

UPDATE

Bi-monthly Newsletter Reporting on US-Vietnamese Current Events and Culture
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The Year of the Tiger

"Tet Nguyen Dan" or the Vietnamese Lunar New Year, begins this year on midnight January 28th. The festivities usually last three days, but for some continue for 10 days. The traditional Vietnamese calendar runs in cycles of twelve years. A genie, in the form of an animal figure, dominates each year. As the old year gives way to the new, the ruling genie quietly bows out to the next. This

coming year will be the year of the Tiger.

On Tet, the home is brightly lit and the family altar resplendent with flowers, fruits, cakes and sweets to welcome the new genie. Firecrackers used to explode at the exact moment of transition, known as Le Giao Thua, much the same as in the West. In Viet Nam, they serve an additional purpose - to chase out the evil spirit. However, since the Tet Of-

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Personal Profile: Young Anthropologist "at Home" In Seattle

Last September, 23 year old Duong Bich Hanh boarded a plane and left Viet Nam for the first time. She had a Jackson Scholarship to study anthropology at UW. If she felt any anxiety at leaving home and traveling half way around the world to study a discipline not taught in Viet Nam, in a language not her own, you would not know it to meet her today. Hanh possesses a casual self-confidence which would seem

to make her feel at home almost anywhere; the perfect quality for an anthropologist.

Hanh did not come to Seattle, or anthropology, by any direct route. The elder of two daughters, her parents are high school teachers in Hanoi. This may not yield a high family income, but does produce a high regard

for education. Hanh did very well in school, skipped a grade or two and entered University. Not having a clear

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Yamaha Gets Kick-Start in Viet Nam

Japan's Yamaha Motor Co Ltd. has moved a step closer to assembling its motorcycles in Vietnam in an \$80 million joint venture with Malaysian and Vietnamese partners, the Viet Nam News Agency (VNA) reports.

All foreign investment in Vietnam is licensed by the ministry of planning and investment, but large-scale projects also need the prime minister's approval. Vietnam's industry ministry has proposed that Yamaha's long-delayed plans to establish a motorcycle assembly plant near Ha Noi be approved.

Yamaha, which has been waiting almost two years for its license, is reported to have a 46 percent stake in the joint venture. Malaysia's Hong Leong Industries Bhd. has 24 percent, the balance being held by local partner, Vietnam Forest Products Company (VINAFOR).

Of five licensed motorcycle assembly projects only Japan's Suzuki and VMEP from Taiwan have begun production. The first Hondas to be assembled in Vietnam are ex-

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New Man at the Helm - What course will he take?

Le Kha Phieu, a lieutenant-general, is the man set to take over Vietnam's top job, Communist Party Secretary General. He will succeed the current Secretary General, Do Muoi.

The journey ahead is far from plain sailing. Phieu must balance Communist Party reformers and conservatives as the country grapples with serious economic problems. Viet Nam is facing its most serious financial downturn since the country began introducing economic reforms in the late 1980s. However, Phieu has little economic experience. What is more, his conservative reputation worries many - he has been prominent in warning of the dangers of external forces seeking to take advantage of economic and politi-

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THE GREATER SEATTLE VIET NAM ASSOCIATION

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fensive of 1968, the use of firecrackers was banned by the authorities.

Another practice used to chase away evil spirits is to plant Cay Neu (a bamboo pole) in front of one's home. The pole is stripped of its leaves and decorated with red paper.

At this time the greetings always concern the well-being of the family, the focal point of Vietnamese life. "May I wish you," so goes the toast to the head of the family, "nothing but prosperity in your endeavours. May you have a son at the beginning of this year and a daughter at the end. May your fortunes increase tenfold and may peace and happiness be with you and your family..."

At dawn, the family sits down to a banquet in honour of their ancestors. When the meal is finished, it is time to dress up and meet parents and grand-parents to wish them luck and happiness in the coming year. Youngsters receive a small sum of money wrapped in the traditional "red envelope".

It is an ancient belief in Viet Nam that fortune or misfortune which occurs on New Year's Day sets the pattern for the rest of the year. The character of the first visitor to the home will leave his imprint on the family for the rest of the year. This ancient custom is called "Xong Nha". It is not unusual in many homes to lock the gates and wait until a few minutes after

midnight to admit a favoured friend as the "first guest in the New Year" who, in the meantime, has been walking around the block, waiting for his cue to make his "guest appearance".

Other important aspects of Tet are the family visit to the Pagoda or Temple, visits to friends and relatives, and plain old relaxation!

