game, a contest to grab a length of sacred bamboo (*cướp bông*), is thought to guarantee a male child for the victor. The sacred dance commences in the evening, outside the communal house, as girls and boys dance in a symbolic act of coupling with the aid of a areca palm spathe and a piece of bamboo. When the dance is over, the objects are thrown to the ground. Bystanders fall upon them, hoping to snatch the prize and its lucky promise. Before the collectivitation era, for three months after the festival, the village youth would enjoy unbridled liberty; neither the offspring born of these festive encounters nor the mothers of these lovechildren would be expelled... and the young fathers were exempted from paying marriage tax to the village!

ANTIQUE LACQUERED PANEL WITH GOLD LEAF

# CÁT QUẾ, DƯƠNG LIỄU AND MINH KHAI

## CONTEXT

Located along the Đáy River linking Hà Tây Province to the mountainous northern provinces, this group of vermicelli-, noodle- and starch-producing villages was originally (in the 1960s) well supplied with raw materials (cassava, canna and other tubers) by river transport. Proximity to Hà Nội and its markets provided valuable outlets for producers. Though not necessarily profitable, these trades were conducted in tandem with farming and thereby helped local artisans, most of them formerly weavers, to diversify after co-operative industry put an end to rudimentary peasant weaving.

In 2005, craft villages in the Hoài Đức district produced an abundance of different commodities: 38,000 tonnes of tapioca (*tinh bột sắn*), canna (*tinh bột dong riềng*, *tinh bột dot*) and kudzu starch (*tinh bột sắn dây*), 5,900 tonnes of cassava (tapioca) and canna vermicelli (*miến sắn*, *miến dong riềng*), 5,400 tonnes of dried rice vermicelli (*bún khô*), 5,600 tonnes of maltose syrup (*mạch nha*) and cane sugar syrup (*đường mía*) and 3,500 tonnes of sweets (*bánh kẹo*).

Some of this activity is seasonal: the first round of food processing is at harvest time, when cassava (September to April) or canna (November to March) are brought in. Raw materials grown in the surrounding mountains (e.g. Hòa Bình, Yên Bái, Phú Thọ, Nghệ An Provinces) are freighted in by local merchants. Lorries, often overloaded with roots, have to weave between the heaps of cassava and canna piled high in **Dương Liễu** market place and the nearby alleys. This is one of the most densely populated regions of the Delta (3,000 to 5,000 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>), and the artisans find what space they can along the dykes and the maze of alleyways to dry their wares. Other activities are year-round, among them second-stage processing of wet starch or other processes involving altogether different species of plants: the shelling, sorting and drying of legumes, notably the green (*đậu xanh*) and black (*đậu đen*) mungo bean for example, which are used for sweetmeats (*chè*). There is also large-scale, on-site manufacturing, notably biscuits (*bánh qui*) and even chocolate (*sô cô la*).

## CÁT QUẾ: THE TAPIOCA VILLAGE

### GETTING THERE

Getting to Cát Quế from Sơn Động is very simple. Most of the workshops you can visit are located on the main road that you came in on, so follow this road to the crossroads and turn left. There is a sign for Cát Quế. One kilometre further on, after you pass the big Viettel satellite dish, a little concrete road goes off to the right. Follow it for a little less than a kilometre until you reach the old communal People's Committee building opposite the Mẫu Temple (*Đền Mẫu*).

The Cát Quế Commune is located in the west of Hoài Đức District. The commune is split by the Đáy River dyke into a village quarter (*miền làng*) and alluvial farmland (*miền bãi*). Food processing activity is concentrated in *miền làng*, the more densely populated sector.

Food processing and animal husbandry provide the livelihood for the people of Cát Quế. The main foodstuffs are those derived from cassava roots (*Manihot esculenta*). Cassava (tapioca) starch is obtained from a multi-stage process, its key phases being the washing and rinsing of the roots, grating, screening of the ground pulp, and sedimentation in vats. After settlement, wet starch is cut into blocks, which are laid out on tiles prior to being sold straight away or stored in the ground for later use.

Tools and equipment used in the production of wet cassava starch have been made locally since the industry began operating in the early 1980s. Some major technological improvements came along in the early 1990s, with the arrival of electricity introduced to cut labour and increase capacity. The first of these was mechanized screening, and since 2007, most of the main stages of processing have been mechanized across all three of the communes on this itinerary. However, these innovations require vast amounts of power and water; wastewater treatment is still a significant environmental challenge for the cassava processing industry.



## Initiative and diversification

In colonial times, the most important weaving centres, where primarily cotton but also other textiles such as mosquito nets were manufactured, were in the Hoài Đức and Đan Phượng Districts in the north of Hà Tây Province. This largely female industry provided work for several thousand women workers. The cloth, generally quite coarse, was used by the village population. Weavers used to buy cotton thread made in the factories at Nam Định from the market at Dương Liễu. They also dyed their cloth.

Villagers with land outside the dyke's protection along the Đáy River (including those from the three communes covered in this itinerary) grew the mulberry trees used to raise silkworms. With the arrival of collectivisation and craft co-operatives, these traditional textile activities underwent change. The weavers, now gathered together in these co-operatives, would produce cotton fabric 120 cm wide at home, using machine looms. The co-operative provided the thread and handled the retail side by means of state shops. The few weavers not belonging to a co-operative continued to produce 40 cm-wide coarse cotton cloth in secret, on their traditional looms. When the co-operatives were wound up at the end of the collectivist era, cotton weaving vanished entirely as weavers could no longer obtain thread.

The men, meanwhile, had turned to food processing: sugar cane could be cultivated on the alluvial soil beyond the Đáy River dyke, and this could be processed into molasses and raw sugar for the confectionery industry. From the producers in La Phù (**see Itinerary n°4 p. 186**) who had relinquished this stage in the sugar production process to concentrate on making the sweets, they learned how to make maltose syrup, or *nha*. As agriculture could not provide enough food to feed the villages, the local authorities, despite the official ban on individual production during the collectivist era, had turned a blind eye to this activity.

The Hoài Đức and Đan Phượng Districts were linked to the mountainous highlands of northern Vietnam – an important centre for cassava and canna production – by the Đáy River. With the liberalisation of markets in the 1980s, these food-processing trades developed and grew, while sugar production came to a halt, forced out by big business. The weavers thus switched crafts to become specialist food processing workers (canna for vermicelli, *miến*, rice for alcohol, *bún* or other kinds of noodles, cassava for tapioca starch, shelling green mungo beans, etc.).

CANNA VERMICELLI



The commune also produces maltose syrup. This is obtained from hydrolysis of cassava starch as it reacts with enzymes contained in young rice seedlings (although rice shoots are gradually being supplanted by commercially-produced enzymes). The sweet syrup is a prized ingredient in sweets, biscuits and traditional confectionery (banana cake, almond paste, jam, gingerbread, etc.). A biscuit factory and a sweet-making facility have recently opened in the commune (**see walk p. 301**).

