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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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OUR FRIENDS THE VIETNAMESE  
or  
NOTHING WORKS IF IT IS NOT GROUNDED IN REALITY

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Dear Peter,

This newsletter is about people who do not make the news. It is about their efforts to ground their life in reality. For if the American war effort was the "bright shining lie" American journalist Neil Sheehan described in his award-winning book,(1) for many Vietnamese, the years that followed were a time when reality was often at odds with official discourse.

In 1989, reform-minded Nguyen Van Linh, then secretary general of the Vietnamese Communist Party, said: "Nothing works if it is not grounded in reality"; a simple enough idea but a revolutionary one in a country where children go to school bare-foot to be told they live in a very rich country. "The government kept telling us we had made huge progress in education," recalls a Hanoi government employee. "But the curriculum my son studies at the University is the same one I had 20 years ago."

Most of the following stories come from the lives of friends and acquaintances, men and women Pierre and I lived with, met as we searched for a house, visited the post office censors, were hit by motorbikes or simply went shopping. This is also the story of our puzzling moments, our attachments, our fits of anger, our moments of disbelief, our naivete, our bursts of laughter. This may not be a very serious newsletter, but it will be an entertaining one. Take it as a gift for Tết, the Lunar New Year.(2)

(1). Neil Sheehan, A bright shining lie, Picador, London, 1990.

(2). Tết is the most important holiday in Vietnam. It is, as some have described before, something like Christmas, New Year and Thanksgiving lumped together in one huge party. This year it fell on January 23.

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.



Two young Hanoians carry home their newly acquired *hoa dao*  
the traditionnal branches of peach-blossoms

It is freezing cold in Hanoi. I am typing with my gloves on as the sound of exploding fire crackers fill my room. Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, is approaching. The narrow streets are filled with Holiday shoppers buying sweets, rice wine, peach trees with pink blossoms and *banh chung*, the traditional rice cake which is boiled for seven hours. In four days, the Year of the Rooster will begin. "And the American embargo will be lifted", says Son, a 19-year-old student and rock singer from Hanoi. "There will be many changes then."



Son. Singing at the New Year party

Hope. There is so much hope these days in Hanoi that you can feel it in the air. Hope is everywhere. In the new neon signs, in the thumping of the bricklayers, the whizzing sound of the blow torches. Hope also shines in Son's long, unruly black hair. "I got in some trouble at school because of the long hair", says the 19-year-old, laughing. "But God gave us hair, why cut it?". Son's favourite songs are the American hits Hotel California and Highway to Heaven. The small band he plays with favours heavy-metal groups like Black Sabbath and Metallica. "We practice in a warehouse," says Son in his shaky English. "At home we cannot turn the volume up because of the neighbors."

We are sitting in a century-old lakeside coffee-shop eating sunflower seeds and drinking coffee so strong it could start a car engine. "The war was crazy," says Hoang, base-guitarist in Son's group and a student of foreign-trade. "We lost twenty years."

Born during an American bombardment, Hoang dreams of visiting the United States. In his room, near the ancestor's altar, he has pinned a Metallica poster (the heavy-metal American band). "I wanted to study at the Conservatory," he says, "But my parents would not let me. They said I had a better chance of earning a living if I studied foreign-trade."

Hoang and Son both believe the Year of the Rooster will bring the end of the long-standing American embargo. Others, like Tran (not his real name) hope it will not. A government official in his mid-30s, Tran could be called a progressive. He supports the market reforms and wants them to gather pace. He sees the American embargo as a way of putting pressure on the Vietnamese government. (The embargo bars Hanoi from receiving credits from international lending institutions.)

Nguyen Xuan Phong, head of the Americas Department of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, disagrees. "Our reforms were not triggered by the pressure of the embargo," he says. "The reforms came out of a need to give a better standard of living to our people."

But Tran has other reasons to wish the lifting of the embargo will be delayed. "When the embargo is lifted, a lot of money will be dropped in the hands on the government", he insists. "They are not ready. They will not know how to use it well. They need time to learn about the market-economy, to learn to decide on facts, not pride or wishful thinking."

As an example Tran cites the Transvietnam power line, a 1500-km north-south transmission line meant to solve the South's energy shortages. Initial estimates set the cost of the construction at US\$300 millions. Experts and engineers have been critical of the project. The line, they say, will cost too much and face massive logistical problems as it snakes its way across impoverished and treacherous mountain range, following the old HoChiMinh Trail.(3) They pleaded in favor of less costly solutions such as buying new turbines for the South but the government has gone ahead. Finally, a few weeks ago, the government admitted the experts were right and the line will cost another \$200 million. "If we cannot make wise decisions on projects such as those, how will we handle the international loans once the embargo is lifted?" worries Tran.

