

TRAVELLING WITH A REVOLUTIONARY - Part 2

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Dear Peter,

The Republican flag of the defeated Saigon regime is reappearing on the streets of Hue, Vietnam's ancient imperial capital in the central province of Thua Thien-Hue. Not that local communist authorities have had a change of heart or that anti-communist dissidents unfurl the old flag in daring demonstrations. Nothing of that sort disturbs the peace of the city on the banks of the Perfume River. The cause of the phenomenon is paint.

"During the war, people had to paint the Saigon flag on their houses or gates," explains 70-year-old Vinh, who fought both the French and the American-backed Saigon regime and was a communist party member until 1978. "After Liberation in 1975, the new red socialist flag was painted over the Saigon one. But the communist paint was never as good as the American kind. The old colors keep coming back."

Today, the southern provinces of Central Vietnam are full of "fading-paint" stories. Some economic and religious beliefs, not so long ago taboo in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam shine again from under the paint of communism. Economic reforms swept in a revival of traditional and religious beliefs, business attitudes and family rituals. "We tried too hard to suppress the past," says Vinh, "We should have built on it. I think we should go back to the political situation of 1945, back to the August Revolution, to the day when Ho Chi Minh called on all Vietnamese political parties to unite to fight for independence. Maybe time has come now to invite everybody to join in the fight to develop the country."

Vinh and I chat near a tall ornery cactus. Our eyes squint from the blinding light of midday. We have been travelling together for a few days and there is much I do not know about the old nationalist who joined the communists at age 23. Cicadas cry from the underbrush. A dry hot wind blows up the sandy approach to the granite hill where we sit.

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Dunes, rock, sand and cacti have replaced the ubiquitous rice paddy so familiar to Vietnam. Hard to believe that just three hours ago we sat in cool Dalat, surrounded by pine trees. Behind us, on the hill, two old Vietnamese men wearing turbans talk in a language Vinh does not understand. We have entered the province of Ninh Thuan in central coastal Vietnam, the land of the vanished kingdom of Champa. The four red brick towers of Po Klong Garai rise behind us on a hillside, a Cham sanctuary built at the end of the 13th century. The ancient Cham people were decimated by the southern migration of the Vietnamese. Chinese archives first mention Champa around the year 190.(1) The Champa empire flourished in Central Vietnam until the 13th century. It fell into decline in the 14th century because of unending wars with expanding Vietnam. By the 17th century, the Kingdom was gone.



One of Po Klong Garai towers.

Today, fewer than 100,000 people think of themselves as Chams. "We never learned about that in school," recalls 50-year old Luu, Vinh's son-in-law who is also travelling with us. "But now, the Chams are a big tourist attraction so we hear more."

In the wake of tourist interests, Cham towers all over Central Vietnam are being restored. At the bottom of the steps leading to Po Klong Garai, seven km from the town of Phan Rang, a new ticket booth advertises visitor's fees: 2000 dong (20 cents) for Vietnamese citizens, 6000 dong (60 cents) for foreigners. "They are better at building ticket booths than fixing roads," grumbles a French tourist.

On top of the hill, in the cool darkness of the sculpted tower, an old Cham priest, his white turban decorated with red tassels, kneels near a small kerosene lamp and carefully paints smiling lips on the statue of a hindu deity. Tomorrow is Kathe, the New Year Festival of the Chams. Kids will receive gifts, families will eat the traditional Vietnamese *banh chung* (stuffed rice cakes), followers will go to religious sanctuaries to sing and pray.

(1). Les Etats Hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie, C. Coedes, Editions E. De Boccard, Paris, 1964, p.42

The ancient Chams spoke a Malay-Polynesian language. Inscriptions on the sculptures they left behind are in Sanskrit. The two main branches of their religion - one Hindu-influenced, the other Muslim - still survive in Vietnam. In some parts of the Mekong delta, near the Cambodian border, one can still hear the call of the muezzin. But the Chams' understanding of the prophet's words would probably anger some Muslims. Chams pray only once a week and they drink alcohol.