The fattening of pigs is another important activity for the commune, though a rather more smelly one! (There are around 30,000 pigs, more than two for every inhabitant.) Villagers buy piglets at 15 kg and sell them on the hoof, six months and 70 kg later, and pig farming interacts strongly with food processing industries, with pigs often fed on by-products from food manufacturing (the waste left over from cassava processing and maltose syrup and cane-sugar molasses production, etc.). The village also engages in other traditional Vietnamese rural activities, such as growing rice, market gardening, gardening, etc.

## Recipe for vanilla biscuits

Ingredients	Grams
Wheat flour	250g
Butter	125g
Sugar	125g
Maltose syrup	100g
Vanilla 1 pod	1 pod
Egg	4
Salt	
Baking soda	25g

Make a hole in the centre of the flour. Add all the other ingredients. Mix and knead into an elastic dough. Cover with a cloth for one hour. Roll out the pastry until it is no more than 5 cm thick. Place in a pre-heated oven and bake until golden.

## Recipe for lemon drops

Ingredients	Grams
Sugar	150g
Maltose syrup	50g
Water	50ml
Lemon flavouring	quantity as required

Dissolve the sugar and maltose syrup in water and heat to 150°C. Pour into a greased pan and cool quickly by placing in cold water. When the temperature drops to 50-60°C, mould the sweet paste into shapes as desired. When they have cooled, wrap the pieces in wax paper. The wrapped sweets can be packed into polyethylene bags.





CASSAVA PLANTS GROWING IN THE HIGHLANDS

SETTLEMENT VATS FOR STARCH MAKING







CANNA ROOTS IN THE MARKET SQUARE  
AT DƯƠNG LIỄU

CANNA STARCH FILMS ON THE PRODUCTION LINE,  
DƯƠNG LIỄU





## DƯƠNG LIỄU: CANNA STARCH AND CANNA VERMICELLI

From September to April, Dương Liễu is the cassava and canna root capital of the region, and when the harvest season is over, sugar cane, sugar-apples and other products destined to feed the citizens of Hà Nội and the numerous communes of the Delta, abound in the markets here.

Like neighbouring Cát Quế, the commune of Dương Liễu is home to a number of cassava starch producers. In addition, Dương Liễu is a busy canna-processing centre. Canna is a perennial plant originally from Latin America. It may grow to a height of 2.5 metres and its broad green leaves are characterised by their protruding veins. Found throughout the tropical and subtropical regions, it is alleged to withstand typhoons. There are two types of canna: one an ornamental plant (*Canna indica*) with broad, often vividly coloured leaves, the other an edible species (*Canna edulis*), cultivated in Vietnam for its rhizomes. The processing of edible canna involves grinding the rhizomes to extract the starch, the main form of energy synthesised and stored by the plant. Wet canna starch is produced locally or imported from China and used in the making of vermicelli, which are eaten especially around the Tết holiday.

Two types of producer groups handle the conversion of canna rhizomes into vermicelli: the first group is the starch makers who purchase rhizomes at the Dương Liễu market and set about processing up to 15 tonnes of rhizomes per day for three or four months of the year (December to March). They then either sell or store the wet starch product locally that will then be made into vermicelli all year round by the second group. However, the weather and access to drying space has a major impact on the success of vermicelli production. Once manufactured, the still-wet vermicelli are laid out on bamboo racks which will then be fetched out to dry each day wherever space can be found around the commune, including in some less obvious places (roofs, courtyards, alleys, dykes, rice paddies, the lake, etc.).

After packing and labelling, the vermicelli (*miến*) are loaded onto the backs of motorbikes and taken by the middlemen to the big markets in Hà Nội, or onwards for export. So far, there is no 'quality-label' to safeguard authentic, locally produced *miến*, which is highly prized by consumers for its specific identity and the local expertise behind it.

## MINH KHAI:

### RICE VERMICELLI, CANNA VERMICELLI AND RICE NOODLE VILLAGE

Minh Khai is situated to the north of Dương Liễu. While it is hard to distinguish between these three communes, so densely packed are the traders and their many customers here in the heart of the village cluster, the fact is that Minh Khai is a less populous village than Cát Quế or Dương Liễu (4,900, 14,500 and 11,700 inhabitants respectively in 2004). Almost 50% of Minh Khai households are involved in food processing, namely the production and washing-refining of tapioca starch; the transformation of kudzu (*Pueraria lobata*) into starch (around the old communal house); and the manufacture of canna vermicelli. However, most households here use rice as the raw material for fresh or dried vermicelli (*bún*) or noodles (*bánh đa* and *phở khô*).

For rice starch production, the rice grains need to be soaked, ground and then settled and filtered in vats flanked by little channels for collecting the liquid starch. Different households then reprocess the starch, cooking and shaping it in special ways to produce rice vermicelli or rice noodles. The finished product is dried in the sun in the same way as canna vermicelli.

Noodles might be used fresh at local markets for the preparation of Vietnamese *phở*. There are facilities locally for processing other rice-based products (edible rice paper, cakes, etc.). Many of these are sold throughout Vietnam or packed for export.

## Recipe for phở xào (fried rice noodles with beef)

### Ingredients

Fresh rice noodles (*bánh phở tươi*)  
 1 piece of beef (*một miếng thịt bò*)  
 A few spring onions (*hành ta*) and one ordinary onion (*hành tây*) *allium cepa*  
 ‘Soya’ sprouts = green mungo bean or gram sprouts (*giá*) (*Vigna radiata*)  
 1 ginger root (*gừng*)  
 1 tomato  
 A little pork fat  
 fish sauce, *nước mắm*, soya sauce (*nước tương*), salt

Cut the beef into thin slices. Crush the ginger and mix with the beef. Chop the tomato and onions, making sure to remove the skin from the bulbs.

**Preparation Part 1:** Place the pork fat in a large wok. Stir-fry a few spring onion bulbs and the sliced onion (*hành ta* and *hành tây*) and tomato. Then add, one by one, in the following order: beef, bean sprouts, *nước mắm*, soya sauce. Remove from the heat and set aside on a large plate.

**Preparation Part 2:** Again using the wok, fry the remaining spring onion bulbs in the pork fat. Add the fresh noodles and toss vigorously so they don’t stick. Season with *nước mắm* and *nước tương*. Add the mixture you made in Part 1, then the *hành ta* leaves and a little salt, and serve.





RICE GRINDING AND SEDIMENTATION

RICE VERMICELLI MANUFACTURE







CANNA VERMICELLI DRYING ON BAMBOO FRAMES,  
DƯƠNG LIỄU

DRYING FRAMES PACKED ALONG THE DYKE  
AT DƯƠNG LIỄU





## A walk through the food and agriculture villages

Remember, this is one of the Delta's most populous regions; during the busier times of year, the villages you pass through become a vast store-yard for raw materials (cassava, canna), sacks of starch and farm waste. With the exception of the areas beyond the dyke (meaning the areas not protected by it, from the Đáy River to the more scattered settlements), where there are still a few orchards, there is little in terms of architectural quality; a strange odour hangs over the villages, watercourses are soiled by run-off from cassava processing. Here you are witnessing a very rapid phase in the development of production, achieved under rather less than sustainable conditions, where waste management is still unresolved. You have been warned: this is not the most bucolic of walks. However, for anyone who enjoys seeing technological innovation at close hand, who likes to marvel at the artisan's resourcefulness, to see agriculture and industry working in tandem, and to watch how strategies emerge for making the best use of limited space, this is a spectacle not to be missed! Wastewater treatment experts out there will note that an integrated scheme for the cluster is required: roll up! You are most welcome to invest! At the very least, come and admire the acrobatic display put on by the delivery men, bobbing and weaving through the alleyways astride motorbikes piled high with noodles, vermicelli and other products.