In Hanoi we planned to live at Tran's house. He suggested it several weeks ago and his enthusiasm won us over. But when we got to Hanoi, Tran had changed his mind, mainly because of his father. Tran's father is not as progressive as his son. He is more of a hard-line Communist.(4) When he heard about the plan, he was not at all pleased. "My father feared he would come under attack if others found out his son was renting a room to foreigners while he was criticizing the open-door policy". Tran was so worried about letting us down, he did not tell us until we arrived in Hanoi. So now we are back to square one: looking for a house.

(3). During the war against the United States, soldiers and weapons travelled from the North to the South on hidden trails nicknamed: the HoChiMinh Trail.

(4). To use American professor William S. Turley's terms, Tran is an "adaptationist" and his father a "renewalist". Turley argues that terms such as "conservatives" and "liberals" are meaningless in the Vietnamese context. In Vietnam, both groups are in favor of renovation. Adaptationists argue that highly centralized political systems have failed to meet the challenges of high technological industrialization and global economic independence. For them the most successful social systems are those based on political equality, direct participation and personal freedom. Renewalists reply that adaptation disguises an urge to imitate the world outside ignoring the fact that no matter how much the world has changed it still cannot overcome the bitter antagonism between capitalism and socialism. They favor continuity with the Vietnamese revolution's own past. William S. Turley, Political Renovation in Vietnam: Renewal and Adaptation. Southern Illinois University, January 1991.

Renting to a foreigner is one of the hottest business in town. Numerous people are renovating their houses, creating small apartments on the second floor, in the hopes of renting to foreigners. In their eagerness, people overlook some peculiar Westerner hangups such as not liking to walk into somebody else's living-room everytime one comes home. Or wanting a bathroom sink not to empty straight on the floor but into a pipe. But they are learning fast about foreigners's strange tastes. "This house is brand new", insists Fon, a mathematician at the Mathematics Research Institute as he shows us a two-storey house half-and-hour's bike ride from the center of town. The owner, the Vice-President of Vietnam's Social Science Academy, wants \$1000 a month for it. "Many houses around here belong to the Mathematics Research Institute," explains Fon. Fon is not an official real estate agent. (There is an agency in Hanoi doing just that but very few people register their houses with them so they have few houses to offer) Fon "helps" his friends rent their house to foreigners. He also talks more about his car and about the housing market than about his research. (Researchers in Vietnam are paid \$10 to \$15 a month) Fon, who speaks English very well, has already found housing for quite a few foreigners. We are not as rich as them, so he takes us to another house, smaller and less modern. An old woman is sleeping in one room. In the second one, a young woman is helping a child dress up. The family will move out if we are willing to take the house for \$700 a month. "Does he have a permit to rent to foreigners?". "Very easy, very easy", says Fon. But we know otherwise. A German woman waited two months to move into her new house because the landlord did not have the permit.

After a period of skyrocketing housing prices, the foreign rental market seems to be stabilizing. The asking price for a room with a toilet and a small cooking corner ranges between \$250 and \$450. Two-room apartments are in the \$500 to \$600 range, depending on the location. A traditional Vietnamese house - often dark and without modern plumbing - may cost between \$600 to \$800. Modern houses, away from the center, go for \$1000 or more. Prices for old renovated villas are much higher.

#### LIFE WITH A REVOLUTIONARY AND A BEAR

In HoChiMinh City, Pierre and I lived with a revolutionary and a bear. No joke. I can tell you the bear's name but not the old man's name. You see, his wife broke the law. She did not pay any tax on our rent. (She was no exception. Most people around here seem to either totally ignore that law or declare a much lower rent than the one they really collect. A friend paid \$900 but his landlord declared \$300, therefore paying \$150 in tax.) But we really enjoyed staying on the second floor of her villa, our room a perfect picture of what life must have been for the French in colonial times: high ceilings, slow-turning fans, large windows with wooden shutters, a shaded roofed terrace where you could slowly rock yourself in a hammock while listening to the rain beating on the roof.

The old man was a founding member of the Communist Party in the South. Until he fell ill a few months ago, he was a high-ranking officer of the Communist Party. He lived in a large French villa in a quiet residential neighborhood of Saigon and kept a black Soviet-made Volga sedan with green government plates in his garage. In early morning, through the French shutters, we could hear Saigon wake up. The roosters sang at 5:30. At 6:00 the two maids washed pots in the courtyard and after that



there was no point trying to sleep as the hubbub of Saigon honked its way into our room amid the songs of the street vendors.(5)

We did not see the old man much. Despite his illness he was often in Hanoi. And when he was home, many people came to talk to him. I wish he had been there more often. He had deep-set, bright eyes, a warm smile, and a firm handshake. He understood French well but did not speak it with us. His right side was paralyzed after an operation during which he was given a transfusion of the wrong blood type (the hospital had no other available).



