

“THE FUTURE LIED”. THREE WOMEN OF HANOI, A PERSONAL STORY

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ABSTRACT AND PERSONAL BIOGRAPHY

My interest in all things Vietnamese started in 1991, after my first trip to Vietnam. This made me want to understand more about the country and its people, both those still in their homeland and those who now live in my home country, Australia. I studied Vietnamese privately with a series of patient tutors, through which I met the people who I would come to consider my second family and who gave me my Vietnamese name, Uyen. In the honours year of my Asian studies degree, I had the opportunity to spend a semester in Hanoi with an international exchange program. I now work as a social policy analyst for the federal government, and hope to be able to go back to Vietnam, to assist the government to develop and implement policies which will bring about a better future for the country and its people.

“The future lied” is my story of three women of Hanoi. It is not the story of these women, because those are not my stories to tell. Instead, it is about my relationships with them, as they developed over six months spent studying in Vietnam. The experiences were of course seen through my own western perspective, and in the process a lot was undoubtedly misunderstood, misinterpreted or just missed. Yet my recollections are presented here, with all the prejudices, confusion and sense of wonder which I brought to the encounters. While deliberately disguised, the characters and events are not fictional. The order has been changed and much has been left out, but the stories happened to me more or less as they are recorded here. More or less as they are probably happening today.

Arriving

Hanoi dawn, my first in Vietnam. I watched from inside the foreign student dormitory grounds as bicycles silently carried their passengers to their destinations. Only a few motorcycles broke the relative peace. There were no cars, just swarms of people, up since before first light, already crowding the pavements. I was struck by how the situation was the reverse of what I was used to – with cars crowding the roads, but people largely invisible.

These women, men and children were to be my new neighbours. I didn't know it yet, but some of them, at some level, I would also come to consider my friends.

Tien

It was in search of my first breakfast in Hanoi that I came across Chi Tien. Her face stood out among those of all the women selling their wares on the road as somehow different. It was rounder, wider, and strangely joyful – attractive, but not so much in a physical as a spiritual sense. She sat behind a small glass cabinet, within which bread rolls, cheese and some other unfamiliar ingredients were neatly arranged. Like so many people in Hanoi, she spent her working day squatted down on an impossibly short stool, her bottom only inches from the ground. I sat down on one of her few stools, a tiny plastic arrangement which required some contortion on my part to get on and off, but which eventually I came to master.

“Good morning, little sister, what would you like?” It was the first and last time she ever asked. From that day on, I bought a bread stick with soft cheese, and some iced tea when she had some, from her every morning and breakfasted while chatting to her. This was Chi Tien, one of the first Vietnamese women I came to know.

Chi Tien was an ever helpful and patient tutor, who would write down new words that I didn't know for me to look up in my dictionary later. Her unfailingly good humour seemed to draw people to her stall, despite the fact she was located only metres from other women offering more or less the same merchandise, and she always seemed to do a good trade.

The back of Chi Tien's little stall was the concrete boundary wall of a football field, about 10 feet high. One side of the stall was made of a large tree, where incense burned in the fork of two branches. Pointing up at to the incense, a Buddhist offering for good business, she asked about my beliefs. There was no judgement on her part when I confessed to having no religion.

The other side of her stall was bounded by a police post, staffed irregularly by indifferent officers in comically small olive green uniforms. This post, a concrete box measuring about 10 by 3 metres with cracking, mouldy paint on the face and a wooden shutter for a door, didn't seem very imposing to me. Yet as time went on, I came to understand the power which the police wielded to people like Chi Tien, perched on the edge of legality in this officially Communist country. Sometimes, for instance, she didn't have iced tea.

“Why not?” I asked once, still perplexed by the simplest things.

“Because it's too heavy to run away with if the police come and arrest me,” was her reply. It was true, and small traders like her were often arrested at the whim of some low level official, usually for failing to pay some arbitrary 'tax' of some description. But her reply was delivered not with malice, not with sadness, but as a joke, smiling and jovial as always.

Her little glass case marked the front boundary of her tiny stand, displaying dried meats, sweet pork, 'laughing cow' cheese, bread rolls, and a few other delicacies lined up in rows. A few coals over a ceramic pot formed a makeshift oven that heated the bread for breakfast. Here she squatted all day, laughingly dispensing cheese, bread and sweet milk to passers-by.