On this walk you will be able to visit specialist artisans (and perhaps do some shopping while you are at it) involved in all the main activities undertaken in the village cluster: rice wine, tapioca starch, canna starch, canna vermicelli, rice noodles, biscuits, confectionery... We suggest you begin at the old People's Committee building of Cát Quế Commune, opposite the Mẫu Temple (*Đền Mẫu n°1 on the map*). Directions for getting there are provided above.

Continue straight towards the dyke road (see map). Here, most of the tradesmen specialise in wet cassava starch manufacture. One exception is **Mr. Phạm Sin (n°2 on the map)**, who has given up this trade due to lack of manpower and now makes sticky rice wine, *rượu nếp hoa vàng*. His quality brew, slightly sweet to the taste, is highly esteemed. It is not as strong (38° to 40°) as the classic white rice wine (55°). Mr. Sin sells his product after eight months but he may keep it for five years. He makes around 1,000 litres per month in the dry season. He buys the sticky rice from ethnic minority peoples in the Điện Biên Phủ highland region. He also rears some of the pigs who provide the ubiquitous soundtrack to Cát Quế and whose presence tends to assault city-dwellers with a delicate sense of smell! If you wish to buy rice wine here, bring some empty bottles, as this brewery sells only in bulk. Prices are still cheap. Mr. Sin's brewery is down a blind alleyway, two alleys on the right before you reach the dyke road.

Down the following alley on the right, you will find the premises of **Mr. Trần Văn Tỳ (n°3 on the map)**, a producer of wet cassava (tapioca) starch. You can see each stage in production, from washing of the cassava to settlement in vats, which is done in the narrow courtyard. Processing is seasonal (see explanations above). In the off-season, Mr. Tỳ keeps busy refining the stored wet starch.

Go up onto the dyke road and turn right towards Dương Liễu Commune. On the dyke, you will see bamboo-drying racks covered with all kinds of noodles, vermicelli or starch left out to dry. Every square inch of free space is occupied, in hygiene conditions that leave a lot to be desired! A large workforce is employed in handling these racks, which have to be put out at first light and moved when the products are dry or when rain threatens.

After roughly 300 metres, you will see a large covered market on the left in the area beyond the dyke wall (**n°4 on the map**). Now take the first street on the right which leads off the dyke road and ends at the open-air market (**n°5 on the map**) where you will see huge piles of stored canna and cassava tubers. The market runs from September to April. Go straight on. You will pass the old People's Committee building of the commune (on your left). Turn into the second street on the right and look for the church (**n°6 on the map**). The entire neighbourhood on your left, forming a maze of tiny alleyways, is used by canna starch and vermicelli producers. It is bursting with activity and the relentless dodging and weaving of motorcycle and trolley traffic. From here, the wet starch is taken to the canna vermicelli makers, the *miến dong riêng*. You can ask **Mr. Nguyễn Thiện Tuấn (n°7 on the map)** if you can see inside his workshop, on the right just after the church.

Continue straight on, and at the end of the street with the church a sign points left, saying “*lên đê*” (meaning “towards the dyke”). Turn left here to come back onto the dyke from where you can reach the commune of Minh Khai, the next section of the walk. It is a somewhat tortuous street taking you past the very fine *nhà thờ tổ họ* (n°8 on the map) belonging to the Phí family (chapel of the Phí clan), which may well have been pressed into service for drying starch for refining.

When you get to the dyke road, turn right towards Minh Khai Commune. At the third road on the right, you go down from the dyke and through a large gateway.

From four in the morning, early risers may watch the making of *miến dong riêng*, or canna vermicelli, at the home of **Mr. Đỗ Văn Chi (n°9 on the map)**, which is opposite (on the right side of the alley) the old People’s Committee building of Minh Khai, in the first alley to the left as you go through the gateway.

You can also visit **Mr. Đỗ Đức Hạnh (n°10 on the map)**, a specialist rice noodle manufacturer, whose factory can be found in the same alley as that of Mr. Đỗ Văn Chi. To get there, go back the way you came and carry on straight ahead, leaving (to your right) the small street that leads to the entrance gateway. His workshop is just on the right. Most producers of *bún* or fresh rice noodles, however, are in the sector of Minh Khai beyond the dyke, and, like the rice wine brewers, they also rear pigs. To reach them, go back up to the dyke road and turn right. Take the first street that drops down to your left. You will see racks loaded with rice noodles put out to dry. There are noodle makers galore in this area: take your pick.

To conclude the itinerary, we suggest you visit some of the small factories making biscuits, confectionery or chocolate, or the yards where the equipment used in the different food producing stages is repaired. For this, you should follow the dyke road southwards (see map) and turn back towards Cát Quế, where you began the walk. Before you do however, you should make a cultural stop at the Hương Trại Pagoda and Dương Liễu Temple, ideal places to catch your breath after the hullabaloo of your walk. These two fine buildings are situated below the dyke (i.e. on the right, in the sector beyond the dyke), a short distance before the covered market.