Baloo the bear drinking milk

We saw more of Baloo the bear: a small black vegetarian bear, roughly the size of a large dog. The old man's wife bought it from poachers who wanted to sell it to Taiwanese buyers who would have cut off its paws and sold them.(6) Baloo led a peaceful life in old man's courtyard, swinging from a fence eating bread and fruit. Every-night, our landlady gave it a bottle of milk. Baloo sucked the bottle quietly while lying on his back holding the bottle with its front paws.

The old man also had a sister-in-law, a bright woman who had earned the highest honors at the Sorbonne in Paris and spoke flawless French. Years of hardship had dimmed her beauty, but one could see behind her mass of grey hair and finely-shaped face, the striking beauty she must have been in her Parisian youth. I called her "madame soeur". She did not talk much, especially not about politics. One night, as we sat together watching the news, she said: "I should have stayed in France. I was offered a good job as the head of a research laboratory. I could

(5). Twenty years ago, I am told, there were many more vendors who sang to let customers know they were around and had things to sell. The one I heard most often was: "*Âi bánh tây ra mua a?*" (Who comes to buy Western bread?)

(6). According to an August 1992 report of the International Primate Protection League, HoChiMinh City is the center of wildlife trading in Southeast Asia. Trading in snakes, monkeys, bears, birds is so profitable that many university students quit school to become traders. At the market in HCMCity, a small bear like Baloo went for \$300 to \$350.

have discovered something. Silly girl I was. I felt a responsibility to my people, my family, my country. I came back and found these imbeciles running the University. We had no resources. I could do nothing. I wasted my life. I lost everything."

I sat motionless. The depth of her sadness was overwhelming. "Maybe your presence helped the students you taught during all those years?", I tried. The look she gave me shut me up. Only she knew what the past fifteen years had been: the incompetent but politically-correct teachers being promoted, the good ones demoted, disciplined, silenced; the students being taught unscientific methods, the sons and daughters of officials getting the overseas fellowships better students should have received.

*Madame soeur* was lucky. Members of her family were powerful. She was spared a lot. "I know of a simple-minded man who was sent to a reeducation camp because he played an American song on his accordion," she recalls. "He died there." Life is easier now, she admits. The openness is real and a new wind blows through the universities. But she feels old, too old to start over again.

Never again was *Madame soeur* to be so open-hearted as she was that night. Like most of the Saigonese I met whose lives were crushed by the wheels of the revolution, she usually carried her burden with a dignified serenity.

It was the same with Hung. In his youth, he had been a promising embassy secretary, well-educated and fluent in foreign-languages. Since 1975 he has been unemployed. Whenever I spoke about improvements and hopes for the future, he listened carefully but never agreed.

#### TANGO FOR A FRANCO-VIETNAMESE CHRISTMAS

In December, as Christmas was drawing near, he invited my husband Pierre and I to a party organized by a recently reopened French-club. ("The government allowed the Club to keep us busy," cynically says Hung on our way there. "This way we don't organize something else,") The medium-size hall quickly filled to capacity with French-speaking Vietnamese dressed in their best fineries. The president gave a short speech. A children's choir sang Christmas Carols in French. Then Santa Claus arrived. And what a Santa it was!

His cotton beard kept slipping and his red costume was rather shabby, but the audience was delighted. Santa had strapped on his back, knapsack-style, a big cardboard box wrapped in red paper. From that box he would later extract dozens of small gifts. He stood on the stage and pulled out a long list of gifts, so long it cascaded all the way down to the floor exposing official-looking stamps of all sizes and colors. "I do not understand the stamps," said Santa Claus, looking seriously worried. "There are four square ones and three round ones. I do not know what they are for. Nobody knows."

I laughed. Santa Claus's mockery of the Vietnamese's love-affair with officialdom was so irreverent I could not believe I was hearing it. Neither could the rest of the audience. (Few others were laughing). Santa marched on with a sarcastic monologue comparing renovation (the Vietnamese perestroika) to science-fiction. I admired his wit.

## SUBVERSIVE COFFEE

A few days previously, Pierre and I had had our worst brush with Vietnamese stamp-mania. A note in our mail box instructed us to pick up a parcel at the post office. The counter we went to was deserted. Behind it, I could see rows of desks covered with books, video cassettes and boxes. People were standing idle next to the boxes while officials were examining the content. Video cassettes were being screened, books flipped through. I managed to get a woman's attention. She took my note and disappeared. She came back a few minutes later and sat down at her desk. We waited and waited. Fifteen minutes later, she disappeared again and came back with a small parcel wrapped in brown paper. We signed a first form, gave our passport and visa numbers. The parcel and the paper traveled to three or four desks before coming back to her. Finally, she motioned us to come behind the counter. Three people were gathered around the desk. One of them handed the parcel and a small knife to Pierre saying: "Open it".

