



UP

One Man's Journey to Feminism

Peter W. Pruyn

he / him / his*

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Revision 2020-12-01

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Cover photo: 7,500 feet over Galveston Bay early on a Saturday morning. ©2020 Peter W. Pruyne.

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Content warning:
Contains descriptions of physical and emotional violence

* Pronounced “prine”. He/him/his: This is the set of pronouns I ask others to use when referring to me. People who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming may use pronouns that do not conform to binary male/female gender categorizations, such as “they, them, theirs.”



Figure 36: Rice paddies in southern Vietnam, late afternoon, somewhere near Highway 1.

7: Vietnam

Age 33
(2000)

“Cultures are creative expressions of meaning shared by groups of people.”
— Doralee Grindler Katonah

As a boy growing up in the 1970s who was enamored by aviation, I could not help but become a student of the air war in Vietnam. The more I learned, however, the more I became interested in the country, itself, rather than the war. So when I traveled home from the Seychelles in 1995, I made a brief trip through Vietnam. In my one week there, I fell in love with the country, its people, and its food, and I promised myself I'd return someday. Now, feeling ready to leave California and not knowing when I'd have another chance to return to Vietnam, I decided it was time to make good on that promise to myself.

Nothing confronts you with your socialization more than living as a minority in another country. This second trip to Vietnam gave me opportunities to experience the arbitrariness of culture; the complexities of trying to build bridges across culture, age, and gender; as well as the delicate dynamics of power and consent in trying to do so.

The Old Quarter

“Motobike!” “Cyclo!” “Postcard? Map? Everything for you!”

Phalanxes of mopeds, “motobikes,” weaving in and out of opposing traffic. No traffic rules, save one: he who is bigger has the right of way. Cyclos, Vietnamese rickshaws, the drivers wearing olive green army pith helmets, pedal ponderously through the waves of motorbikes, waving down any Caucasian in sight: “Hello! When you go now?” Women in straw conical hats carry their goods in two baskets hanging from either end of a shaft of bamboo balanced on their shoulder like a scale. They trot along like speed walkers as they call out their wares, occasionally switching their load to the opposite shoulder. They carry bread, rice, fruit, vegetables, clothing racks, lingerie, charcoal, live chickens, or smoking portable cooking stoves. You can go to the crowded market, but the market also comes to you. The heat and humidity overwhelm you. Your cotton t-shirt feels like a wool sweater. Meanwhile, the women carry their loads all day long.

“Hello!” “Motobike?!” “Cyclo?!” “Shoe shine?”

In Hanoi's Old Quarter, each ten foot wide and fifty foot deep shop specializes in one kind of merchandise: clothing, lacquerware, software, IBM PCs, one hour photo, “foto copi,” ice cream, cooking utensils, t-shirts, red ceremonial banners, wood carvings, musical instruments, Buddha statues of every size and color, Hmong woven clothing, cheap plastic toys, video games on arcades of PCs, internet access by the minute, newspapers, magazines with color pictures of female celebrities, tin boxes, bamboo ladders, rice cookers, business cards and stationery, karaoke, videos, bootlegged CDs, and Coke, Fanta, and Sprite. And 7-Up. And Pepsi.

“Motobike!” “Change money, change money!” “When you go now?” The motorbike driver grabs your arm as you walk by just to make sure you heard him.

The men wear their long dress pants and pressed shirts, proud to have the status of a cell phone to complete their ensemble. Young women may wear long pants, too, with tight little flowered hats as they ride on the back of their boyfriend’s motorbike weaving in and out of traffic. The garbage from each house is swept into the street, adding to the obstacles to avoid as you navigate the crowded narrow pavement. You would like to walk on the sidewalk, but they are parking lots for the motorbikes and dining rooms for the restaurants. With their living room serving as their shop, and their shop only 10 feet by 10 feet, the sidewalk becomes their porch. The restaurant clientele sits on brightly colored one-foot-high plastic stools and slurp their pho (“phuh”)³⁸, rice noodle soup, with chopsticks and a Chinese soup spoon.

Your shirt is now soaked with sweat from the humidity. The street assaults your senses: smoke from an old woman’s charcoal cooking fire on the sidewalk, the fresh cilantro in your soup, the exhaust from the two-stroke Chinese-made farm tractor chugging up the street, the drone of local government announcements over the neighborhood public address system, the fragrance of the fruit-flavored shampoo that the young girl sitting next to you used, the bright orange flash of flame as the cooking oil in the restaurant’s wok momentarily ignites, the smile from every child who makes eye-contact.

