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HIGHER EDUCATION: CAN THO UNIVERSITY (11-69)

Young, raw, virile...

CAN THO UNIVERSITY

Far more than most college campuses, Can Tho University epitomizes the dynamics of youth. Situated in the heart of South Vietnam's rice bowl, it is the youngest, rawest and least endowed, yet the most virile of the nation's five universities.

It has a rector who, at 37, is one of the youngest of Vietnam's top-flight educators, and deans whose average age is less than 40. It has a student body of

1,971, all young men and women brought up in the fertile but intellectually unsophisticated Mekong Delta. Like many of its students, Can Tho University is still somewhat crude but still growing, physically and in its academic horizons. It seems only natural to its young faculty that on such a campus the emphasis should be on reforming education, eradicating the more stultifying of French colonialism's influences, and building a curriculum conforming to the aspirations of the new generation and new world trends.

The non-autonomous city of Can Tho, capital of flat, green Phong Dinh province, is the largest city in the Delta, and six million of South Vietnam's citizens live in that watery-region's 18 provinces. But until 1966 neither Can Tho nor any other community south of Saigon had a university of its own. The Delta's exceptional sons and very exceptional daughters who sought higher learning had to go to the nation's capital, 125 kilometers northeast of Can Tho. Some even went to Dalat in the Central Highlands, or to Hue 765 kilometers away. But all those universities offered curricula more oriented toward the arts and the professions than toward living a full life close to the soil.

Can Tho University is strongly regional-minded; it hopes to create a corps of educated leaders for the Delta of the future. But while it is designed for the relatively gifted farm boy and farm girl of what used to be called Cochinchina, it is no agricultural trade school. Under its energetic rector, Can Tho-born Dr. Pham Hoang Ho, the university in two and a half years has created four other faculties besides agriculture, and has developed modern curricula and teaching techniques that provide a broad general education. Said one Western-trained scholar who visited the campus: «The vigor and individuality of Can Tho University, together with its freedom from the French influence that still hinders development at Hue and Saigon Universities, will make this Delta institution the outstanding university in Vietnam's future.»

Enrollment Doubles

When Can Tho University opened its doors in October 1966 a total of 985 students enrolled for the first classes -- just half its current enrollment. Today's student body is broken down this way:

* Faculty of Law and Social Studies, under Dr. Nguyen Ngoc Huy as dean, has 584 freshmen, 99 sophomores and 44 juniors (none of the faculties is old enough to have any seniors);

* Faculty of Science, under Dr. Pham Huu Hiep, has 233 freshmen, 69 sophomores and 37 juniors;

* Faculty of Pedagogy, under Dr. Nguyen Van

Thach, has 235 freshmen and 135 sophomores;

* Faculty of Agriculture, under Phan Luong Bau, has 50 freshmen for its first term; and

* Faculty of Letters has 347 freshmen and 138 in either the second or third year. This faculty has as its dean Dr. Le Van Diem, who is in his early forties, the only dean not under 40.

Unlike most such institutions, Can Tho University has no board of regents, and is run primarily by the rector. Dr. Ho, who attended a Can Tho private school in his youth, studied in France from 1948 to 1956, and in 1961, having earned his doctorate in botany, he began teaching at the University of Saigon. He subsequently became intimately involved in all the planning that went into the creation of a university in his home town. He appoints the secretary general of university, now Dr. Tran Ngoc Thai, as well as the deans of the five faculties.

The university follows the French tradition of separate faculties, each headed by its own dean, but has scrapped the French custom that tended to keep faculties isolated from each other. At Can Tho the five deans and the 154 faculty and staff members are responsible to the rector. The concept of the dean running an independent faculty without any necessary relationship with the university as a whole had been introduced in Vietnam, initially at Hanoi University, in imitation of the French. The concept had suited French colonial requirements, for it turned out a relative handful of specialists (the majority being excluded from educational opportunities) that could be recruited as civil servants but whose intellectual horizons expanded no wider. At Can Tho today, however, Dr. Ho and his colleagues see higher education as a democratic process to serve society in general as well as an avenue to the realization of personal hopes and development of personal talents. All deans and faculty members work together, coordinating their teaching to achieve such ends.

With their cooperation and with the support of the central government, Dr. Ho now is implementing the first stage of a 10-year plan for development of the university.

Three Campuses

At present the institution's buildings are scattered among three sites. The administrative offices are in a former provincial government building on Hoa Binh Plaza in downtown Can Tho. The Faculty of Science occupies a rented building in the same neighborhood. All other activities are conducted at the Cai Rang campus on the south side of Can Tho.