“Everyone in Hanoi has so much sugar,” she would laugh regularly, as she scooped four or five huge spoonfuls into a small glass of milk, filling some customer’s order. It was to become a running joke between us, with my grasp of her native tongue still intermittent and hers of mine nil. For six months, she looked at me knowingly as she filled cup after cup with almost equal parts sugar and milk.

“So sweet!” she would exclaim, and we would laugh. I didn’t find it funny so much as comfortable, a sign that there was some relationship between us, even though neither of us could express it in words the other could understand.

Chi Tien was married to a *xé om* driver – one of the ubiquitous unofficial motorcycle taxi drivers who ferry passengers around Hanoi, a kind of public transport on demand. Chi Tien was always his last ride of the day, ferried home in the late afternoon so she could start preparing for the next day’s business. Her husband, she informed me, watched TV and drank beer with friends in the evenings while she washed, cooked and cleaned for the family.

“I’ve been working hard all day,” she mimicked him, with a wry smile on her face. She married at a typical age, 20. Her only son was 12 years old, which made her 32. I always thought she looked older than that to me, except when she smiled, which was often.

Every Monday, she would ask me what I got up to on the week-end. Normally I replied with tales of trips down the coast to Ninh Binh, to the beach at Ha Long Bay, or out into the mountains. Chi Tien would listen, interested in these stories of what were, to her, far away places. She herself had never been out of Hanoi. She went to visit Ho Chi Minh’s tomb once, a few miles away, but as a rule she couldn’t afford to take time off work. If she didn’t work one day, her family didn’t eat the next, she explained, in her matter of fact way.

She was always interested in seeing the photos, though, to see what the rest of the country was like. There was never a hint of jealousy, which I found hard to understand, trying to imagine the positions being reversed.

“Aren’t Vietnamese people jealous when they see tourists here,” I asked her once, imagining them enviously coveting the luxury of leisure time and spare money to travel the world.

“Not jealous,” she said, “just confused.”

“Confused?” I questioned, not understanding her answer. She clarified for me, “If you could go anywhere on earth, why would you choose Vietnam?”

A few months into my stay, Chi Tien’s well rehearsed routine was to be disrupted when her side of the street was slated for demolition. The disorderly row of shops which had sprung up along the boundary of the football field were to be knocked down, to make way for a nice, neat sidewalk. The reason, I later found out, was an up-coming conference to be held at a nearby university campus, with a number of international delegates. The local bureaucrats had decided the occasion required a general clean up of the city’s streets, particularly messy looking local shopping districts like the one Chi Tien was in. One by one, the little clothes shops, noodle houses and photocopy stalls lining the street closed up as their owners moved on, leaving their new addresses scrawled on shuttered doors.

The last of the shop owners had barely departed when gangs of men arrived to tear down the empty buildings. Starting at one end of the road, they swung sledge hammers nearly as heavy as them for 10 hours a day into the brick and plaster walls, until nothing but piles of rubble remained. I wondered

how they physically managed, given that their wage barely covered two bowls of rice a day. A small army of police accompanied them, making sure the demolition crews were not disturbed and were being diligent in carrying out their assigned task.

Chi Tien's customary position was at the end of the row. She seemed to be hanging on to her spot till the last possible moment, and each day I asked her whether she'd be there the next. Each day, she answered that she thought so, but she didn't really know. One morning, I found her selling her bread rolls perched on a pile of bricks and mortar. But finally she, too, was swept away as a neatly paved walkway replaced the ramshackle collection of former livelihoods. It turned out that the place she'd carved out for herself over the previous 10 years was far more precarious than she'd realised. I wondered if the rationale behind the redevelopment made any sense to her, but I couldn't help thinking it would be a question she either didn't understand or didn't consider worth pondering. As I was learning, arbitrary government in Hanoi was the rule rather than exception, and people as poor and vulnerable as Chi Tien had little choice but to obey.

