

Vanessa
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Please note: To save paper, I have modified this essay's format. Also, I have numbered the paragraphs to facilitate discussion. --PClauss

Tho Cau, the Village of My Heart

(1) My family travelled to China when I was just seven years old. Two years later, my mom took me to France where she attended a high school reunion. While in Europe, we visited other countries by train, including Germany, Spain and Italy. When I was in tenth grade, my parents and I returned to Europe again and visited Anne Frank's secret annex in Holland and climbed the Toompea Castle in Estonia. Two summers ago, we had a family reunion in Mexico, spending each day playing in the waves, drinking piña coladas and riding on banana boats. However, my favorite trip occurred this July when my parents, three cousins, and I visited Vietnam for three and a half weeks. It was the first time my cousins and I had been to Vietnam. Our tour began in Saigon (now known as Ho Chi Minh City) and ended in Hanoi with numerous stops along the way. Before returning to Saigon, we visited some relatives living in a small village, Tho Cau, located ninety kilometers south of Hanoi. At first, I was a little apprehensive about staying at my relatives' house, but fortunately, those four days in Tho Cau became the best days of my trip. Out of all the places I have visited in my life, Tho Cau is my favorite.

(2) The hospitality we received in Tho Cau is one of the reasons Tho Cau is my favorite village. For instance, after unpacking at my second cousin's house, we all walked over to my great uncle Khai's house to eat dinner. The women brought out four huge round trays filled with all kinds of Vietnamese food, including steamed white rice, shredded papaya salad with pork and shrimp, spinach stir-fry with garlic, steamed lemongrass chicken cut into small pieces, gingered fish sauce, fried tofu sautéed with garlic and tomato sauce, caramelized fish in clay pot, and sweet and sour fish soup flavored with pineapples, tamarind, beansprouts, and tomatoes. We all sat on mats on the floor and each person had a rice bowl, a soup spoon, and chopsticks. During the meal, my relatives kept putting food in our bowls, wanting us to eat as much as we could. Our dinner ended with a delicious lotus seed dessert, some exotic fresh fruits, and green tea. It was the best Vietnamese food I had ever eaten. We had special dinners just like this one three times a day for the next three days. The wives of my second cousins seemed to spend most of each day just preparing food. My relatives in Tho Cau spent so much time making sure that my own family would feel happy. Knowing how

little they had and how they struggled to make ends meet especially in this tight economy, I was deeply touched by their sacrifice.

(3) Another reason I really loved Tho Cau was the friendliness I experienced from the residents. One day stands out in particular. During my second day in Tho Cau, my cousins and I pedaled my family's bikes to the open market. As we passed through the village, neighbors smiled and waved at me. When I got closer, I could see five raised blue tarps forming a semi-circle around a street corner. I excitedly got off my bike and walked over to a stand selling fruits and vegetables. Everything was so colorful in the containers stacked next to each other. A crowd was bustling around the many fruit, fish, vegetable and meat stands but everyone was kind and amicable. The vendor, a short, skinny woman in her sixties, asked me my name. When I replied in Vietnamese, she smiled and told me to call her "Bac Linh." She told me to try each fruit before I returned to America because only Vietnam has these amazing fruits. Bac Linh offered me *chom chom*, a thick and hairy red fruit and told me that *this fruit* tastes the best during the late summer months. Other vendors came over and told me about the many other fruits they had for sale. When I could not open the *mang cut*, a dark red fruit with sweet white flesh inside, a young and pretty vendor grabbed another *mang cut*, popped it in her mouth and cracked it open with her teeth. Now I learned the easy way to open many fruit. Later, when Bac Linh's husband came by, he sliced open a large yellow spiky fruit, called *sau rieng* or durian, to show me how it looked inside. A pungent mixture of smells emerged from the creamy and stringy durian meat. I had always enjoyed durian smoothies in Utah, but this was the first time I ate real durian fruit. I returned to my great-uncle Khai's house with a bag full of *mang cuts*, a gift from Bac Linh. The friendliness of the people in Tho Cau made me feel very welcome here. In Tho Cau everyone, even outsiders were treated like they belonged there.

(4) Tho Cau also has a strong sense of family. I vividly recall one evening, after spending the entire day exploring the village under the hot sun, my cousins and I bustled inside my great-uncle Khai's house. The men had just returned from work at different construction sites in Hanoi. My great uncle sat on a long ornate wooden bench with carved depictions of the kings and palaces of early Vietnam. My second cousins joined him on the bench. I sat on the cement floor, surrounded by all the children. The women placed many branches of *nhan* fruit on the table. Within seconds, all the branches were empty. Meanwhile, the women sat cross-legged on the wooden bed with my mom and talked about their families. As I chewed on my *nhan*, my great uncle told us his story. During the Vietnam War, the communist government awarded him the silver-star medal for his

bravery during a battle in which everyone was killed except him. My uncle opened his display cabinet and pulled out his rusty medal and a picture of him as a soldier sixty-two years ago. I was amazed. Above the display case, a picture of his parents hung on the wall. Incense sticks burned on the altar beneath. We all just sat there together, in one small room, as one big and happy family, and talked for hours. I looked around the room and saw pictures of so many family members from generations past, hanging on the wall, as if they had just been alive yesterday. Although few, the moments I shared with my family all around me became very special.