In the countryside the ceremonies include a tilling event to insure a plentiful harvest after the spring planting. Once again, folks will pay old debts, pray for good health and happiness for their families while many will look forward to a very prosperous new year. *Cung chuc tuan xuan!!! Tyler DuLam*

Tet from page 1

Business Breakfast

Schedule for the beginning of 1998

January 21

Tim Douglas, Director
WA State CTED

February 25

Chris Morgan
Sales Director
Asia Pacific Sales, Boeing

March 25

Al Davignon, Director
REM Ventures

April 22

Derek Haynes, Product
Development, *SE Asia
Microsoft*

*Please contact GSVa at
206-322-1178 for details.*

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career objective, she began studying English.

At that time, in "Doi Moi" Viet Nam, studying English could seem like a good career move in itself. This delusion was short lived however. "The language instruction is not very good," says Hanh. Formal Vietnamese English instruction has been barely adequate to produce tourist service functionaries. And

multinational companies were looking for candidates with specific skills training, in addition to English. Upon graduation, Hanh began looking for jobs with non-governmental organizations (NGO's). Fortunately, she had that palpable "comfortable-with-herself" quality that Oxfam Canada was looking for. Wisely, they hired her.

Hanh became an interpreter with the Oxfam projects designed to create economic opportunities for Vietnam's ethnic minorities, the hill tribes. They also created opportunities for Hanh. She now had daily exposure to native English speakers and became virtually fluent. She traveled, west of Hanoi to Mai Chau and Son La Provinces, and to the Central Highlands. And she became familiar with minority cultures: Thai, Hmong, Muong and others.

The focus of Oxfam Canada's was to tap into existing native skills, promote craft co-ops, suggest design im-

provements and develop markets for the products. However well-intentioned, misunderstandings arose. At one time, Oxfam lent low-interest "seed" money to a collective of weavers. Whereas the Vietnamese are quite familiar with the concepts of lending, principle and interest, these minority women were not. They did not understand the terms and defaulted on the loan.

But from "disasters" like this, Hanh recognized an opportunity. By getting a degree in anthropology, which is not offered at any University in Viet Nam, Hanh could make herself considerably more valuable to an NGO employer. So, after two or three years with Oxfam, she applied, won the scholarship and came to UW. And Hanh fits right in. By her dress, demeanor, even her English, you would not guess she just left home. She seems almost a typical American student. She shares an off-campus house with other foreign students. But despite her success and easy adaptability, the academic life is not for Hanh. She does not like studying and is not interested in a teaching career. Hanh wants to return to Viet Nam and get back to work, helping the hill tribes to a better life. In the meantime, she would like to attend a GSAV meeting before she goes.

Scott Wild

Premiere Screening
Reversing the Legacy
of War

Sunday, January 11
5pm - 7pm
Seattle Unity Church
200 8th Avenue North
Seattle

Join Peace Trees for this inspiring, hour-long documentary, produced by Carol Burns and Chris Stegman, featuring the Peace Trees Vietnam landmines clearance and reforestation project in Quang Tri Province. Donations to the Danaan Parry Landmines Education Center for Children will be gratefully accepted.

For more information
call 286-5766

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pected to roll off the production line within the next few months.

While there are few cars on Vietnam's roads, official estimates say there are some 4.2 million motorcycles cruising the highways in this country of 77 million people. Vietnam imports about 350,000 motorcycles each year and with demand increasing by 10-15 percent annually official forecasts say 650,000 to 700,000 machines will be needed in the year 2000.

Mai Ling Corke

cal liberalization in order to undermine communism. One Hanoi-based diplomat says, "His antecedents, on paper, are not so attractive. We would presume him to be a party man, not particularly interested in economic reform."

"But there are straws in the wind that this is not the correct interpretation. The Vietnamese to whom I have spoken don't see him in such black and white terms."

In an interview with Reuters, Professor Carl Thayer, an expert on Viet Nam at the Australian Defense Force Academy, said "The big question is what is the basis of legitimacy for the Communist Party ... it's economic growth, and it's slowing...In the long-term I'm optimistic, the Vietnamese are very pragmatic people, but I'm pessimistic presently because of the structural impediments in the party. They have a system

that doesn't allow rapid change."

But other analysts find Vietnam's economic problems so pressing that the leadership has no option but to sail the path of reform. "The effects of the downturn will be felt greater next year and this will force people to confront the need for change," says a Western analyst. "I think, in a nut shell, we can be optimistic."

Mai Ling Corke

THE GREATER SEATTLE VIETNAM ASSOCIATION



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