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May Day 2013

The Vietnam International Students Association members were very active on May Day, running a stall providing Vietnamese food for people at the rally in the Torrens Parade Ground. They were able to raise funds to send back to Vietnam to assist families still suffering from the impact of agent orange, a tragedy that is crossing from one generation to the next. May Day offers a great occasion to develop solidarity and comradeship so that the Vietnamese people among others know that there are friends in Australia that they can look to.



Vietnamese students' stall at the May Day Rally

Full Moon Festival

Vietnamese Students are holding a Full Moon Festival in the Union Building at Adelaide University on Sunday 22nd September. Members and friends are very welcome. Join in one of the great festivals celebrated each year by people in Vietnam.



Mid-Autumn Festival in Hanoi

Inside: The pearl industry in Vietnam

VN pearls have the world as their oyster

by Luong Thu Huong (edited for *Vietnam Today*)

The entire audience at the fashion show, Silk Heritage, on August 2 at the Grand-Ho Tram Strip, were deeply impressed by the unique combination of pearls and traditional materials used in the collection "Hue khoi xu Nam Ky" (Beauties of Cochinchina) by fashion designer Vo Viet Chung. The pearls are natural and have never been processed or polished. They were carefully selected by the Hoang Gia Pearl Company and bring a freshness to the collection. Pearls have been said to be a precious natural gift endowed to countries with the advantage of having a long coastline, like Viet Nam.

It is recorded in history that many hundreds of years ago, Vietnamese pearls used to be very famous. Right by the sea near Bai Tu Long National Park in Quang Ninh, there are many legends associated with pearls that the Vietnamese still take pride in. Many islands in the area are named after this precious gift, like Minh Chau (Bright Pearl) or Ngoc Vung (Luminous Pearl), which are the pride of local people.

However, just over ten years ago, Vietnamese pearls were still considered a potential resource that had not been properly exploited. They used to be harvested in nature or raised in rare traditional small farms without using any modern technology. The pearl industry or even a brand name for Vietnamese pearls seemed to be a long off vision at that time. According to Nguyen Manh Thang, the general director of Vietnam Pearl Joint-stock Company, the art of raising oysters to produce pearls started to appear in Viet Nam in 1967 on Co To Island in Quang Ninh; however, by 1980, the business had dissolved.

"The aquaculture sector in northern Viet Nam in 1988 undertook many studies on how to breed pearl oysters and ways of implanting beads into them, starting the journey that eventually confirmed the status of Vietnamese pearls," he adds.

Thang says, at present, there are 11 enterprises studying, breeding and making pearl jewellery nation-wide, producing about 70-80kg of pearls per year. The biggest are the Vietnam Pearl Joint-stock Company and the Hoang Gia Pearl Company, which hold almost 80 per cent of domestic market share. The others are mainly small enterprises producing pearls to serve tourists.

Origins of a brand-name

Thirteen years ago, a group of French specialists travelled to Viet Nam to study and begin a project to raise oysters for pearls in certain coastal areas. One of the key participants in the project was Ho Thanh Tuan, who later established the Hoang Gia Pearl Company. Tuan spent six years on Con Dao Island in the southern province of Ba Ria-Vung Tau and brings over one million of black, silver or sparkling golden pearls to the mainland every year. These shining pearls are the result of all the sweat and tears that the devoted 37-year-old man has put in, plus his endless love for these gifts of nature.

"The sea in Con Dao is different from others around the world because it is suitable for many kinds of oysters, which explains why, with the same sea water, I could culture pearls of different colours, the most valuable of which is golden", says Tuan.



Slow growth: Under the right conditions, it takes at least five years before an oyster becomes mature enough to produce a pearl and the success rate is about 40 per cent. For pearls over 10mm, it might take up to seven or even ten years. — VNS File Photo

"Pearl farming depends largely on the sea's environment. A polluted environment always leads to certain failure and other elements should also been taken into consideration like salinity and water depth, when raising different kinds of oysters", he says.



Quality control: Ho Thanh Tuan checks a pearl oyster cage off Co Dao Island

Under the right conditions, it takes at least five years before an oyster becomes mature enough to produce a pearl, and the success rate is about 40 per cent. For pearls over 10mm, it might take up to seven or even ten years. However, most of the crude pearls harvested in Viet Nam are exported to Japan, the biggest pearl market in the world. However, some surveys have shown that the demand for pearls in Viet Nam is rising. Many expensive pearl products from hundreds to thousands of dollars have been successfully sold to both domestic and foreign tourists. A new market has started to open up, so besides production for exports, the developing and trading of pearl jewellery for domestic demand must also be taken into consideration.