We eat lunch on the beach, surrounded by eucalyptus and cacti. There is juicy grilled cuttlefish, sticky-rice cakes and ice cold tea. Vinh daydreams in a reclining chair, arms folded behind his head, feet in the sand. It has been years since he travelled outside the din of HoChiMinh City.

We relax in the calm of Ninh Thuan, home of the heroes of "Black Cactuses," a 1991 movie by Le Dan, one of Vietnam's better known filmmakers. The film tells a story of love between a young Cham woman and a man born of a black American father and a Cham mother. Ostracized by the village, the young man marries the girl against all odds but their crops fail and he goes to HoChiMinh City - always called Saigon in the movie - to find work. There, he meets a prosperous woman who seduces him and they make plans to go to America. In the end, the young man goes back to his wife's love and the poverty of their life among the cacti. In the meantime, we have been introduced to many Saigon youth obsessed with fast money. "Everyone says the young people are more pragmatic these days," comments Vinh as we talk about the differences between his generation and the postwar one. "I disagree. They are not pragmatic they are utilitarian. All they care about is having money in their pocket."

On occasions like this one, Vinh reminds me of the retired general in a famous and controversial short story written by Hanoi writer Nguyen Huy Thiep.(2) In the story, the general, who spent all his life fighting for his country and living very simply, comes back to his family to find out that obtaining wealth is their main concern. His daughter-in-law, a doctor, raises dogs at home for export, an activity still popular in Hanoi. To save on the cost of dog feed she uses aborted fetuses she brings back from the hospital and cooks them on the family stove before feeding them to the dogs.

Today, at 70, Long collects an 80,000 dong (roughly US\$8) monthly state pension. "Not enough to survive more than seven days," he says bitterly. Without his children, he could not buy enough cigarettes to last a month.

The next day, we arrive at Po Nagar, a ninth century Cham sanctuary, two km from the town of Nha Trang. The site was used for Hindu worship as early as the second century AD. These days, even

(2). The magazine editor who first published Thiep's short story lost his job. The story has been translated both in French and English, and widely published abroad but Thiep, a Hanoi history teacher, has not yet received a cent. Thiep also wrote the script of the movie based on his story and was paid US\$60 for it.

Vietnamese Buddhists come to the tower to make offerings. Today, a group from the local Youth Association visits. The youth say they are of the "Brahmin" branch of the Cham faith but they pray little and spend most of their time taking photographs of each other near the four towers. Some of the young men wear turbans and the long straight skirts of their Malay ancestors. All young women wear the Vietnamese *ao dai* (long slit tunic over silk pants).



21-year-old Hon wears the Cham turban.

Hon, a 21-year-old Cham sporting a white and gold-lined turban, has come to the tower with his wife to celebrate the New Year "the way his ancestors used to." He says the French massacred the Chams and forced them out of the cities and villages where they used to live. "The French are responsible for the disappearance of the Cham civilization," he says. "The Vietnamese are helping the Chams rediscover their culture." Even my Vietnamese friend and translator cringes at the comment. "He has learned his religion in the marxist Koran," he says as we move away.

Few people come today to this sanctuary. Larger religious ceremonies will take place tomorrow at remoter sites, further up the coast, in the province of Khanh Hoa and Quang Nam. "The young people are very curious about the religion of their ancestors," says Tinh, a 40-year-old Cham farmer. "And as there is more money around we are seeing a revival of the temples."