“Moto!” “Cyclo!” “When you go now!”

Hanoi doesn’t reach out and touch you—it grabs you by the scruff of the neck. Participation is not optional. The pace rivals a neighborhood in my hometown known as Times Square.

It’s alive.

Modern Couple

“Why don’t you spend more time with them?”

“I don’t feel comfortable there.”

“Why?”

“Well, I can’t smoke. I can’t relax. When your father says something that I don’t agree with, like, ‘America is a horrible place,’ I just have to sit there and nod.”

Hanh, 27, and Minh, 30, the reluctant family visitor, met in an internet chat room about six months ago. They have been dating ever since. Traditionally, when a woman gets married in Vietnam, she goes to live with the man’s family. So initially, to make sure the guy is alright, he is supposed to spend as much time as possible at the woman’s house, reading the paper, watching TV, helping with household chores. This demonstrates commitment, respect for the in-laws, and helps them get to know him. Minh doesn’t like this. This is a sore spot. He continues his defense.

“You can tell them that I respect them, I just don’t want to go to their house.”

“I have. And they say, ‘How can he respect us if he doesn’t come to our house?’ I have to make up all these stories every time we go out. ‘Minh is on a business trip.’ ‘I am going out with my girlfriends.’ Or, ‘I am going away for the weekend with my high school classmates.’”

Hanh pauses to check her florescent blue cellphone for messages. Like most Vietnamese daughters Hanh has a curfew: 10:30 pm. Another one of her friends has to be home by 11:30pm—and their parents will wait up for her. If she gets home half an hour late, her parents will be angry but she can get away with it. But if she’s more than an hour late, there is hell to pay. Hanh’s family has two houses. This is unusual. She has asked to be able to live on her own at the other house. Sorry.

³⁸ Vietnamese is a tonal language; words with the same spelling but different accent marks have different meanings. For example, ‘ba’ can mean father or the number three. ‘Bà’ means grandmother. The actual Vietnamese spelling of “pho” is phở and is pronounced something like “phuh??” not “faux”, as most Americans pronounce it.

Neither Hanh or Minh knows any unmarried Vietnamese young women who live on their own.

“So what would happen if you were direct and just told them the truth?”, I naively propose. Minh nods enthusiastically. I continue, “You just tell them that you love each other, and you want to spend time together.”

“Believe me,” Hanh laments, “I have lived with them for 27 years; I know them. There is no other way.”

“But really, what could they do?”, I persist.

“They would say, ‘Fine. You want to spend time with him; you are no longer our daughter.’ Twenty years ago, they tied a girl’s feet together and hung her by her arms from the ceiling. If a woman slept with a man before marriage, they would shave her head, put ash on the back of her neck, and walk her around town.”

“And today?”

“Not today in the city, but maybe in some of the villages in the countryside.”

“And what would they do to a man?”

“Nothing. That’s just the way it is. My parents don’t even think we have kissed—and I’m not going to tell them. They think if we stay out late we will go to Lenin Park and do unspeakable things to each other.”

In Vietnam it is expected that women do not have premarital sex. Younger couples are having sex more often, but they would never tell their parents. If the girl gets pregnant, she would rather have an abortion than face the shame of a pregnancy out of wedlock.

In Vietnam there is extremely little public display of affection. Couples generally do not hold hands or kiss in public, except perhaps in secluded parks at night. I have never seen anyone hug anyone else. It may happen; I’ve just never seen it. Still, they express affection in other ways. You fill a friend’s drinking glass before you fill your own, and members of the same sex may hold hands.

“How many Vietnamese elope?”, I ask.

“What is ‘elope?’”

I explain. “Do they have a word for this in Vietnamese?”

“No.”

“Well, I guess that answers my question.”

“Yes, they have a word for that,” says Minh. “They would say it was ‘uneducated,’ or ‘backward.’”

“So how many?”

“Point zero zero zero one percent.”

There is a very low divorce rate. When a man marries, he doesn’t just marry the woman, he marries her family. Frequently money and economics play a key role in the relationship. On the down side, it can be very difficult for a failed marriage to be broken up.

Westerners

I know an American man living in Hanoi who has been married to a Taiwanese woman for 25 years. They have discussed frequently some of the cultural differences between their two cultures. In one such conversation she said to him,

“You westerners are so rude!”

“What do you mean?”, he replied, dumbfounded.