After the French left the project in 2007, at the start of the global economic crisis, Tuan took a risk by setting up the first and biggest pearl jewellery firm in Ho Chi Minh City. It has gathered hundreds of pearl workers together to produce large quantities of pearl jewellery at reasonable prices, so that Vietnamese women can also experience the true beauty of pearls. The company's situated in Con Dao and Phu Quoc, two islands that have ideal ecological conditions and waters for producing precious pearls. Thanks to that, Tuan's company can now establish stable sources of supply and ensure they can satisfy market demands. Another success story of producing pearls for tourists is Le Nam Trung's, one of the first Vietnamese experts to receive professional pearl training in Japan. He is now the general director of the Halong Pearl Joint Stock Company, a big Vietnamese joint-ventures involved in the manufacture of pearl jewellery, based in Quang Ninh. In 2004, Trung's company exported 171kg of pearls overseas, recording a turnover of over VND3 billion (US\$150,000). Two years later, its export value had doubled, resulting in a turnover of over VND10 billion (\$500,000). The Halong Company is adding to the arm of its project that manipulates the pearls, by building a centre to promote and trade pearl products on a new 6,500m² site in Van Don District. The local people's committee has already approved the plans for Co To District, which includes a \$1-million-plus investment for the initial period alone.

"With all the advantages that the natural conditions provide here, the techniques we use and especially the increasing number of trained workers we have access to, Viet Nam can be confident of building up a strong and vibrant pearl industry, as well as create its own brand name in the international pearl market," says Trung.

Products from the Hoang Gia and Halong companies as well as of many other manufacturing centres in the country have passed all the strictest verifications and are successfully exported to the markets of developed countries.

Pearl inventions

How do you establish a globally recognised brand name for Vietnamese pearls around the world? This is a question that many young Vietnamese pearl jewellery makers, like Tuan and Trung, are desperately keen to answer. After two years studying a range of ideas that could characterise the nation's features on cultured pearls, Tuan finally succeeded by engraving some decorative patterns of a bronze drum (a Vietnamese cultural icon) onto pearl then implant it into the oyster again and raise in another year. According to Tuan, if the oyster is raised in a longer time, the images will be lost because the oyster will secrete a thicker layer of nacre to cover the surface of the pearl. With proper time, the pearl that is re-harvested will produce unique blurred decorative patterns. With this unique invention, Tuan has realised his ambition of introducing an exclusive kind of pearls that bears Viet Nam's cultural images. Tuan's creativity went further, when he has successfully created pearls by transplanting teeth into the oysters. After this breakthrough, he submitted an application to the National Office of Intellectual Property of Viet Nam, to request for patents on his two inventions.

According to a spokesperson for the office, Tuan's two methods met all the necessary standards. The assessment has proved that his inventions are unprecedented and have never been registered anywhere else before. "If nothing changes, Tuan will receive patents for his inventions by the end of this year," adds the spokesperson. Recently, with the aim of casting the nation's spirit into pearls, the Hoang Gia Pearl Company has given fashion designer Vo Viet Chung 20,000 two year old pearls, worth over VND10 billion (\$500,000) for his collection, "Hue khoi xu Nam Ky". Meanwhile, Trung hopes that pearls raised in Ha Long Bay will add to the prestige of Viet Nam's world natural heritage and enhance the country's range of luxury products. He has taken great pains to study and establish a closed process for raising oysters for pearls, from producing the breeding oysters to raising and finally turning them into the finished product, to avoid producing low quality, cheaper crude pearls. This closed process has been a big success for many other pearl businesses, including leading ones in Japan and India. Thanks to all his efforts, Trung has helped to build up one of the biggest pearl enterprises in Viet Nam, with the renowned brand-name, SPICA pearls. Trung is planning to expand the model of running tours to pearl raising villages in Ha Long Bay, to other branches of his company in Nha Trang and Phu Quoc. He says that this could enable Vietnamese pearls to appear on the international market in the near future. — VNS



Glittering success: Suc Song (Vitality) and Qua Cua Bien (Gift of The Sea) jewellery collections by Hoang Gia Pearl Company. The aim of the company is to enable Vietnamese women to experience the true beauty of pearls produced in Viet Nam. — Photos courtesy of Hoang Gia Pearl Company.