

## The Vietnam Experience

by Dinh Trinh (8/96)

I returned to Vietnam after 15 years living in the States. The image of Saigon was blurry in my mind. All I remember was the worst experiences I had after the fall of Saigon: the years of living in constant fear, the Marxist indoctrination that lasted 18 months, the many self-incrimination sessions, the feeding on yam and cassava instead of rice, the noisy distribution sessions of rations of meat, fish, sugar, and kerosene, the escape by boat, the arrest on the high seas, the long years of imprisonment, then after release, the loss of civil rights. I remember the time I was not anymore a citizen in my own country. A former intellectual, I made my daily living pedaling the cyclo, and spent my evenings drinking cheap booze to paralyze the mind, so fearful of thinking. I remember the insidious desperation of having no other way of survival than leaving the country, the loss of hope in anything in life, and the haunting of re-experiencing Communist jail. I left Vietnam walking twenty seven days across the Cambodian territory which was controlled by the Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouges, risking my life on the mine fields, to go to Thailand in search of freedom. Twice I was arrested, twice I escaped. I left my oldest son behind in the area of Nong Chan and arrived at the Thai border, a human creature without a soul, happy of reaching the search of liberty goal, but deeply disoriented and sad of being lonely. I was unsure of my future because I lost total confidence in myself. Where would I spend my new life, since I knew that I had been reborn as I reached the NW9 camp for land refugees. France? Australia? The USA? What would I be? A street sweeper, a laborer, a dishwasher? Sadness filled my soul and despair my mind as I suddenly realized that I lost completely my intellectual ability by not using it during the seven years I lived under the Communist regime. And I was wrong! I realized how incredible it was for a human mind to recover and function again. I realized that human beings could stand the toughest experiences in life, endure the most difficult hardships and still survive. How much I wondered at the human self-adaptation abilities! And how much I still wonder at all the changes that went through me during the last fifteen years I lived in my new country!

**Hochiminh City, here I come!**

It took the plane more than four hours to reach Hochiminh City, formerly Saigon, from Seoul. We arrived at Tan Son Nhat Airport at late night. I felt a strange sensation to be back to the country I thought I would never see again. In 1981, in the middle of the liberation chaos, people who departed Vietnam could not anticipate the change that would happen fifteen years later in this part of the world. I could not anticipate either that I would five years later be reunited with my wife and my kids that I left behind.

And I also felt suddenly sad when I saw the tiny dwellings surrounding the airport, as the plane slowly, very slowly reached to a stop. The few minutes waiting seemed an eternity to me. I descended the plane to the oppressing heat of June and the few yellowish lights did not allow me to see well the surroundings. I followed the crowd of passengers, mostly Korean tourists and Vietnamese coming back for a family visit, to a waiting bus which made a long detour to transport us to the main building. We came in through the big entrance adorned with a large welcome sign in both English and Vietnamese and proceeded to the Immigration checkpoint. Coming back for the first time I was unaware of the procedures and watched my compatriots to determine what to do. I inserted a five-dollar bill in my passport, as I heard people always did to avoid complications, and waited in line. The officer took my passport, removed quickly the bill, glanced at my visa, put a stamp on it, and wished me a nice stay. Ouf! I muttered. It was easy, my first step through the papers checking process. I felt relieved and a little bit happy. Like other passengers, I scrambled to look for a baggage-cart. I thought it would be a scarce commodity but I was wrong. There were plenty of them and they were free. I waited twenty minutes to recover my luggage and proceeded to the customs declaration checkpoint. Again I showed my papers. A ten-dollar bill was in my passport this time. Thirty seconds passed, a stamp quickly put on the form, and there I went through the security check gate, as light as a feather. My luggage was back on the cart, I pushed it outside into a jungle of people waiting either for a family member or a business. There must be one hundred taxi drivers standing there waiting for fares. I was sweating, exhausted by the trip and the heat, and at the same time amazed and curious to know. I wished I could learn a thousand things at once so much I felt a stranger in my own homeland.