“When you see a friend on the street, you walk by them without even saying hello. If you say hello, you just say, ‘Hi.’ You don’t stop to find out how he is or how his family is. You live 1000 miles from your sister, and you never try and see her. You live 2000 miles from your parents, and you see them once a year. How can you say that this is a family? You didn’t go to your high school friend’s

wedding. How can you say you are friends at all?”

Lunch

Hungry? Want to have lunch? Let’s have lunch. We’ll go to a Vietnamese place. How traditional do you want? I have the following scale to judge how traditional the food is: how close you sit to the ground. In western restaurants, you sit in plastic chairs. In street-side pho shops, you sit on little plastic stools. In alley pho shops, you sit on a little plank of wood on two smaller pieces of wood, two inches off the ground. And the most traditional is when you eat at a family’s house: you sit on the floor. So, how traditional do you want to be today?

Let’s go to this place on Pho Bat Dan I know. It’s run by a family that knows me by now. They have little wooden stools.

Here it is. See what it says on the awning? “Bia Hoi.” Bia means “beer,” and hoi is a homemade kind of beer on tap; it’s very cheap. Let’s sit on the corner here so we get more of a breeze from the street as well as the fan. God, it’s hot.

What would you like? If you have pho, you can have either pho ga, that’s rice noodles with chicken, or pho bo, that’s pho with beef. Although I prefer pho bo thai, which uses fresh raw beef instead of pre-cooked. Or you can have something else entirely. The fried rice is good. I’ll order two bottled waters for us. The local brand is called La Vie.

See that kid cooking? He’s very good. If you watch the wok long enough, you’ll see the cooking oil sometimes catch on fire in a big flash of orange. Look at those Asian tourists over there. What country do you suppose they’re from? I think ... they’re Japanese. Their clothes are too avant-garde for Vietnam.

See those ladies on the opposite street corner with the burlap bags in their baskets? They’re selling banh mi, fresh baked bread. No matter how many times I walk by them and say no, they still offer bread to me as I walk by. They’re all characters. Hear that little bell? That’s that old man over there with the wispy white beard. He’s selling peanuts—boiled, not roasted. The story is that he used to be a doctor, but a long time ago he gave someone an overdose and was put in jail for five years. Now he walks the streets selling peanuts.

Many street sellers have their own sound as an advertisement. The ladies who collect rubbish have a short metal pipe they hit like a bell. The ice cream guy has that little electronic music box that drives me insane—just like an ice cream truck in the States, except he has a cooler on the back of a bicycle. Some vendors just call out what they’re selling periodically, as in medieval times, peddling their wares.

O.K., here’s your fried rice and my pho. Vietnamese always wipe off the restaurant’s chopsticks with a napkin before they use them, I suppose because they have been sitting in this holder all day in the open air. It’s funny; to a Westerner Hanoi at first seems dirty: the refuse in the street, the exhaust. But Vietnamese are very clean; it’s just that they have different ways for going about cleanliness. They’ll shower two or three times a day and wipe off their bowls before using them, but then they toss their napkins on the floor to be swept up at the end of the day.

You can try some of this chili sauce if you like. They put chilies on everything. I don’t like it myself. I’m already hot enough.

Uh-oh! Did you see that?! Those two motorbikes just ran into each other. That guy’s watermelons are now all over the street. People are going to come and stare for a while now. It looks like no one got hurt. With the way they drive, you’d think this would happen more than it does, but they all give and take a little, and, by and large, the system works. See how no one’s angry? There’s no finger-pointing or fist-shaking. They just brush themselves off, check their bikes, and move on. Of course, they are also happy to get out of there before the police arrive. Usually officials just make

things more complicated. God, it's hot.

Had enough? I'll ask for the check. "Em, oi!"

In Vietnamese the word order is reversed from English, as in French. Instead of 'beef noodles,' you say 'noodles beef.' Instead of 'my guitar,' you say, 'guitar of me.' Oi is one of their most common exclamations, like 'hey!' Em is the pronoun for a person younger than you, like a younger sibling. So they don't say, "Hey, you!" They say, "You, hey!"

Let's see, that's thirty-two-thousand Dong, 'ba muoi hai nghin.' It's 14,000 Vietnamese Dong to a dollar, so that's about \$2.50 for both of us, and a lot of that was just the bottled water. It would have been even cheaper at a street-side stall. And one good thing about eating out in Vietnam: nobody leaves a tip.

Want some ice cream?