The next morning I found her, after some searching, further down the road, on the pavement in front of her sister's noodle stall. She had finally been moved on by the police had been sent there to deal with just such difficult cases. Relations between the two siblings were clearly strained, and she seemed grateful for company. While she wouldn't offend the visiting foreigners from here, business was markedly slower, away from the prime position she occupied at a cross-roads and adjacent to the bustle of the market. She still laughed as she spooned huge quantities of sugar into warm milk for her loyal customers. But not so heartily, and for not so long. For the rest of my stay, I bought extra bread rolls to take away. I rarely ate them, normally they went to some beggar children or old widows. I think Chi Tien knew it, but I hoped she appreciated my token effort to support her business. Over time, the police presence in the street abated. The whole street seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. Chi Tien moved back out onto the pavement. Her new location wasn't quite as premium as her old one, but it was certainly better than the one she'd managed to squeeze into next to her sister. With her little glass cabinet back on the street and her business seemingly back on track, her banter with the other stall holders picked up and her big smiles came back.

One day I arrived to find her little glass box arranged as always, but elevated on a olive green cart which she could wheel around, with space underneath for her oven, tea, and cash box. Her husband had made it for her for \$100, she told me. I laughed, thinking of the changes I'd witnessed in her business in these few short months and how they represented not only the rate of change which Vietnam and its peoples were undergoing, but also the development of my own Vietnamese language skills and knowledge of the country. Chi Tien proudly showed off her new acquisition, and gave me a few words of advice. "If you saved up, you could start your own bread stall at home," she said, nodding encouragingly.

Tuyet

I became aware that Chi Tien had some relationship with a small girl who hung around her stall, Tuyet. At first I had thought Tuyet was Chi Tien's daughter, but in fact she was her *con nuoi* – literally an adopted child, but a term which loosely refers to any relationship where a person takes some responsibility for supporting a child.

Tuyet was 10, and spent her days trying to pick up whatever little tasks people had to hand out to her so she could make a few dong to get by. Her nights were spent sleeping on a piece of floor donated by the owners of a small restaurant. She went to sleep around mid-night, when the restaurant closed for

the day, and was up again by six in the morning, when it opened for business. Not for her the luxury of a sleep in on a week-end morning, or an early night after a long day.

Chi Tien could be fairly dismissive of Tuyet. “Oh, she’s really dumb, and so lazy,” she’d say disparagingly, whether she was within earshot or not. Personally, I thought Tuyet must have been pretty clever to survive at all. And she certainly knew far more about hard work than I ever would. I didn’t know all that much about Tuyet’s history. The little I gleaned included that her mother was still in her village, in one of the poorest provinces in the central region. Her father had long since disappeared. When she had turned 10, her mother was unable to keep her any longer and sent her off to beg in Hanoi. I also knew there was also a younger sister who, I couldn’t help thinking, was probably destined to share her fate.

Tuyet had a real knack for communicating. Most Vietnamese people had trouble understanding me, as I did them. Yet Tuyet had an almost uncanny ability to understand what I and the other non-Vietnamese students were trying to get at, and to explain this to other people in a way they could understand. I wondered if it came from her need to constantly read people’s feelings, intentions and motives in order to just survive without any structured adult or institutional protection. Perhaps she was just naturally talented. Either way, it made her a real favourite with the foreign students and all of us knew her.

Tet Trung Thu, mid-Autumn festival, came around about the middle of my stay in Vietnam. It’s also known as the children’s festival, or sometimes Vietnamese Christmas, because children often get given presents on the night of the festival. The old quarter of Hanoi became progressively more crowded in the lead up to the celebration, as sellers and buyers converged to haggle over coloured lanterns, kites, toy stars, moon cakes and all kinds of knick-knacks.

The night of the festival it seemed that the whole city were out, riding their bikes around the lake in the centre of town and wandering through the markets, which were aglow with coloured lanterns and red and gold paper decorations. A couple of us students headed into town on our bicycles to be part of it. We saw Tuyet on the way and asked her if she wanted to come with us. Only just containing her excitement, she jumped on the back of one of our bikes. “I’m just going down to the lake!” she called out to everyone we passed, like it was an everyday occurrence.