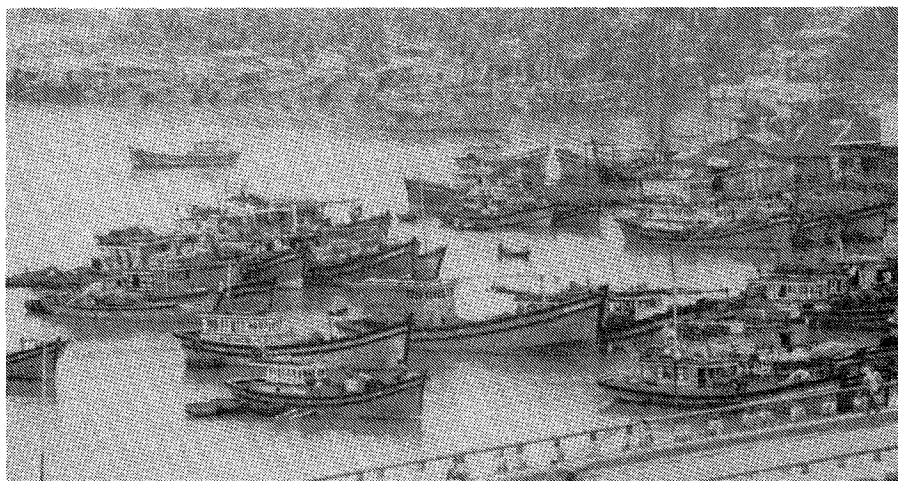
The town of Nha Trang also looks better off than when I last saw it in 1989. Along the beach front, hotels have been revamped and new restaurants have opened. Tourists abound even in this off-season period. An overseas Vietnamese from Canada has opened a beer factory and his new brew, called Vinagen for "Vietnamese Intelligence" (sic) is hitting the market with marked success even though competition between domestic brewers of beer and soft drinks is now fierce. The Vinagen brewery created 300 new jobs, not counting the waiters serving the local brew at the exclusive Vinagen restaurant on the beach front. "Over 150 people applied to become waiters," recalls 21-year-old Cuong. Only 16 were hired. Cuong is fluent in French and Chinese and takes every opportunity to improve his English. He works afternoon and night shifts at the restaurant and studies in the morning to complete his diploma in French Literature. Cuong, who inherited his love of French from his

grandmother, dreams of Paris. He admits to being tired most of the time but also is thrilled by the new possibilities economic development has brought to the region. "Maybe I can get a scholarship to go to France," he says, hopefully. "I must be the best student in my province."

Not everybody is as thrilled as Cuong. At the Nha Trang Oceanographic Institute, the mood is gloomy. Before 1986 and the "new economic mechanism", the State covered all unforeseen expenses. The Institute was recently warned there would be no more "supplements". Directors were told to be creative and raise their own funds. Once the pride of Vietnamese scientists, the Institute is now so penniless it once sold some of its precious fish to a HoChiMinh City trader. The small museum, in the Institute complex, is fast deteriorating. "Last week, a Taiwanese visitor offered me US\$100 for this fish," says 35-year-old museum director Chu Anh Khanh, showing me a brightly-colored fish in a dirty old tank. "I refused and sent him to a HCMCity store. It is not the role of the State Museum to sell exotic fish to the public."

Khanh's museum is small and dark; the exhibits poorly-lit. Many specimens - especially naturalized ones - are in bad shape. The aquarium is now closed to the public. Only the Institute's 80 researchers can see the 40,000 live specimens kept there. "Until we build a larger building, we cannot open it to the public," says Khanh.

Recently, the Institute begun to sell exotic fish to a prosperous HCMCity trader who caters to the rich Saigonese taste for aquariums. "Few people here have the kind of money the Saigon people spend on exotic fish," says Khanh. "Some are willing to pay 10 million dong (US\$1000) for a nice aquarium. People in Nha Trang see no interest in buying those fish because they come from our sea."



Fishing boats in Nha Trang harbor.

A few Nha Trang fishermen specialize in catching fish for the Institute. Supply is good. But Khanh dislike this new business activity. "The trader sells the fish at ten times what he gives

us," he says. "The middleman gets the money, while the workers get poorer," snaps Vinh, obviously displeased as well. We talk about the different ways Western museums raise funds. Khanh is not convinced. The government and foreign organizations seem to him the only adequate sources of funding. The French have promised to help and Khanh, who is paid US\$15 a month to manage both the aquarium and the museum, banks a lot of hope on their intervention.

We break the long drive from Nha Trang to Danang with a stop in Qhuy Nhon, a depressingly dark coastal town. The hotel is full of young sailors on holiday. Loud rock and roll music covers the swishing sound of the sea. We do not stay long.