I found my aunt waiting for me. She asked me how the trip was then scurried away to get the taxi that she had taken to the airport. I was surprised that the taxi was a new air conditioned Korean compact sedan. When I left Vietnam in 1981 there was no taxis running on the streets of

Saigon, nor private cars. There was no gas for many of the little Japanese Honda motorcycles either. People used bicycles as the only means of transportation. Of course, those who could afford would make a trip on a cyclo, a tricycle with a passenger seat in the front, pedaled by a coolie.

It was already almost midnight but the streets were not empty yet. On my way from the airport, I passed by many noodle shops and other eateries still open to customers. When we arrived home, the family went already to bed. I spent twenty minutes chatting with my aunt then retreated to my bedroom. The jet lag, the heat, the million thoughts circling my mind prevented me from sleeping. Above my head the ceiling fan was making a familiar noise, and the mosquito bites reminded me of my being back in Vietnam.

### **The Struggle of a City and its People.**

It was amazing to see how much the city and its people had changed. I could not recognize the neighborhoods that I used to drive daily through. From a dead city in 1981, Saigon had revitalized, flourishing of business of all sorts. It seemed to me that this was the most populated city in the world with its seven million inhabitants bursting every minutes of life. What made me happy was the smile that appeared on many faces, the colorful clothes many people wore, the expression of hope in life that transpired from the overall picture. Fifteen years before, you only saw haggard eyes on sorrowful faces, the expression of doomed destiny, suffering, and desperation. That was the most meaningful change that a human being can expect and I thanked God for making it happen.

However, the changes were not all rejoicing. After the decadence of the Soviet regime in Russia, the economic boom resulting from the open economy policy of the government in the early 90's, created a class of newly rich people who held both political and economic power. They owned shares in joint venture corporations, controlled the business operations, and made decisions to their own benefits. Then there was a middle class who could profit of the open state of the economy and could prosper and get out of poverty. These middle class people, the obviously privileged to the eyes of the rabble, had their house rebuilt into mini-hotels or rental properties to accommodate the housing needs of foreigners, visitors or long term residents who did business in the country. They were government officials who could make money under the table, accept bribes, or smuggle goods. They owned small factories, retail stores, restaurants, service centers, or opened private English, Business, and Computer learning schools... They were

also small entrepreneurs, doing all kinds of transactions, business deals which might net thousands of US dollars. Under this middle class were the people who did business on the streets or in open marketplaces, making up to an equivalent to US \$200 or \$300 per month. Then, at the bottom of the social ladder was the vast majority of people, living at the very low level of income of less than US \$80 a month. To them who had to endure the social inequity, the economic openness was detrimental. Ten years before, everybody was poor, everybody suffered the same economic privation, everybody had the same destiny and the same hope.

### **The Economic dilemma:**

Hochiminh City gave me a feeling of anarchic economic development, at least at the city level. Stores of all kinds appeared on every street, business seemed uncontrolled, unregulated, unorganized. Small businesses mushroomed everywhere even at most unexpected places: front yard of the beautiful colonial French villas, first floor of residential buildings, street-faced areas of high school and college campuses, especially small eating places and coffee shops where people drank beer at any time of the day. I could see a group of young people spending hours in a "café" drinking many dozens cans of locally brewed beer. (Foreign beer makers, such as Heineken and Tiger, established their breweries in Saigon). In the evening, I could see thousands of people eating, drinking, and talking aloud on Thi Sach street where were concentrated dozens of "quan nhau", small eateries where alcohol was served with food. This atmosphere of living in haste, of immediate enjoyment was the result of decades of privation and reflected the uneasiness of the situation. Everybody was trying to take advantage of the economic freedom while it was there and prepare for an unsure future. Que sera, sera.

In order to provide extra income to employees, public institutions were allowed to do business. Many public agencies became owners of hotels, car and bus renting companies, and restaurants to cater tourists. Many Colleges and Universities became providers of utilities and services to customers. Schools charged fees and requested parent's contributions. It was known, for instance, that parents must contribute hundreds and even thousands of US dollars to the three most renowned schools in the city to have their kids admitted to the first grade, or the sixth grade or the ninth grade. These prestigious schools emphasized the instruction of foreign languages,

especially French.( Paradoxically, in Hanoi, to be admitted to Kindergarten, a child must take private lessons with a teacher and produce a certificate that verify that the child already know the alphabet and number counting ).