As we got closer to town, the streets became more and more crowded and we realised that parking the bikes and walking was the only realistic option. As we got off, Tuyet grabbed hold of whichever of our hands was nearest to her, as if the whirlwind of people, bikes and motorbikes might suck her away unless she held on. Although we were only 20 minutes by bike from where she lived, she had never been this far away before and probably had no real conception of where it was or how she would get back home. We reassured her, and took turns at putting her up on our shoulders so she could see everything as we plunged into the old quarter’s narrow streets and tiny market lanes. Gradually she seemed to forget any apprehension and gazed, open mouthed with amazement, at everything going on around her. Realising that all the other children had presents, we decided to buy Tuyet a brightly coloured tiara, which we placed on her head, like a princess. We asked her if she liked it. She was too awed to respond.

On the way back to the student quarter, we decided to stop and have an ice-cream and a drink. We had to laugh as we watched her take her first ever sip of fizzy cola, the bubbles taking her by surprise and making her sit bolt upright with the unexpected and strange sensation in her mouth. As we paid, one of us lifted her up so she could see herself, with her tiara, in a mirror. She gazed at herself, transfixed,

straightening the crown and pushing her hair under its band. The next morning she was still wearing it.

Tuyet often complained of coughs, stomach pains, headaches and various other ailments. I didn't think that was all that surprising, given her lack of adequate nutrition, what I imagined must have been her incredibly stressful lifestyle, and lack of access to basic hygiene practices like washing. But I was still shocked that the most serious health problem I saw her with began as such a simple thing as a pimple. This got infected, with the infection gradually spreading from her cheek to her eyes, which became red and swollen. One became so bad that she couldn't open it any longer. I gave her some antiseptic cream, and it seemed to clear up a little. But eventually it became evident that it wasn't going away, and indeed was getting worse. It was Friday, and I promised her that if it didn't look better by Monday, I'd take her to see a doctor.

Saturday morning – well, closer to afternoon really – I emerged, hung over, in search of caffeine. Tuyet was waiting for me at the front gate of the dormitory building. The whole side of her face was covered in bloody pus, which oozed from under the plastic wrap that someone had tried covering the sore with. She didn't say a word, just looked up at me. “Wait there,” I told her, “we'll go get my bike and go to the hospital.” Tuyet hopped on the parcel rack of my bike, and we cycled the 15 minutes to the hospital together in silence. Arriving, we went to go up the steps. A Vietnamese man stopped us. “What are you here for?” he barked at us. “We've come to see a doctor, uncle,” I replied, as respectfully as possible. “OK, but leave her outside,” he said. I didn't know what he thought I would be doing at this Vietnamese hospital. I didn't know how he couldn't have noticed the side of Tuyet's face. But I didn't think about these things, just took her hand and, ignoring him, walked in. The hospital looked like most of Hanoi's official buildings; old, dusty, run down and bare. A waiting area was filled with people, either lying down or bent over. Some were moaning, as anxious family members hovered over them. Not a doctor or nurse – or even administrator – was to be seen. In fact, the entire building seemed empty of staff, and I wondered who it was that was supposed to be looking after all the injured people, and if they had been seen to or not.

“Big sister,” whispered Tuyet, tightening her grip on my arm slightly, “I'm scared.” I looked down at her. “Don't be scared, little sister. There's nothing to be scared of here,” I replied. I think she understood that I wasn't saying what I really felt, and why. We started to look into different rooms, seeking out any staff. Finally I opened a door on one young man watching a day-time TV soap. He looked barely old enough to be a high school graduate. “Are you a doctor?” I asked. He nodded, not looking away from the TV. “Do you speak English?” I inquired, doubtfully. He shook his head, seemingly irritated by all these questions and keen to have the interruptions cease. Undeterred, I asked him if he could have a look at Tuyet's wound. Obviously having decided he wasn't going to get any peace until my request was met, he got up, sat Tuyet down on a vacant chair, pulled the cling wrap from her face, and started poking and prodding her swollen, pus-filled cheek. A few moments later, he straightened up and motioned for us to follow him into another room. In his head he had obviously decided on a course of action, although he hadn't disclosed it to us as yet. In fact, he still hadn't said a word.

