MOSAIC

2011-2012 vietnam | cultural memory in contemporary times
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“Cultural Memory in Contemporary Times”

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NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
Introduction

The Vietnam War (or "American War," as the Vietnamese call it) ended in 1975, almost two decades before any of student travelers on the recent Albert Gallatin Scholars trip to Vietnam were born. Although a seemingly historical event, the conflict helped frame AGS’s yearlong investigation into the theme of "Cultural Memory in Contemporary Times" and, more specifically, the group’s tour of the country. This framing was appropriate as the war--by any name--was a seminal event in the histories of both Vietnam and the United States.

But certainly the history and culture of Vietnam the country encompass much more than Vietnam the war. Indeed, our very first impressions of the country--from several days spent in Ho Chi Minh City--were of booming consumerism, a pervasive youth-oriented pop culture, and an almost universal tendency to look forward, not backward. That tendency, whether derived from optimism or resignation, was belied at only a few moments in the trip--at the former imperial palace in Hue, at Ho Chi Minh’s elaborate mausoleum in Hanoi, and at a former prison on Con Son Island.

The student contributions to this issue of Mosaic reflect the breadth of what we encountered in Vietnam. From an analysis of a new luxury development near Ho Chi Minh City to a rumination on the vagaries of Vietnamese women’s footwear to an exploration of Vietnam’s rampant consumer culture, these essays illustrate both the richness of Vietnam’s contemporary culture and also the impressive breadth of the student travelers’ academic interests. Read and enjoy!

Patrick McCreery
AGS Administrative Director

ALBERT GALLATIN SCHOLARS

Albert Gallatin Scholars is a program for undergrad students at NYU’s Gallatin School of Individualized Studies. Students are offered admission before their freshman year, and upon entrance they are granted the option to travel with the group for two out of their four undergrad years. MOSAIC is the once-yearly fruit of our labors. It contains the writings, photos, art and videos inspired by our travels.

ABOUT OUR TRIP

What is it like to travel through Vietnam as a millenial American--thirty-seven years after the defeat of American forces in Saigon? Do the Vietnamese remember us with animosity, with pity, or with something else? The theme of our trip--"cultural memory in contemporary times"--is meant to address these questions.
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Student Contributions
A Tale of Two Cities

CAITLIN MACLAREN

During our stay in Ho Chi Minh City, my fellow Gallatin students and I were able, on at least one occasion, to find our way back to our hotel by locating and walking towards a nearby skyscraper, the Bitexco Financial Tower. This tower, which stands 68 stories high, is a great landmark for lost tourists, but as Forbes reported in March, “half of the building’s office space is still empty and none of the six retail podiums is open.” As a native of Miami, Florida, I am all too familiar with half-empty towers, and they conjure up a visceral cynicism that was hard to shake during our time in Vietnam.

Several kilometers south of the Bitexco Tower, just outside of Ho Chi Minh City, is Phu My Hung, a new development outfitted with condominiums, car dealerships, golf courses, schools, and a gleaming mall. Our guide, Tam, remarked that it is hard for guides like him to find an affordable place to eat when they bring tour groups there, but he would love to move his family there one day. The sprawling development, well manicured and built on what was once wetland, reminded me of suburban Florida.

One of the most memorable moments of the trip for me was the moment when, during a presentation on the Hanoi-based fund management company VinaCapital, our friendly hostess, flipping through slides of the resorts and condos the company was involved in building, casually remarked that their developments generally cater to the wealthiest 3% of the country’s residents; the company isn’t involved in affordable housing because it simply isn’t profitable. She recounted how, in one instance, the company had to remove bodies from a cemetery in order to construct a development. As I listened to her presentation, I could feel my eyes bulging and my face heating up, but I shouldn’t really have been surprised – where I’m from, affordable housing is sparse while condos are plentiful, and environmentalists constantly do battle with developers lobbying to extend the urban development boundary closer and closer to the Everglades.

However, Vietnam is unlike Florida in that all Vietnamese land is owned by the government, though individuals and companies may acquire land use rights, as with doi moi and the liberalization of the economy have come new legal frameworks for regulating property. Private land use rights were established in 2004, but by 2006, real estate prices had skyrocketed beyond most Vietnamese people’s means. Still, these changes are not enough for some. The Heritage Foundation ranks Vietnam low with regard to property rights – one of the measures in its “Index of Economic Freedom” – remarking that “private property rights are not strongly respected.” For my part, however, I shudder to think what or who else might join the cemetery our VinaCapital hostess spoke about in being uprooted if more respect were to be given to private property rights.

Our group had several discussions in Vietnam about the “Westernized” appearance of our surroundings. Many of us took exception to the notion that the United States or other Western countries were having an undue influence on Vietnam, pointing out that the developers we met with were more likely to compare the changing appearance of Vietnam to Singapore than to New York.

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York. Therefore, my intention here is not to draw comparisons between Vietnam and the United States in order to prove how “Americanized” Vietnam is. Rather, I want to draw attention to the global finance and real estate web in which both countries are to some degree entrenched – a web that cares little for such things as national borders. While VinaCapital’s main focus is Vietnam, the company has offices in Cambodia and Singapore, and its property investments – and those of other companies like it – are focused primarily on foreign companies. For example, Phu My Hung – the development where Tam, our guide, had difficulty finding an affordable lunch – was primarily financed by a Taiwanese firm, Central Trading & Development Group, and workers will soon break ground on a 520,000 square ft. mixed-use project in Miami’s financial district that is funded by Hong Kong-based real estate conglomerate Swire Properties.

Over 4,000 homes entered foreclosure last month in Miami-Dade County, but before they all make their way through the process we will be in the midst of another condo frenzy that will do nothing to alleviate the affordable housing crisis. These condos are linked to the many houses in foreclosure by global capital flows and the financial institutions that influence both the supply and demand of development.

David Harvey provides a useful perspective for considering the changing physical and political landscape of Vietnam in his commentary on China. Harvey compares the recent development boom in China, which only privatized housing in 1998, to the suburban housing boom in the postwar United States, which, he writes, led to “a distinctive crisis for marginalized and excluded urban populations.” This observation gets to the heart of the unease I felt in Vietnam and that I constantly feel in Miami – the sense that development based on “market forces” never manages to provide for the needs of a community or country, succeeding only in creating unconscionable waste and inequality. In Vietnam, this sense of unease became a conviction.
Sixteen students, three faculty, nineteen travelers to Vietnam, nineteen perspectives on Vietnam. But I, Jack Richards, can only comment on, retell, share the pictures of, analyze the events of one of those nineteen experiences: my own. And while my experience shares so many of the same events, stories and passings of the other eighteen, my experience is truly and uniquely mine. And while I could attempt to recount my entire experience, this essay is just about one specific bus ride through Ho Chi Minh City.

As we drove through the old capital of South Vietnam, as with many of our bus rides, it was impossible not to notice a few things: it was impossible not to notice the hundreds if not thousands of motorbikes and scooters that surrounded us, passed us, and waited behind us as we made wide turns; it was impossible not to notice the large, dominating, billboard-like signs that commanded every storefront, every restaurant, every commercial entity; it was impossible not to notice the questionable dichotomy between dustiness and natural life; and it was impossible not to notice how out of place we were amongst the motorbikes, amongst the aggressive commercial promoting and amongst the muted life on the Vietnamese streets.

While each of these topics intrigued me and could easily warrant their own essay, this essay is about something that was particularly specific to this bus ride. It is not something that I caught myself noticing on other bus rides, it is the shoes, and more specifically the heels of the Vietnamese people whom we passed and who passed us, specifically those on motorbikes. Since this bus ride was really the only time I took such notice of the motorbikers’ footwear, I don’t know if the day of the week or the time of day were contributing factors or not to the high occurrence of high heels and platforms amongst the footwear of the Vietnamese women, but a high occurrence there certainly was.

Whether or not this was a strangely high volume of foot fashion, sitting on that bus, that day, the heels caught my attention. They became such an intrigue, as most things do when they seem out of place. And heels on motorbikes and scooters surely seemed out of place. To me high heels exist in my thoughts only in the context of female coworkers or nights out with friends. The only remotely similar association might be the idea of high heels speeding away from a nightclub on the back of a motorcycle, but not as part of the everyday life.

This realization of incompatibility between high heels and the quotidian brought me to fully realize how much the lives of the Vietnamese, in terms of transportation specifically, differed from the United States. Before this instance, I undoubtedly took notice of the differences in transportation, and in fact our guide had emphasized the necessity of motorbikes in Vietnamese culture as a cheap but still motorized mode of transportation. Nonetheless, for some reason it took seeing those heels to make me fully understand that motorbikes are the overwhelming mode of transportation.

To me, heels corporeally signify wealth and special occasion. They are not cheap or simple sneakers or tennis shoes: footwear I more associate with motorbikes and scooters. To me, heels are not shoes I would have imagined my peers risking – for lack of a better word – on a motorbike where they might end up scuffed or damaged. But the Vietnamese women have no problem with it, because they have no other option. Motorbikes and scooters are their mode of transportation, motorbikes and scooters are their way of getting to work or going out in heels, motorbikes and scooters are their daily conveyance.
The heels of the Vietnamese women opened my eyes and thus opened me to new viewpoints. To say the least, Vietnam, in many instances, showed me how much I take for granted, this experience being one of the most sobering.