By then, we knew the package was from Pierre's mother and wondered what was in it. Pierre cut the paper and uncovered a small metal box. By then, two more people had come to watch. The box popped open and small pouches of instant coffee burst out onto the table. I must have giggled. The uniformed-lady was not amused. She again wrote down both our passport and visa numbers and sent us to another table. Two stern-looking uniformed-men stamped our paper and pointed us toward the door. Just when we thought we were home-free with our instant-coffee another bored-looking uniformed-man stopped us. A last stamp and we were out. "You were lucky it only took you an hour," says Hung. "A few years ago, we had to queue for hours, sometimes whole days, to get our parcels."

There are fewer parcels now that so many products - such as toothpaste and soap - are widely available in Vietnam. Most overseas Vietnamese send money (not long ago some use to hide tightly-rolled dollar bills in toothpaste tubes). But the security apparatus is still there trying to stop pornographic videos and subversive literature from getting in the country. One wonders how effective it is. Two days after the coffee incident, we found a thick envelope in our mailbox. Pierre's brother had sent us a chess software program for our portable computer. The diskette - potentially much more subversive than our coffee - had not gone through censorship. Such is life these days in Vietnam. And Santa Claus was right to joke about it.

That night at the French Christmas party, a Vietnamese couple in their fifties opened the ball with a smooth gliding waltz. Soon the whole room was waltzing. Sitting in a corner, a white-hair Saigonese was quietly telling his pink-cheeked daughter that a young man would certainly come to invite her for the next dance. She looked shy and demure in her bright silk evening gown. Suddenly Hung, my Vietnamese friend who was usually so serious, surprised me by asking me to dance. And for the first time in my life, I managed a fox-trot and a tango. Hung was smiling broadly. "It has been years since I danced like that," he said. I could imagine what he must have been like in his youth, the well-educated embassy secretary, well-versed in the affairs of the world. As we walked home that night, he began to recite French poetry. Pierre followed suit by quoting Beaudelaire. Hung was delighted. An engineer reciting Beaudelaire. Maybe there is hope for this world after all.



## MEETING A COMMUNIST CADRE

In Vietnam, nothing quite happens the way you think it will. The bamboo curtain which so often surrounds the reality of daily life opens when you least expect it to give you a look inside.

Take this Saturday morning for example. I phoned a Vietnamese friend to warn him of my visit. He seemed overjoyed. "I have a surprise for you", he said. (Since our arrival in HoChiMinh City, his family had introduced us to many new foods and exotic fruits, so I rode over on my bicycle thinking I would get a taste of a new Vietnamese delicacy.)

Hen (not his real name) lives on a busy street of Saigon. His office occupies the front room of the three-storey building. When I got there, a frail man was sitting in the office, quietly arguing in Vietnamese. I was ready to sit back and wait when Hen switched to French. "Vanh heads a discussion group", says Hen while introducing me.

- "What kind of group?" I asked.
- "Un club d'histoire appliquée," he answered. (A group of applied history)
- "What do you mean?"
- We talk about the situation in Vietnam, about the economy, the reforms, about what we can learn from the past.
- Who goes to these meetings?
- Mainly students. Last meeting there were about 200 of them. We meet once a month on Sunday morning."

Five minutes and a few questions later I was cursing myself for not having my notebook, cursing my friend for not telling me his surprise was this fabulous man. I struggled with my disbelief. Was this frail man in his oversized shirt really what I thought he was?

At 50, Vanh (not his real name) is a party cadre.(7) He is in charge of research for a local section of the Communist Party. His full-time job is to keep the party informed of the situation on the ground. In his youth, he shared a cell with an old VietMinh fighter and got there his militant education. For him, the struggle began in 1969. He was a young teacher then, involved in the teachers Trade Union in Saigon. From there he joined the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (the nationalist clandestine umbrella organization controlled by the Communists which fought the American-backed Saigon regime). "People are dissatisfied," says Vanh. "Last year I began to feel we needed a forum where they could discuss, take charge. In my spare time, I launched the History Club."

The ability of a single political party to represent the varied interests of a nation was the Club's last topic of discussion. According to Vanh, the general consensus was that single-party rule was good for

(7). A term commonly used in Socialist countries for ideologically reliable personnel with qualities of leadership working in the Party or carrying out Party policies in other organizations. The term is derived from the French meaning a frame, implying a permanent core staff around which a complete operational unit can be developed at need. Joseph Wilezynski, Marxism, Socialism and Communism, Joseph Wilezynski, An encyclopedic dictionary, De Gruyter, Berlin, NY 1987.

a country's development only if certain conditions were met. Those conditions were the following:

- \* the party must unite all stratum of the population;
- \* the party must be close to the people;
- \* the members of the party must be "uniques". (Vanh explained it meant the members must be not only virtuous but must display indisputable competence).

- "How about Russian historians such as Youri Afanassiev,(8) the longtime Communist who recently said democracy under a single party rule was "a myth"? I asked again.