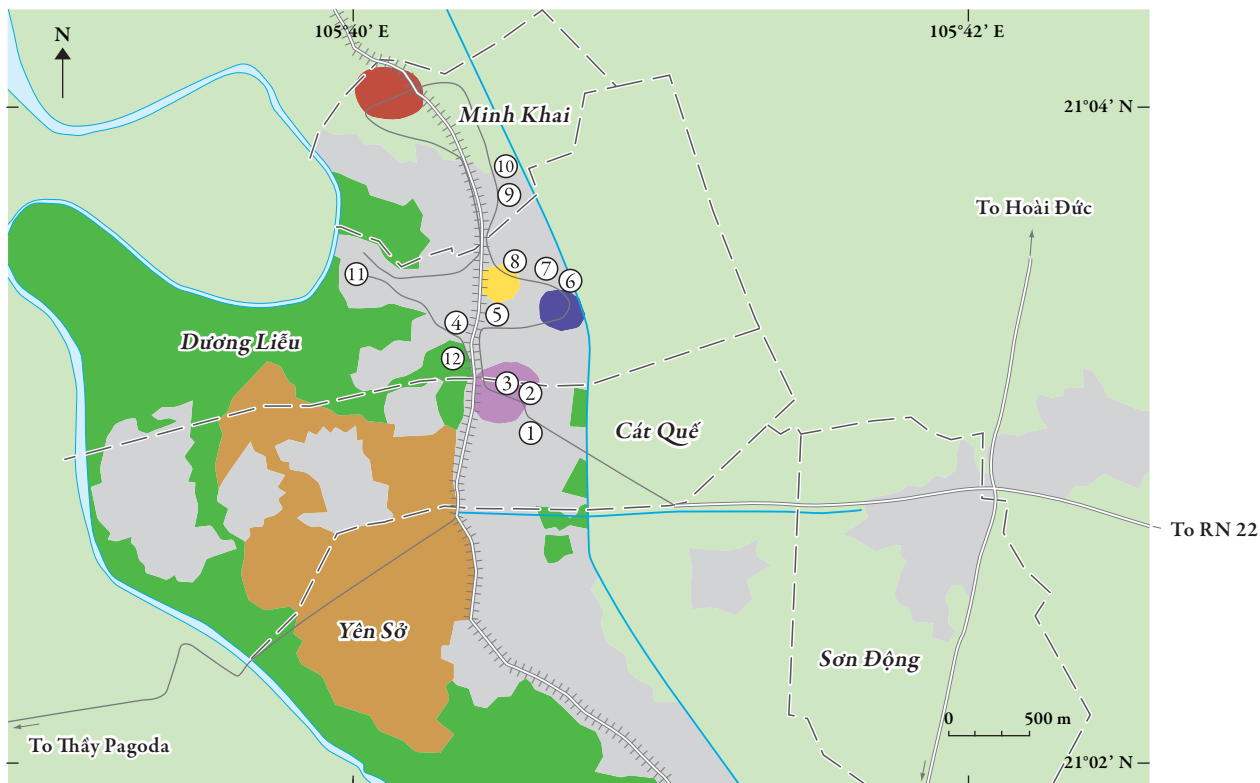
A little further on, level with the street where you came out onto the dyke after leaving the church, lying across to your right, down in the sector beyond the dyke, is the workshop of **Mr. Huy Vương**, the leading maker of machinery for the food processing industries. Still on the right, past the covered market, you can take the road leading down from the dyke and stretching away towards the Đáy River. This gives you a chance to see the effect of the sluice constructed on the Red River to regulate the Đáy: between the high dykes built up to keep it at bay, the turbulent river is now no more than a stream. On the road, you walk through a mini industrial estate where the **Việt-Pháp chocolate factory (n°11, on the map)** stands.

Go back onto the dyke road, and turn right towards Cát Quế. When you draw level with the street where you came out onto the dyke at the start of the walk, take the track going down to the right. You can visit a large **biscuit factory** down here (n°12 on the map), and even buy some delicious *petits-beurre*. A little further on, also below the dyke, is a **sweet factory**, which uses maltose syrup produced by a refinery established in the commune of Sơn Đồng. The wet starch obtained from the village artisans whom you have visited, is thus returned to the village workshops whence the starch originated, in the form of maltose: the cycle is complete. You can watch the different stages of production. The very young (not to say juvenile) workforce you will meet here reflects poorly on the spirit of initiative and economic drive shown by these villages. It is an incongruous sight especially for a sweet factory!

We suggest you conclude your foray into the villages by visiting the Pagoda of the Master, **Chùa Thầy**, which is barely five kilometres from the edge of Cát Quế. The road crosses the area beyond the Đáy River dyke, where orchards and sugar cane plantations merge (see map).



## Cát Quế, Dương Liễu and Minh Khai



- Residential area
- Paddy fields
- Orchard area
- Agricultural area
- Area producing starch and cassava
- Area producing canna starch
- Area producing canna vermicelli
- Area producing rice noodles

- Canal
- Dyke road
- Itinerary
- Communal boundary
- Yên Sở* Name of the commune

- ① Temple
- ② Mr. Sin
- ③ Mr. Ty
- ④ Covered market
- ⑤ Open-air canna market
- ⑥ Church
- ⑦ Mr. Tuấn
- ⑧ *Nhà Thờ Họ*
- ⑨ Mr. Chi
- ⑩ Mr. Hạnh
- ⑪ Factory producing Việt Pháp chocolate
- ⑫ Workshop producing biscuits

## THE PAGODA OF THE MASTER (CHÙA THẦY)

Chùa Thầy (in the village of Thụy Khê, Sài Sơn Commune, Quốc Oai District) dates from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, but has been restored numerous times. It is dedicated to Từ Đạo Hạnh, a monk renowned among local people for his great spiritual powers. He lived most of his life here, in prayer or making healing remedies. He is also the founding ancestor of water puppetry.

The pagoda site, against the backdrop of Mount Thầy, or Mount Sài Sơn, and flanked by Mount Long Đầu, faces the Long Chiếu Lake (Lake of the Dragon). The main pagoda (Chùa Cả) is surrounded by covered bridges: on the left, Nhật Tiên bridge leads to Tam Phú Temple, built in the middle of the lake; on the right Nguyệt Tiên bridge leads to the foot of the mountain. In the middle of the lake is a pavilion used for water puppet performances. Chùa Cả comprises three parallel buildings, the highest of them dedicated to the cult of Từ Đạo Hạnh. Beyond the Nguyệt Tiên bridge, a track winds up the mountain towards the Cao Temple, where legend has it that Từ Đạo Hạnh was first admitted to the holy order. Behind the temple is a grotto, Thánh Hóa (metamorphosis of the saint), where the monk, upon his death, was reincarnated as King Lý Thần Tông. Following the track along the mountain, you will come to more grottoes: Các Cỏ, a meeting place for lovers at festival time; and Bụt Mọc, with its stalagmites in the shape of the Buddha. Several of the small pagodas well away from the crowds, west of Mount Thầy, all built at different times, are worth a visit.

The pagoda's festival is held from the **5<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the 3<sup>rd</sup> lunar month**. Several nearby villages take part, among them Đa Phúc, Khánh Tân and Sài Khê, which are also the sites of famous pagodas. During the festival, the statue of Từ Đạo Hạnh is anointed, and there are games, *chèo* theatre and, of course, water puppet shows at the pavilion on Long Chiếu. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the feast month – the anniversary of Từ Đạo Hạnh's birth – a procession makes its way around the four villages and commemorative tablets are brought out in the monk's honour.



DRYING OF RICE NOODLES

A MUCH SOUGHT-AFTER PITCH ON THE DYKE  
AT MINH KHAI





## Appendices

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# Festivals near Hà Nội

## 1<sup>st</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> days/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month

*La Cả, Dương Nội, Hoài Đức, Hà Tây*

In honour of Dương Canh, a soldier in the army of the 16<sup>th</sup> king of the Hùng Dynasty. He famously killed a number of tigers that were wreaking havoc in the region, and was made a guardian spirit of the village. Processions, religious festivities, games, theatre and cockfighting take place. The most enjoyable part of the festival occurs on the 14<sup>th</sup> day, when a tiger hunt is performed on stage in the *đình*.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> days/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month

*Khê Thương, Sơn Đà, Ba Vì, Hà Tây*

In honour of Tản Viên, Genie of the Mountains.