He indicated for me to sit down, and to hold Tuyet on my lap. He chose an instrument from among a collection of scalpels and other surgical implements laid out on a bench to one side of the room. He poured a clear solution into a pan, I guessed to sterilise the instrument or to wash his hands. I was wrong on both counts, as he did neither. Instead, he drew the solution into a syringe, and proceeded to inject it into the wound, although it wasn't clear to me why. No anaesthetic, no apologies, no ceremony. Tuyet's body stiffened, as did mine. Yet not a sound came out of her mouth. I compared her to how I carried on with a stubbed toe or grazed knee. Tears began to fall from between my

clenched eyelids, although I stifled the cries I wanted to scream. Through muffled sobs, I asked the doctor, “don’t you have any medicine to make it not hurt?”

“Of course,” he grunted, the first words he’d communicated thus far. “She’ll get some Panadol afterwards.” Tuyet’s eyes turned to meet mine, looking up at me from where I was holding her on my lap.

“Don’t be frightened, big sister,” she said. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.” She turned away, back towards this ‘doctor’, and the tears streamed down my cheeks, unchecked. At that moment, all she was worried about was whether or not I was OK. Next, the man who 10 minutes before had been sitting watching TV while seriously ill patients lay only metres away, made a cut into Tuyet’s cheek. Later, I was to know that this was only an inch or so long, but at the time I couldn’t see, mainly because my eyes were clenched shut. Tuyet’s body tensed in my arms again, and then relaxed. I think she might have fainted. I was hopeful.

I suddenly had a terrible thought about my role in this. What on earth was I doing here, inflicting on this tiny scrap of humanity a terror which I felt certain I would never have withstood if our positions had been reversed? Who on earth was I to think that western medicine held all the answers? What made me assume that someone with the title of ‘Doctor’ would automatically be able to cure Tuyet when poverty and a system that didn’t care had led her to this, and were waiting for her again just outside? Above all, what was I doing as part of it? My mind reeled, as much from the confusion of these thoughts and questions as from the emotional stress of the event I was living.

The procedure over, we followed the man outside as he took some of Tuyet’s statistics. “Full name,” he asked. “Tuyet,” she answered, but didn’t really appear sure of the surname. Nguyen, he wrote, the Vietnamese equivalent of Smith. For an address, she gave a suburb. When pressed for a street address, she couldn’t answer. Her age she knew, though, 10. It was the only thing she seemed sure of, like something which couldn’t be taken away from her. He wrote out a prescription for at least 10 different drugs, to be taken three times a day after meals. I wasn’t sure how to explain that she only ate once or twice a day, so I just put it in the back of my mind. While waiting for an injection to be prepared, we went outside and filled the prescription. The cost was about \$10. A month’s salary for most Vietnamese, and who knows how many day’s work for Tuyet. I paid and went back to the doctor. By now, news of the little Vietnamese girl and her foreign patron had spread, and a few people had come to see what was happening. A large, matronly lady, who showed little more sympathy for Tuyet but was certainly more talkative, had been brought in to give Tuyet an injection.

“Is this your foster child?” she asked, her voice booming out like a market spruiker into what had now become a small crowd. “No,” I answered, “just ...” there seemed no good word to describe our relationship, in either language, “... a friend,” I finished, lamely.

“You’re obviously fond of her, though,” she continued on, her explosive voice like chalk on a blackboard. “Why don’t you take her home with you?” she suggested, as casually as she might suggest going for a walk in the park. Though I was exhausted and overwhelmed by emotion, I managed to croak, “It’s not that easy.” “Of course it is,” she replied, cheerily. “Just go to the embassy and ask. It’s really simple for foreigners!” She looked around at the crowd, as if for affirmation. I’d heard this argument so many times, but I was in no shape to attempt the refutations I often did. “I can’t,” I simply stated. It was inadequate, but it was all I could manage. She looked at me, her brow furrowed, genuinely unable to see the reason for my obstinacy. Then she turned back to Tuyet, as she injected her arm with an unknown substance.

“Don’t worry, little sister, she’ll adopt you and take you home to Australia with her. Then all your problems will be over.”

In my mind I was screaming at this women, “Stop! What are you saying!” But all I could manage was to say, “No, it’s not possible. Please don’t say that.” “Why?” the woman asked.