And I wanted to capture that experience; I wanted to capture the significance of the heels.

I was already concentrating on them. My eyes darting from pedal-to-pedal, footpeg-to-footpeg and footboard-to-footboard. My view narrowed further as I turned on my camera. If my eyes weren’t still darting back and forth between motorbikes, where at least through my peripheral vision I caught glimpses of other things passing by, they were fixed on my camera screen, closing my vision of the street to just a few square feet.

In about a ten-minute period, with some failed attempts, I successfully captured four pictures of heels, but what else are they? An expression of the difference in transportation culture? When viewed together, it is possible that conclusion could be found but without my personal anecdote, that meaning and personal realization would likely be much harder to arrive at. These pictures taken out of the context of this essay may be an accumulation of all of the heels passed by in an hour drive even though they were in fact a fraction of the heels passed in ten minutes.

But these pictures lack more than just as an expression of transportation differences. While the list is literally infinite for what these pictures lack, just in terms of my aforementioned issue: they do not show the overall number of heels compared to other shoes; they do not provide enough context to truly build the environment that I at first found risky to wear heals in; they do not include the full outfit of the heeled women to provide more reasonable assumptions as to where the women are headed; and among many other things, most importantly, these pictures cannot produce the chemical imbalance and mental “lightbulb” moment of realization that the experience of seeing those heels brought me.

That most important “lightbulb” moment that I attempted to capture, was undoubtedly an incredibly important part of my Vietnam experience but looking back now, I realize that by concentrating so heavily on those heels, and especially in my efforts to capture them with my camera, I lost part of the Vietnam experience.

If I were to write an essay about the hordes of motorbikes, or the billboard signage on every building lining the streets or the seeming dustiness of life in Vietnam, I would most likely not be drawing on my experiences from that particular bus ride, let alone those ten minutes of high heeled concentration. My anecdotes and thought processes about these subjects developed in other bus rides, at other moments in the experience.

I am able to draw on other moments of the experience to develop thoughts about those things missed, so why would I need ten more minutes of exposure to the magnitude of motorbikes, the blatant billboards and lackluster liveliness? After all, those ten minutes would just run together with my other experiences of those things: had I noticed the motorbikes that day, they would become inseparable from the motorbikes on other days; the incomprehensible billboards passed by the bus that day would be no different from the other billboards I could not understand; and the matte sidewalks and trees and buildings would look the same as any other street we drove through.

Perhaps there was something significant that we passed that I missed by concentrating on the high heels but I favor the known significance that I saw in the footwear over any other potential matter of significance. By this logic, narrowing my focus is a positive thing.

But, my focus narrowed twice, once my vision focused on the heels, the second time it focused on my camera screen which focused on the heels. This latter narrowing kept me from exploring more with my eyes: it kept me from looking into the high heeled women’s fashion, their vehicle, their facial expressions, and their companions; it kept me from noticing any other trends in footwear; it kept me from taking in a more comprehensive scene. By trying
to capture the experience I hindered my ability to sense that entire experience. And with that long list of things the photographs lack, is it worth it?

Is it worth it to hinder the experience just to create piecemeal hard evidence of the experience? Yes. And no. It is a balance that we each must find for ourselves.

Ever since I took 400 pictures of one concert, my brother has in fact challenged me to experience through my camera lens less, a challenge that I have tried to follow. I have tried to experience with my own senses more than through the senses further focused by lenses. Cameras surely are not the only lens that narrows an experience: this essay and all other travel writing narrows the experience; even elaborate story telling with inflection and dramatic timing narrows the experience; even HD Imax-sized video, although not by much, narrows the experience. I am in no way arguing that experiences aren’t worth sharing if they are not complete because that is impossible, since the only complete rendition of an experience is the experience itself.

Although I mentioned above that this narrowing is a failure, which I stand by, I do not think that success is necessary because it is not tangible, especially considering that even if two people took the same trip – heard the same sounds, touched the same textures, tasted the same flavors, saw the same sights, and smelt the same odors – they would have different experiences. So if every experience is going to be different anyway, it is silly to not create and share lacking renditions of the experience.

What I have found to be important is to determine how much of the original experience is worth sacrificing for the ability to share it later. I do not regret dedicating those ten minutes to high heels and in fact I would do it again. I am satisfied with sacrificing the other aspects of my experience for that concentration, that elaboration on one aspect of the experience, and most notably that “lightbulb” moment of realization, and from this I hope that I have encouraged you to consider what lenses it is worth narrowing each experience for.
Relatively inexpensive, and practical in the crowded streets of Vietnam, motorbikes have rapidly become a staple of the country and have all but replaced the cycle rickshaws, or “cyclos,” and bicycles of past generations. It is evident that motorbike owners take pride in their vehicles simply from observing the vehicles' cleanliness. However, with this new and beloved form of transit comes a problem prevalent in many urbanizing countries: widespread pollution and traffic. Information about the dangers of pollution and traffic accidents has given rise to the use of helmets – now mandatory – and facemasks, which, while not required, are popular among many Vietnamese for protection against pollutants and smog. It is unclear whether or not the facemasks actually provide such protection, but their use demonstrates an increasing concern for health. Interestingly enough, these facemasks also keep the sun off a rider's lower face, which the helmet shade fails to cover, preserving the ancient East Asian ideal of untanned skin. Many female riders further protect their skin by wearing long-sleeved shirts and gloves, even on the hottest of days. This shows that, while the motorbike culture has revolutionized transportation, other subtleties of Vietnamese culture have been upheld.

For example, street culture is alive and well in Vietnam. Unable to afford real storefronts, many Vietnamese have turned to setting up makeshift restaurants with plastic tables and chairs on the sidewalk. Some serve meats and phở out of portable cookers while others specialize in tea or coffee. Many venues that we passed were large enough to easily accommodate more than a dozen people at a time, and we noticed that these sidewalk businesses were often livelier than the restaurants occupying the storefronts behind them. However, we also visited a development named Saigon South, also known as Phu My Hung, which contrasted starkly with this vibrant street culture. Designed largely for ultra-wealthy Vietnamese or expats, Saigon South and developments like it are frequently designed and constructed by Taiwanese, Singaporean, or American companies. With immaculate streets, quaint townhouses, and grand malls, Saigon South presented a very different view of city life – a view that felt eerily distant from the sidewalk culture thriving in other urban areas. A popular real estate website, Living In Vietnam, offers house and apartment rentals in Saigon South for between $650 and $4000 US per month. For comparison, the General Statistics Office of Vietnam has reported that the Vietnamese in the highest income bracket in 2011 earned
an average of $165 US per month.  

Though it is not unexpected for a large part of a country’s population to shift from rural areas to urban areas as the country advances, Vietnam presents an interesting dichotomy of landscapes as a result of how rapidly its cities have grown in the last few decades. Centuries-old cities have suddenly given life to skyscrapers and sparkling, modern buildings, allowing for rapid urbanization and rampant overcrowding. Meanwhile, only a few kilometers away, some families still practice subsistence farming and use livestock such as water buffalo to help work the fields. These farmers live on a fraction of the average urban salary and although our tour guides reported that the standard of living is improving or both urban and rural Vietnamese, it is evident that standards of living in urban areas are far outpacing those in rural areas. Surveys show that in 2008, an individual living in an urban area of Vietnam earned an average monthly income of 1,605,200 đồng (approx. $96.31 US, 2008) while an individual living in a rural area of Vietnam earned an average of 762,200 đồng (approx. $45.73 US, 2008) per month.

Snake wine was, to me, a particularly interesting aspect of Vietnamese culture. It is made by coiling venomous snakes, occasionally holding scorpions in their mouths, into bottles of alcohol products, which are then aged for several months. The Vietnamese consider the resulting liquor a folk medicine, believing it to be an aphrodisiac and to have various restorative properties. It is customary to invite guests to share the good fortune of opening a new bottle. The contents of the bottle are consumed not for alcoholic enjoyment but as a prescription; according to our Saigon guide, one shot each morning will do the trick. However, in another case of cultural-items-turned-commercial, the Vietnamese seem to have picked up on foreigners’ fascination with snake wine and a reportedly fake version is frequently marketed to tourists who cannot tell the difference.

2 Vietnam’s annual rate of urban movement was estimated at 3% in 2011. Source: http://www.indexmundi.com/vietnam/urbanization.html
If one word could properly summarize the food in Vietnam it would be bold. The smells are rich, the colors are vibrant, and the culture that has evolved around eating is warm and exciting. The animals consumed, presentation of the food, and the mixture of tastes are worlds away from typical American cuisine. Vietnamese spring rolls are the perfect combination of crunchy and soft, the warm pork on the inside chilled by the cool rice paper. Pho, Vietnam’s iconic soup, steams with various meats and vegetables in a thin but flavorful broth. In the markets and on the streets people sit eating warm rice noodles, homemade sweet chili and beef while drinking heavy Vietnamese coffee.

Unfortunately, I ate none of that. In fact, I spent a large part of my trip to Vietnam repulsed and nauseated by the food.