There is a procession to take the statue of the Genie on his palanquin from the far side of the river Đà to Mount Nghĩa, at Phú Thọ, to visit his father-in-law, the 18<sup>th</sup> Hùng king. There are wrestling contests representing the legendary conflict between the Genie of the Mountains (Tản Viên) and the Genie of the Waters (Thủy Tinh).

## 4<sup>th</sup> day/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month

*Đồng Kỵ, Đồng Quang, Từ Sơn, Bắc Ninh (Itinerary 1)*

In honour of the guardian spirit of the village, Thiên Cương Đế, a warrior in the service of King Vương, the Hùng king, a native of Đồng Kỵ, who thwarted a rebellion. He was also the patron of commerce (the village being known for its buffalo trade). There is a contest for the biggest, noisiest firecracker, processions of highly decorated firecrackers (in the form of dragons), wrestling bouts and dances that recall ancient fertility rites. The local clans compete in a race to the biggest column of the *đình*, symbolising the four squadrons commanded by Thiên Cương Đế during the battle.

## 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> days/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month

*Phật Tích Pagoda, Phật Tích, Tiên Du, Bắc Ninh (Itinerary 1)*

Religious festival: celebration of the Buddha. Veneration of King Lý Thánh Tông. Asking for blessings to obtain contentment and stability, etc.

## 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> days/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month

*Trăm Gian Pagoda, Tiên Lữ, Tiên Phương, Chương Mỹ, Hà Tây (Itinerary 8)*

In honour of Nguyễn Bình An, hallowed as Saint Bôi. Procession of the statue of Saint Bôi on a palanquin, water puppet shows, living chess and wrestling.

## 4<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> days/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month

*Đông Hồ, Thuận Thành, Bắc Ninh (Itinerary 3)*

Festival to celebrate the craft ancestor of traditional prints and votive objects.

## 5<sup>th</sup> day/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month

*Đống Đa Hill, Khương Thượng đình, Đống Đa, Hà Nội*

Festival taking place on the site of national hero Quang Trung's victory over Sino-Manchu invaders during the Qing Dynasty, in spring 1789, and veneration of the fallen warriors. Performances, wrestling, unicorn dance and popular games (swing, cockfights, living chess).

## 6<sup>th</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month

*Đình of Đình Bảng, Từ Sơn, Bắc Ninh (Itinerary 1)*

An annual festival in honour of the Lục Tổ, the six founders of the village (from the 15<sup>th</sup> century).

## 6<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> days/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month

*12 villages of Cổ Loa Commune, Đông Anh, Hà Nội. Takes place between Cổ Loa Citadel and An Dương Vương Temple*

Cổ Loa Festival in honour of King An Dương Vương, who founded the Âu Lạc Kingdom and the Cổ Loa Citadel to fight off the Chinese enemy in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. Very long procession in the King's honour of dignitaries and citizens from

the 12 villages. Wrestling, games (tug-of-war, rice-cooking contests, cockfighting, living chess), performances of *chèo* and *tuồng* theatre, *Ca Trù* singing competition.

#### **6<sup>th</sup> day/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

*Vó, Quảng Phú, Lương Tài, Bắc Ninh*

The village of Vó (or Quảng Bồ), close to Đại Bái (Itinerary 3), specialises in bronze. Veneration of the founding ancestor of the craft Nguyễn Công Lê, procession, games, duck-catching contests, cockfighting, *chèo* and *tuồng* theatre.

#### **6<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> days/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

*Linh Sơn Temple, Nga Hoàng, Quế Võ, Bắc Ninh*

Celebration of guardian spirits: Linh Sơn Mỹ, daughter of one of the Hùng kings, at the temple and Đồng Vành at the *đình*. *Chen*, a kind of mass scrummage between girls and boys (symbolising equilibrium between the sexes and universal harmony) recalling ancient fertility rites. Anyone who doesn't take part will bring bad luck to the village! In the *đình* there is another ritual performance: lights-out while girls and boys get friendly together!

#### **7<sup>th</sup> day/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

*Phù Lãng, Quế Võ, Bắc Ninh (Itinerary 1 b)*

In honour of Lưu Phong Tú, founder of the pottery craft.

#### **7<sup>th</sup> day/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

*Sóc Sơn Temple, Vệ Linh, Phù Linh, Sóc Sơn, Hà Nội*

In honour of the genie Gióng. Cult of *mộc dục* (bathing of the statues), bamboo procession (ancient ceremony involving the linga, a phallic symbol, but also one of Gióng's weapons), elephant procession, betel procession, canoes and mime simulating the decapitation of enemy officers.

#### **7<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> days/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

*Làng, Dương Nội, Hoài Đức, Hà Tây*

In honour of Dương Cảnh, guardian spirit of the village in the days of the Hùng kings.

Processions, *Ca Trù* musical performance, games, tiger hunt...

#### **8<sup>th</sup> day/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

*Thị Cẩm, Từ Liêm, Hà Nội*

Rice-cooking festival in honour of Phan Tây Nhạc, a commander in the armies of the 18<sup>th</sup> Hùng king. When his troops billeted near the village, he organised a rice-cooking contest. On his death, he was made guardian spirit of the village. Three types of contest take place: filling the pot with water, lighting the fires, and cooking the rice.

#### **9<sup>th</sup> day/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

*Thôn Ngõ, Chuyên Mỹ, Hà Tây (Itinerary 6)*

In honour of Trương Công Thành, founding ancestor of mother-of-pearl inlay work on wood.

#### **9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> days/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

*Triều Khúc, Tân Triều, Thanh Trì, Hà Nội*

In honour of King Phùng Hưng, who liberated Đại La (Hà Nội) in 791 from Chinese Tang invaders, defeating them in battle here in the village. The king was made guardian spirit. A second guardian spirit is also venerated during the festival: Vũ Uy, a mandarin who went to serve as an ambassador to China where he learned to weave fibres into conical hats (*nón*). The village grew wealthy from the craft and subsequently specialised in silk weaving and flag making. The festival takes place in the two *đình*, at Sác and Đại. The Đại *đình*, the larger of the two, is dedicated to the cult of King Phùng Hưng. Processions, flag and dragon dances, wrestling and *chèo* theatre.

#### **10<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> days/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

*Đa Hoà and Dạ Trạch Temples, Yên Vinh, Khoái Châu, Hưng Yên and Chữ Đồng Tử Temple, Tự Nhiên, Thường Tín, Hà Tây (Itinerary 6)*

In honour of Chữ Đồng Tử and his wife, princess Tiên Dung. Water procession: a boat decorated with dragons is

launched on the Red River for princess Tiên Dung to perform her ablutions. The convoy, with husband and wife seated on their palanquin, sets off from the *đình* towards the temple of Đa Hoà, passing each of the places where the couple lived. On another palanquin, relics of the venerable couple are paraded through the village: the conical hat and the miraculous stick. Theatre, *trống quân* music, games, cockfighting, living chess, unicorn dance, *con đi đánh bông* (“brazen strumpets banging on bongos”, performed by men dressed as women). The festival takes place on both banks of the Red River, in the temples at Đa Hoà (left bank) and Chữ Đồng Tử (right bank).