The Music Shop

I want to buy an inexpensive guitar to have during my time in Hanoi. I've spent about forty-five minutes going from music shop to music shop on Hang Manh street. Here about 15 shops all sell traditional Vietnamese instruments as well as a few modern ones, such as guitars. The guitars range in price from about \$8 for the cheapest, \$15-20 for mid-range models, and \$40 on up for decent ones. Most of the shop keepers claim to have hand-made many of the instruments themselves, but the guitars look suspiciously similar from shop to shop. As a side benefit, I get to practice my guitar playing. If I spend 10 minutes trying out guitars in five shops, I get to practice for fifty minutes.

I'm about to go home, when I pass the entrance to a hallway that is covered with guitars. I step inside and look at the instruments hanging in plastic bags on the walls. The hallway is very narrow; I can touch both sides without extending my arms all the way. As in many shops, no one immediately appears to greet me. But in the back of the hallway, lit by a single bare lightbulb, I see a group of people. One of them nudges what appears to be the father and nods in my direction. Dressed in a white undershirt and blue shorts, the father puts down his rice bowl and chopsticks and makes his way down the hallway towards me.

Even though he doesn't speak English very well, I can tell he's glad to see me. I take down a few guitars and look them over. He hovers next to me. I brush the dust off a Chinese-made Kapok brand guitar and try to take it out of its plastic bag. He offers to do it for me and takes the guitar from me. We are now at the back of the hallway near his family. He points to a stool, the standard one-foot-tall plastic kind, and hands me the guitar. I sit down on the stool with my back to the wall and start to tune the guitar. In front of me his two children are sitting at a blue plastic table. The table is about three feet by two feet, and takes up about a third of the width of the room. That gives me about four feet to play with. The children, a boy and a girl, perhaps 5 or 6, sit next to the opposite wall facing each other, each with a bowl of rice in front of them.

The children have stopped eating and stare at me while holding their chopsticks in front of them. As far as I can tell, they are eating plain rice. There is nothing else on the table. This is the first time I've seen that in Hanoi. On my right, at the rear of the room, the mother is standing with her back to a small sink and some white cabinets. The father stands at my left and looks down at me anxiously. Over his left shoulder against the wall a rung ladder goes up at a very steep angle through a two-foot by two-foot square hole in the ceiling.

As I tune the five strings, I suddenly have a realization: I am sitting in the middle of their kitchen. And dining room. And living room. Or perhaps the hallway I walked through was their living room? The ladder in the corner goes upstairs to where they probably sleep. In fact the grandmother is probably sleeping up there right now. And perhaps some of them sleep where I am sitting right now. The children are still staring at me. Should I sing "Old MacDonald Had a Farm?"

and make them smile? The mother, who has avoided eye-contact with me, notices that her children have stopped eating and gives the boy a small whack on the back of his head while saying something sternly. The only time I ever see Vietnamese be stern like that is as authority figures such as parents or teachers. Elsewhere, it's all smiles. The children re-focus on their rice.

I try out the guitar by giving them some Beatles. "Close your eyes and I'll kiss you \ Tomorrow I'll miss you \ Remember I'll always be true"³⁹ There's not much of a reaction. I wonder how I would feel if some foreigner was sitting at my dining table singing songs I didn't understand while I was trying to eat dinner? More guitars in plastic bags ring the ceiling. The mother keeps staring at her children.

The guitar isn't that great. I ask how much: "Bao nhieu?"

"Tam do la," the husband answers. Eight dollars.

I stand up slowly and hand the guitar to the father. I thank him: "Cam on, ong." He nods in understanding to the floor. No sale today. I duck by the guitars hanging at the entryway to the kitchen and notice that all their shoes are on the other side of the entryway. Nuts. I kept my shoes on. Vietnamese usually take their shoes off at some point in their homes, but it's not always right at the front door, and a foreigner is sometimes left to guess where. In this case, I was waved on through for the guitar try-outs. I hate that.

I make my way down the hallway trying not to knock the guitars on the walls. The father watches me as I leave and takes my place on the stool in the middle of the kitchen. I return to the noise of the street.

Behind me, dinner resumes.

What are the dynamics of power in this moment?

It looks as if they haven't sold anything for days. I've never seen a Vietnamese family in Hanoi eating only plain rice. I feel sorry for them. How would it be if I left a \$100 bill in their kitchen one day anonymously? How would they react? What would they do with it? Would that kind of charity inspire independence or create dependence? Would they merely hope that another foreigner would feel sorry for them again someday and do the same thing, or would they invest the money in their business to make more money? Would they get some new inventory, buy a flashier store sign out front, or maybe add some protein to their rice?