- "The History Club does not agree, says Vanh. A one-party rule can be democratic. But the conditions have to be met.

- Are they met in Vietnam now? I asked.

- They were before the liberation, said Vanh. All the best people of the country were with HoChiMinh.

- But how about now? I insisted.

- Talk to the people, said Vanh. They will tell you. Look for yourself, look at the reality of life. You will find the answer."

Vanh would go no further. He would not say if the Party could be reformed but he showed little confidence in the actual campaign to fight corruption. "The people know who own the big new houses, they know whose spoiled children lead the good life."

Vanh believed groups like his were badly needed all over the country. "We committed ourselves to the struggle so that after the Liberation the country would not only be independant but also prosperous. We are not prosperous. The intellectuals in the South are unhappy."

- "But there has been progress recently? I suggested.

- It is not sufficient.

- What is missing?

- Better conditions for development and a competent team to lead the country.

- The actual team is not competent?

- Ask the people," briefly said Vanh.

Vanh had to go so we stopped and he promised to invite me to one of the Club meetings. The Club also raises money for worthy causes. "We try to mobilize the rich to help the poor", he says. Recently, the Club donated 20 millions dong to a tribal village of the Central Highlands. "We do not want people to see us as living-room philosophers," says Vanh. "We want to reach out to help the poor."

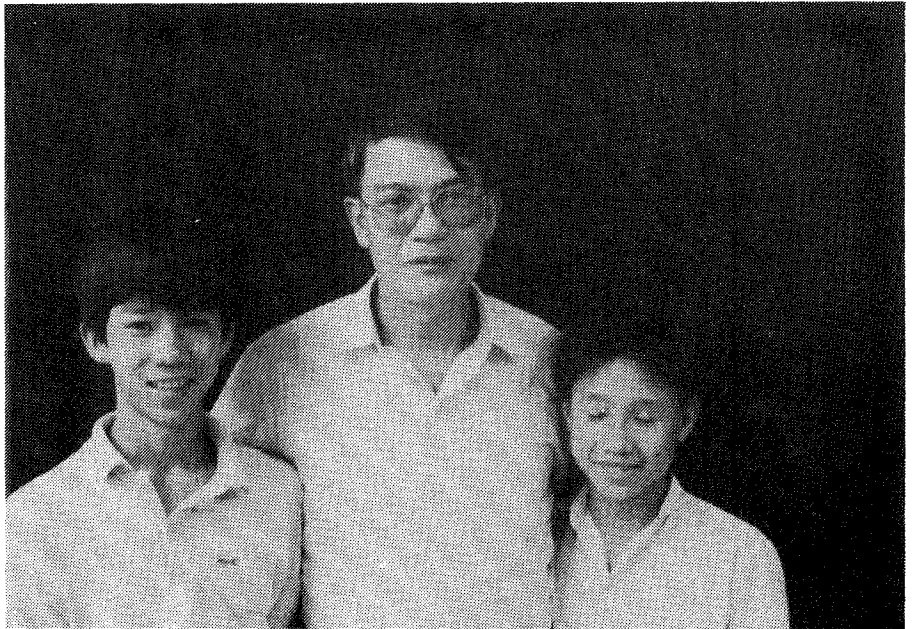
#### HELPING THE POOR

In the ideal marxist-leninist state, the poor were to become an extinct species. "The people were to care for them", recalls Tran Van Soi, a former Saigon soldier who became a catholic priest after the war.

In 1975, after the Communists took over the South, charitable organizations were shut down and social work schools were closed. In each district and commune somebody was put in charge of the poor. But these people had no money, little expertise and few resources.

(8). Youri Afanassiev, Ma Russie Fatale, Editions du Seuil, 1990.

In 1989, Vietnamese charitable organizations were allowed to reopen. (Some foreign ones had never left the country). In October 1992, Ho Chi Minh University welcomed its first social work students since 1975. In 1989, in the heart of one of HCM City poorest neighborhood, Father Tran Van Soi opened HCM City's first youth center, a small narrow three-storey house.



Father Soi with two of his boys

Sixteen children live there now, thirteen boys and three girls. Eighty-seven more come daily to participate in various activities.

A hundred more drop-in irregularly to get their nails cut or their hair combed. "The law says children must go to school," says Soi. "But in this neighborhood over 800 children under 15 live on the streets." (Authorities estimate the number of abandoned children in HCM City at about 12,000. In a country which takes pride in having almost eradicated illiteracy after independence, over 2,2 million children dropped-out of primary school last year.)

The center functions on a small budget: \$600 a month. Funds come from a Swiss-aid agency, the City's welfare department and donations from local residents. "We live very simply", says Soi as we enter the boy's room.