**12<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> days/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

*Đa Sĩ, Hà Đông, Hà Tây*

In honour of a famous doctor at the royal court during the Lê dynasty (18<sup>th</sup> century), Hoàng Đôn Hòa, and his wife, Princess Phương Dung, renowned for her wisdom in traditional healing. The festival takes place every three years. Also celebrated is the founder of the knifemaking craft, who is the guardian spirit of the village. Procession between temple and *đình*. Dragon dance, procession, cockfighting, wrestling, *ca trù* song, *tuồng chèo* theatre.

**13<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> days/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

**Lim Festival**, *Lũng Giang, Nội Dụ, Tiên Sơn, Bắc Ninh (Itinerary 1)*

In honour of Hiếu Trung Hầu, founder of *quan họ*, a love duet tradition. The festival starts with a *quan họ* contest involving competitors from the 49 villages of Bắc Ninh Province that specialise in this form of song. It takes place in the Hồng Vân Pagoda on the hill called Lim, and then in boats around the village. Processions, games (swing, tug-of-war, living chess, wrestling...).

**13<sup>th</sup> day/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

**Pig Festival at La Phù**, *Hoài Đức, Hà Tây (Itinerary 4)*

In honour of a 17<sup>th</sup>-century general who defended the village. Whenever he drilled his troops before combat, villages would lay on a feast of sticky rice and pork dishes. The festival takes place every year on the day of his death. Main activity: a procession of village elders, 32 young villagers and a 120 – 200 kg pig, to the temple dedicated to the general. Ceremonies to petition the guardian spirit for a good harvest, good fortune and prosperity.

**13<sup>th</sup> day/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

**Vạn Phúc đình**, *Hà Đông, Hà Tây (Itinerary 4)*

In honour of the founder of silk weaving, female ancestor Lã Thị Nga.

**13<sup>th</sup> day/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

**Chùa Bối Khê**, *Hưng Giáo, Tam Hưng, Thanh Oai, Hà Tây (Itinerary 7)*

Bối Khê Pagoda Festival. Living chess matches, games, music, etc.

**15<sup>th</sup> day/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

**La Khê**, *Hà Đông, Hà Tây (Itinerary 4)*

Festival of the *đình*.

**15<sup>th</sup> day/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month – end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> lunar month**

**Perfume Pagoda**, *Hương, Hương Sơn, Mỹ Đức, Hà Tây*

One of the largest and longest festivals in the country. There are no games or cultural events, but rather visits to a number of sacred sites, pagodas and temples, clinging to the mountainside or inside caves. Access is by boat on the Bến Đức River. Some young couples head for the Hương Tích Pagoda, an immense cave ornamented with stalagmites and stalactites, to have a priest offer prayers for a male child.

**18<sup>th</sup> day/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

**Phù Ninh**, *Ninh Hiệp, Gia Lâm, Hà Nội (Itinerary 2)*

In honour of Lady Thái Lão, the crafts ancestor for the processors of medicinal plants and of silk weaving. The festival is held in Điểm Kiều Temple, built to pay homage to her.



### **20<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>th</sup> days/1<sup>st</sup> lunar month**

*Thổ Hà, Việt Yên, Bắc Giang (Itinerary 1b)*

The village's spring festival goes on for three days, with traditional games, entertainment, *quan họ* singing and *tuồng* opera.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> days/2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month**

*Tích Giang, Phúc Thọ, Hà Tây*

In honour of Tản Viên, Genie of the Mountains. Fishing contest to offer catches to the genie, fish supper, water puppets, *đúm* song, game of *đáo đĩa*.

### **1<sup>st</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> days/2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month**

*Đại Lộ Temple, Ninh Sở, Thường Tín, Hà Tây (Itinerary 6)*

Cult of the Sacred Mothers who protect trading fleets on the Red River. Procession, bathing of statues in the Red River, *lên đồng* spiritualism, dragon dance, lion dance, living chess, *quan họ* songs, cockfighting.

### **5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> days/2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month**

*Sơn Động, Hoài Đức, Hà Tây (Itinerary 9)*

In honour of Hoàng Phó Thái Công, who fought in the war against the Chinese. Buffalo sacrifice, cockfighting, dances, procession and contests to prepare *bánh dầy* and *bánh cuốn*, sticky rice cakes. Another mating ritual is the contest to grab a length of sacred bamboo (*cướp bông*).

### **6<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> days/2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month**

*Vua Bà Temple, Làng Viêm Xá, Hoà Long, Yên Phong, Bắc Ninh (near Cầu river, on the other side of Thổ Hà)*

In honour of Vua Bà, the founding ancestor of *quan họ* traditional duet singing. Ceremony on the anniversary of the death of the founder, during which *quan cầu đảo*, and *quan họ trùm dẫu* songs are performed. Contests are also organised.

### **8<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> days/2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month**

*Thanh Liệt đình, Thanh Liệt, Thanh Trì, Hà Nội*

In honour of Phạm Tu and Chu Văn An. Procession of palanquins from the *đình* at Nội (dedicated to Chu Văn An) to the *đình* at Ngoại (dedicated to Phạm Tu), classical theatre, traditional games such as cockfighting, *bỏi* chess.

### **9<sup>th</sup> day/2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month**

*Cổ Nhuế, Từ Liêm, Hà Nội*

In honour of Đông Chinh Vương (fifth son of King Lê Thái Tổ, who fought against the Ming Dynasty Chinese), his wife, and Princess Tạ Minh Hiền. Procession, *bỏi* chess, living chess, *quan họ* and cockfighting.

### **9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> days/2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month**

*Giàn đình, Cáo Đình, Xuân Đình, Từ Liêm, Hà Nội*

In honour of Lý Phục Man (a general during the Lý Dynasty who fought off the invaders of Lương and Lâm Ấp). Procession, living chess, cockfighting, traditional wrestling.

### **10<sup>th</sup> day/2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month**

*Đại Bái, Thuận Thành, Bắc Ninh (Itinerary 3)*

Anniversary of the death of the ancestor of metal beating, Nguyễn Công Hiệp.

### **12<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> days/2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month**

*Đình Bảng đình, Từ Sơn Bắc Ninh (Itinerary 1)*

*Đình* festival honouring the three spirits or genies (the Mountain genie, Water genie, and Agriculture genie) and the six guardian spirits of the six village clans who rebuilt the settlement after it was destroyed by the Ming invaders.

Wrestling bouts here draw in the best wrestlers in the region (the Lý kings were great fans of wrestling). Martial arts, cockfighting, chess tournaments. Offerings such as roast buffalo, boiled pork and sticky rice are made to the spirits.

### **14<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> days/2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month**

#### ***Bát Tràng đình, Gia Lâm, Hà Nội (Itinerary 2)***

In honour of Hán Cao Tổ, Queen Lữ Cai O Minh Chính, General Phan, Hồ Quốc Thần and the genie Bạch Mã. Water procession, washing of the genie's ancestral tablets, *ca trù* song contest.