The next morning, we happily reach Hoi An, 30 kilometers south of Danang. The streets are lined with the 18th century residences of Japanese, Chinese and Vietnamese merchants, each in their respective traditional style. Shops, warehouses, bridges, churches and pagodas each reflect the various cultures their builders brought with them. Many of them date back to the time the place was called Faifo and was, from the 13th to the 19th century, the major port of Central Vietnam and one of Southeast Asia's main international ports. Beams and pillars of houses are made of precious wood. Doors and windows are carved with images of flowers, animals and birds. Roofs are covered with curved brick tiles. An 18-meter-long Japanese covered bridge with rooms for "trading activities" spans a small stream. *Cao lau*, the town's unique dish, is still made here with noodles cooked in water drawn from the town's main well without which *cao lau* is said to lose its specific taste. We wander through town for hours.

Few Vietnamese tourists come here. Our driver did not want to come. "No hotel there," he said, ignoring the recent opening of the town's first and only hotel, set in what used to be the Regional Communist Party School. (There is another small guest house in town but it is closed to foreigners).

To preserve the city's character - and protect the hotel's monopoly - no other hotels are allowed in town. Cars are banned from certain streets; even motorbikes in some places. "The authorities want to protect the town but they do not help us," complains Phuc, whose family has lived for three generations in a historical house he guides tourists through for a small fee.

The truth seems quite different. Local authorities, with the help of Japanese money, are offering to pay a large part of the renovation but few house owners have taken up the offer. "People worry the State will gain a right on the house if they accept the money," explains a Japanese architect.

Japanese archaeologists are digging in Hoi An and investing a lot of money to help the Vietnamese preserve the architectural heritage of the city. The three large Chinese Congregation Assembly Halls have already been restored using money given by American-Chinese Associations. At the Hai Nam Chinese Congregation Assembly Hall, on Tran Phu Street, a wall is covered with photographs of the generous donors from the Southern California Hai Nam Association.



Hoi An: street scenes.

Site of the first Chinese settlement in Vietnam, port of call for Persian and Arab vessels from the 2nd to the 10th century, first Vietnamese town to be exposed to Christianity, Hoi An is an amazing reminder of a Vietnam once open to the world; a Vietnam multicultural and tolerant. "We had a Japanese and a Chinese community living here in harmony," recalls Phuc. The surrounding area experienced fierce fighting during the war with the United States. Hoi An was undamaged.

Early morning, a heavy curtain of rain covers Hoi An. Despite the rain, the wharf teems with haggling women traders. They all wear conical hats and long blue plastic capes. From afar, the blue capes confront the grey sky, exploding like a bouquet of wild flowers on the grey canadian tundra.



Raincoats and conical hats on Hoi An wharf.

The raincoats are newcomers to Vietnam's market. During the war, Vinh used to wear a raincoat made of leaves of "latanier". During my first visit in 1989, people protected themselves with the rain using a large square piece of plastic. The new raincoats brought new life to the streets. They are cheap and they are a big hit, even the ones with big red dots. Children sizes recently came out on the market and Hoi An streets are now full of mischievous flocks of children thumping their feet in puddles of water, the wings of their capes flapping in the wind.

Young men lounge in coffee shops, watching videos and drinking coffee. There are no women in sight. "Women do not go to coffee shops," explains Vinh's daughter Phuong who is also travelling with us. "They have no time but it is also not good for their reputation. They meet at the market instead."

Most Vietnamese women I talk to say life has improved since 1986 and the beginning of the reforms. Although figures are scarce, some experts say the majority of small businesses born out of *doi moi*,

Vietnam's economic renovation process, were launched by women: food stalls, hairdressing salons, laundry services, tailoring shops, etc. Women now have more disposable income and can buy consumer goods: a fan to fight the heavy summer heat, a motorbike, a television, a refrigerator.

But women also admit they have paid a price for their new income: they are tied all day to the sales counter. No more helping out at nursery schools where teachers are so overloaded, no more visiting friends or reading books in the afternoon, no more teaching songs to the youngest ones or taking part in the Women's Union meetings. "If you define quality of life as having a refrigerator and new clothes, their lives have definitely improved," says Canadian researcher Lisa Drummond, who has just completed her thesis on Vietnamese women traders. "But if quality of life is having time to oneself, time to see friends, to get involved in the community, to play with your children, then women have less and less of that these days."

