

Waldorf Steiner Education in Vietnam – A Beginning ***Thanh Cherry***

Born and brought up in Vietnam, Thanh began teaching in the kindergarten at the Bowral Rudolf Steiner School in Australia when it was founded in 1983. She is currently also involved in the kindergarten teacher training program being set up in various parts of southeast Asia. The needs for the work in Vietnam, she says, are enormous. They include monetary donations, human and material resources, and (not least) genuine moral support and good thoughts. She can be contacted at P.O. Box 416, Bowral NSW 2576, Australia

Ph: +61-248-722520

Fax +61-248-713646

e-mail benthanh@hinet.net.au

After two prolonged wars this century, first with the French then the Americans, Vietnam is now, according to United Nations statistics, one of the poorest countries in the world. Contrary to what one might expect, however, it has an extremely high literacy rate – supposedly over ninety percent. Travelers speak of their encounters with people who are eager to learn and often self-educated. Many street kids can read and write; cyclo drivers and hawkers can be seen during siesta time reading a newspaper, sprawled in idle vehicles or on the sun-drenched pavements.

On my second trip back to the country in January this year, since leaving it in 1972, I made contact with a number of people and institutions that have had a glimpse of Anthroposophy through curative education. Being a Waldorf kindergarten teacher myself, I also visited many state run kindergartens and preschools, together with a few private ones that have recently been allowed to open.

I was horrified by what I saw. Education, especially in early childhood, has become a sterile repeating of facts and techniques, and is steeped in materialism. Even the plants in many classrooms have become plastic, at great expense to the schools. The authorities keep a tight control on the curriculum, down to the tiny details of which poems and song are to be taught. Movement in particular is quite militaristic and totally unsuitable for the age group. There are inspections every two months and children (from three years of age) have to go through tests each time. They are under great stress. Traditional culture has lost its significance; in its place, the drilling of information for success in exams and business. Money is sweeping aside morality as the ruling god, with an urgency that is fueled by pressure to compete against the giant economies of Asia and the West.

Among the many people with who I talked, there are some who can see what I happening (though they have to be careful how they express their concern). They long to find a different form of education for young children. It is as a result of these conversations that I have, with help from Vietnamese friends, made a commitment to three separate projects involving early childhood education.

The first is to raise funds to build a classroom and establish a Waldorf kindergarten for orphans and street children who live in an orphanage attached to a Buddhist temple on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City. The 'House of Love' has about 100 children to date, of whom 16 are in early childhood. The aim is to open this also to the many children of destitute families living around the temple.

The second project is to help an initiative to start a private Waldorf-based kindergarten in the city itself. This involves training the teachers, setting up classrooms, talking to parents and so on. At Least there is no shortage of children! We are looking to support a teacher to training for two years in Australia. I also intend to visit the country twice a year to guide the work in the right direction.

Project three is a commitment on my part to hold a yearly seminar on Waldorf early childhood education at university level in Ho Chi Minh City. I had a few initial meetings with the people involved and was met with interest, although only on a methodological level at this stage. We are in touch via e-mail.

With the devastating after effects of war still in evidence on all levels – emotional and spiritual as well as physical – Vietnam has a hard road ahead of it to heal itself and rebuild its sense of identity and well being. Its people are eager to pull themselves out of the wake of pain and destruction. Their will is still strong and readily engaged when they believe in what they are doing. But they need help – financial, physical, spiritual – to guide them through the grip of materialism in which they are now caught, if they are to find ways of fulfilling their mission in the coming century.

Nowhere else is this more urgent than in the sphere of education.