

# DEVELOPMENT OF VIETNAM'S JEWELRY INDUSTRY

by MEcon. LÊ VĂN HOA



The Vietnam economy increasingly integrates into the world market, so to build the development strategy and sharpen the competitive edges of the national economy, each enterprise and product is our largest challenge in the process of integration. It is especially for existing occupation villages including traditional and fresh handicrafts. The traditional occupation village has great values but some of them have died out. However, from 1993 until now, after the Party Central Committee's Resolution 5, Term VII, many occupation villages have been revitalized and grown fast, producing a great quantity of goods for local consumption and export. One of famous industries is the jewelry manufacture because jewelry is one of indispensable goods for embellishment. It not only makes people and streets look nicer and more beautiful but also creates the national identity. The ornaments of the ancient Vietnamese indicate Vietnamese artistic mind thousands of years ago when they used 12 substances for daily activities and embellishment, including earth, stone, bamboo, wood, bone, horn, conch, shell, arca, gold, pearl, and so on.

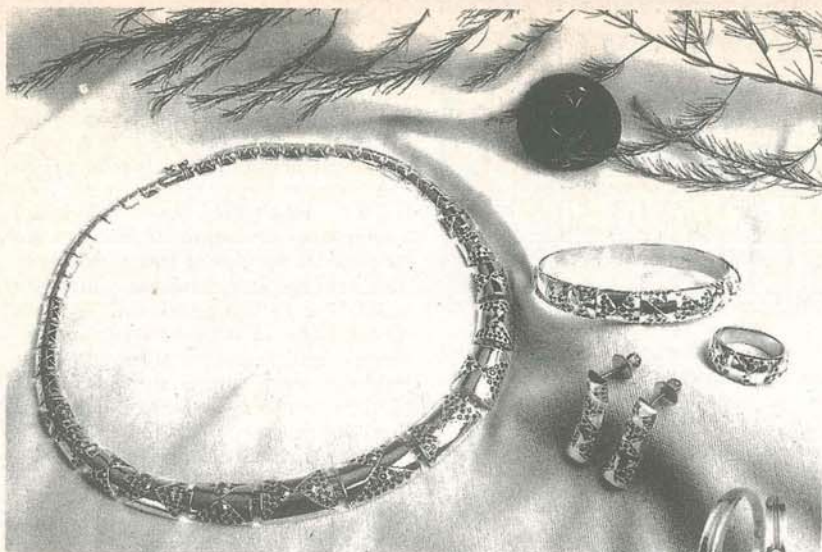
## 1. From the beginning

In the beginning, when the ancient Vietnamese made and used ornaments is disputable. However, according to archaeologists, the ancient Vietnamese knew to wear ornaments for embellishment since the palaeolith. The archaeologists excavated and found primitive stone tools such as axes, cutting stone pieces... Although no ornaments were discovered here, but at the same time there were ornaments found in the world. Therefore, they assumed that the ancient Vietnamese also used ornaments.

In the early Hoà Bình neolithic culture (10,000 years ago) primitive people's real ornaments were first found in Vietnam. Apart from working tools, there were ornaments including a piece of bold and animal eye-tooth which were holed for chaining; and necklaces of seashells and blue stone rings...

These above ornaments were found in our country from the palaeolith to the late neolith. In spite of long span of time, the amount of ornaments detected were only modest, but more importantly, the evidence proved Vietnam's ancient people knew how to produce and wear orna-





ments rather early in the Southeast Asian region.

In the Bronze Age, when people hunted enough food for their demand, they began paying attention to the beauty. The labor division helped them change from agriculture into stone handicraft and bronze casting. Some of them specialized in manufacturing ornaments all the time or only in farming leisure. Their ornaments were made of various kinds of stone, terracotta, mollusk shell, glass, bronze, iron... Their shapes were also diversified.

