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The Cham Student Programme

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The Cham Student Programme

Tay Ninh, a province located near the Cambodian border, is home to seven Cham Muslim villages. Their main claim to fame is that they are considered the most backward of all Cham. The Cham Student Programme (CSP) was born in one of these villages after a 1995 family reunification visit by Mr

Abdulla Ysa. Learning that his nephew Sale had placed first in the province's college entrance exams, but was planning to work in the family's field because the family was poor, an idea started to form. Money was found, and Sale entered college a year later. In 2002, he graduated from Ho Chi Minh's University of Social Sciences and Humanities, having majored in English, Malay, and computer science.

Seeing the impact that this had on the other young people, a decision was made to provide scholarships to students from grades ten to twelve, those who took college preparatory classes during the summer, and those who were admitted to college. For the 2000–2001 academic year, the CSP spent 360 USD to sponsor three secondary school and 17 high school students. For the 2001–2002 academic year, the figure rose to 800 USD to support 48 secondary school and 16 high school students. For the 2002–2003 academic year, 1440 USD was spent to support 32 students from grades eight to nine, 23 students from grades ten to twelve, one university student, two students taking college preparatory classes, and four students in community college.

As the programme becomes more popular and the students keep asking their parents to let them pursue their education, the number of students receiving scholarships continues to increase – with the full support of local and provincial Vietnamese education officials.

Goals

The CSP's leader in Vietnam is Mr Cham Huong Mit, who has worked closely with local and provincial officials. After receiving several 'temporary' permissions to operate the programme, he secured official recognition for the programme on 22 May 2000, when the provincial government's student programme issued a decree allowing and encouraging the CSP to continue its activities. Recently, the CSP also received official 'permanent' permission to operate from 2002 until 2005. Vietnamese officials have praised the CSP as being one of the best-run programmes in the province. In addition, its activities are covered by local television stations and newspapers.

Having reached this level of acceptance, the CSP's top priority is to encourage the students to become bilingual in Cham and Vietnamese. Cham students are taught in their native language only until the fourth

Local Vietnamese officials participate in a ceremony to honour Tay Ninh's Cham Muslim scholarship recipients at the beginning of the 2002–2003 academic year.



PHOTO: CHĂM HUONG MIT, 2002

In the first issue of the ISIM Newsletter (pg. 14), Jay Willoughby reported on some recent developments in the small and little-known community of the Cham of Vietnam. Five years later, he gives an update, in particular on the progress in education as illustrated by the Cham Student Programme.

before the CSP appeared, attrition rates are high.

The Vietnamese government would like to see more Cham teachers qualified to teach both Cham and Vietnamese to their students. The CSP supports this goal, and also encourages students to major in English and computer science so that they can participate in Vietnam's national development plans.

The CSP seeks to bring the Cham together by supporting local soccer teams so that the students can get to know each other. This is easier said than done, however, as Cham from different villages, not to mention different provinces, have a long history of not cooperating with each other. According to Mr Mit, this attitude is now held only by a small minority. In exchange for this support, students are to attend Islamic classes in local mosques. As a result, their patronage of local coffee shops, pool halls, or just hanging out has declined noticeably. Most local Islamic officials support the programme, and local Islamic teachers, both male and female, are being supported financially by the CSP and the Vietnamese government.

The Vietnamese government allows the Cham to acquire Islamic literature in Vietnamese. To meet the demand, a group of Cham Muslims in California so far has translated the following books: *Prayer Made Simple*; *The Beloved Prophet*; *The Holy Qur'an* (1997, Vietnamese text only); *Toward Understanding Islam*, *Islam at the Crossroads*; and *40 Hadith*. In early 2001, the Vietnamese government allowed the printing of 1,000 copies of a Vietnamese-Arabic Qur'an in Hanoi and its distribution to Cham communities. Hopes are high that all CSP students will receive a solid grounding in Islam.

Plans

The CSP is planning to expand into Dong Nai, a neighbouring province that has only one Cham village. The students have made it clear that they want to join the programme and further their education. When sufficient funds become available, CSP officials hope to sponsor Cham students in Tay Ninh and Dong Nai provinces all the way from grades one to twelve, as well as those in college. Beneficiaries have agreed to direct some of their earnings to the programme to support new students and so that the programme can become self-supporting. Also in the works is a training centre to teach students computer repair and sewing.

grade, after which they are mainstreamed. As many find the transition difficult, they drop out. Also, given that Vietnam does not have compulsory education laws and that extra labour is welcomed by the parents, many of whom saw no value in a modern (as opposed to an Islamic) education be-

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The Cham Muslims of Vietnam are descendents of Champa, an indigenous Hinduized empire that ruled much of southern Vietnam from 192 AD until the 1490s. After the rise of Islam, Muslims began stopping in Champa to acquire its aloe-wood and other products for resale in China. Archaeological remains show the presence of a small Muslim community during the mid-tenth century. For many years, Islam spread only among the elite. However, by the time of its demise, most Cham were Muslim. Some scholars attribute this to the Cham's desire to maintain ties with the largely Muslim Malay world to which they are related ethnically, culturally, and linguistically. After the sixteenth century, however, this contact was lost.

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