Friends have told me that Vietnamese can be poor investors. There is a traditional lack of trust in the banking system. People rarely have savings accounts or keep track of their monthly expenses. If they want to start a new business, they borrow from friends and family instead of taking out a loan. If they come into money, they frequently simply assume that this will be the last time in a long while that they will have any extra, so they end up enjoying it all. If all you knew was poverty, who's to say that that wouldn't be rational behavior?

So maybe I should buy that guitar. But if I buy it, aren't I denying them the feedback of the free-market that is telling them that they need a better product? I should buy because he offers the best value, not because of my sense of Western guilt. Nevertheless, I fantasize about blowing my remaining travel budget on everything he has: \$100, \$200 worth of stuff, perhaps. I could clean him out. What would he do then? Would it help him, or hurt him if he then abuses the income? And what would I do with 20 guitars? I could give them away. Or sell them cheap.

As an American of relative means, what is my responsibility?

³⁹ *All My Loving*, Paul McCartney & John Lennon, 1963. Copyright 1963, Paul McCartney, Yoko Ono, Sean Ono Lennon, Julian Lennon.

Peetuhhh!!!!

The Korean singer's fire-engine red spandex tube-top gyrates to the beat, and four male dancers in tight black t-shirts surround her like points on a star: "Wake me up before you go-go, 'cause I'm not plannin' on goin' solo"

I lean over to Chai and say in her ear, "Do you like this kind of music?"

Chai barely breaks her gaze from the TV. Her reply is a brief, sage-like nod, as if her younger sister had just asked her if two plus two was four.

Chai is a 16-year-old Hmong. She is wearing the traditional dark blue native dress consisting of beige plastic sandals, leggings, a one-piece dress with an embroidered collar, and a small crown of wrapped blue cloth that Hmong girls use to keep their hair loosely spiraled on the top of their heads. That's because they never cut it. Hmong are very short. Hmong children are shorter. With their little indigo hats, they remind me of Lilliputian Chinese Mandarin lords.

Chai comes from her village into the town of Sa Pa almost every weekend to sell traditional clothing and crafts to tourists. As a result, her English is uncannily good. Such contact has also resulted in a few additions to her traditional ensemble, most of which hang from her neck. These include: a faded red American bandanna worn like a cowboy, a tiny bottle of blow bubbles on a string, a red plastic squeezable change purse, and a pair of metal folding scissors.

It's Saturday night, and Chai and her sisters, Sho, 12, and Mai, 8, are sitting with about 50 other Hmong children, mostly girls, watching boot-legged Asian music videos in a make-shift performance space at the Sa Pa marketplace. All three sisters stand out because they wear fluorescent green t-shirts as the first layer of their traditional dress. Little Mai stands out further because she has a small Canadian flag sewn onto the front of her hat.

Sa Pa is a small town 20 miles from the Chinese border in northern Vietnam. The Hmong, one of more than 50 ethnic minorities who live mostly in the rural areas of Vietnam, have several villages around Sa Pa and are a common sight around town. Sa Pa is small enough that over the past two days I have run into Sho and Mai multiple times on the street, enough that we now greet each other by name. It is a coincidence that I have run into them here. Tonight the owner of this hall is attempting to put together a performance of traditional Hmong music and dance. The videos serve as the warm-up act—or maybe stalling? Nothing has happened for quite a while.

We sit on white plastic chairs on either side of the long hall which is about the size of a high school gym. The owner chats with a Hmong man who appears to be the leader of the Hmong performers. The man then huddles with a few Hmong teenagers as well as what appears to be his son. Still, nothing seems to be happening. Every few minutes the owner picks up the microphone and says something in Vietnamese over the stereo speakers. Unfortunately, he's got the reverb turned all the way up, so I have a feeling that even some of the Vietnamese are having a hard time understanding what's going on.

There is one other option for a Hmong performance tonight: the Green Bamboo Hotel. I went there last night. Finally Chai confers with her sisters and then leans over to me to ask, "What do you want to do?"

I reply, "What do *you* want to do?" I don't know the options.

"Go to the Green Bamboo."

"O.K., let's go."

A gaggle of the three sisters and their friends gets up and heads outside. I follow. As we head down the main street in the dark, a little voice tells me to give them some space, so I walk several paces behind. Besides, I'm happy to follow them. They know more than I do.

Periodically they look over their shoulders at me and smile. I don't really know why they trust me, but I'm grateful they do.