Having grown up in a Jewish home, food has been an essential part of my existence. Dinner only counts as a meal if I leave the table feeling full to capacity. Jewish holidays, conversations, and gatherings all center on a buffet of traditional cuisine. Thus it should come as no surprise that as a Jewish traveler, I consider food to be of the utmost importance, a crucial way to experience a country’s true culture. No trip to Italy is complete without a taste of authentic Nona pasta, and a visit to the Middle East is unfinished without tasting the oiliest of shawarma. In Vietnam, however, I felt there was a massive barrier between me and the local culture. Obviously the language difference was difficult, but my inability to experience the food—the distinct taste and smell of everything—fully prevented me from immersing myself in Vietnam. While I was able to appreciate the beauty and diversity of the country and all it had to offer, it was impossible for me to sink my teeth into anything but plain white rice and therefore I missed out on the opportunity to really connect with Vietnamese life.

Walking through the streets and seeing the foods on the translated menus or in the market places was intimidating. Whole dead cows and pig feet hanging from the rooftops, crabs crawling in buckets on the floor of marketplaces, snakes and beetles stuffed to capacity in bottles of wine—all these sights were daunting to a tourist attempting to be vegetarian. As the two weeks went on, I had an increasingly fun and interesting time but grew hungrier and hungrier and only more repulsed. Now, however, thousands of miles away in the comfort of my own kitchen, I am retroactively able to see this cuisine as a metaphor for the rich culture that is Vietnam.

The theme of our trip was historical memory, and while food is not the most direct medium through which to study this, it does symbolize the Vietnamese way of life. It can serve as an emblem of a driven, young generation with a desire to transition from a complicated and clouded past into a vivacious and exciting future. It can also represent the juxtaposition of traditional Vietnam with modern Vietnam, as well as the fast-paced business of the cities. Most notable are three categories: presentation of the food, combination of tastes, and traditional versus modern dishes.

For me, presentation was the most shocking aspect of all. As Tam, our beloved tour guide in Ho Chi Minh City, said, “If it has four legs, we eat it.” Yet it seemed to me that even if the animal had eight legs, or no legs, it was eaten as well. And unlike in my kitchen at home, where meat has no semblance to its original live form, the meat in Vietnam is served on a platter as if it had just been slain. Not to say that I’ve never seen graphic presentations of food. I’ve eaten the most detailed of fish heads, carved out turkeys, Cornish Hens, and the like. Never, however, had I ever seen a full bird—wings still attached—stuffed into a wine bottle and served. Never had I seen pigeons presented with their decapitated heads on a toothpick. This was all indeed very new for me.
I realized that in the U.S. we are far more removed from the sources of our food than Vietnamese people are. Of course, one cannot make broad inferences about a diverse culture simply based on the appearance of food. Even if one could, however, I would still not argue that the general population of Vietnam is necessarily more ‘in touch’ with their food, and thereby with nature, than Americans. In America, however, a formidable distance separates us from our food. This distance enables us to consume foods manufactured for mass production, with chemical substitutes and harmful factors that have adverse effects on our health and the environment. Shelves and shelves of neatly sliced meat triple-wrapped in plastic is a near universal sight in American supermarkets. While this may seem a sanitary practice, it is also a way of providing more distance between what we are eating. A new movement gaining popularity in the United States venerates locally sourced foods. This movement is unnecessary in Vietnam, where locally-sourced food already exists as an obvious way of life. I believe that we have a lot to learn from this close connection with food and food systems.

Additionally, the presentation of food evoked in me a sense of the more daring and carefree way of life in Vietnam. Just like walking through the streets of Ho Chi Minh City—the absence of traffic lights creating exciting chaos—where there is no need to look both ways before crossing the street, people instead diving into traffic and hoping for the best, the bold and vibrant nature of the culture shines through in the cuisine. In our meeting with students from the Vietnamese National University, we sat over rich Vietnamese coffee and listened as they voluntarily sang for us various Vietnamese songs. This incredible moment, when students our own age showed no inhibition whatsoever and dove into full-fledged singing in front of complete strangers made me think again of the bold, uninhibited delicacies. Food is presented as it is—stomachs as stomachs, whole birds as whole birds, frogs as frogs. The excitement of the food is simply a manifestation of the excitement in the air. There seemed to be a permeating eagerness to move forward, to build a new nation, and to dive right into the future as opposed to dwelling in the past.

Like the raw stomachs and whole birds and frogs presented on restaurant dishes—webbed feet and eyeballs intact—many aspects of Vietnamese culture exist on the surface. Gatherings, from business meetings to haircuts, occur on the sidewalks.

Much like Vietnamese culture as a whole, which is the result of a lively combination of outside influences, Pho, the most distinctive Vietnamese dish, is a lively medley of broth, vegetables, different types of beef and poultry, herbs, and rice noodles. As Andrew Zimmern, the host and food-critique-extraordinaire of TV show Bizarre Foods said, Vietnamese food is “fresh, complex, and packed with attitude.” For a people always on the move, street food is good food made fast. In the packed, constantly bustling cities, people can expect small portions packed to the maximum with flavor and diversity. The street food also symbolizes the importance of community and gathering in Vietnam. All food is made to share and is enhanced by contribution and partnership of the eaters.

To me one of the most notable aspects of Vietnam is the stark intersection of traditional and modern culture. There are Pepsi advertisements on the Perfume River, and a well-known photo depicts a street vendor outside a Louis Vuitton store, coconuts selling for mere cents alongside expensive luxury clothes. These images stick out and represent the fusion of the old and the new. Perhaps this is most appropriately symbolized through banh mi, sandwiches made from ham and vegetables in a French baguette, which have become a national delicacy. Or perhaps from Kentucky Fried Chicken, the ever-fattening fried chicken chain imported from the USA and now found in various cities. In Ho Chi Minh City, there is a KFC right next to the Chinese Food Market, where everything from seafood to pigs to insects can be feasted on. Again, this juxtaposition of restaurants and food types represents a common theme of Vietnam as the country continues to incorporate tradition into its rapid development.

Luckily I had listened to my Jewish mother, who insisted I bring snacks on trip “just in case” and had something to eat. Thus, while
I am still bothered by my own fear and revulsion of the native food and my inability to experience Vietnamese culture in that way, I have nevertheless been able to use the food as grounds for learning. By assigning meaning to Vietnamese cuisine, it is possible to understand the rich and beautiful culture that shines through the vibrant food and remember that my experience with Vietnam was one is bold, adventurous, and warm people.
Vietnam: Two Worlds

EVA HUANG

“Hi!”

“Hello!”

“Welcome!”

These seemed to be the only sounds I heard left and right as I biked through the countryside in a bright yellow poncho, the rain steadily falling as I moved past the beautiful rice paddies, the strong oxen grazing peacefully in the fields, and the simple yet sturdy homes of Hue, Vietnam. The children had just been released from school and were making their way home. All of them were wearing the same thing: red, white, and blue uniforms, small backpacks, and huge smiles on their faces. Whenever I passed by a schoolchild making his or her way home, he or she would start screaming “Hello!” and jumping with joy. Their energy was absolutely beautiful and I remember beginning to start considering the true beauty of Vietnam to be the spirit of its ever-welcoming and ever-friendly people. All of them, including the elders sitting on their porches, who would also be sure to exchange hellos, seemed so happy that new friends had come to visit from halfway across the world. It didn’t seem to matter to them that I had all the latest Apple products and that they didn’t. They lived a much simpler life than I did back home in the U.S but that didn’t appear to bother them at all because their world was free of distractions and excessive luxuries.

This impression was very different from the one I received from a place I had visited earlier in a development in the southern part of Ho Chi Minh City called Phu My Hung or Saigon South, a project funded by foreign investors. This new center is supposed to be a model for the future of Ho Chi Minh City and is, according to Vietnam’s Prime Minister, “a new urban center” that will be a “center for commerce, finance, services, science, cultures, education, accommodation, entertainment and transportation, etc., supporting the development of the existing city and playing as a propelling force” towards accommodating a projected population increase of 10 million people over the next ten years. Saigon South seems poised for success. Not only has an award-winning team of master planners been recruited for the project, but the venture is also directly supported by the government. As “The Model City,” Phu My Hung has received endless recognition, and was the first city in Asia to receive an award from the American Institute of Architects for best urban design.

On paper, it’s perfect but when I actually visited, I found it odd that the streets were deserted. I wasn’t greeted by any joyful screams of “Hello!” but instead, an uncomfortable silence that didn’t seem reflective of the lively and personable Vietnam I experienced elsewhere. I learned from our local guide that few actual Vietnamese people normally ventured into Saigon South. In fact, this was his first time visiting even though the development was supposed to help accommodate the city’s expected population increase over the next decade. No one from outside this new city center was moving in because the homes were apparently too expensive for anyone but foreign expatriates. In addition, the names of the storefronts and of the streets were not in Vietnamese, but in English. Was I even still in Vietnam?