Dr. Ho has received central government approval to purchase 87 hectares in the nearby Cai Khe section on Can Tho's southwestern edge, and there construction will start in 1969 on what will be the main campus. By 1979 some 10,000 students are expected to be enrolled in six faculties (including a Faculty of

Engineering now being planned). The Hoa Binh Plaza facilities will be returned to the provincial government for use as a secondary school, the Cai Rang campus will be used for faculty and student housing, and all academic and administrative functions, including the science faculty's, will be concentrated on the new Cai Khe campus.

On the temporary Cai Rang campus now there are 10 cement buildings completed in December 1967 at a cost of 2,500,000 piasters (US\$21,187), plus six prefabricated buildings completed in June 1968 at a cost of two million piasters each. A seven-million piaster dormitory for 50 girls is under construction. Approval has been received for the construction of a house for the rector, three duplex units for the deans, and an apartment building to house 14 professors and their families.

Until the Cai Khe campus is completed and the Cai Rang campus can be devoted exclusively to housing, Can Tho University will remain principally a «commuter» college, with students arriving for classes on bikes, motorcycles, scooters, tri-wheeled lambrettas and a few cars. Those not native to the city of Can Tho must take rooms downtown that cost 3,000 to 4,000 piasters a month, which is expensive for most students. The university charges no tuition, but a token registration fee is collected annually.

First Graduates

An applicant is admitted to Can Tho University on passing his second baccalaureate, equivalent to a 12th-grade diploma. Most courses run four years, but the Faculty of Pedagogy offers a two-year course which qualifies the graduate to teach junior high school classes. A total of 148 students completed this course in 1968 — the university's first graduates.

«The students here want very much to learn,» says Rector Ho. «They have more difficulty here — no dormitories yet, fewer opportunities than can be afforded on larger and older campuses — but they have great motivation, resiliency and determination.»

The dean of the Faculty of Letters, Dr. Diem,

agrees. «I find students at Can Tho not as cynical as the general run of students in Saigon,» he says. «They appreciate their opportunity more than those in Saigon, and the reason they attend the university is to get an education. In Vietnam educated people have always enjoyed a certain social status, even though they do not always earn as much as those in other fields. We have many bright students here from the socially modest classes. As an educator I find it encouraging to see the great potentiality in these humble and socially modest people. Our students are not as outspoken as many, and politics is not their daily concern. But once in a while they may get themselves involved in a demonstration. These are perhaps the result of momentary outbursts, for they certainly are not a part of their day-to-day life.»

Dr. Diem, who studied at the University of Minnesota, says he came to Can Tho because he found the task challenging. «I can be a pioneer in a new field, helping set up a new university where there has never been one before,» he says. «One of the greatest concerns of the leaders of this university is how to reform education so as to make it suitable to the aspirations of the present generation and the new trends in the world in general. My colleagues and I find ourselves at a turning point in our mission as educators. We find there is much to correct and reform in the educational system that came down from the past, and in the philosophy of education. We want to democratize education. This means not only increasing the number of students we can take in, but changing many of the methods and much of the philosophy of education as it now exists in Vietnam. We will eventually succeed.»

Under an Agency for International Development (U.S.AID) contract, a small party of professors from Ohio University works closely with the Can Tho University staff to help develop and expand the teacher-education curriculum. Ohio's science adviser, John Witmer, who is in his early thirties, teaches several classes at Can Tho University, and he points out that «one of its great advantages is its very young staff, one which is receptive to new ideas, and this makes the university more flexible than others in Vietnam.» He adds:

«Since this is the first university in the Delta and since it was established to meet the social, economic and political needs of about six million people, it has a real responsibility in developing this area, particularly in the field of agriculture. This cannot be done very well from Saigon. If the Delta is ever going to be properly developed to its full potential, it needs an institution in the region which can provide the research which is necessary for development as well as the technicians capable of going out and implementing programs. In the field of pedagogy the Delta now can educate its own people to teach in the region. In the past the Delta has been led primarily by Saigon. Teacher-training will help to bring this area into its own politically.»

As at the four other universities in South Vietnam, much remains to be done at Can Tho. College-level instruction was nonexistent in the South prior to 1956, only 36,000 students throughout the country now are enrolled in universities, only about 1,700 university students graduate annually, and too many of them obtain degrees in liberal arts and law while the nation needs educators and scientists. All universities



Pretty science instructor examines slide (right).
Bus above has been converted into mobile library.