Vinh knows how important women were in his militant life. "All those years when I was in jail and I worked for the party, it was my wife and my mother who worked to feed the children and send them to school," he recalls as we take a last walk around Hoi An. "The party gave us nothing. Our only salary was the thought of working for freedom."

Further up the coast, at Ngu Hanh Son, the main street is full of sculptors' shops, most of them manned by women. The village is doing well although sculptors are now forbidden from taking stones from nearby "Marble Mountain", a favorite tourist stop. The marble buddha sold at Ngu Hanh Son are made of stone imported from other parts of the country. "Last time I was here," recalls Luu, who visited the village ten years ago, "there were only miserable huts." Today, all houses on the main street are made of bricks. Many artisans hire apprentices. Business is good.

Near the central town of Danang, Non Nuoc, better known as "China Beach" and made famous by the American TV series of the same name, is deserted. A few days ago, the strip of sand where American soldiers once surfed and enjoyed "rest and recreation" between tours in the jungle, teemed with surfers from all over the world. They had come to China Beach to take part in Vietnam's first professional surfing contest. "Many people came to look," recalls Son, a 60-year-old Danang resident who often comes to the beach for a swim. "It was very interesting to meet all those foreigners and see some Americans. We hope to see more."

More and more tourists do flock to China Beach. So many in fact that conflict is arising between developers and town planners. Tourism advocates fear the impact of a nearby export-processing zone on the quality of the water. Industrial developers complain tourism does not create much employment and brings "social evils". (In the Vietnamese jargon, the expression "social evils" usually means prostitution and drug use.)

Vinh does not swim so I sit with him on the beach. In front of us: the South-China Sea, the gulf of Siam, the sea of Java, all linking coastal people of widely different cultures just like an

Asian Mediterranean sea. Could Southeast Asia not be a kind of Asian Europe? "The Thais, the Vietnamese, the Malays, the Indonesians, the Filipinos, they are all like women washing clothes around the same pond, chatting about their affairs," he says. "The South-China sea links us all, just like the pond does. Our economies are linked."

But much still has to be done before Vietnam gets a competitive edge in the region. Growth in Danang, once a dynamic harbor town is slower than in Hanoi or HoChiMinh City. Fewer houses have been renovated. Passersby wear less colorful clothes. An unofficial survey, conducted in 1993 by a foreign trading company, shows 40% of Danang households own a motorbike, 60% own a television, 10% have a VCR and 23% a refrigerator. However, 90% of those goods are secondhand. Shops are full of old models, the used goods being brought from Japan by Vietnamese sailors. "Secondhand consumer goods make people optimistic about the future", says Lan, a 44-year-old shop owner.

Danang is often talked about as "the gate" to Central Vietnam, the communication hub between the North and the South. Its proximity to Laos and northern Thailand is often cited as an advantage. But town authorities have been slow in response to market economics. During a March trip here, Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, urged them to "effect a mightier shift to market mechanism".

Most investment projects, excluding oil, are in HoChiMinh City and Hanoi. Officials in Danang complain about the delays and the cost of travelling back and forth to Hanoi to get their projects approved. Some have asked to be allowed to manage small investment projects on their own but they have been rebuffed by the Hanoi-based State Committee on Cooperation and Investment (SCCI).

As of September 1993, the province of Quang Nam-Danang had 21 foreign-invested projects, most of them joint ventures. Investors come from all over. Latvians produce oil and shampoo for exports, Australians mine gold, Hongkongers build ships and Taiwanese make shoes.

The province's External economic relations department expects to attract US\$350 million in 1994-95. An export-processing zone is under development with the help of a Malaysian company. The City recently inaugurated a digital microwave line linking it to the rest of the country. An Australian Group plans to invest US\$625 million to turn Danang into a major tourist spot for the Asian nouveaux riches. with heliport, amusement parks, zoo, casinos, marinas etc. The project clashes with other heavy-industry inclined projects so a master plan is now in the making at the Institute of Urban and Rural Planning, in collaboration with the Australian International Development Assistance Board (AIDAB). Balancing tourism and industrial development will not be an easy job.