In my opinion, Phu My Hung is part of a beautiful vision in trying to establish Vietnam’s position in the global economy while “creating a modern well-planned city that can become the most desirable international business location in Southeast Asia.” Yet the current reality is sadly different. The government needs to do is find a way for Vietnam to move forward without the country losing its spirit and energy; Vietnam just will not be the same without those greetings of “Hi! Hello! Welcome!” ringing through the air.
Losing the Western Lens

KRISTEN IGLESIAS

I never truly realized how much culture affected my outlook until I went to Vietnam. I had an incredibly powerful “western lens” covering my eyes at all times, as I think most of my fellow travelers did, and I never knew about it until it was challenged. From the day we arrived until the day we left, we used the term “Western” to describe so much of what we saw: the progress, the consumerism, even certain housing developments. It was all “Western,” and we analyzed why this might be without actually questioning our use of the word. We even carried this lens over to our meetings with the Vietnamese people, especially the college students we met with in Hanoi. All of these experiences made me think that maybe it is time I started to look at other cultures for what they are instead of how they compare to my own. If I ever go back, I am going to take pains to do just that.

Where this “Western lens” was most apparent was in our dealings with the development Phu My Hung. It is a sprawling, upscale, suburban development in District 7 of Ho Chi Minh City, and was quite the topic of debate amongst our group. Most people thought it was tacky and terrible, something that wasn’t the real Vietnam. Others of us, myself included, quite liked it. I personally thought it was beautiful and would choose to live there over any of the other cities we visited while on our trip. While we didn’t agree on our opinions of Phu My Hung, what we all did have in common was how we were viewing it: through a cultural lens. Our Western culture and experiences shaped how we saw it, how we reacted to it, and certainly how we judged it. I liked it so much because the minute we drove into the area it reminded me of my home in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. It looked just like where I grew up, so I couldn’t help but feel a level of comfort there, something that was missing in the rest of the places we visited. Those sprawling developments are the norm where I am from, so how could I look at it as a negative? On the other hand, people who disliked it found the same things I found attractive to be terrible. It was so sterile, so empty. Where was the Vietnamese culture that we had been studying, the excitement of the streets? It was too clean. They questioned if it was even Vietnam at all.

At the end of the day, though, neither of these opinions on Phu My Hung are truly right, because neither of them are complete. We only looked at it from a Western standpoint, never stopping to consider that it isn’t western based at all. In fact, more than once I can recall being told that it is based on Singapore and the cities of Taiwan. Our guide Tam told me, after I had asked him how he felt about Phu My Hung being so western unlike the rest of Vietnam, that it was Singaporean, a city-state there that he had once visited. Not to mention that the designers explicitly stated that their inspiration was from those countries. Phu My Hung’s motto during the initial stages of the project was actually “Singapore’s Lifestyle in Vietnam.” But did I stop to consider this while I was there? No. Instead I considered how much it looked like home, and more so, the differences from home. I was really only thinking about myself in the context of Vietnam, instead of Vietnam itself.

A more common belief of why this “Western lens” can get in the way of experiencing another culture was formulated by Edward Said in his book Orientalism. He suggests that Western viewers look at the East through such a lens because we need to see it a certain way. We need to see it as the “East” so that we can be the superior “West.” So, according to Said, when we look at Phu My Hung we compare it to our own neighborhoods and experiences so that we can point out how much better ours are. Theirs would then be an imitation that falls short, and we could continue to be the superior “West” to the “East.” This begs the question: under this “Western” lens, would we ever be able to fully appreciate something “Eastern” that is comparable to us, since we would
Looking back, another glaring example of being dependent on my “western lens” was in talking to college students in Hanoi. Instead of asking them questions strictly about Vietnam, or about their cultural experiences, we predominantly asked questions that we could relate to. Not that we did it on purpose, but it was the only way we even thought to ask, since, I at least, never stopped to consider the fact that their experiences wouldn’t have been the same as mine, that they might have had completely different and foreign experiences to mine. For instance, we asked them about their dorms for school, and where they wanted to move after they graduated (assuming that, like many of us, they had moved there for college and then would move somewhere else after they graduated to get their dream job). So, of course their answers surprised me when most of the students said they had no plans to move away, and that they would be staying in Hanoi or around the area when they graduated. I had figured at least a few of the students would have wanted to leave the country and move to somewhere like Britain or the United States for jobs, especially since they were studying English, but not a single one did. I, along with almost all of my friends, moved to New York from a different state, and plan on moving away again (to another new place) after graduating, so the concept of staying in one place really caught me off guard. I now realize that if that “western lens” hadn’t been there, I would have been more able to appreciate their college life and culture. Instead I unfairly compared it to mine, and to what I had expected theirs to be because of my western perceptions of Vietnam.

This idea of having a lens that shapes our perception of a place, in this case Vietnam, begs the question: How much does it matter? Did it harm my trip, or just change it from what it could have been? I say it depends. On the one hand, having this lens over my eyes helped me to see and analyze differences between my culture and theirs. It helped me to be analytical about my own lifestyle, and about what I find “normal.” In this way, I learned more about myself than I had expected. On the other hand, my lens blocked so much information about Vietnam. I wasn’t able to properly understand certain aspects of Vietnamese culture, because I was too busy trying to fit it into what I already knew, or what I thought it should be. In that way, I was boxed in, and feel like I missed a real learning opportunity about another culture. I think how one decides to answer the question of whether it is a good thing depends on whether one wanted to learn more about oneself or about someone else. For me, I like learning about myself, but I wish I had been able to unbiasedly appreciate the amazing culture in Vietnam. Next time I travel out of the country, I will make sure to remember this. I will make sure to leave my western lenses at home and just bring a pair of sunglasses instead.
Human Rights: A Different Understanding

In the United States we believe our rights to be intrinsic. In fact, throughout our founding documents, and the surrounding commentary, we find the words “God given” repeatedly used to describe their nature and origin. As philosophers and scholars sought to justify this same sense of intrinsic rights without relying on religious thought, the belief in a fundamental level of human rights and an unimpeachable set of citizen rights grew in popularity. Whatever logic we choose, however, what is clear is that most rights are not something that we need to earn. Except for in the most extreme cases, our rights are “inalienable” from our persons; this is considered to be the natural order of societies.

Perhaps this is why the implementation, and perhaps indeed violation, of rights that occurs in a nation like Vietnam so bothers our moral sentiments. Not only do the Vietnamese not follow our system, they do not accept the premise on which our style of government is organized. Far from the idea of inherent rights, the Vietnamese system explicitly attaches to each right an equivalent and matching duty, without which the right is not offered. Furthermore, this right is then scalable insofar as those citizens better at fulfilling their duties to the Vietnamese state are given precedence in the exercise of their rights—often to the detriment of those considered offering less service to national goals.

It is tempting from a Western perspective to claim that this justification of rights based on duties is merely a smokescreen to enable Vietnam to de-prioritize rights. However, there is significant evidence to believe this is not the case. While the Vietnamese government’s actions on political and economic freedoms are notoriously derided by the West, the government’s commitment to the rights of the indigenous peoples of Vietnam is consistently held in high esteem. The 1992 constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam not only guarantees equal treatment under the law for the nation’s minority groups, who live primarily in the highland areas, but further dictates in articles regarding both development and welfare systems that there exists a special obligation to protect these groups. The document is replete with special guarantees for national minorities, dependent of course on their continued national duty to not violate the rights of other minorities.

While having these rights enumerated in the constitution is clearly a good step, what really shocks international audiences is how committed the Vietnamese government has been to upholding these principles in practice. In the early 2000’s when large groups of highlands minorities, many of whom were illegal settlers from Cambodia, protested what they perceived as government bias in policies, those who didn’t understand the Vietnamese system of rights predicted oppression and denial from the government. While it would be an exaggeration to say that the government handled the issue perfectly, Vietnam didn’t shy away from the rights claims of the minority groups and has in fact passed substantial laws directed at redistributing land and aiding in the development in the highland region. It is hard to imagine that many Western nations would have done significantly better on similar issues of minority and immigrant rights, while surely many historically have done significantly worse.

In recent years, Vietnam has explicitly demarcated development and economic growth as its central national mission. For this reason, rights issues have been extremely visible among and surrounding development organizations. On the outskirts of Saigon there is a community called Phu My Hung, a planned development that has been active and growing since its licensing agreement in 1993. The immense pride with which the Vietnamese government views Phu My Hung is best demonstrated with the enormous number of prestigious accolades which they have offered to the...
project over the last two decades. Inextricably linked to this burgeoning and affluent community, however, is the Tan Thuan Export Processing Zone. Tan Thuan is in many ways not unique. Similar to other export processing zones worldwide, economic incentives such as no taxes on repatriation of profits, a zero-percent value added tax, and low barriers to the development of infrastructure are offered to corporations, mostly international, to settle and do business in the zone. In exchange, Vietnam is able to reap the benefits of increased output and employment that these companies bring with them. Interestingly, the zone has been allowed to act largely independently of government intervention. Tan Thuan's advertising materials boast of its ability to avoid interference from the government by means of a deal requiring government agencies to go through its own officials before bringing any concerns to a corporate client. In their own words, corporations are spared “tedious document procedures” leading to the “lowest operation costs.” In practice, this means that corporations need not follow the same standards as non-zone businesses. It seems that the Vietnamese government here is sending a pretty clear message: As long as the Phu My Hung corporations as a whole continue to be key players in development and growth in Vietnam, they can expect a double standard on rights that grants them an otherwise unimaginable leniency. This is true even if it comes at the expense of Vietnamese citizens, such as the workers who are employed by these unregulated business interests. The businesses’ rights trump those of citizens in the proportion to which the business is perceived as being more exemplary in performing its key duties of development and economic planning.