I tried to explain, in the usual way. “I’m only a student, I don’t have any money.” She didn’t buy it for a second. “Don’t worry,” she repeated to Tuyet, almost conspiratorially, “She doesn’t mean it. Look how much she cares for you. You’ll be living overseas soon.” By this time, I had to get out. My mind wheeling, I took Tuyet’s hand and we went to leave. As we were walking out, we crossed paths with a woman who looked like she had fallen from a bicycle. Her forehead was bloody, and a lump was swelling up on it. Her arms were grazed. The doctor rose and started prodding this new complication in his day, without washing his hands and never for a second losing his air of absolute indifference.

I prayed that I would never get sick in Hanoi. But, of course, I knew that I wouldn’t be treated here. I would be treated at the foreigners’ clinic where the doctors wash their hands and use anaesthetic. Riding us home, I passed Chi Tien. In tears, I handed Tuyet over to her, along with a box of medicines and one American dollar for extra food. I couldn’t face Tuyet any more. It was like we’d shared something intimate and now I was embarrassed. I walked back into the sanctuary of my dormitory building, with no answers to the questions that had flooded into my head.

Phuong

Phuong always seemed to hate Tuyet, although I never really understood what was behind it. Most of the people in the street, actually, didn’t seem to like Tuyet much, I think because they thought she was lazy. While well old enough, in their opinion, to be out working, she spent a lot of her time doing what most kids do, I guess – hanging around, watching TV at one of the cafés, waiting for people she liked to come and play with her. And begging, of course, to support not only herself but a whole extended family.

It’s true, though, that at not much older Phuong worked harder than most people I have ever met. I guess it’s not so easy to be charitable when that’s your lot in life, at the tender age of 17. The work she did wasn’t all that physically demanding, just waiting on five or six tables, carrying fried rice, soft drinks and sweet cakes to the foreign and Vietnamese students who frequented her café in the student quarter. The afternoons were mostly quiet and the girls – she worked with two other, younger girls – took advantage of these times to read a newspaper, watch something on TV or laugh over silly jokes together. Sometimes she would try and learn a bit of English and practise a few words, but she didn’t seem to have much enthusiasm for it. It always seemed to me like she was chipping away at something she found unconquerable.

While the work wasn’t physically hard, it was constant. She opened the café at six in the morning, and at 10 at night would sweep the floors and put away the chairs before closing up. The only break she had was to eat a quick lunch, and she got maybe a week off at *Tet* – New Year – to visit her parents in the village she grew up in. Sometimes I noticed her, nodding off in a plastic chair in the heat of the Hanoi summer, her head dropping and then jerking back up. When I got that tired, I always at least knew I could sleep in the next day, or have an early night, or at least that the week-end was coming up. Phuong never had that luxury – unless you counted the one week a year she got off. And even then, her shirt and pants still had to be washed every day. Only having one pair, she had to hand wash them every night after she finished work. I remember, once, her examining the smooth skin and

buffed nails of my hands. Hers, 10 years younger than mine, were so dry and cracked they bled from time to time.

“You have the hands of a young girl and I the hands of an old woman,” she said, in a matter of fact manner. She was right, of course. Yet she never seemed to question her lot, any more than anyone else I met ever did. The other girls who worked in the café were nice to us, always friendly and pleasant. Phuong was too, but I also got the impression there was more to her, a natural intelligence just waiting for the opportunity to be used. She took me aside once and asked me about the adoption of Vietnamese babies after the war. “I don’t understand, big sister, why did all those babies have to go to America,” she asked. “Well, Phuong, after the war there were many orphans,” I started. She cut me off, frustrated by yet again having to explain even the simplest thing to me. “I know that, sister, but why America? Why did they all have to go to the country which had just fought the war, which had just made these babies into orphans? Surely that isn’t right?” As usual, she had more questions than I had answers.

One afternoon I was in the process of reading through some research on the position of young rural women migrants to the city when it occurred to me that Phuong had come from the country. I wondered what her own opinions would be. Surprised that it hadn’t occurred to me earlier, I went down on to the street, both to take a break and to ask Phuong a few as yet unformed questions. I ordered a banana shake, and sat down in the café, watching the street. The café was empty at the time, between the lunch and dinner rushes, and Phuong was immersed in the task of cleaning the five by five or so metres of foot-path which marked her territory, around the plastic chairs and tables, sweeping leaves and rubbish into the gutters with a large, hand-made brush. The other girls weren’t around, I guessed they were out the back preparing for the next lot of customers, or grabbing a few minutes of sleep on one of the kitchen benches.