Occasionally we pass slow-moving groups of other Hmong, Vietnamese, and tourists. With

the exception of tourists and small children, everybody in tropical countries seems to move slowly. Once in a while old Hmong women approach me with hand-stitched clothing for me to buy. They hold up a shirt in front of me as if to see how it would look on me and say with big smiles, “You look so beautiful!” I wave them off. “Why you no buy from me?” said with a hurt look is their parting effort. Sometimes they also offer opium and marijuana. Hmong clothing is hand-woven from hemp.

The day before, Mai had handed me a friendship bracelet, a six-inch-long black, red and white intricately embroidered strip of cloth. I said, “Wow. Who made this?”

In unison, Mai and Sho said, “My mother!”

I examined the immaculate stitching. It looked like silk.

“How long did it take her to make this?”, I ask.

Again, together, as if right on cue, they answer: “All day!”

That stitching looked almost a little too immaculate to be handmade, a suspicion later borne out by a tour guide who informed me that the material was actually made by a machine in China.

Somehow such news didn’t diminish my appreciation of the original gesture, however.



Photo ©2020 Peter W. Pruyne



Figure 37: Top: Sho (with balloon), Mai (with photo), and friends in Sa Pa, North Vietnam. I took this photo for my friend Isaac who accompanied me on my first trip to Vietnam. Bottom: The friendship bracelet Mai gave me of contested origins.

We arrive at the Green Bamboo, a small bar with mostly tourists sitting on stools wondering what's going to happen next. I sit on a stool and Chai and her sisters stand by a column. Before anything starts, however, the Vietnamese owner approaches Mai and tells her something. He's telling them to leave. I wonder if he approached Mai because her Canadian flag makes her stand out. He uses a tone of voice that one might use with a dog. I guess minorities get treated like minorities everywhere. They start to leave and wave goodbye to me. To heck with that. I follow them out. They turn around to see me follow and beam. I guess we're heading back through the dark to Entertainment Option #1.

And we luck out. Just after we get back, they start the dance performance. We grab our seats. Chai sits on an overturned white plastic bucket; little Mai sits in her lap. The first dance consists of four boys standing side by side in a line. Three are holding small gongs, the fourth, bells. They hit their instruments in rhythm and start to walk back and forth while at the same time rotating around the center of their line. Then they switch the direction they are rotating. The line is held loosely. They do this for several minutes.

Next, a Hmong man uses a traditional wind instrument that has six short bamboo pipes tied together connected to a single mouthpiece. Each pipe has a hole on the side that he can cover with a finger to change its pitch. A reed in the mouthpiece vibrates whether he is exhaling or inhaling. While playing the pipes, he dances around in a big square, spinning on one foot at the corners. The music is very repetitive, but he gets more intense in his spinning around as he reaches the end of the piece.

The evening continues: some Hmong girls demonstrate the Hmong mouth harp, which sounds similar to the American mouth harp only smaller; we hear a demonstration of using a leaf to make sounds like blowing across a blade of grass between your thumbs except they are able to vary the pitch; a man uses a bow to play a two-stringed instrument with 3 frets that looks like a cross between a violin and a banjo; and some girls do some group singing. It strikes me that almost all the melodies are exactly the same: abrupt octave and fifth intervals mimic the fret changes of the stringed instrument. Finally, four girls and four boys stand alternating in a circle and do a dance, not unlike square dancing. The boys hold bells and shake them like tambourines to keep the beat. The girls step into the center of the circle and bow, and then the boys do the same. Then the whole group rotates in a circle.

I exchange glances with the girls. They seem to be enjoying the performance, but I can't help wondering how many times they've seen all this before. I guess when there's only one game in town, you play it. Eight-year-old Mai calls my name: "Peetuhh!" Like most cultures, the Hmong and Vietnamese lack the hard American 'r', so in this country I am no longer "Peter," but "Peetuh."

"Yes?"

She points to the friendship bracelet on my wrist. "Who gave you that?", she asks playfully.

I glance down at my wrist and answer: "You did."

"Thaaaaat's *right!*" She and her sister break into twin giggles. They crack me up.

I try to imagine life in their village of thatched houses. Our guide told us that the Hmong typically eat rice three meals a day, though these kids will be exposed to other kinds of food when they come to Sa Pa. Back in the village, they may add vegetables or pork fat to their rice bowls a few times a month. They grow the rice in terraced paddies the same way they have for thousands of years: by hand. The kids attend make-shift schools for two hours a day, one hour of Vietnamese and one hour of Math. In order to get to Sa Pa, they have to walk an hour up narrow muddy paths between terraced rice paddies along the steep river valley. Reaching a dirt road, they then take motorbike taxis 20 minutes to Sa Pa. They seem to be a very open, easy-going, docile kind of people who spend a lot of time smiling—with the exception of when they are staunchly haggling with motorbike taxi drivers over their fare. Every time I catch munchkin Mai and Sho smiling at me, my heart crumbles. I have a primal paternal impulse to bring them home and witness their discoveries exploring America. But I know if I did that, it would destroy who they are.

