

FEATURE

Phoenix, Arise !

By Catherine Li

Ever since my youth, I hope that one day I will have the opportunity to visit Vietnam because the specters of the Vietnam War loomed on the horizon of my consciousness for a long time. And over the years, among my friends and acquaintances are those who were once Vietnamese boat people or refugees. When that opportunity came, I fly to Vietnam to discover the real Vietnam for myself.

Shortly after my arrival in Hanoi, I find myself standing in a long queue with the Vietnamese people silently trooping past the body of Ho Chi Minh lying in state as if he were a god. Not far from the memorial is an elegant small traditional dwelling of the hill people that was the official residence of Ho Chi Minh. It is near the impressive former French governor's palace where international heads of state are housed and entertained. Even though at the height of his power, Ho Chi Minh could have had his every whim and desire fulfilled, he is best remembered as having led a simple and austere life devoted to his cause and beliefs.

In Vietnam, none can escape from the vestiges of the wars and the suffering of the Vietnamese people from the north to the south. In Hanoi, Hoa Lo Prison also called Hanoi Hilton, a remnant of the colonial past stands next to a tall modern hotel. The Hoa Lo Prison is where the French incarcerated or executed Vietnamese revolutionists on a guillotine and later in the same place the communists incarcerated American prisoners of war. On the outskirts of Saigon, Cu Chi town houses a complex of tunnels excavated by the Viet Minh and Viet Cong for refuge during

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the darkest hours in Vietnamese history. The tunnels contain ingenious simple traps to maim and kill the enemy. Though bomb craters are everywhere, the jungle has reclaim most with new growths of bamboo that made the craters look like giant flowerpots.

These relics of war remind me of the specter of the Vietnam War forty year ago.

This specter was even larger in the consciousness of many American people than mine. Then, many Americans viewed communism as the enemy who threatened her convictions and way of life. As a result, the United States sent her sons and daughters across the Pacific to engage in a war that ended with withdrawing from Vietnam, the deaths of 57,000 Americans, many more lives destroyed, and her reputation being tarnished in the international community.

For many years afterwards, I was curious about who was this enemy, the Viet Minh and Viet Cong, who espoused a brand of romantic Maoist vision. It was natural for the Vietnamese people to view their neighbor to the north as the Big Brother. Throughout the history of Vietnam long before the arrival of the French, the Chinese had influenced every aspect of Vietnam: her religious beliefs, language, culture, arts, and government.

However, during the French colonial period, all things French mesmerized Vietnamese intellectuals. They were enamored by the French concept of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Nationalistic Vietnamese were also quick to recognize the contradiction found in the French worldview that deprived the Vietnamese these same rights. They revolted and defeated the French at Dien Ben Phu and forced the French to

withdraw from Vietnam to leave behind a vacuum, a state without a viable government. While jockeying for power with one another to rule over a nation with multiple constituents, a number of political factions rushed in to fill this vacuum. Among these were the Viet Cong.

Alarmed at the political instability in Vietnam, the US took up arms in hope of containing the spread of communism. In some way, every American was personally touched by the decision of his government. At the time, my older brother faced the possibility of being drafted.

At first, I was concerned by the specter of war far from American soil, and yet seduced by the passion of those Vietnamese who were willing to sacrifice their lives for a cause. A Vietnamese Buddhist monk, who violated the basic teaching of his religion by taking his own life in 1963, startled the world by setting himself on fire in Saigon to protest against the then Catholic president of South Vietnam. The world saw the extreme in a Vietnamese monk as heroic.

As time passed, I began to have doubts about this type of tactic as a form of political protest. The tactic was to destroy the self and the innocent so as to sow seeds of doubt in the opponent in the rightness of his cause. It also successfully isolated and alienated the opponent from his sympathizers and supporters.

As I pass through the former Demilitarized Zone and later walk through the Museum of War Remnants, I cringe at seeing and hearing the suffering of the Vietnamese people. I ask myself did the sacrifices made by the Vietnamese people actually resulted in a common good? Was the civil war that caused the suffering of many millions of Vietnamese including a million boat people attempting to escape from a war torn homeland in the open sea, the death of four million people, and the near annihilation of a nation and its people justifiable?

It slowly dawns on me that the tenacity and ferocity of the Viet Cong are no longer

another romantic version of Robin Hood. The Viet Cong are in reality a minority who foisted their iron will onto the majority under the guise of nationalism and made the majority to make unspeakable sacrifices. Their main concern is to gain power.

Amidst the rubble of war some forty years later, Vietnam is like a Phoenix arising from its ashes. On the narrow streets of the Ancient Quarter of Hanoi, I weave among the crowds of people hustling and bustling about. Goods of all kinds flow onto the streets for sale. Each street sells only one product. On Shoe Street, the merchants sell only shoes. And on Candy Street, nuts, dried fruits, and candy wrapped in colorful paper are piled high everywhere. Hanoi pulsates with life.

The Mekong Delta and Saigon like Hanoi, Hue, and Hoi An are also bustling with much activities with the people devoting their incredible energy to livelihood, commerce, and private enterprise. Indeed it is true that the Viet Cong have physically won the civil war, but free enterprise has won over the people without shedding a drop of blood, but drops of sweat.

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