In sharp contrast to the grandiose allowances given to corporations like Phu My Hung is the dismissal of rights claims of those at the other end of society. People living in ramshackle urban communities have been seen by the Vietnamese government as failing in their duties and therefore have been largely divested of what might be seen as their traditional rights. For the last decade, it has been considered normal government policy to destroy the ad hoc constructed homes of Vietnamese urban dwellers—many of whom are undocumented migrants from rural villages. Normally, destruction accompanies some plan in which the government feels it has a better use for that land. While the residents are usually offered some meager form of restitution it is always vastly inadequate. No effort is made in order to help the former residents resettle or reconstruct their lives after being uprooted from their homes of potentially over a decade. Despite outcries from these citizens that their rights have been ignored, the demolitions have continued in much the same way. According to the government, these people have failed to live up to their duties by not following the explicitly stated responsibility to utilize national resources, in this example their land, to the best means possible for the nation of Vietnam. In response to this failing, they are no longer guaranteed the rights to their property and housing, both rights enumerated in the 1992 constitution dependent on this duty.

In light of this varied policy on rights, it is easy to criticize the Vietnamese government for favoring the rights of those who hold power over those who do not, but this would be to miss the point entirely. In the Vietnamese conception of rights, power is a just factor in rights determination. If a right is dependent on a duty and one actor lacks the power and authority to fulfill that duty then the system deems it reasonable to give the right to another actor who can meet his or her obligations. While this is obviously a vastly different understanding of rights then has been long forwarded in the western world, can we with any authority claim that one system of rights is in absolute terms preferable to the other? Even if we move beyond debates on the justice of the Vietnamese system of rights, it is at least important that we engage with the reality of rights in a nation like Vietnam. While continuing to simply paint countries with differing conceptions of rights as tyrannies on par with more severe rights abusers may serve short term political goals, without truly understanding where it is they are coming from it will be impossible for us to adopt long term successful policy.
Better than We Know Ourselves

KIRA WILLIAMS

“Miss! Miss! For you miss?”

“Madame. Here, Madame.”

The cries, smells, and sounds buffeted my senses as I tripped and weaved through the narrow aisle between stall after stall of clothes, perfume, watches, jewelry, shoes, food, toys, bags, colors, shapes—all described by the vendors in a one- or two-word shout. I was in Ho Chi Minh City, a hot, bustling, lively city in a magical country. Walking through the huge markets was overwhelming; there were so many options and aisles and people calling to us as we went through them. The vendors selling goods in the markets were extremely adept at communicating with us. They knew enough about us to understand what we wanted to know about their goods and what they wanted to tell us. They easily got their points across, using their knowledge of a few English words and of the desires we could mutually understand. Hearing cries of “Miss” and “Sir,” I could tell they recognized respect for strangers or elders as a mutual value, translating it into a single shout. They knew which fundamental similarities to target in order to achieve their goals, and they were skilled at hitting their marks.

Breaking the language barrier was exhausting but intriguing. I had to expend a great deal of energy to shave down my sentences in order to convey even simple wants or needs, but I loved discovering what words people understood the most. To strip away the fluff and ask for a smaller size or for directions or for a napkin involved reconciling differences in language and figuring out our essential desires. Human nature is so similar that we want the same basic resources, rights, entertainment, etc. in certain situations. These simple, common desires were what we used to understand each other. In contrast to what I had read before about “Charlie” and “gooks,” human beings reduced to animals and viciously killed by U.S. soldiers during the 1964-73 war, these were a beautiful people who were really not that different from us.

Forty years ago, the Viet Cong guerrillas also displayed an uncanny understanding of the American troops during the American War (or to us in the United States, the Vietnam War). At the Cu Chi Tunnel exhibits outside Ho Chi Minh City, we saw replicas of traps that guerillas constructed. They engineered these traps as if they knew how the U.S. troops were going to act before the troops knew themselves. One of the traps was planted in the ground for a soldier’s foot to slip into. Consisting of metal prongs slanted downward from the top of a square opening, it was designed so that the foot could go in, but could not come out. If the soldier did try to extract his foot, the prongs would cut deep into his leg. His cries would bring more soldiers, who would be massacred by the guerrilla troops hidden close by in the bushes.

The Viet Cong troops also constructed a door-shaped trap filled with spikes that swung down when a soldier opened the door. The trap was made of two parts held together by a hinge. The top part of the trap swung down first, then the bottom swung up on an angle. The guerillas’ thinking behind this trap was that a soldier would open the door with his rifle, expecting to set off a trap or an attack. The rifle might stop the top part, but the soldier would be impaled by the second section swinging up from the bottom. While the United States was fiddling with its cluster bombs, helicopters and other distancing, dehumanizing devices, the guerrillas took initiative and came to know the enemy well enough to destroy it.

The street market culture with its tones of capitalism and perseverance saw many different types of communication. Foreigners from all over the developed world were speaking their own languages around the markets and streets, but the communal, most mutually understood languages were English and body
language. Gestures could communicate as well as any sentence. The vendors and buyers mutually understood this language and used it to get the price or item they wanted. As we were walking the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, a group of us passed a woman selling faux designer wallets. Kristen, a fellow Scholar, spotted a Louis Vuitton clutch and her glance lasted a second too long. It only took that second and the gleam in her eye for the woman to follow us, shouting,

“Miss!! Miss, one for you? Only seven dollar, miss!”

She followed us. We could not believe it, but she followed us for about a block. Finally, Kristen slowed down, leaned over to me, and confessed that she really, really wanted it. So we turned around. The woman had recognized that emotion—that longing in her eyes—in less than three seconds. And now Kristen has a new Louis Vuitton wallet. This woman had a goal, and she knew the characteristics and understood the language of the person who would help her achieve it.

This is not to say that the vendors in the Ho Chi Minh markets are the modern day equivalent of the guerrilla troops, but the similar relationship between the Americans and Vietnamese of both time periods is worth considering. When traveling, I discovered that I was not gaining a pure knowledge of the “real Vietnam”—whatever that is. I do not feel as if I have a well-rounded, anthropological, cultural knowledge of the Vietnamese people and their country. I (maybe selfishly, but inevitably) learned about Vietnam with the ever-looming awareness of my existence in the country. Our theme, Historical Memory in Contemporary Times, also inescapably tied us to the country. We are a part of both their history and their contemporary times, and I learned how our respective roles in Vietnamese-American relations have remained the same although guided and molded by situations and environment.

The salespeople were using us as devices to achieve a goal. I was a device in the markets as much as the troops were on the battlefield. And although this time I was accepted for economic reasons, the basic motive of the Vietnamese people was the same: to have an economically stable society, building and advancing a prosperous community. This is not unlike the noble goal most had in mind when they were fighting against various imperialists for centuries. The type of understanding the vendors and soldiers had was developed as a survival tactic against American invaders—whether they are armed with guns or with cameras. The traps that guerillas set for U.S. troops were defensive, and in a way, learning a bit of English, or being able to communicate with a foreigner is defensive too—also against the poverty, repression, and class stratification that the Vietnamese have been trying to escape for decades.

The vendors had their own ways of achieving their goals, but most of the Vietnamese people with whom I interacted were future-oriented as well, thinking ahead in a way similar to ours. We spent time with English-speaking college students who strived toward professions such as teachers or engineers or doctors. They knew they had to get an education in order to do what they loved and make money while pursuing that career. Some of them came from outside of the city, and were thinking about moving to and working in the city—something which is, according to one of our guides, a relatively new practice for young adults in Vietnam. They knew they had to make money in order to do this. In the United States—especially in New York—we have the same discussions with our parents and friends.

Speaking with the students about these things was very natural. Some of the first questions we asked to get to know them better were about school. Both groups knew that finances and education are central to making a living in the developing world, and we were able to speak about this. Although some of the students were not as well-spoken as others, and some of us could not find words to convey what we wanted simply, we were able to share ideas and values even if with a simple comment about ourselves. We were able to understand each other because of the similarities we shared.

The people with whom we had the honor and pleasure of relating
were looking towards the future, as they were during all the years that Vietnam fought imperialism. They wanted to achieve their goals then and they do now. And one of the main goals that has existed for most of Vietnam’s history and still exists today has been independence. Contrary to many of my older relatives’ beliefs, Vietnam is not a war-torn country that still despises America. Although I definitely saw influences from the war, I cannot be sure whether they are beneficial or negative influences. However, I did gather that Vietnam is a country that desires forward motion—just like the United States does—even though we may go about it in different ways. Apart from language and cultural or developmental differences, I found that the similarities abounded between those we met in Vietnam and our group of scholars.
Tam’s Vietnam

The reports of Vietnam that Americans have read over the last forty years, in newspapers and textbooks, tend to chronicle the Vietnam War and its aftermath from an anti-communist perspective.

However, within Vietnam there is no single perspective. We heard several different accounts of postwar Vietnam from people we met there, museums we visited, and works we read.

Tam, our tour guide in Saigon, told us remarkable stories from his own life, which narrate his personal history of postwar Vietnam, and illustrate events that to us are nothing but distant news headlines.