There are no beds in this bedroom. Only a big table in the center and a row of wooden desks, their shelves laden with used books. At night, bedding is pulled down from the top of the high desks and spread on the floor. Kids do all the cleaning and most of the chores. Early afternoon, the room is bustling with activity, the boys are busy cutting up wooden toys. A lone figure sits at a desk, quietly studying English. "His name is Minh," explains Father Soi, softly ruffling the boy's hair. "He travelled on his own from Hue [1084 km for HCM City]. An American found him in a park where he was begging. He brought him here and offered to pay for his upkeep. The boy is very bright."

A few minutes from Father Soi's center, over the canal, nearly 2000 people are squatting in a cemetery. They have no water and no sewers. Some try to earn a living collecting used plastic bags. (A kilo of plastic bags buys a kilo of rice). Soi visits them, bringing whatever help he has to offer. Some people now earn 3000 to 5000 dong per day carrying water for their neighbors with the jugs he helped them buy. "I know I cannot solve every problem in HCM City. We do what we can."

Soi's faith make him an easy target of distrust.(9) Two months ago, the City tried to replace him by a party-member. The local party committee resisted. "I have lived in this neighborhood since 1984," says Father Soi. "I know the people, their needs and their suffering. They trust me. This is very scary for the government. They are afraid I might turn the people against them."

Soi harbors no such intention. He is busy looking for scholarships to send 22 nuns for social work training. Tuition and food included, he needs one million dong a year for each of them, about \$100 US.

#### KEEPING OLD GRUDGES OUT OF THE PAGODA?

Father Soi is not alone fighting poverty in Vietnam. The country is teeming with donors of all sorts: international relief agencies, government programs, foreign non-governmental agencies. The scope of the fight and the questions it raises will be worth a newsletter of its own but for now let me introduce you to the peculiar situations faced by the Viet Kieu, the Overseas Vietnamese.

Minh and Canh (not their real names) wanted to help the poorest of their countrymen. The first one is a devout catholic living in Saigon. The second one is a buddhist who has been living in Canada for many years. They thought they could mobilize some Viet Kieu money to alleviate some of the suffering. In order to do so they had to overcome two formidable obstacles: the Viet Kieu's profound distrust of the Hanoi communist government and Hanoi's fear that some of the Viet Kieu are only interested in plotting to overthrow them! "It took us a long time to find an arrangement with the authorities", admits Canh. It is Sunday in HCMCity. Canh has come all the way from Canada to inaugurate the new dispensary his group will be funding at a local pagoda. We are only 20 minutes away from the city's downtown lights, but we could be on another planet. There are no fancy clothes here, no shiny motorbikes, no neon lights. This is shanty town at its best: wooden shacks, open sewers, narrow dirt alleys, ragged passersby and a filthy market.

The grounds of the pagoda, with their open spaces, their nicely tended flower beds and tall shade trees are almost unreal. Grey and brown clad nuns walk softly around the buildings. On the left of the compound, a freshly-painted rectangular building stands out. It is the new dispensary. The Canadians paid for the renovation and will supply the medication. Local doctors will give their time for free. Both western and traditional medicine will be provided.

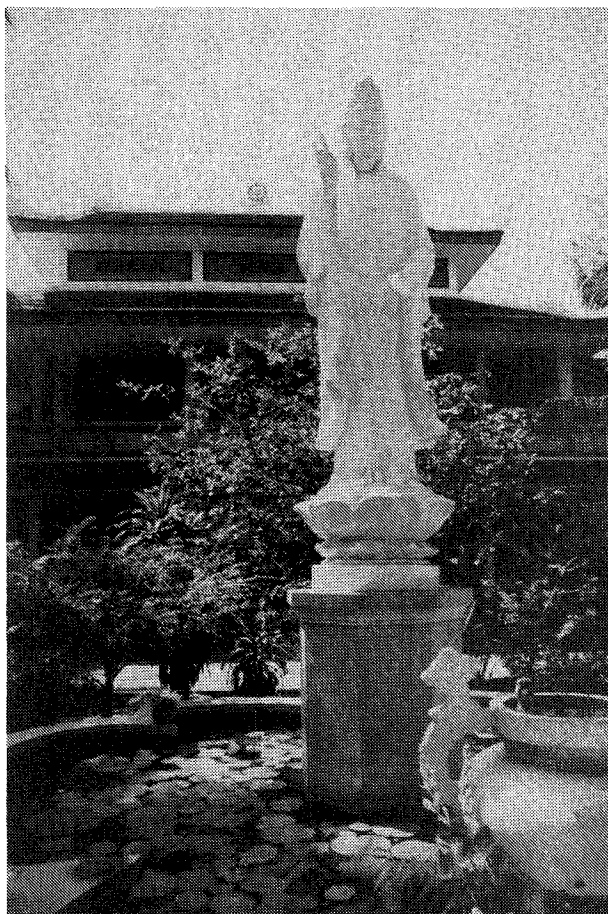
Over 200 people are present at the inauguration, among them some leaders of the official Buddhist Church. There are long speeches, prayers and songs. One of the speakers, a young-looking monk in a brown robe is angry. He beats the air with his fist and I struggle to understand what the problem is. He is unhappy because a nun has been giving out pins emblazoned with the Foundation logo (a lotus flower). He says the pins are "not Vietnamese". They are a western phenomenon. The monk also blames the members of the Foundation for having spoken of the