Foreign tourists actually find little to see or do in Danang, Vietnam's fourth largest city. Compared to Hoi An, the town looks grey, dirty and sad. "We like Danang because it is a real city," explains Nam, our driver. Nam does not understand foreigners' interest for Hoi An and their preference for deserted beaches. He likes busy ones, full of people and shops. He also does not

understand our interest in the "old stones" of Danang's Cham Museum and stays in the bus while we visit. "Vietnamese tourists do not often come here," admits 33-year-old Viet Anh, history professor and guide at the Museum. "They are not interested."

Created in 1913 by *L'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*, France's famous Far-East School, the museum is struggling to protect from neglect the best collection of Cham sculptures in the world. Water drips from the ceiling and paint is peeling from the museum walls. Valuable bas-relief are scattered in the muddy backyard of the building, surrounded by weeds and bits of discarded metal. The museum lacks storage space. Those pieces have not been catalogued yet. Although the museum is small it must have been very pleasant in its early days. The ceilings are high and the large windows let in a profusion of light and wind. The place is now crowded with sculptures, some of them often worth a room of their own, so fascinating they are with their mix of diverse Hindu, Khmer, Chinese, Malay, and Javanese symbols. "This is Uroja, the Mother of the country, symbol of fertility", explains Anh as she shows us a sculpture of women's breasts topped by a phallic symbol. Uroja, or "woman's breasts", in the Cham language, was worshipped by the Chams in the form of the nipples. Every Cham tower also had its "linga", a phallic symbol set in the center of the tower. Bas-relief and sculptures exhibited in the museum present a stunning world of hindu gods, dancing shivas and flying garudas.



At the Cham museum:
Uroja and a linga.

Some Vietnamese artists and artisans are beginning to look back to those images, as well as to those of other Vietnamese ethnic minorities. Traditional Vietnamese designs, often Chinese-influenced, are not very popular on world markets and traders are increasingly asking for "tribal" products. But more on this in another newsletter.

Signs in the museum warn visitors not to touch the exhibits but our guide keeps tapping on the sculptures with her key chain as she takes us around the museum. Children roam around freely in the museum, climbing on fragile sculptures. The French are back supporting the museum and some foreign researchers have joined the

badly-paid Vietnamese team of Cham scholars, but "renovations are slow and expensive," complains Anh.

Before we leave Danang, I give in to Phuong's favorite game: visiting gold shops. "I have found a goddess," she insists. "You must see it". So off we go, out of the hotel, into Danang's drab streets, heading for the docks. Tiny light bulbs shine in the glass counter of the small gold shop giving it an attractive look of warmth in the Danang drizzle. There are gold rings, bracelets and chains. Phuong hands me a tiny jade figurine of a woman buddha. "The goddess protects travellers and brings luck and happiness."

I am glad to have the goddess when we leave Danang for the three-hour mountainous drive to Hue along National Highway One, Vietnam's main South-North road. Scores of trucks and overloaded buses lie overturned in the ditch. Under the heavy rain, parts of the two-lane highway have collapsed and teams of workers are busy filling up holes with crushed rocks. A slow drizzle falls on the slippery pavement.



"Pothole" on the road to Hue.

Midway between Danang and Hue, National Highway One crosses Hai Van Deo (Sea Cloud Pass), a name I find more romantic in its French version of *Le Col des Nuages*. Phuong and Vinh fall silent. The narrow road snakes its way along steep green cliffs. Small altars are set almost at every turn, marking the site of a fatality. Mud slides are frequent in this season. A parts of the road is blocked by a recent one.

The pass is a key point along the Truong San Cordillera, the natural divide between the climatic zones of North and South Vietnam, a cultural divide between the Chinese-influenced North and the more Hindu-Muslim-coastal-influenced South, also a political divide in the 15th century between Vietnam and the Champa Kingdom.

The rain gets heavier after the pass and will not stop for the next three days. No wonder so many sad poems were written in Hue. The town has changed since my first visit in 1989. Hotels have been renovated, new shops have opened, foreign newspapers are available, and no one seems to fear inviting foreigners to their home anymore.