“Little sister Phuong,” I called to her, to get her attention, “What do you want to do in the future?” She continued sweeping, seemingly lost in her task. When she failed to respond I guessed she hadn’t got my meaning. So, after a pause, I attempted to clarify my question for her.

“I mean, what do you want to do for a job? Do you want to keep working here in the future?” Phuong’s silence continued, and just as I was beginning to wonder how else I could ask the question she responded with a question of her own. “Is that what you think?” she asked me, still not looking up. “I don’t know,” I replied, honestly, “that’s why I’m asking.” She was silent again, still sweeping the leaves, still not looking up. Her response was another question, asked in a measured and calm way. “What do you think, when you see us girls working in places like this? What do you think of us?” I tried to answer her as honestly as possible. “I see that you are not stupid, that you are intelligent, hard working, and that you have a lot of potential, but that you can’t get a job here which can help you to develop that potential. It’s wasted here, all you do is work in poor conditions for low pay.” After another pause, she looked up from her sweeping. I realised that there were tears in her eyes. For a Vietnamese person, even a young girl, such a show of emotion would only accompany the most heart rending sadness, especially in front of a stranger and outsider like me. Finally, she gave me her answer.

“You can’t go around asking people in Vietnam these questions,” she started. “You can’t make people think about their lives like that. It’s not fair! Look at me. I was smart at school, not dumb. I always studied hard and did well. But my parents, they had no money. I had to come to Hanoi, have to do this work. It never ends! What future do I have now, after leaving school like that? This is it, my life, my destiny. It’s not fair for you to come here, make me think about it. Elder sister, you can’t do that in Vietnam!” She turned back to her sweeping. As was often the case, the answer I got wasn’t the one I’d

expected. But she was right. I realised, perhaps for the first time, just how little I could ever really understand about the lives of these people.

“The Future Lied”

My life seems little different from that of a sampan pushed upstream towards the past. The future lied to us, there long ago in the past. There is no new life, no new era, nor is it hope for a beautiful future that now drives me on, but rather the opposite. The hope is contained in the beautiful pre-war past. (Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War*, p 42.)

The Vietnam war was fought in the name of independence. Ho Chi Minh led a generation of men, women and children into battle against the last in a long line of foreign powers which had managed to dominate and exploit his people for centuries. Despite the might of the vastly technologically superior forces amassed against him, his peasant army ultimately forced its withdrawal, leading to an independence which ‘Uncle’ Ho, as he is popularly called, dreamed of but never lived to see. This newly independent nation offered not only the promise of freedom from the foreign domination and exploitation which had plagued Vietnam for generations, but also the opportunity to build a country based on socialist principles of equality: an egalitarian system which would see men and women rewarded equally for their work; education and health care for all; and all citizens equally able to reap the rewards of their labour, be it intellectual or agricultural.

The cost of the sacrifices made for these goals is incalculable. Figures for enemy casualties are regularly touted: 500 Australians, 50 000 Americans. But figures for the Vietnamese – on both sides – can only be roughly estimated at about 4 million – 10 per cent of the population of Vietnam at that time. Those Vietnamese who went missing in action remain for the large part lying in unmarked graves in swamps and rice fields around the country.

Numbers as huge as this can seem meaningless. The Hanoi Women’s Museum offers examples of the tragedy on a far more personal level. “Heroic mothers”, hundreds of them, line the walls, with their individual losses recorded as if they were donations. This woman, nine sons, a husband; that woman, all seven sons, a daughter and a grandson; everywhere husbands, sons-in-law, fathers, daughters, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, friends, lovers, neighbours. What did these people make these sacrifices for? For freedom from oppression and exploitation; for equality; for a better future for their children. It’s heartrending to say that I didn’t see much evidence of these things in Hanoi. I think of those women who I had the chance to know.