### **20<sup>th</sup> day/2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month**

#### ***Phú Thụ Temple, Dương Xá, Gia Lâm, Hà Nội (Itinerary 3)***

In honour of Lady Ý Lan, important royal figure and first concubine of King Lý Thánh Tông (11<sup>th</sup> century).

### **2<sup>nd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> days/3<sup>rd</sup> lunar month**

#### ***Bình Đà, Bình Minh, Thanh Oai, Hà Tây***

Firecracker festival, in honour of Lạc Long Quân, father of the Vietnamese. Competitions for different firecrackers and fireworks (Bình Đà was, until 1994, the centre of the firecracker industry). Processions.

### **6<sup>th</sup> day/3<sup>rd</sup> lunar month**

#### ***Tây Phương Pagoda, Thạch Xá, Thạch Thất, Hà Tây***

Festival incorporating religious ceremonies to pray for good luck and request blessings from the Buddha. This Lê Dynasty pagoda is famous for its beautiful columns and wooden statues.

### **7<sup>th</sup> day/3<sup>rd</sup> lunar month**

#### ***Thấy Pagoda, Thụy Khê, Sài Sơn, Quốc Oai, Hà Tây (Itinerary 9)***

In honour of the monk, Từ Đạo Hạnh. A number of nearby villages take part (including Đa Phúc, Khánh Tân, Sài Khê, all sites of famous pagodas). The statue of Từ Đạo Hạnh is bathed, games are organised, and there is *chèo* theatre and especially water puppet shows in the pavilion on Lake Long Châu. On the feast day, which is the anniversary of Từ Đạo Hạnh's birth, a procession parades around the four villages. Ancestral tablets are brought out for the occasion.

### **10<sup>th</sup> day/3<sup>rd</sup> lunar month**

#### ***Vạn Ninh, Gia Bình, Bắc Ninh***

Celebration of Cao Lỗ, inventor of the crossbow. Boat races on the river between the commune's seven villages.

### **10<sup>th</sup> day/3<sup>rd</sup> lunar month**

#### ***Yên Sở đình, Hoài Đức, Hà Tây***

In honour of Lý Phục Man, a celebrated commander in the Lý Nam Đế army in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and a native of Cổ Sở, the old name for Yên Sở.

There is a performance representing the review of the Imperial army, processions, fireworks, music, etc.

### **15<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> days/3<sup>rd</sup> lunar month**

#### ***Lý Bát Đế Temple or Đô Temple, Đình Bảng, Từ Sơn, Bắc Ninh (Itinerary 1)***

This annual festival honours the eight kings of the Lý Dynasty. Every third or fourth year, it becomes a larger-scale affair. Statues of the eight kings are paraded from the Đô Temple and Cổ Pháp where Lý Công Uẩn (later called Lý Thái Tổ), who founded the Lý Dynasty, spent his childhood in a monastery. Elements of the Buddhist faith combine with traditional beliefs in the supernatural. Games, cockfighting, wrestling. Living chess matches re-enact historic struggles between the Lý and Trần Dynasties.

### **23<sup>rd</sup> day/3<sup>rd</sup> lunar month**

#### ***Lệ Mật, Gia Lâm (Hà Nội)***

In honour of Hoàng Ngọc Trung who is alleged to have killed a river monster and saved the daughter of Lý Thái Tông as she was walking on the banks of the Đuống. As a reward, Trung was granted a royal privilege, along with his village companions, to clear and cultivate the territories west of the capital.

Procession of a pot filled with water and a carp fished from the village well. Serpent dance, recalling the exploits of the hero. On this day, representatives from the villages that the pioneers established (a present-day district of Hà Nội) go to Lệ Mật.

#### **8<sup>th</sup> day/4<sup>th</sup> lunar month**

***Dâu Pagoda, Liên Lâu, Thuận Thành, Bắc Ninh and also in 12 other villages of Thuận Thành District (Itinerary 3)***

At the Dâu Pagoda, a major Buddhist centre, and in four other pagodas in the district of Thuận Thành, four goddesses are venerated: Cloud, Rain, Thunder and Lightning, the daughters of Man Nương. Processions, contests, games (chess, fireworks, etc.), dances, wrestling. The festival is linked to Buddhist religious practices and fertility cults.

#### **6<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> days/4<sup>th</sup> lunar month**

***Phù Đổng and Phù Đực temples, Gia Lâm, Hà Nội (Itinerary 2)***

Commemorating the genie Thanh Gióng, or Phù Đổng Thiên Vương, a young hero who fought the Chinese army during the Hùng Dynasty (6<sup>th</sup> king). Rituals connected with water, processions, food offerings in the temple, water puppetry performances, races, dance of the standard bearers, flag ceremonies, plays commemorating the battles against the Chinese.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> day/5<sup>th</sup> lunar month**

***Dư Dụ, Thanh Thủy, Thanh Oai, Hà Tây (Itinerary 5)***

Festival to celebrate the anniversary of the death of Lỗ Ban, founder of the craft of wood sculpture.

#### **15<sup>th</sup> day/5<sup>th</sup> lunar month**

***Chèm đình, Thụy Phương, Từ Liêm, Hà Nội***

The very old đình Chèm is dedicated to the cult of Lý Thân, alias Lý Ông Trọng, a legendary figure from the time of the Hùng Dynasty. He was sent to China on a mission to help the Qin emperor repel the Mongols. Water processions, bathing of the statue of Lý Thân in the Red River, ceremony in honour of the Buddha. Kite-flying contest, releasing of birds, wrestling, popular theatre, living chess.

#### **12<sup>th</sup> day/6<sup>th</sup> lunar month**

***Quất Động, Thường Tín, Hà Tây (Itinerary 6)***

Celebration of the death of the founding father of the craft of embroidery, Lê Công Hành.

#### **12<sup>th</sup> day/8<sup>th</sup> lunar month**

***Thụy Ứng, Thường Tín, Hà Tây (Itinerary 5)***

Festival of the founding father of horn carving.

#### **16<sup>th</sup> day/8<sup>th</sup> lunar month**

***Nhị Khê đền, Thường Tín, Hà Tây (Itinerary 5)***

In honour of Nguyễn Trãi (1380-1442), great diplomat, strategist and man of letters. He assisted the leader of the popular uprising, Lê Lợi, in organising resistance against Ming Dynasty Chinese invaders. Takes place in the temple dedicated to him.

#### **17<sup>th</sup> day/8<sup>th</sup> lunar month**

***Kiều Kỵ, Gia Lâm, Hà Nội (Itinerary 2)***

Craft ancestors Nguyễn Quý Trị (end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century) and Vũ Danh Thuận (beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup>) are honoured with a celebration in the đình.

#### **29<sup>th</sup> day / 9<sup>th</sup> lunar month**

***Đại Bái, Gia Bình, Bắc Ninh (Itinerary 3)***

Festival to venerate the ancestor of the craft (of metalbeating), Mr. Nguyễn Công Truyền.