When the artefact production was at the apogee, the ancient Vietnamese society had labor division. This is an important progress in handicraft development. The economic sectors were then visualized as follows: most were purely farming villages, a few earned living by manufacturing jewelry and they exchanged their products with agroproducts. The favorite substance of ancient people includes gemstone, glass and bronze. In addition, they knew to embellish themselves with normal materials such as terracotta, shell, bone, horn, feather... Before Christ, the ancient Vietnam did not use gold as jewelry, archaeologists discovered golden ornaments in Champa culture several centuries after Christ.

## 2. To the 15<sup>th</sup> century

In the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, when our country's metallurgy developed, the silver casting entered a new stage. Three gold and silver handicraft centers took shape in the Hồng River Delta: Định Công (Hà Nội), Đồng Sâm (Thái Bình) and Châu Khê (Hải Dương). These areas produced gold and silver jewelry earliest

in our country. Afterwards the craftsmen originated from these villages moved to many cities across the country including Thăng Long citadel to earn living and clustered into handicraft guilds. In the Lê Thánh Tông dynasty (1460-1497), a silver bar casting factory was set up in the Thăng Long citadel. The jewelry in southern region also experienced a robust growth with the cradle of Kế Môn village. The craft originators were born in Thanh Hóa province, some in Đức Thọ village, Hà Tĩnh Province. In the late dynasty of Nguyễn Phúc Khoát, the jewelry industry began to thrive. In the Tây Sơn dynasty (1790), King Quang Trung established a workshop to produce jewelry. In early 19<sup>th</sup> century, King Gia Long set up the capital in Thuận Hóa, the silver casting industry also moved to the new capital. Here, craft originators had trained thousands of jewelry makers in Phú Xuân citadel. They left their impressive works in the royal palace. However, Châu Khê craftsmen remained in Hà Nội and did not follow King Gia Long. They built Hàng Bạc Street or Đôi Bạc Street in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The seventh day of February in lunar calendar is their anniversary of their craft originators, on this day they meet one another to discuss how to maintain and boost this handicraft.

## 3. Current situation

Along with ups and downs in the national history, many generations of jewelers have preserved and developed this craft strongly. However, the current production remains scattered and mainly handed down from ancestors. So far, although there is

no exact statistics of jewelry makers, based on the Vietnam Gold and Gemstone Corporation's employment (349) and some 6,000 businesses engaged in this handicraft, the number of jewelers is estimated at tens of thousands. Most of them are young workers. They have ambition of promotion and demand for official training. More importantly, their products need be saleable. To do this, we must have a stable market. Nevertheless, although the local consumption and export volume rise, domestic enterprises find it hard to seize the taste of each market and build long-term relations with foreign partners. The cost of trade promotion is rather high, thus a hindrance to local manufacturers. Therefore, they do not take the initiative in finding outlets but fulfill direct orders of foreign companies or intermediaries, so the export volume remains low. Moreover, the price of Vietnam jewelry is still higher than that of many countries in the region. The reason is due to enterprises buying materials on the floating markets and high tax rates on imported material gold. On the other hand, enterprises have not yet made the best use of their machinery and equipment to reduce unnecessary processes and losses in production. Another paradox is when there are large orders, local enterprises are not able to meet the requirement.

In the meantime, the potentials of exporting local jewelry makers are very large. Such markets as the U.S., Japan, United Arab Emirates have great demand for these workers because of their characteristics of diligence, skill, and invention. If the Government has proper orientations and policies, this is a good opportunity for enhancing this handicraft.

The following conditions should be satisfied to preserve and develop the traditional handicraft:

First, each jeweler, manager, and policy maker try their best to build a national identity of jewelry culture and attract local and foreign customers.

Second, there should be a breakthrough in the Government and enterprises policies to revitalize and boost traditional handicrafts, find outlets and export support. In addition, priorities should be given to the craft development, for example, reduction of land rent, electricity and water fees, and so on. Finally, technological application should be encouraged in production of traditional handicrafts. ■