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Celebrating 175: Jack Lenor Larsen, Personal Correspondence, 1958, 1972-1997

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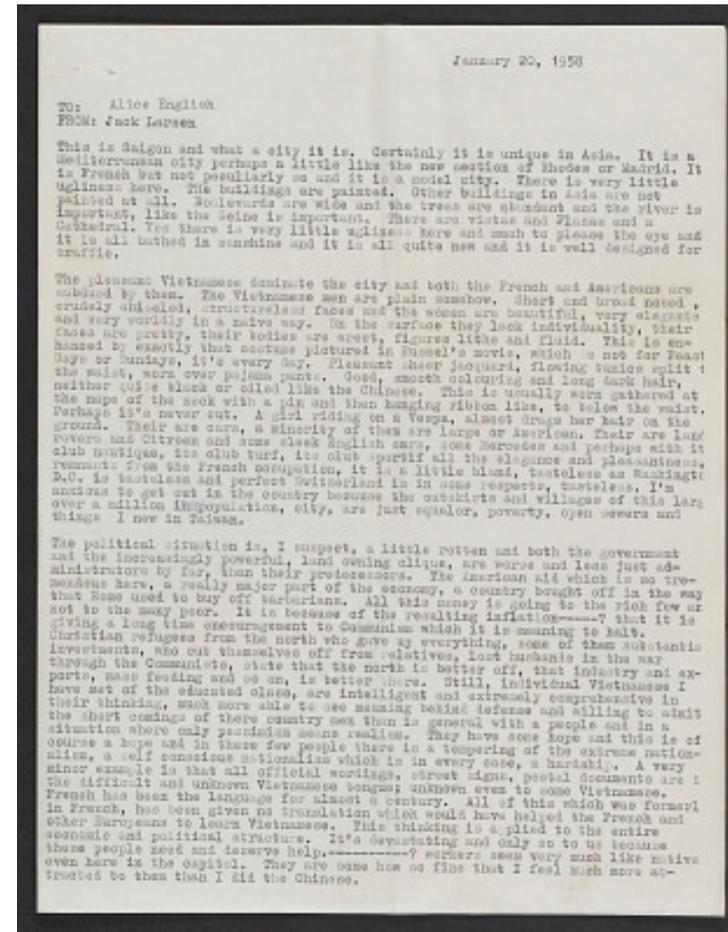
January 20, 1958

TO: Alice English
FROM: Jack Larsen

This is Saigon and what a city it is. Certainly it is unique in Asia. It is a Mediterranean city perhaps a little like the new section of Rhodes or Madrid. It is French but not peculiarly so and it is a model city. There is a very little ugliness here. The buildings are painted. Other buildings in Asia are not painted at all. Boulevards are wide and the trees are abundant and the river is important, like the Seine is important. There are vistas and Plazas and a Cathedral. Yes there is very little ugliness here and much to please the eye and it is all bathed in sunshine and it is all quite new and it is well designed for traffic.

The pleasant Vietnamese dominate the city and both the French and Americans are subdued by them. The Vietnamese men are plain somehow. Short and broad nosed, crudely chiseled, structureless faces and the women are beautiful, very elegant and very worldly in a naive way. On the surface they lack individuality, their faces are pretty, their bodies are erect, figures lithe and fluid. This is enhanced by exactly that costume pictured in Russel's movie, which is not for Feast Days or Sundays, it's every day. Pleasant sheer jacquard, flowing tunics split t the waist, worn over pajama pants. Good, smooth colouring and long dark hair, neither quite black or oiled like the Chinese. This is usually worn gathered at the nape of the neck with a pin and then hanging ribbon like, to below the waist. Perhaps it's never cut. A girl riding on a Vespa, almost drags her hair on the ground. Their are cars, a minority of them are large or American. Their are land rovers and Citroen and some sleek English cars, some Mercedes and perhaps with it club nautique, its club turf, its club sportif all the elegance and pleasantness, remnants from the French occupation, it is a little bland, tasteless as Washington D.C. is tasteless and perfect Switzerland in in some respects, tasteless. I'm anxious to get out in the country because the outskirts and villages of this large over a million in population, city, are just squalor, poverty, open sewers and things I new in Taiwan.

The political situation is, I suspect, a little rotten and both the government and the increasingly powerful, land owning clique, are worse and less just administrators by far, than their predecessors. The American aid which is so tremendous here, a really major part of the economy, a country bought off in the way that Rome used to buy off barbarians. All this money is going to the rich few ar not to the many poor. It is because of the resulting inflation-----? that it is giving a long time encouragement to Communism which it is meaning to halt. Christian refugees from the north who gave up everything, some of them substantia investments, who cut themselves off from relatives, lost husbands in the war through the Communists, state that the north is better off, that industry and exports, mass feeding and so on, is better there. Still, individual Vietnamese I have met of the educated class, aare intelligent and extremely comprehensive in their thinking, much more able to see meaning behind defense and willing to admit the short comings of there country men than is general with a people and in a situation where only pessimism means realism. They have some hope and this is of course a hope and in these few people there is a tempering of the extreme nationalism, a self conscious nationalism which is in every case, a hardship. A very minor example is that ll official wordings, street signs, postal documents are i the difficult nd unknown Vietnamese tongue; unknown even to some Vietnamese.



French has been the language for almost a century. All of this which was formerl [[formerly]] in French, has been given no translation which would have helped the French other Europeans to learn Vietnamese. This thinking is applied to the entire economic and political structure. It's devastating and only so to us because these people need and deserve help.-----? workers seem very much like native even here in the capitol. They are some how so fine that I feel much more attracted to them than I did the Chinese.

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