Tien, who must be typical of the women of Hanoi, whose work never ends while her husband looks on. Where is the equality she was promised? How is it right for her to live in constant fear of arrest for doing what she has to do to feed her family and educate her children? The state, meant to help people just like her, has instead become something she fears, an instrument of exploitation and oppression just as surely as the foreign regimes which preceded it.

Tuyet, who instead of learning to read and write is on the streets of Hanoi, begging for food and a place to stay, forced to work to support her poverty-stricken family. She could not even have gotten inside a hospital – at one time the greatest achievement of the Vietnamese social experiment – without a foreigner to demand it, and in any case could never have afforded the drugs to treat a simple infection. Her only hope is seen to be getting to the west.

Phuong, the child of farmers, whose academic ability should have guaranteed her a place in a state university and a government job on graduation. Instead, she is forced to leave school early and face a life of exploitation shared by most who, like her, have little choice to accept what they get.

This, I am certain, was not the future that the parents and grandparents of these women sacrificed so much for. And ultimately, even the communist underpinnings of the system, which so much of the post-war hardship has been for, are also crumbling. While not yet publicly acknowledged, there is no doubt that communism in Vietnam it is slowly being replaced, from the bottom up, by the very capitalist model which was so feared and despised that four million people died fighting against it. It seemed, to me, that what military power could not accomplish 20 years ago, economic might has brought nonetheless.

Yet the country is now left in the middle, in the worst of both worlds. While certain sectors of society are undoubtedly prospering as the economy opens up, the ever expanding commercial opportunities combined with an immense government bureaucracy also leave the gate wide open to corruption. State owned enterprises are shut down due to lack of productivity, but the workers are offered no alternatives and lack the skills to succeed in private enterprise. They seem caught between a communist system which few still believe in and a capitalism which does not technically exist, struggling in a market full of limitations but without safeguards, its government proclaiming itself to be on the road to communism while at every stage courting foreign owned US ventures. People like Tien, Phuong, Tuyet, eking out existences as best as they can, 30 years on from the winning of the war which was to bring about Uncle Ho's worker's utopia.

But as I cannot tell the stories of these women, I also cannot judge their lives or say how they might have seen things. For this reason, the title of this story should be considered more a comment based on my perceptions, instead of a statement of fact. The people who have the right to make that final judgement are people like Tuyet, Tien and Phuong. Not an outsider, like me, whose home is on the other side of the world.

There's a new life ahead of me, and a new era for Vietnam. I have to survive. (Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War*, p 40.)

Leaving

My time in Hanoi was up all too soon. I found myself torn between looking forward to seeing my old friends and familiar surroundings again, and feeling a great sadness at leaving the people I had come to know and the relationships I had made in my time in Vietnam. Ultimately, however, I had no choice in the matter and on the last morning I packed up the last of my things and went to say my goodbyes.

To Phuong, I took a bag of stuff I didn't want to take with me, like some moisturiser. "For if your skin gets dry," I told her as I gave it to her, looking at her dry and chapped hands. I also gave her some clothes. They were probably a little big, but I hoped that, as she only had one pair of pants and one shirt, she would not mind too much. She gave me her address, not in Hanoi but in her village, where her father lived. She asked if I would write. I said yes. I could see she didn't think I meant it, and I guessed she'd heard that before from other students before me. I did mean it, then, with all my heart. But I also knew that, in a few months, I may well not have gotten around to it, and then perhaps it would become too hard... I took photos of her, and promised to send them.

I went to see Tien. I took photo after photo of her and her cart, regretting that I had none of her before against which I could have charted her progress in the short time I'd been there. If it were only a matter of hard work, I wouldn't put any degree of success past her. She presented me with a single white flower which she'd bought in anticipation of my goodbye visit. The flower came with me on the plane that day, to Saigon, and sat in my hotel room. I couldn't throw it away, although it was hard to articulate exactly why. People in the airport winked at me. "Vietnamese boy-friend!" they said, smiling knowingly. "No," I replied, "a friend."

Tuyet wasn't around that day, on the street. Sometimes she did that, just disappeared for a few days. I looked for her for as long as I could. But I never did see her again.

Quotes from: Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War. A Novel*, Published by Vintage, 1998. English translation copyright Martin Secker & Warburg Limited, 1993, Random House Publishers: London, Sydney, Auckland, Parktown.