COMMUNISTS TAKE OVER SAIGON; U.S. RESCUE FLEET IS PICKING UP VIETNAMESE WHO FLED IN BOATS; ‘HO CHI MINH CITY.’ May 1, 1975.

On the last day of the war, Tam’s father took a nap. He and his fellow officers were waiting, exhausted, for the Northern troops to come claim Saigon. When he awoke, he was alone. He hopped on his motorbike, sped to the port, and got on the last boat out of the country.

Tam was a small child then, only two or three years old. His father was out of the country for about twenty years. In the meantime, he and his family suffered for their connection to a high-ranking South Vietnamese officer. When Tam’s mother waited in line for food, those who recognized her would jeer at her. For years, Tam could not get a job because employers checked his family background.


Tam tried to flee Vietnam three times with his brother. They paid boatmen to take them out into international waters, where law demands that ships pick up small, stranded vessels. They hoped to be taken to a refugee camp, perhaps in Hong Kong. Tam saw his fellow fugitives turn cruel and vicious as food and water ran low. On his first two attempts at escape, he and his shipmates ran out of supplies before they could be picked up, and were forced to return to Vietnam.

On Tam’s third attempt, after days tightly packed below deck with dozens of other seasick, puking people, he and his brother were picked up. Unfortunately, however, their rescue vessel was a Vietnamese ship, which they knew would bring them back to Vietnam and straight to jail, but Tam was too exhausted to be afraid. When he finally got a breath of fresh air, he decided that he would never again try to leave Vietnam.

Tam and his brother were imprisoned in the Mekong Delta. Tam was sentenced to just a few months because he was only fifteen, but he was separated from his brother, who was older and would have to stay longer. Tam lived in a communal cell with one or two dozen other men. Each day they were given one bowl of bad rice, full of pebbles. To divide it evenly they sat in a circle - take a bite, pass the bowl.


One day Tam saw his brother carried out of prison on a stretcher. He had caught malaria and the prison could not treat him, so he was free. For the rest of his time in prison, Tam would let mosquitoes land on his skin and beg them to do their job. However, he never got sick, and so was forced to wait out his full sentence. But life can play tricks, Tam now says: when he was finally free to return home, head shaven as public humiliation, he came down with malaria and his mother had to care for him.
SECURITY TACTICS IN VIETNAM STILL INSPIRE WIDESPREAD FEAR.

Tam went to pick up his father at the Saigon airport when he returned for the first time. His first question: who are you? I am your son, Tam. Where is the car? He got in quickly. He was worried that he could be a target, even after so many years, because of his involvement on the wrong side of the war. Sure enough, officials arrived at their home soon after he got there, to let him know that they were keeping an eye on him.

VIETNAM, POOR BUT ORDERLY, IS NOW TOURISTS’ SAFE HAVEN.

Tam had no money to pay for English classes, but his sister had a rich boyfriend who paid for hers, and in the evenings, she tutored him. He studied all the time, and started taking his bike to the museum to pick up foreigners, showing them around the city in exchange for a chance to speak English. He learned fast, and passed the test required of tour guides within months.

30 YEARS LATER, CAKE AND CREDIT CARDS IN SAIGON. May 1, 2005.

Tam is now a successful tour guide in Saigon. His brother owns a growing business and his sister is working for an American company. Tam believes that Vietnam still has a lot of problems to solve, but he has seen his own life improve to a degree he never would have imagined.

He came with us to tour Phu My Hung, a modern, Singaporean-style development also known as Saigon South - where wide empty streets lead to air-conditioned high-rises, Western restaurants, private international schools and a gleaming shopping mall. We felt very far from downtown Saigon, with its dense motorbike traffic and its sidewalks teeming with food vendors and pedestrians. Tam said that the place was amazing, but to him it was not Vietnam. He could not even find a recognizable, affordable lunch there. Still, he kept a hopeful tone, saying that Vietnam needs to experiment with modernization in different ways to determine what will work best for the country.
In the Name of Uncle Ho

I encountered a statue of Uncle Ho on my first day in Vietnam. His bronze face smiled, sheltering children in the shadow of the square. Uncle Ho was the flagship of Vietnam’s revolution, a national symbol invoked as proof of Vietnam’s power. As the Albert Gallatin Scholars traveled Vietnam, a dichotomy began to emerge between the symbol of Uncle Ho and the historical figure of Ho Chi Minh. Even though Ho Chi Minh chose his nickname, the persona grew into a separate entity. In the shadow of Uncle Ho, Vietnam rapidly expanded into an unequal nation. Since the 1986 implementation of Doi Moi, a policy allowing market economy, the poverty gap has widened every year. Luxury golf courses sprout across Vietnam’s terrain while its basic infrastructures struggle. The Uncle Ho persona thrives in this environment; and Ho Chi Minh is forgotten. As Vietnam’s political and economic structure advances, it fails to implement the ideals of the historical figure Ho Chi Minh, and patronizes his nickname, a symbol for national pride.

Ho Chi Minh, born Ngyuen That Thanh, brought independence and the communist movement to Vietnam. Born in 1890 during the French occupation, he grew up in an oppressive world where his people experienced unemployment and poverty. In the early 20th century, Ho Chi Minh left Vietnam for France, where he joined the Communist movement. From there, he travelled to the Soviet Union and China and organized political movements. At the end of World War II, Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam and declared the nation’s independence as a communist state (BBC). Essentially, Ho Chi Minh plays the role of America’s George Washington; like Washington and his apocryphal cherry tree, Ho Chi Minh is an appropriated figurehead of nationalism. This nationalistic image backs the government’s advances from a pure communist nation into the pseudo-capitalist, Doi Moi-influenced Vietnam of today.

Ho Chi Minh’s original declared beliefs do not match the policies developed in the shadow of Uncle Ho. In his writings, Ho Chi Minh encourages equality for all Vietnamese. One tract, “The Twelve Recommendations” clearly states his beliefs. Within the piece, the “Six Forbiddances” articulate a striking contrast between Ho Chi Minh’s beliefs and the current policies supported by the symbol of Uncle Ho.

“Six Forbiddances:

1 — Not to do what is likely to damage the land and crops or spoil the houses and belongings of the people.
2 — Not to insist on buying or borrowing what the people are not willing to sell or lend.
3 — Not to bring living hens into mountainous people’s houses.
4 — Never break our word.
5 — Not to give offence to people’s faith and customs (such as to lie down before the altar, to raise feet over the hearth, to play music in the house, etc.).
6 — Not to do or speak what is likely to make people believe that we hold them in contempt.” (Ho Chi Minh)

Current Vietnamese policy commonly contradicts Ho Chi Minh’s words. Its government and economy cater to the interests of the wealthy few. While its people die in overcrowded hospitals (as we learned at a presentation with the Vietnamese NGO, Vinacorp) or are exhumed en masse from their final resting places to build golf courses in Danang (a project funded by Vinacorp’s more profitable sectors), the upper class enjoys millions of dollars of new development.

Another corporation, Phu My Hung, built an entire district of Ho Chi Minh City called South Saigon. Here, the divide between the achievement of Uncle Ho and the belief of Ho Chi Minh is glaringly
apparent. The district looks more Singaporean than Vietnamese and isn’t even owned by a Vietnamese company—Phu My Hung is Taiwanese. This district brings in vast revenue for the economy and creates a postcard beauty of wide avenues and serene palm trees. Its center is The Crescent, a mall paradise separated from the rest of Ho Chi Minh City, which is a tangle of wire, humanity, and scent. It is not built for the Vietnam of Ho Chi Minh’s vision. To cross the bridge to South Saigon costs a fee, making it impractical to visit from the rest of the city. The Crescent mall is extravagantly expensive, even by American standards.

The influx of foreign corporations also leads to another thing Ho Chi Minh spoke against, which thrives in the fever pitch of the nationalist progression represented by Uncle Ho. Few of the speakers whom the Albert Gallatin Scholars met from major organizations were Vietnamese. They hailed from Taiwan, Singapore, or the United States. In his work, Ho Chi Minh writes, “In administrative offices, despite length of service and recognized ability, a native is paid starvation wages, while a freshly arrived white man receives a higher salary with less work to do” (Ho Chi Minh). Ho Chi Minh spoke against the phenomenon that now drives the Doi Moi Vietnamese economy.