Teachers, like other public servants, earned a meager 60 to 80 US dollars a month. They made extra money by giving their students private lessons in the afternoons, evenings, and on Sundays (Saturday is a work day in Vietnam). Parents spent on the average 15 US dollars per month to send their kids to these classes or risked to see their kids fail at school. It was told that some high school teachers of English, Math, and Science earned ten times more than their official salary teaching private classes that prepared high school seniors for college.

Doctors and pharmacists were allowed to have private practice. A two to five US dollar charge per visit allowed a doctor working after official hours (usually from 5 pm to 9 pm) to earn 2000 to 3000 dollars a month, a comparatively enormous sum in Vietnam, equivalent to 30 times what he made officially. Pharmacists were allowed to own their drug store and could make an earning similar to doctors.

Similarly, there was an open policy in education. Students could further their education in Western countries as long as their parents could afford to send them there. A US \$5000 fee was required for the processing of the application to study abroad. As a consequence, only children of high ranking officials, rich business people, and prominent professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, could enjoy this privilege. Most parents sent their kids to Belgium, France, Switzerland, or Australia, although the US was considered their predilection. There was rumor in Saigon that the son of a general, famous for commanding the forces that liberated the South and Saigon, was sent to a prestigious school in the States.

Vietnam, and especially Hochiminh City, was widely open to foreign visitors. Foreign visitors with a valid passport could apply for a visa at their arrival to the airport, which is processed in five minutes. In Hochiminh city dozens of large hotels with several hundreds of suites and rooms were built and several thousands of taxis were allowed to operate in anticipation of the influx of tourists. Besides, hundreds of economical mini-hotels were established by privates to cater foreigners. Tourists with less money might rent a room for \$10 a day in a private residence (The Saigonese use the rather pejorative expression "Tay Ballots" which translated in English as

"French wearing a backpack" to call these stingy visitors). Expensive hotels which cost over \$100 a night did not find customers easily and their high vacancy in most time of the year was a disaster to many investors who ended up declaring bankruptcy. The average tourist preferred to pay \$30 and spend a night in a quite comfortable mini-hotel room.

Restaurants of all types abounded in the city and visitors could enjoy different cuisines from French and American to Chinese and Japanese. However French and Vietnamese cuisine restaurants were in greatest number. Small eating places where a meal cost less than \$10 were especially appreciated by tourists.

Although Vietnam promoted tourism to foreign visitors, its policy had several setbacks. The official establishment of higher service fees to foreigners, more than twice the fees charged to locals, left a bad impression to people who visited the country. For instance, a one-way plane ticket to Hanoi cost US \$170 to a foreign visitor but only \$75 to a local resident. The same rule applied to entry to museums, temples, theaters, and other sightseeing attractions. Another annoyance was the airport service fee. In Hanoi, foreign visitors paid four dollars for the bus to Noi Bai Airport (which cost only 20 cents to locals) and \$1.50 before leaving the airport. In Hochiminh City, they paid \$8 at Tan Son Nhat Airport before leaving Vietnam.

A first-class 36 hour long trip by train to Hanoi cost almost as much as a plane ticket, but the tourist had the opportunity to see the countryside and the beautiful scenery of the coastal central region. Rental cars with chauffeur were rather expensive, approximately \$100 a day including gas and mileage. You did not rent a car without a chauffeur because the traffic in large cities, such as Hochiminh City and Hanoi, were so congested with motorcycles and bicycles that it was almost impossible for foreigners to drive without causing a fatal accident. First-time visitors to these cities were terrified by the intense flow of traffic going in total disorder and amazed by hundreds of motorcyclists on their little Hondas sailing through the traffic maze.

Out-of the country tourism was not encouraged among local residents though. Vietnamese citizens were not allowed to go abroad unless they were on business. To make an unofficial trip to America or Europe, they must provide in writing a verification that they were on a "market study"

assignment and post a bond. Children and spouses were not allowed on these "business" trips.