Capital of Vietnam from 1802 to 1945, residence of the last Nguyen Emperors, Hue was badly damaged in the 1960's. During their surprise Tet Offensive of 1968, the Vietcong (Vietnam's southern guerilla movement) occupied Hue's Citadel for three weeks. Before they succeeded in dislodging them, the Saigon forces and their US allies severely shelled the Citadel and its Walled City. Casualties are said to have reached 10,000, most of them civilians. "Many buildings were destroyed during the Tet Offensive," comments Lan, the young guide taking us through the Walled City.

Hue is now a "strategic attraction" in Vietnam's tourism strategy. Unesco has pledged support and hopes to raise US\$5 million at a November 1993 conference.

Restoration work has begun at the *The Tu Cam Tanh*, the Forbidden Purple City, ancient palace of Vietnam's Emperors, modeled on Beijing's Forbidden City, albeit on a smaller scale. The main buildings have regained their original color and lights have been installed in buildings I visited in almost total darkness in 1989. But the palace is still an odd place to visit. Workers cook their meal in century-old buildings, makeshift houses and crops of peanut plants still dot the two-century-old courtyards. Guides rush the rare visitors of this rainy season to the new palace gift shop. Nothing imperial is on sale there but one can buy a copy of French writer Françoise Sagan's well-known novel Bonjour Tristesse.



Gate to the Imperial City.

It is the wrong season to be in Hue. Three mornings in a row, we try in vain to visit the Imperial Museum. On the first morning, we find a sign telling us the museum opens the next day. On the second

morning, a guard tells us it's Women's Day and the place is closed. On the third day, an employee tells us all the exhibits have been moved for renovation. The only exhibition open is the result of a recent dig conducted by the archeological society. There is the skeleton of a small woman in a stone coffin and tall old jars that used to serve as coffins, the dead bodies sitting upright inside. Phuong peeks into one of the precious jars and startles a sleeping cat hiding there. They both scream loud enough to wake the dead.

Deprived of Imperial paraphernalia, we retreat to Thien Mu pagoda (also known as Linh Mu pagoda). There are over 100 pagodas in Hue but Thien Mu is a special one.

In 1963, while the US-backed Saigon regime of Catholic President Diem arrested monks and brutally repressed Buddhist activities, a well-known monk of the Thien Mu pagoda travelled to Saigon to make a stand against the regime. Sitting cross-legged in the middle of a busy Saigon street, he calmly set himself on fire. The photograph of his burning body travelled around the world, igniting a wave of opposition to US involvement in Vietnam. Today, the Austin car in which he travelled to Saigon is parked in the compound of the pagoda, the famous photograph pasted to its windshield.

While they welcomed Buddhist political activities in the 1970's, the communists liked them much less after 1975. The Buddhist Church was forced to join the National Fatherland Front, the large umbrella group still uniting all Vietnamese mass organizations. The Church complied but some elements within it never stopped demanding their independence. The Thien Mu monks were among them.



Thien Mu Pagoda.

Conflict between the authorities and the pagoda flared again in May 1993. On May 21st, a 52-year-old man from the Mekong Delta set himself alight behind the pagoda. His death triggered a series of events leading to the arrests of nine monks who are still in jail, accused of causing public disorders. (As I write this, three of them have been sentenced to four years in jail, the others to three years)

Accounts of the May events vary greatly. After the discovery of the dead man, the head resident monk - one of the monks later arrested - said he knew nothing about the dead man. A few hours later, the monk said the victim was a Buddhist follower who had committed an act of "self-immolation". Interviewed by Vietnamese journalists, members of the dead man's family said the man was not religious. According to them, he had been depressed for many weeks over a family quarrel. One of his brothers said "his mind was troubled" and he may "have been incited into taking his life to serve other people's purposes."