#### **6<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> days / 10<sup>th</sup> lunar month**

***Than Temple, Cao Đức, Gia Bình, Bắc Ninh***

In honour of General Cao Lỗ, who helped King An Dương Vương to build the citadel of Cổ Loa. Dragon dance, wrestling, a theatrical display imitating a tiger hunt.



**25<sup>th</sup> day / 10<sup>th</sup> lunar month**

**Nhị Khê, Thường Tín, Hà Tây, (Itinerary 5)**

In honour of Doãn Văn Tài, founder of woodturning craft in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Takes place in the temple.

**11<sup>th</sup> day / 11<sup>th</sup> lunar month**

**Hạ Thái, Duyên Thái, Thường Tín, Hà Tây (Itinerary 5)**

In honour of Bùi Sỹ Lương (military official of the Lê Dynasty, after the 15<sup>th</sup> century) and Madam Đinh Thị Trạch, the guardian spirits of the village. On the feast days, villagers set up a pole next to the well and organise ceremonies and festivities including water processions, *mộc dục* (washing of statues), cult rituals in the *đình*, wrestling, *sinh tiền* and lion dances, etc.

**26<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> days / 11<sup>th</sup> lunar month**

**Đậu Pagoda, Hà Tây (Itinerary 5)**

In honour of the Water Genie and Buddha. Blessings requested to bring rains and a good harvest.

**6<sup>th</sup> day/12<sup>th</sup> lunar month**

**Đại Bái, Gia Bình, Bắc Ninh (Itinerary 3)**

Festival in honour of Lạc Long Quân, the forefather of the Việt. Besides ceremonies and a procession, the festival involves villagers in a performance known as the “pouting dragon”. Thirty or forty young men take part, wearing only g-strings. They form up in single file behind the elder dignitaries who strike gongs while moving in zigzag fashion, in the snaking movements of a dragon.

# Glossary of Vietnamese words

*áo dài*: long, tight tunic split to the waist, worn with light, flowing trousers

*bánh*: cake

*bánh đa*: paper-thin rice pancakes for making spring rolls

*bánh dày*: rice cake filled with meat or sweet paste

*bàn thờ*: shrine to the ancestors

*bộ đội*: regular soldier of the revolutionary army

*cây sơn*: lacquer tree

*chèo*: folk opera

*chùa*: pagoda

*đậu phụ*: tofu (soya bean curds), a substitute for animal protein

*đền*: temple

*điểm*: look-out post/small temple

*điệp*: pearly-white paste made with mussel shells to decorate and strengthen *dó* paper

*đình*: communal house

*dó*: tree (*rhamnoneuron*) whose fibrous bark is used to make paper

*Đổi Mới*: Economic Renewal, open-door policy

*giang*: short and robust variety of bamboo

*giáp*: subdivision of a hamlet (members of the same clan)

*giấy dó*: paper made with the bark of the *rhamnoneuron* tree

*gốm mỹ thuật*: artistic ceramics

*hàng sáo*: rice husker

*hậu*: title conferring eligibility to carry out sacrifices to Buddha

*hợp tác xã*: co-operative

*khuôn*: working frame, made of bamboo, to make a hat, *dó* paper, etc.

*làng*: village

*lễ hội*: festival

*lên đồng*: ritual ceremony where a medium becomes possessed by spirits

*lò*: oven, kiln

*mây*: rattan

*miếu*: small temple where villagers worship deities providing protection and succour

*mô*: temple block, a hollowed piece of wood carved in the shape of a dragon, fish or frog, struck with a beater to accompany prayers in temples and pagodas

*người viết sớ*: scribes for hire at temples who write down messages and wishes for the faithful

*nhà quê*: pejorative term (since the colonial period, even used in French) for anyone lacking urban sophistication, a country bumpkin

*nhà thờ họ*: building where clan members worship their ancestors

*nhà văn hóa*: cultural centre

*nơi hoá vàng*: oven for burning votive paper, found in temples

*nôm*: former Vietnamese writing system

*nón*: conical hat made of latania leaves

*nứa*: large species of bamboo (from south of the Delta)

*nước mắm*: salty fish sauce, a vital source of nutrients in the traditional Vietnamese diet

*ông tổ nghề*: craft ancestor

*phường*: village ward in Hà Nội, until the collectivist period

*quan họ*: love duets

*quạt*: fan

*quỳ*: very thin gold or silver leaf used to decorate lacquered objects

*rối nước*: water puppets

*sào*: unit of measurement = 360 m<sup>2</sup> in the north of Vietnam (500 m<sup>2</sup> in the south)

*sơn ta*: natural lacquer made from the sap of the lacquer tree

*Tết*: Vietnamese lunar new year's festival  
*thần thánh hoàng*: guardian spirit of a village (literally "the spirit of the ramparts")  
*thầy cúng*: animist priest hired by pilgrims to officiate in a (Taoist) temple  
*thợ mộc*: itinerant carpenter  
*Thuốc Bắc*: northern traditional medicine (mountainous north of Vietnam and China)  
*Thuốc Nam*: southern traditional medicine (Vietnam)  
*thủy đình*: pavilion built in a pond for water puppet performances  
*tiểu*: ceramic burial casket (for bones only)  
*tổ sư*: founding ancestor  
*tò he*: rice dough figurines  
*trắc*: mahogany  
*tre*: wide-sectioned bamboo (from south of the Delta)  
*trúc*: ivory bamboo, slender with closely-spaced nodes  
*tuồng*: classical theatre  
*ủy ban xã*: communal people's committee  
*văn chỉ*: temple of literature  
*vông*: Bamboo hoops that make up the conical hat's skeleton  
*xóm*: hamlet



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With their festivals and traditional industries, their communal halls, pagodas, temples, and vernacular buildings, the villages around Hà Nội possess a rich body of cultural, architectural and craft heritage. Less than one hour from the capital are over 500 specialist craft villages, producing an array of religious or artistic objects, as well as food products, industrial goods, textiles, basketware and much more. Despite the trials and tribulations Vietnam has endured, these traditions have remained alive; today they constitute the basis of material, social and spiritual culture among the village communities of the Red River delta.

The artisans themselves, and their local institutions, see cultural tourism as a way of further improving the fortunes of the craft village communities and bringing their heritage to wider attention. Until recently, few guides or tourists had forayed into these settlements, some of which are lost in the maze of routes and tracks that criss-cross the rice paddies of the Hà Nội hinterland. The history and skills they harbour have been inaccessible to all but a few specialists. Few of the villages are signposted, yet between them they are home to three quarters of the architectural, religious and craft heritage of the upper delta.

This book, the fruit of several years' research by specialists working in northern Vietnam, comprises ten itineraries, blending potted histories, legends, descriptions of craft techniques, signposted walks and maps, designed to introduce travellers and lovers of Vietnamese culture to forty or so villages around Hà Nội. Many of us have seen their wares on sale in shops in and around the 36 streets of Hà Nội Old Quarter or in other cities in West. This book is about the true lives and enduring skills of the nameless artisans who made them.

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