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need improved facilities, equipment and books, Can Tho perhaps most of all. There is a need for improvement in semester planning, course credits, registration procedures, student services, libraries and laboratory facilities. And the shortage of lecturers is acute. But Can Tho, possibly more than any other Vietnamese university, is aware of these deficiencies and is working to correct them.

What could very well have killed the new university before it was well launched was the communists' Tet offensive of February 1968. Viet Cong troops occupied university properties in downtown Can Tho and had to be blasted out. Two university buildings on Hoa Binh Plaza were destroyed in the fighting, with the loss estimated at 50 million piasters. The buildings had been used for science laboratories, lecture halls, offices, and a library.

The government in Saigon, which has financed all expenses of Can Tho University, allocated funds for the rebuilding project. Special Tet-recovery funds also were advanced by the United States to supplement the government's allocations. The university, assisted by a U.S. AID grant of 5,500,000 piasters, is now constructing a new science building. In the temporary, rented science building, 729,000 piasters worth of new equipment has been installed since Tet. U.S. Navy Seabees helped build a four-story classroom building. A grant of 657,000 piasters was used to convert a 40-passenger bus into a mobile library and to purchase books to replace some of those lost in the Tet offensive.

First to Reopen

Although Can Tho University was more badly damaged than any other in Vietnam during the February fighting, it was the first to reopen its doors. Rector Ho went to Saigon not only to arrange for funds to rebuild his shattered buildings but personally to persuade many professors to return to Can Tho, still insecure then, and resume teaching. Then, as the post-Tet mobilization campaign got underway throughout the country, he found 36 members of his teaching staff were being drafted into the army. Rector Ho spoke with the Minister of Education, the Minister of Defense and finally the Prime Minister, and he got his teachers back. A subsequent nine-week mobilization of faculty members under the age 38 — which included the great majority of them — for special military self-defense training did not close the university. Classes were doubled up and some substitute teachers were hired until the professors came back from the rifle ranges and drill grounds.

Rector Ho is optimistic about the future. «We may be able to get back some professors who are now in France,» he says. «I have received several letters, and they want to return to their homeland. We have had many difficulties not only with staffing but with building problems. I have been lucky to find assistance and understanding from the government in Saigon, the U.S. AID and The Asia Foundation. The university must be a leader in the development of

this area and so I say to myself whenever new difficulties appear: Have patience, have patience! As we develop our applied science and agriculture curricula we hope to have more and more of an influence on the development of the Delta.»

Future Plans

Plans are being made to set up a special laboratory in the Faculty of Science to test Delta water. Before water resources can be developed and controlled for irrigation, drinking and industrial uses, the flow of the tides, the degree of siltation and the salinity of the water must be known. The Faculty of Science intends to make monthly tests to discover the nature of the water, to find out the best time for irrigation, and to determine the best locations for dikes. Technicians will go throughout the Delta to bring back to the laboratory samples of water for bacteriological and chemical-content analyses. From this beginning there may grow a multi-million-piaster project to establish a Water Research Development Center as an integral part of the university.

Faculty members all carry a full teaching load and, because of their low pay (an average of 18,000 piasters a month), many must «moonlight» by teaching part-time at other institutions. Nevertheless, research and scholarship are not neglected at Can Tho. Volume No. 1 of *The Annals of Can Tho*, published in December 1968, contained solid research reports in the fields of electronics, political science and botany, written in Vietnamese, French and English. Rector Ho himself contributed two research reports on botany to the issue.

One factor that makes Can Tho different from Hue, Saigon, Van Hanh and Dalat Universities is the esprit de corps so evident on campus, and Rector Ho is responsible for much of it. Unlike the traditional Vietnamese professor who has a tendency to hold students at arm's length, Dr. Ho mixes closely with the youngsters. Students regard him as a serious person, but one who is interested in them personally as well as academically. He attends science workshops with them, goes on field trips with them, prowls the laboratories to watch their experiments, and talks with them about their personal problems. He is building them restrooms and a cafeteria. He is young enough to socialize with them, mature enough to guide them through the pathways of this new society to which they are being introduced.

Rector Ho has asked the Saigon government for 80 million piasters to spend in 1969 to get his 10-year improvement program off the ground. So far he has been promised 30 million piasters, and a number of construction contracts are scheduled to start this spring. By 1979, Dr. Ho is confident his university no longer will be raw and unendowed. Objective educators watching his progress are equally confident that the future Vietnam, the Vietnam at peace, will be able to point to Can Tho University as an example of an enlightened institution providing the all-round education needed to keep a region and a nation viable and virile.