A mausoleum in Hanoi displays Ho Chi Minh’s preserved body to the public. The tone there is a reverence nearing sacredness. Silence embraces the tomb as guards nudge visitors, including myself and other members of our group, into a proper marching formation. As we circle the body of Uncle Ho, his remaining physical presence appears to reaffirm Vietnam’s path. Like the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery, it is a pilgrimage and the grave is its relic. Uncle Ho is a symbol, and its existence is separate from Ho Chi Minh, who did not want preservation—in his will, he requested cremation. Were his wishes followed, no physical talisman of the man would remain. Instead, the government of Vietnam created an icon as a rally point for its nation. They always have Uncle Ho. He remains a tangible reassurance of Vietnam’s careening globalization, which abandons Ho Chi Minh’s words in the dust of uneven progress.
Be OK Viet Nam

While we traipsed through Vietnam taking photos with cell phones and digital cameras, Daniel LaCosse was taking incredible high-resolution video footage. The result of his labors is entitled “Be OK Viet Nam,” and it features Daniel’s Vietnamese footage as well as interviews he conducted with friends and scholars. It can be found by following this link: http://vimeo.com/42041770. The following pages are filled with stills taken from Daniel’s video footage.
DRAGON PONTOON ON OUR BOAT
PERFUME RIVER, HANOI

MODEL OF PHU MY HUNG’S DEVELOPMENT PLANS
SAIGON SOUTH, HO CHI MINH CITY

COLLEGE STUDENT PLAYS GUITAR FOR SCHOLARS
VIETNAMESE NAT’L UNIVERSITY, HANOI

“BE OK VIET NAM” TITLES FOR DANIEL’S DOCUMENTARY
The Ecology and Economy of the City: Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and New York

Popular attitudes toward developing nations tend to stress one of two fantastical narratives. The first is the pristine quality of the nation’s pre-industrial isolation. The second is the assumed vitality of their urban economies. This second idea draws its strength from the clear ways in which the urban economies of developing nations mirror the theoretical ideals of capitalism. Picture the roundabout at the southwest end of Le Loi Street in Ho Chi Minh City. A billboard for Canon, a Japanese multinational corporation, hangs from the building that houses a restaurant called Pho 2000. There is an advertisement for the Malaysian tourism industry, a billboard advertizing VINAMILK (a state-owned enterprise that sells about 49.01% of its shares at the Ho Chi Minh Stock Exchange. In 2006, the state owned the other 50.99% (Lien)). There are street vendors, local businesses, and people on motorbikes, in cars, and on foot. Ho Chi Minh City seems poised at the crux of so many economic paradigms, and as a photograph of Le Loi Street will show, none of them seem able to gain any particular dominance over any of the others. Le Loi Street reflects (for the Westerner) the image of a market in perfect competition, the perfect and primordial state of capitalism – except that the products for sale on Le Loi Street are not goods per se, but forms of culture and economy, only one of which is capitalism as we know it.

A look at the rice-growing countryside to the southeast of Hue shows this “market” in action. Here, a single-lane road strings together dozens of villages along a stream of the Perfume River, and all commerce in these villages runs on the closed circuit of this one poorly paved road. Nevertheless, we saw evidence of capitalism’s sticky fingers. In an open-air market in the village of Thanh Toan, we saw local butchers carving slabs of meat in one stall, while, in the next stall, a vendor sold commercial beverages such as Sprite and the domestic coffee brand Trung Nguyễn.

How do such commercial products enter the economy of a one-road village like Thanh Toan? In the United States, a subcontractor from the Coca-Cola Company or the Trung Nguyễn Company would make regular deliveries to rural vendors, but in Thanh Toan, vendors do not sell in high enough quantities to warrant a subcontractor. Here, these products exist only to complement the village’s own “products” – such as the Thanh Toan Bridge (a preeminent tourist attraction), the Perfume River, locally grown rice, and locally slaughtered animals. The presence of Sprite and Trung Nguyễn in this village actually indicates a preexistent and self-contained economy thriving on the fruits of its own ecological riches. At the microeconomic level, commerce in Thanh Toan still reflects the profound relationship that a rural village may have with its ecology, while at the macroeconomic level, the village exists as only a tiny node in the larger and looming web of global capitalism.

This system survives – however uncertain its perch – because of the way it brings culture and economy to mirror the importance of environment. At the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi, we saw how this relationship has historically played itself out in the arts of local ethnic groups. Here we found water buffalo puppets that harvest rice, instruments made of lacquered wood, and painted snakes. These artifacts overlap on the plane of Vietnamese ecology. The resin used to make lacquer for ritual objects, for instance, secretes from sumac trees (trúc). The snake that inspired a wooden sculpture in the Museum hides in the shade of those same trees to regulate its body temperature during Vietnam’s long summers.

To the people of Vietnam, the snake has medicinal value

1 In Ho Chi Minh City, our guide, Thom, told us that children catch snakes for their meat and venom (which has medicinal value). Children look for snakes among the trees in a rubber plantation on the north side of the city, where they come out in the coolest part of the morning. Incidentally, this is also the best time for recovering both rubber and lacquer from trees.
and is also eaten as a delicacy. It thereby sustains the people who whittle and lacquer the sáo trúc and who stitch its flowers into their clothing. Thus, the assembly of items in the museum indicates the complex sense of ecology that informed the conventions of artistic production in pre-dynastic Vietnam. Here, elements of the Vietnamese environment appear in both figurative and literal forms. Floral motifs, for instance, decorating the formal dress of most of Vietnam’s 54 ethnic groups are figurative evocations of the beauty of the local flora (Vietnam Museum of Ethnology). The figure of a flower on the prow of a longboat outside the museum clarifies the locus of its beauty. Here the flower’s natural symmetry aligns with the symmetrical designs painted on the boat’s sides, and its washed-out reds complement the primary colors painted in stripes along the boat’s edges. The importance of symmetry in this design invokes scientific notions of the flower, as symmetry is one of the botanist’s primary tools for identifying types of flowers – the coloring and radial symmetry of this particular flower indicate that it is probably a lotus. Its aesthetic charm comes in part from the designer’s knowledge of important botanical distinctions amongst flowers, and is directly related to his experience as a member of the local botanical society.

Additional development on this topic may be read in the stilted houses that can be seen outside the museum. A five-foot clearance keeps these houses dry in the rainy season, which falls between May and September in Hanoi (Embassy of Vietnam to UK). Here, the intersection of land and edifice is mediated by architectural innovation. One might read into these stilts the tragic undertones of flooded homes, a peasant’s devotion to traditional practices of rice farming, or the practicality of living on one’s own paddy; one might infer legal ties between family structure and land ownership. This five-foot clearance, like the museum’s other artifacts, affirms the figurative and practical importance of ecology in pre-dynastic Vietnamese culture.

In a more modern and international culture, five feet is the popularly accepted standard for “eye-level.” Contemporary business owners exploit this figure when hanging lateral signs advertising their businesses. As Sophie Elias said to me on the streets of Hanoi, “There’s so much detail at eye-level here.” Her observation reveals the differences between American and Vietnamese signage practices. In Vietnam, a vibrant sidewalk culture encourages business owners to place signs at eye level, with medium-sized typefaces, catering to the city’s patterns of commerce. Shopping in central Hanoi is organized around shopping districts. For example, a Hanoian looking for motorbike parts will walk through the bike shop district in southeastern Hanoi. He will read the signage at walking speed and see it at human height. Hanoi’s walking culture also complements the café culture that arose when Đoi Mới revoked some of Vietnam’s harsher anti-capitalist policies (Hayon, 51).

In already-industrialized nations, different rates of urban development have resulted in different signage practices. The city of New York had industrialized by the end of 19th century, well before motor travel first became popular. The city’s reign as commercial center of the United States during the early 20th century coincided with the boom in car traffic. Advertisement in New York, therefore, complements the car and taxi culture of the city. Larger and higher billboard ads are specifically tailored for reading while driving. These ads share visual space with marquees, bus stop ads, and lateral signs on buildings, but this shared visual space is spread over hundreds of vertical feet. Advertising styles and formats in New York City, therefore, are informed by the separate cultures of cars, walking, and public transportation.

Similarities between signage practices in Hanoi and New York are paralleled by the art found in the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, and each of the three draws its conventions from the local culture’s relationship to its land. In Hanoi and New York, signage practices are derived from styles of transportation, which mediate the readability of signs. For the ethnic cultures of Vietnam represented in the Museum of Ethnology, visual signs gain importance from their ecological significance. Water buffalo, for instance, are important tools for cultivating rice; the lotus, with its incredible symmetry, is
the model par excellence of floral anatomy. Each of these examples suggests that, while the land itself is an exhaustible commodity, it has an inexhaustible capacity to generate figures of meaning.

The rural Vietnamese took their livelihoods from the confluence of land and water, which allowed them to establish a distinctly Vietnamese culture of rice growing that persists even today\(^2\). In this culture of rice cultivation, a family can maximize its income by having the greatest possible number of relatives working on the greatest possible acreage, with the best possible weather. And considering the inelasticity of rice prices in such a homogenous market, there is no way for a family to better its lot except by minimizing its costs and maximizing these other parameters. The livelihood of the rice farmer, therefore, exists within a paradigm whose limitations are equal parts physical and economic. But what will these limitations look like in 50 years, by which time “developing nation” may have become as antiquated a category as “2nd world” is today? The question posed by Le Loi Street still stands. Will Vietnam move further along the path towards advanced capitalism and the consumer culture that goes with it? Or will a diverse world also have, like Le Loi Street, more diverse forms of exchange as well? ■

\(^2\) Vietnam seems poised to overtake Thailand as the world’s number-one exporter of rice in 2012 ("Vietnam may take top rice exporter title from Thailand").
How does Vietnam remember the war that ended in 1975? Is there any trace left of our military and political presence in Vietnam? Will the people we meet on the streets, in the villages, or on the rice paddies see us as cultural imperialists, as ideological agressors? Will they begrudge us their hospitality? Will they treat us with the hostility with which we once treated them? Or do we live in a world where the national and historical have been obliterated—replaced, as it were, with the more general presence of the current and the global? These are the questions that we have endeavored to answer through the medium of photography.
BARBED WIRE ON A WAR-ERA WALL
CU CHI TUNNELS, NEAR HCMC
DANIEL LACOSSE

