

FEATURE

KFC in Hanoi

By Xiao-huang Yin

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"It's just like China," I thought to myself as I was touring Hanoi's prosperous downtown. It was my first trip to Hanoi, but the city and its busy street life felt familiar as if I were returning to my old hometown in China. The sound of the language, the traditional architecture, the streets filled with Chinese-made motorcycles, the dress of people on the crowded sidewalks - everything was so reminiscent of China that I wondered, for the first time in my life, if the "ethnic joke" that all -Asians look the same might contain some truth.

Most of all, I was struck by a feeling of simplicity and honesty in Vietnamese life that used to be characteristic of Chinese society until "modernization" began in the 1980s. When I hired a Vietnamese motorcyclist to drive me around Hanoi, he would only take the equivalent of \$2.50 for his fare, though I offered him more. When I mentioned the story to a Vietnamese friend, he laughed: "Well, I guess we haven't been quite 'corrupted' by market economy."

However, a series of subsequent encounters made me rethink my unspoken conclusions about the similarities between Vietnam and China. While shopping in Hanoi, I found the Chinese RMB (*yuan*) was favored by most street peddlers over the Vietnamese currency, the VND (*dong*). But when I asked my hotel receptionist if Chinese money was indeed more popular than other currencies in Vietnam, her sweet smile vanished. "The most popular and respected currency in Vietnam is the *dong*" she responded sternly. "*Dong* actually means 'shield' in Vietnamese," she then added, as if to warn me that Vietnam knows how to protect herself against her giant neighbor in the north.



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On another occasion when I raised doubt to my Vietnamese tourist guide about whether Ho Chi Minh could really speak five different languages — Vietnamese, French, Chinese, English and Russian — as the Ho Mausoleum booklet boasted, the young man, who had voiced his admiration for the wealth and prosperity in Chinese society, became agitated- His angry voice and words immediately reminded me of the way Chinese Red Guards defended Chairman Mao in the old days. "What do you mean?" He shot back sharply: "Are you challenging Uncle Ho's language ability and talents?"

Vietnamese nationalism hit me even more unmistakably when I questioned a store owner about the quality of her pearl necklaces. Guessing I might be from China, she retorted: "Only Chinese like to sell fake goods." Then it hit me: if Hanoi looked familiar to my eyes, it is the multiple manifestations of Americanization, rather than the seemingly "Chineseness," that made the city seems less foreign.

Spurred by globalization and the pre-Olympics frenzy, English has become fashionable throughout China, The situation is the same in Vietnam because of the growing American influence there. Touring Hanoi's scenic spots, I was constantly met with students who

were eager to practice English —the "global language"—with foreign visitors. DVDs and discs of the latest American movies and music spill off the shelves of crowded stores.

For my last dinner in Hanoi, I followed the suggestion of a Vietnamese friend and went to a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet. In both Vietnam and China, American fast food restaurants are now favored by many as a symbol of progress and modernity. It seems that while America may have "lost" China and Vietnam during the Cold War era, it has regained its ground in Beijing and Hanoi in today's globalized economy. Ironically, cultural values and economic influence have proven more powerful than military' might in winning hearts and minds. Even the notorious Hoa Lo Prison or "Hanoi Hilton," in which American POWs were held during the war, has been transformed into a public museum. One wonders if John McCain would be honored there should he win the presidential election this November.

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