(9). Catholics supported Diem's corrupt and brutal regime in the South during the late 50's and early 60's. Diem and his family, themselves catholics, abused and cruelly repressed Buddhist monks. Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, Picador, 1990.

dispensary's budget in dollars instead of dong, the Vietnamese currency. "We must not let the foreigners impose on us", he says.

The whole ceremony, so peaceful to an outside observer, is riddled with conflict. To the last minute, the organizers fear the representative of the local sanitary committee - a government body - will not come. He has threatened to do so two days ago. Only a last minute intervention saved the show. The official came but disapproved in his speech of the fact that nowhere on the dispensary was there a sign identifying the City's health department. The discussion goes on.

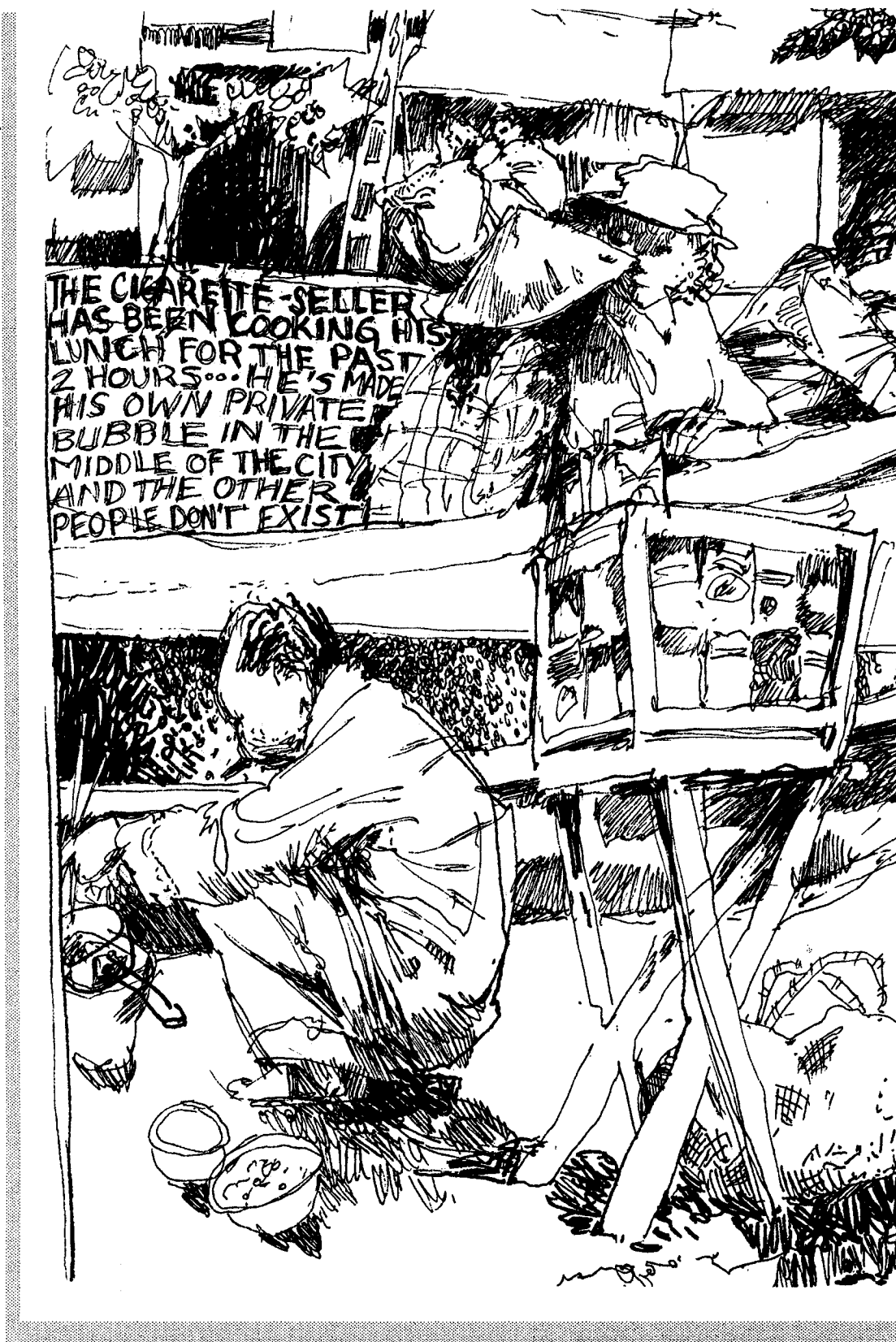
In HCM City, the guardian of the Foundation's good deeds is a 37-year old buddhist nun, a soft-spoken woman who took the veil at the early age of 14. "I love the Buddha", she says before taking me on a tour of the pagoda. Here, the photographs of people who have no family are displayed and strangers come to pray for those unknown ancestors. Not all is well these days for the monks but life is easier, says the young nun, "much much easier". But that is another story.