### **Hanoi, the beautiful capital**

The capital of Hanoi, like any other capitals, was more conservative, more traditional. Residents of Hanoi had always been proud of the culture of their beautiful city. Beside the colorful streets of Hanoi, tourists had the opportunity to visit dozens of ancient Buddhist and Confucian temples inside and outside the capital, the botanical garden, and the many lakes. People in North Vietnam, especially in Hanoi, lived a calmer life. After decades of misery and threat due to the war, they seemed to be resigned to their fate. They were happy that the war ended though. Now they were building their future, or at least the future of their children. Hanoi residents had a different lifestyle, more culturally oriented. They had a disdain for the Epicurean lifestyle that we saw in the south. They dressed better and eat less. They worked harder and earned less. I did not see the buoyant picture of private enterprise on the streets of the capital. After forty years, I walked again the streets of my birthplace, admiring the beauty of its old buildings, remembering the old neighborhoods of my childhood years. I enjoyed the bike rides around the lakes, the ice cream on the boathouses, the picture taking sessions under the shade of big old trees. July was still very hot but it was the litchi and longan season. I watched the new sumptuous residences to be rented to foreign investors erected at the Hotay (West-lake) area. The Hilton Hotel was built at the site old central prison, where shot-down American pilots had been jailed during the war, but still a long way to be completed.

My stay in the North was shortened by a sudden illness and I did not have the opportunity to visit the Halong bay and the Chapa resort. Nor did I return to the port city of Haiphong where I grew up and to the beach of Do Son, twenty miles away, where I used to spend weekends with my parents, sister, and brother. I did visit the Ninh Binh resort for a day though, spending four hours on a sampan to tour the Tam Coc river grottos, and the many temples that abounded the region.

### **A Farewell and Lingering Memories**

It was a somewhat pleasant visit to the country that I missed so much. Before my return to Vietnam I had heard so many stories, both good and

bad, from my compatriots, many of whom regularly paid visit to their motherland. I had not been able to imagine the picture I would see when I would be there. I had not been able to realize how much change Vietnam went through in the last few years, nor had I anticipate the kind of hospitality that I would encounter there.

Vietnam had become a progressive Communist country where people had a lot of liberty: the liberty of loving America, the country they were at war with for two decades, the liberty of listening to American music, watching American movies, drinking Coca Cola, and using Vietnam made American products. That was a liberty that nobody had been able to think of ten years before. Young kids in middle schools started having the dream of going the America.

I, a Vietkieu i.e. a Vietnamese living abroad, was also free to go wherever I wanted. I did not even carry my papers with me, so afraid was I of losing them. The first few days, I was so concerned about my security, always on my guard, always prepared for the worst. I realized later that I was as safe in Saigon as in San Francisco and there were no more muggers, pickpockets, or scam-artists there than anywhere else in the world.

Many experiences left a deep scar in my memory though. I still see the faces of the poor people I met, the "miserables" to use Victor Hugo's expression. Old handicapped people, mothers holding a baby, and young children of ten, I saw them everywhere, in big cities or at small tourist attraction areas, begging for money. I still see the faces of these cyclo coolies, painful faces enduring the hardships of the enslaved job, many of them skinny and deeply lined, reflecting the decades of suffering. "If I knew I would be as happy as they are now, I would have participated to the Revolution", a sixty year old coolie told me bitterly. He had been coolie for 35 years. And so many others, especially in the countryside, living in substandard conditions, struggling to have two meals a day. And their children, many with brilliant eyes, were forced to beg tourists to afford school textbooks and supplies.

I left Vietnam with mixed feelings. I was sad that the times were better for only a minority of the population but happy that there was hope for a brighter future. Saigon and Hanoi were under reconstruction to fit the image of modern cities but not the whole country. Millions of young people were studying English and trying to get some computer skills hoping to get a job in foreign companies. A very few of them had already learned modern



management skills, adopted to wear a suit and to acquire a business attitude. Some drove a car and many used cellular phones. Teenage girls wearing a Walkman danced to Janet Jackson music and teenage boys played bowling and smoked cigarettes. And hundred of thousands of young women were in the business of providing pleasure to foreign customers. All were the signs of a changing society.