PRAYERS IN CHU NOM SCRIPT
HO CHI MINH CITY
DANIEL LACOSSE

SPIRAL INCENSE IN A BUDDHIST TEMPLE
HO CHI MINH CITY
DANIEL LACOSSE

A WOMAN MAKES INCENSE STICKS FOR PURCHASE BY TOURISTS
TOMB OF EMPEROR TU DUC, NEAR HUE
JACK RICHARDS
FRENCH IRONWORK AT NGUYEN TOMB
TOMB OF EMPEROR KHAI DING, NEAR HUE
DANIEL LACOSSE

TET (NEW YEAR) DECORATIONS FOR SALE
HCMC
KIRA WILLIAMS

SCHOLARS ON THE BEACH
CON DAO ISLAND
DANIEL LACOSSE

PHU MY HUNG MASTERPLANS
“SAIGON SOUTH.” NEAR HCMC
JACK RICHARDS
DRAGON ACROTHERION  
HUE

MOUNTAIN PEAKS IN A SEA OF SKY  
EN ROUTE TO CON DAO ISLAND  
JACK RICHARDS

PAGODA, IMPERIAL FORTRESS  
HUE  
JACK RICHARDS

PRAYER FLAGS AT BUDDHIST TEMPLE  
PERFUME PAGODA, HANOI
LOTUS FLOWERS, YEN RIVER
EN ROUTE TO PERFUME PAGODA.
JACK RICHARDS

LE LOI STREET FROM THE REX HOTEL
HO CHI MINH CITY

ENTRANCE TO THE PERFUME PAGODA
NEAR HANOI
JACK RICHARDS

LITURGICAL DOLL AND INCENSE
INSIDE PERFUME PAGODA, NEAR HANOI
BUDDHIST TEMPLE AT HANG DUONG CEMETARY
CON DAO ISLAND
DEVON BUSSELL

SCHOLARS AT NGUYEN TOMB
TOMB OF EMPEROR TU DUC, NEAR HUE
DEVON BUSSELL

MOTORBIKERS
HANOI
PAT MCCREERY

SOLDIERS GUARDING NGUYEN TOMB
TOMB OF EMPEROR KHAI DINH, NEAR HUE
DANIEL LACOSSE
RICE PADDIES ALONG THE O LAU RIVER
COUNTRYSIDE NEAR HUE

TWO VIEWS OF THE MEGAMALL
SAIGON SOUTH, HO CHI MINH CITY
SOPHIE ELIAS

CHINESE MARKET
CHINATOWN, HCMC
KIRA WILLIAMS

INTERIOR OF BUDDHIST TEMPLE (TOP)
PLASTER “PRISONERS” AT PHU HAI STOCKADE (BOTTOM)
SOPHIE ELIAS
PALMIST TELLS GALLATIN SCHOLAR HIS FUTURE
THANH TOAN BRIDGE, NEAR HUE PHUOC TICH VILLAGE
KIRA WILLIAMS

EV TROS NAM VIET
HANOI
DANIEL LACOSSE

DRAGON PONTOON ON PERFUME RIVER
EN ROUTE TO THIEN MU PAGODA.
KIRA WILLIAMS

A VIEW FROM OUR BOAT ON THE YEN RIVER
EN ROUTE TO PERFUME PAGODA.
KIRA WILLIAMS
Glossary of Terms

American War: The Vietnamese name for what we call the Vietnam War. Go figure.

Chu Nom Script: The Chinese script used to represent the Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary until the 19th century. By the 20th century, a Latinized Vietnamese alphabet was becoming more and more popular; in 1918 Emperor Khai Dinh abolished the traditional writing system, and by the 1930s, this Latinized alphabet had totally replaced Chu Nom as the script of choice in daily Vietnamese life.

“Chuc Mung Nam Moi!”: A phrase which means “Happy New Year!” in Vietnamese. We were in Ho Chi Minh City during Tet, so we saw this phrase all around us as we navigated the holiday festivities laid out in the streets.

Con Dao Prison: A prison on the Con Dao Islands, built by the French in 1864. Used to house political prisoners during French-Colonial rule. Also used by the South Vietnamese government to imprison political dissenters during the Vietnam War. The site has a long history of prisoner abuse and torture, by both the French and the South Vietnamese. Audited by the U.S. government in 1970.

Cu Chi Tunnels: A large network of tunnels to the north of Ho Chi Minh City. The Viet Cong’s base of operations during the Tet Offensive in 1968. The Viet Cong used these tunnels to relay soldiers, supplies, and information between checkpoints. They also used the tunnels as hiding places from which to ambush American soldiers.

Doi Moi: Economic reforms initiated in 1986 following the slow and informal introduction of capitalist forms of exchange in the previous decade. Led to the development of a socialist-oriented market economy in Vietnam.

Emperor Khai Dinh: Nguyen Emperor who died in 1925 and was buried in a large tomb featuring both French and Vietnamese architectural influences. He was very unpopular with the populace because of his close collaboration with Vietnam’s French colonizers.

Hang Duong Cemetary: Houses the graves of both identified and unidentified people who died at the Con Dao Prison. Sits next to a beautiful Buddhist temple built to commemorate their deaths.

Hanoi: Capital of French Indo-China; capital of North Vietnam during the Vietnam War; and capital of a reunited Vietnam since 1976. A very Parisian city with wide, tree-lined avenues, pastel-colored plaster peeling from the walls, an opera house, and wrought-iron fencing along tiny Parisian balconies. Also the headquarters of Vietnam’s Communist Party.

Ho Chi Minh: Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Also President and Prime Minister of Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Educated in France and the United States. Fought against both the French colonizers and Japanese invaders as leader of the Viet Minh during World War II. Founded the Viet Cong in 1954 and led North Vietnamese resistance against the United States during the Vietnam War. Known to Vietnamese today as “Uncle Ho.”

Ho Chi Minh City: Located in South Vietnam. Known as Saigon until the end of the Vietnam War, when it was renamed after Ho Chi Minh. Headquarters of American operations in Vietnam during the war. Now the scene of a thriving international business culture but also home to a perilously old infrastructure, large slums, and overpopulation problems.

Hue: Located in central Vietnam. The imperial capital of the Nguyen Dynasty during the 19th century. Home to Vietnam’s Imperial City,
which is guarded by a moat and a citadel. A feudal-style city, with narrow and maze-like streets built on uneven ground.

**Perfume Pagoda:** Buddhist temple complex located in the Huong Tich mountains near Hanoi. At the center of the complex is the Huong Tich Cave, within which can be found a statue of Buddha and an altar of sorts. The Perfume Pagoda is the site of a yearly festival and pilgrimage which begins in January.

**Pho:** Everyone’s favorite Vietnamese dish. A clear broth is made by boiling bones in a pot for hours. The soup is then filled with noodles, basil, bird’s eye chiles, bean sprouts, fish sauce. Then your choice of beef (bò), chicken (gà), or vegetables.

**Phu My Hung:** A joint venture between a Taiwanese corporation and the government of Ho Chi Minh City. Phu My Hung is responsible for developing and building Saigon South.

**Saigon South:** An 8154-acre development on the south side of Ho Chi Minh City which is under the jurisdiction of the Phu My Hung Corporation. Site of the first condominiums in Vietnam as well as Vietnam’s first megamall. Currently home to expats from Korea and Japan.

**Six Forbiddances:** Part of a pamphlet penned by Ho Chi Minh and issued by the Viet Minh in 1948 as part of its resistance to France during the first Indochina War. This pamphlet offered guidelines for aiding the Viet Minh resistance effort in the form of six “forbiddances” and six “permissibles.”

**Snake Wine:** A rice wine which is bottled along with snakes or scorpions and is considered to have medicinal or aphrodisiac qualities. The snake’s venom is denatured by the alcohol and thereby loses its potential to harm.

**Tet:** The Vietnamese New Year, based on the Chinese lunisolar calendar. Takes place on the first day of the first month of the lunar year. People from Northern Vietnam decorate their living rooms with kumquat trees during Tet. We saw many kumquat trees strapped to motorbikes on our way into Hanoi.

**Thanh Toan Bridge:** A tile-roofed bridge which spans the canal running through Thanh Toan village, near Hue. Built in the 18th century by Tran Thi Dao, the wife of a high-ranking Mandarin. The Emperor Khai Dinh granted Tran Thi Dao a posthumous title in 1925.

**Tiger Cages:** Tiny cells where political prisoners were held in Con Dao Prison during the Vietnam War. Jail guards observed the prisoners from walkways suspended above the cells, which were built without ceilings. They threw caustic lime powder on the prisoners from above during their rounds, a form of torture which left many prisoners permanently blind.

**Viet Cong:** Military organization which fought for Northern Vietnam during the war. It had guerilla units as well as regular units. The name is a contraction of the Vietnamese phrase which means “Vietnamese Communist.”

1 Sources: Our tourguides, our experiences, and Wikipedia.
VIETNAMESE ARTIST PAINTS FOR TOURISTS IN A SHACK NEAR THE TOMB OF TU DUC. HUE, VIETNAM
PHOTO CREDIT KIRA WILLIAMS