Courtyard of the pagoda

As we ride home, we again face HoChiMinh City's chaotic circulation. Months after our arrival, I still do not understand why there are traffic lights in HCMCity and signs indicating one-way streets. Nobody cares. Nobody respects them. It is open season on pedestrians and on the cyclists crazy enough to try to obey the rules. A few days ago, a careless motorcyclist rammed into my bicycle, throwing me off on the pavement in the middle of busy Dien Bien Phu street. That was the day I first swore in Vietnamese. The night before a car driving with no headlights in the wrong direction of a one-way street had hit Pierre's bike head on. Then, I had been too shocked to swear and too busy making sure Pierre was all right - which he was. Then the car was gone and a helpful street-vendor was offering us her two wooden seats for a rest, feeding us pineapple and stubbornly refusing to be paid. A few minutes later we were laughing, she at our primitive Vietnamese, we at how close we had come to a serious accident.

Life in HCMCity was a roller-coaster of frustrations followed by exhilaration. Buying newspapers and magazines was a frustrating moment because not only street-vendors but respectable hotels were selling "subscribers copy not for sale" issues at twice their normal price.



Sketch by Rosemary Kacoroski

In the confusion of HCM City some people manage to build a bubble



Going to the post office was another frustrating moment. The four ladies working the *poste restante* desk could hardly be persuaded to get off their seats, busy as they were painting their nails. They would painstakingly look through piles of unclassified letters and then in a movement I finally understood meant "Nothing", they would raise their two hands up in the air and agitate them like windmills. But progress finally came to the *poste restante* desk. One day in December, a young woman smiled at me from behind the desk. She kept a notebook listing the most recent arrivals. I loved her. Just like I loved Mlle Phuong, the young bank teller who took care of my account. Going to the bank was not a frustrating moment. Phuong knew everything and could do anything. At least that is what I thought. She spoke lovely French and remembered my name the second time I went to see her at Exim Bank. The whole bank staff seemed to be less than 30-years-old and I never spent more than 15 minutes there. "Often in the past people went to the bank and were told there was no cash", recalls Hung. "Especially before Têt, there was always a cash shortage." Those days seem to be gone.

But the days of suffering are not. A few days before we left HCMCity a woman in rags fell unconscious in front of our gate, her child crying at her side, passersby ignoring them. By the time I got there, wondering how angry my landlady would be if I moved them inside, a man on a motorcycle stopped and signalled me he was taking care of everything. I felt powerless. I did not even know where the closest clinic or hospital was. Each morning brought its new load of squatters around those residential streets where villas were being renovated and rented to foreigners. Squatters had few possessions: a rattan mat, a few pots, a plastic sheet for a roof. They cooked on the sidewalk and relieved themselves in the streets. Early morning, young couples, their bodies intertwined, slept in full light. At night, men played cards and smoked in the dimmed light of kerosene lamps. On Christmas Eve, a lone man, his back to a telephone poll, his bundle on the pavement, played a sad tune on a wooden flute. A few blocks down, in a Catholic chapel, a choir of nuns were singing "Holy Night" in Vietnamese. Then a government car shrieked to a stop and an elegantly-dressed woman jumped out, giggling, her arms loaded with colorfully wrapped gifts. It was our last night in HoChiMinh City.

It is now midnight in Hanoi and the sound is deafening. All over town, and especially around Hoan Kiem Lake, firecrackers are exploding, fuses are lighting up the dark velvet sky. The air is



Preparing for Têt

full of the acrid smell of powder and I am choking. Thousands of Hanoians are cheering the New Year. At a party earlier in the evening, a bunch of young Vietnamese each had a small cup of wine to toast the New Year. Just one. And then we sang, and danced and danced again and went for a stroll around the lake. Hoan Kiem Lake was one of the prettiest sight I had ever seen. There may have been drunken people in town, but I did not see any. Families were leisurely strolling around the lake, parents showing children how to light their first firecracker, buying sweets and nuts, eating ice cream, waiting for the New Year. Teenagers were bicycling around, dressed in their best clothes, balloons flying from their bikes like colorful kites. Old people were sitting on benches, holding hands and watching the bright lights illuminating the pagoda in the lake. *Chuc Mung Nam Moi!* Happy New Year.

*Carole B.*

Carole Beaulieu  
Hanoi - Feb.93