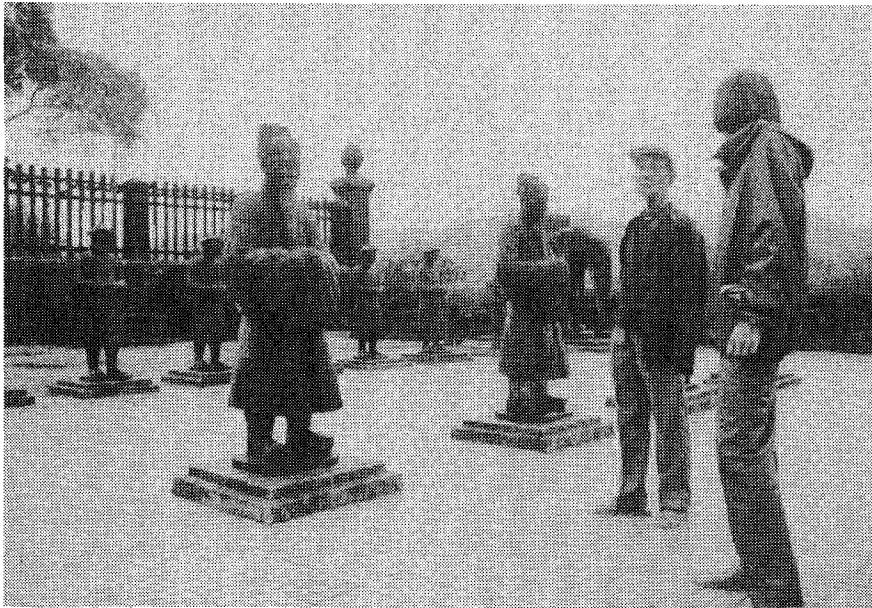
The head monk was called in for questioning on May 24th. To protest what they feared was an arrest, other monks staged a sit-in on the highway near a busy bridge. The headmonk was quickly rushed back to the site in what authorities describe as an "official car". According to official accounts, the car was turned over and burned.

As we walk the grounds of the pagoda and reach the stupa near which the man killed himself, I am tempted to talk to the young monks I can hear laughing in the main hall. But I already know that Mr Vinh has little compassion for the imprisoned monks. His deep French-inspired principles of respect for human rights seem to be forgotten when talking about them. "They should worship the Buddha and get out of politics", is the only comment I get from him. It is probably not wise to talk to the monks while Mr Vinh is around. And Luu, my Vietnamese friend and interpreter is scared. "I am afraid of the questions you will ask," he says. I do not insist.

Hanoi-based officials at the Office of Religious Affairs say Buddhist political activities have always been more radical in Hue and Saigon. They say they are not worried about it spreading to the rest of the country. But still the monks remain in jail. And most foreign observers say Hanoi is privately very concerned about Buddhist activism.

Vinh longs to see the tombs of the Nguyen Kings which he has never visited, so we travel slowly from one to the other, sloshing through rain and mud. King Tu Duc's tomb, with its carefully laid-out gardens, its quiet lotus ponds and reflecting pools, is a pleasant sight. "Ten thousand men died building this tomb," says Vinh, breaking my reverie. "It is said that this tomb is made of bones and blood." Today, fishermen lower their nets in Tu Duc's lotus ponds, lovers sit by the reflecting pools and children run around the gardens. We hide from the rain under the roof of one of the pavilions and Vinh begins to quote famous *Vietnamese lettrés* and poets. "Mandarins along the Perfume River, prostitutes on the river," he says, recalling some of the writings that got him angry enough in his youth to want to profoundly change his society.

Later on, as we visit Khai Dinh's tomb, the last one to be built and the most westernized in its architecture, Vinh has his photograph taken with some of the stone mandarins standing guard in the courtyard. As he sees me also taking a photograph of him, he laughs. "You will publish that in a paper," he says. "The feudalism mandarin and the communist mandarin. Maybe that's what we were after all."



Saying good-bye to the mandarins.

That night, as darkness falls on Hue's flooded streets, I make my last trip to the Post Office, unashamedly called "La Poste". A television set is on the counter, there for everyone one to listen to. The BBC-Asia presenter spells out in English the new developments in the Canadian election campaign. No one listens, except me. Hue is already used to its new openness.

Tomorrow, Vinh goes back to HoChiMinh City. We will not go north to the demilitarized-zone (DMZ) where young bikers run a brisk business taking tourists around the fire zones of the recent past. Neither of us saw much interest in the long ride. We also did not go to My Lai, site of the much publicized American war atrocities. The past we were looking for, the past Vietnam seems to want to build its future on, was a different one.

Carole Beaulieu
Hanoi, November 24, 1993

PS: The names of our three travelling companions have been changed.