As the performance ends, we meander outside and stand next to the railing that overlooks the now dead marketplace. The girls appear to be discussing what to do next.

Suddenly it dawns on me that all of this is just a little too familiar. Where have I heard this conversation before:

“I’m bored. What should we do?”

“I dunno. What do you wanna to do?”

“I dunno. What do *you* wanna to do?”

These words could just as easily be coming from any group of American teenagers on a Saturday night. Slowly, they would migrate to the next hopeful location for where “the action” was. And upon arriving, soon realize that there was very little going on there either, only to repeat the cycle. Perhaps, many years later, sometime after they’d married, they would realize that all that was really important during those Saturday nights was simply being with those friends. The only “action” worth having was always right there with them.

It’s time to go. I bid them good night, knowing that I may never see them again. I get multiple little waves. “Good night! Bye, Peetuhhh!”

The next morning I take motorbikes with my guide to visit a Xao (“Zow”) village, another local ethnic minority. We’re on the bikes 20 minutes down the rough gravel road when all of a sudden I hear four tiny voices yell, “*Peetuhhh!!!!*”

The driver slams on the brakes, I turn around, and there by a roadside stand are the small indigo outfits with florescent green t-shirts I know so well. Mai, Sho, and a few of their friends wave enthusiastically, as though they haven’t seen me in years. They are about to start their hike from the road down to their village. My first impulse is to get off the motorcycle, tell my guide to go on without me, and have them be my guides for another day. But reality intrudes. This is their home, and I am just passing through. Our guide yells to them where we’re headed, and my driver starts to coast down the road. We wave back. And they all wave back again in unison.

It breaks my heart to say goodbye.

A Night at the Opera

Sitting on the stoop of the guesthouse, Thuy (“Twee”) flips through my latest photos of her hometown of Hanoi. Inspired by the dozens of photographs displayed in their guest house of her and her family posing with guests over the years, we’ve made a ritual of me showing her each roll of film I develop. She comes to a photo of the Hanoi Opera House. One of the most ornate French colonial buildings in Vietnam, this three-story, pale yellow and white building has a row of giant white columns in front supporting a Baroque palace-like facade. Above, the vaulted slate roof reminds me of a cathedral’s. Black iron gates, ornamented with gold, surround the entrances like a mote.

“Have you ever been there?” I ask her. A motorbike drives by the steps we are sitting on and weaves its way down the alley.

“I have been to the building, but I have never seen the inside of it,” she says.

Thuy, 20, the precocious oldest of three children, is a student at the national foreign language college. Her mother and father have run this guesthouse for the last five years. Her more reserved sister, Giang (“Zang”), 18, is studying to prepare for college entrance exams.

A week later, I find myself walking by the opera house and see a large banner on its fence. I don’t know enough Vietnamese to read the whole thing, but I can make out a few words: “Saint-Saëns,” “Beethoven,” “Shostakovich,” and the date. It’s next Saturday. I find out how to buy tickets—and then it occurs to me: should I buy tickets for Thuy and Giang, too?

I have only been at the guest house for two weeks, and I really don’t know if it would be

appropriate. I don't know if they would even be interested. I don't know if their parents would approve. And if they don't want to go, for whatever reason, I'm sure that they would be too polite to tell me that they weren't interested. And I'd waste 12 bucks.

So what? My sense is: there's a bridge here worth trying to cross. If they come, they'll remember it for the rest of their lives—even if they don't like the music. I buy four tickets, one for myself, two for them, and one for Richard, another American at the guest house who by coincidence is a grad student from Cornell.

I present the tickets to them the next day. I try to leave it up to them: "Maybe you don't like classical music; I don't know. You don't have to go, if you don't want to. I just thought that if you lived in Hanoi, you should go to a concert at the Opera, even if just once. And if your sister doesn't want to go, you can bring a friend."

I try not to make it "a date." I leave them in control. I think I succeed. In response, Giang is uncharacteristically direct: "No thank you. I don't like classical music." Oh, well. They put the tickets away under a book.