(5) Not only does Tho Cau have a strong sense of family, but it also has a strong sense of community. For instance, one afternoon, I ate coconut popsicles and watched a Vietnamese horror movie with my family in my second cousin Cuc's house. Her husband Ninh owns a small sawmill, located right in front of his house. As I heard a loud buzzing sound echo through the house, I quickly ran to the balcony and watched what Ninh was doing. He had just turned on a machine used to saw large logs into boards. Using a small backhoe loader, he positioned a large log onto the saw carriage. However, he placed the log at an angle where the machine could not function. As he tried to readjust the position of the log, three neighbors passing by stopped and helped him align the log. He happily thanked them. From above, I saw a sign of relief on Cuc's face as he started the saw. The willingness of the neighbors to help out greatly impressed me. The village's strong sense of community was exemplified by their willingness to lend a hand.

(6) Furthermore, the visit of Tho Cau gave me a glimpse of the hardship of life for the majority of the people in rural Vietnam. The Tho Cau community and my relatives are farmers out of necessity. In fact, almost every family in Tho Cau owns and harvests their own paddy field, usually enough to meet their personal rice consumption with a little left to sell. One morning at dawn, my third cousin Huy took me to his father's rice field, about ten minutes from his house. It was the harvesting time. We walked around the yellow ripe rice paddy as Huy explained to me the cycle of planting, growing and harvesting rice. I observed adults and older children, with their backs bent over for hours and hours, working in a line across the paddy field. Each with a hand sickle, they gathered a handful of adjacent stalks and roughly cut them in a single motion at ground level. Others bundled together the cut stalks. It was a lot of back breaking work! We went back to my great uncle's huge front yard. My family was separating rice grains from the stalks by striking them against wood boards placed at the center of a mat. The striking continued until the rice kernels were free from the head and fell to the mat. Huy took me to his neighbors' platform where they were separating the rice grain from the small bits of chaff by throwing them into the air, using a special

winnowing mat which let the wind blow away the lightweight chaff from the heavier rice kernels which fell back onto the mat. Later, Huy showed me large sacks of rice stored, after winnowing and drying, in an elevated dry area of his house to prevent the mice and rats from getting at it. Huy also explained that nothing was wasted. The discarded stalks were stacked and later used as fuel for cooking and as compost for gardens. Throughout the day we observed people in the paddy fields or in the yards, bare foot, trousers rolled up and sweating under the excruciating sun, harvesting from dawn to dark. For the first time, I understood and appreciated the skill and hard labor required to have a bowl of rice at meal time. That night, at dinner, the rice I ate tasted especially sweet. I began to truly appreciate all the blessings I have.

(7) Although only a few hours away from a metropolitan center of business and modernization (Hanoi), Tho Cau is a place of tradition, the thing I liked most about it. In fact, the night before we left Tho Cau, my whole family visited the grave of my great-grandmother (Ba Co). The older family members drove their mopeds down the main street while the kids and I pedaled the bikes happily, waving at strangers. When we arrived to the cemetery, we parked our bikes and walked over a river, passed by grazing crows and stomped through muddy grass. The graves were large and ornate, about seven feet long and three feet wide. There were so many graves that we had to step on them to reach Ba Co's grave. An ornate description of her name and year of birth and death was carved into the stone altar. A small blue and white porcelain pot filled to the rim with ashes sat beneath the plaque. My great aunt (Ba Mo) removed a bag of incense sticks from her bag and placed two sticks into the ashes. Then Minh lit them and soon a strong aroma of burning incense surrounded the grave. I inhaled deeply, closed my eyes and listened to the soft voice of Ba Mo praying to my great-grand mother to watch over my family and protect us during our trip home. The mixture of her singing voice and the aroma of incense created a spiritual feeling inside of me. Ba Mo handed me an incense stick and I also placed it in the porcelain pot. I silently prayed, asking my great-great grandmother to bless my wonderful family in Tho Cau. We all bowed to the grave before leaving. When I walked back to the bicycles, the aroma of incense seemed to follow me. I sensed my great-grand mother was really watching over me. It was my first time praying to my ancestors in the Vietnamese traditional way. The experience made me feel close to my culture and its traditions.

(8) Now it was time to leave. In just a few days, I had developed a strong attachment to my family and their village. I would miss them very much. Once again, they rented a large van so all of us, thirty people, could go to the airport in Hanoi. For some it was their first time in Hanoi. Our

departure was very emotional with a lot of tears and sad eyes. During the plane ride to Ho Chi Minh City, my mind was still remembering all the things that had happened in Tho Cau. I would never forget Tho Cau, our family and the awareness I gained. I was most impressed with the hospitality, sense of family, connection to traditional values, and the sense of community within the village. Rural life in Tho Cau can appear simplistic, yet those who live there must contend with many hardships. My experience in Tho Cau became truly memorable and I could not wait to return to “my village Tho Cau” again. Maybe next year...