The night before the concert, I wait for Richard downstairs at the guest house to walk over to the opera and have dinner beforehand. Thuy sits on the stoop of the guest house in silence reading a Vietnamese translation of *The Godfather*. Neither she nor her sister have said a word to me about going or not going—and I don't ask. I don't want to risk coming across as pushy. Thuy makes some comment about the brutal yet curiously intriguing Mafia. I agree that they are not very nice people. Richard comes downstairs, and we leave for dinner.

Two hours later, Richard and I are sitting by ourselves at the front center of the third balcony of the Hanoi Opera. The concert is supposed to start at 8:00. It's now 8:02.

"I don't think they'll come," I say.

Richard says, "Oh, I think they'll come. They told me they would come. Why don't you think they'll come?"

"I think they'd be too embarrassed. Giang said she didn't want to go. I just don't think they'll come."

8:04. They're not coming. They're just not coming. My first attempt at making Vietnamese friends has failed. I will still enjoy the concert, but I will have blown \$12 dollars; I could eat for almost a week on that. Oh well.

It's now 8:06. Richard points to the end of the aisle and says, "Here are our girls!"

Standing at the top of the stairs that lead down to our row are Thuy and Giang. They smile and give little nervous waves. I'm speechless. "I don't believe it. I don't believe it. I just don't believe it." Dressed as most young Vietnamese going out would be, in jeans and short-sleeved blouses, they could be going to a disco. Uncharacteristically, Thuy has her hair down.

They try to enter our row from the far end, but too many people trying to do the same thing get in the way. They walk out and around through the hallway and push through the crowd on the other end of our row to make it to their seats next to us.

"Chao, em," I say, greeting them in Vietnamese using the pronoun for a younger person.

"Chao, chu Peter, chu Richard," says Thuy. She uses "chu," the form of address that means "uncle," for us. My sense is she does this to make clear a certain degree of social distance between us.

Now sitting in their stained wood and dark red velvet seats, Thuy and Giang grab the deep red velvet railing of the balcony and expectantly lean out over the audience seated down below. It looks like almost a full house tonight, maybe 400 people. The tickets said, "Evening Attire Required," so nobody's in shorts.

We are about 150 feet from the stage almost directly in the center of the opera house. Even from the third balcony, we are close enough so that I can read some gold lettering on a red satin sash at the front of the stage. There really are no bad seats in the house. The box seats on either side of the stage have plush winged red velvet chairs. Red velvet curtains frame the stage which is filled with

the chairs and instruments of the orchestra. Along the walls, gold-leaf plaster flourishes lead up to a centerpiece above the top of the stage depicting a female Viking wearing a helmet with horns. Below her, a gold shield reads, “1911.”

High above this spectacle, on the domed ceiling romantic puffy white clouds have been painted on a sky-blue background. The artist has tinted the edges of the clouds with a hint of orange, giving the feeling that somewhere the sun is just setting. And in the center of these clouds, hanging on a chain fit for the Phantom of the Opera, is a story-high, multi-layered, crystal and gold chandelier.

How French.

And while taking all this in, for the first time that I have seen, Thuy’s trying-so-hard-to-be-grown-up veneer slides away, revealing the little girl within who can still experience wonder.

The house lights dim.

Home

I walk into my childhood bedroom for the first time since returning home. In my absence, it has become a storage space for stacks of boxes while my parents renovate. On top of my bookshelf, my model rockets stand upright in a row slowly collecting dust. My hat collection, including the conical Vietnamese hat from my first trip to Vietnam five years ago, sits underneath, inviting colonies of mildew. A stack of my old 45 RPM records sits beneath the bedside table. Should I throw those out?

Walking over to the bookshelf, I stumble upon some old friends: my collection of Vietnam books. I smile. All paperbacks, they include titles such as *My Secret War*, *Phantom Over Vietnam*, *The Quiet American*, *Into the Mouth of the Cat*, and *Chickenhawk*. Looking at them, a quote from T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* that I had included in an old *Seychelles News* materializes in my mind:

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.⁴⁰

More than 15 years ago, these books were the genesis of my Vietnam education. From them I learned about the war. But while the past is always a good place to start, there is nothing to be gained from living there. Vietnam isn’t a war. It’s a country, a country that wears the faces of people with names like Hanh, Minh, Giang, Thuy, Sho, and Mai. Looking down at the broken spines of these yellowing paperbacks that I once so revered, I suddenly realize: I don’t need them anymore.

I have my own Vietnam now.

⁴⁰ Eliot, T. S. *Four Quartets* (Harcourt Brace and Company, 1943), p. 59.

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