



HANOI CALLING
ONE THOUSAND YEARS NOW

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MY HANOI AND THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF HANOI BY GREG GIRARD

LE VAN LAN

I started to have my own Hanoi in the middle of the 1930s.

I was born on Hang Cot Street, so named because it was where they made bamboo sheets. I was delivered at Doc Tam's Hospital by a woman who had such smooth hands in delivery that she was lauded as "Doc." That well-known maternity clinic—where many Hanoians were born—became a cooperative where they printed lines on paper and bound books at one point, and later a furniture manufacturer. It's now the site of a large, shiny business.

My mother brought me home to the family house on Hang Dau Street (Bean Street), where she bought and sold green beans, black beans and soya beans, and eventually rice, corn, potatoes and cassava. My father, a student of Master Can (Bachelor Can Van Luong) of Dong Kinh Academy in the early years of the century on Hang Dao Street, returned home to practice herbal medicine in the back of the house, with my mother's store in the front. Inspired by the beginning of the eight-word adage "born spring, grown summer, harvested autumn, stored winter," my father named the store Spring Birth, and had a sign drawn in large Chinese characters, hanging it over the front door.

That house is now a big bank owned by the people from Vinh who came to Hanoi to do business at a location close to a well-known address: The School of Doc Moc—Dien Duc Le, Doctor, Chief of Education of Hanoi, from Ke Moc. The respectful teacher was beaten to death without cause by French colonist Jean Dupuis one day when he passed the North Gate (Main Gate in the North). His school, in the middle of Hang Dau Street, was built into a family temple by his students and relatives. The temple was sacred and spacious,

shrouded deep within a cloud of incense burning all year round. But now, what is left of the temple is small and dark.

In the mess and noise of today's Hanoi, I often go looking for the city of my childhood and my ancestors. I find it sometimes, under the foundations of many houses on Hang Cot Street, for example, when excavation occasionally reveals printed bricks, or pieces of flowered earthenware of the Ly or the Le Dynasties. Here, before the Nguyen Dynasty built the Old Citadel of Hanoi in the beginning of the 19th century on top of what was left of Thang Long Imperial City, was the easternmost part of the palace, dating back to the 11th century. My father told me that in his time, people were still able to see the gate of Thang Long Hanoi.

Unexpectedly, I recently found pieces of the old soul of Hanoi in the photographs of Greg Girard that reflect the real life of the city—in its houses and on its street corners. It is Hanoi, but somehow presented with shapes, and without much movement or bright light. The photos are so humanistic, taken with such finesse, that I recognize the soul of Hanoi lingering within them. At the risk of sounding too nostalgic, I want to thank Greg Girard for this opportunity.

Le Van Lan is one of Vietnam's best-known historians. He is the author of 20 books, including *The Era of Hung Kings, Civilization in the Bronze Era* and *Figures in Vietnamese History*.

AT THE END OF A JOURNEY

NGUYEN QUI DUC

It happened in Singapore. It had rained, and when it was over, an earthy smell rose from where the soil had been baking since early morning. I lingered outside a hotel lobby, overwhelmed by the recognition of a familiar aroma of white and yellow flowers. It happened, too, in Baguio, Philippines. The orange and gold coloured rocks and the rows of pine trees on the hills above the roads coming in from the airport were so familiar. I was grieving for the clouds, the hills and the fog—and a childhood in another town.

These moments of remembrance continued in whichever city I lived in, and so did the longing for my native Vietnam.

From North Africa to North London, on the steps of the Chichen Itza pyramids in Mexico or inside the craziness of Tokyo, whether on short visits or longer sojourns, I made discoveries and met people with foreign tongues. All the while, the travelling and exposure to new things did nothing to dampen my longing for the old home. In Indonesia, Morocco and San Francisco, something would always—suddenly—send my mind back to my youth. And now, after all the airports, the train stations and foreign destinations, I've found a place—Hanoi. A new life, in the old country.

It's been four years since my arrival in Hanoi, and two since I opened a gallery and bar. Friends joke that I'll be found one day, 10 or 15 years on, demanding another drink long after rigor mortis has set in. I've finally found a way to end a peripatetic life. In an insane moment, I felt that Hanoi needed a different kind of place where local artists could hang out and work on projects together. I'd be a bridge helping foreigners to learn more about Vietnamese arts and culture.

The gallery and bar is on a street named after Trieu Viet Vuong, a military leader who waged guerrilla warfare and defeated northern invaders in the years between 545 and 550. He declared himself emperor, and later, encircled by an enemy, his own son-in-law, he was chased to the coast. He drowned himself in 571 at a spot east of Hanoi where the river Day meets the South China Sea.

Such stories are one reason Hanoi and this country are deadly appealing: it is old, its history unconcealed. You can see it in the museums, but also in the frowns on people's faces, in the way a neighbour talks about his grandfather's grandfather. You can hear it in a banker's words—her accounting and services to a customer driven as much by business as by ancient customs. You can hear history in the words a tea vendor uses in his daily life, and in a mother's temple prayers. Watch the news, and the journalist will report on something related to a battle centuries before. And you can recognize that history even in the energy of a new generation that, on the surface, is hell-bent on a Western future.

Trieu Viet Vuong Street stretches for about a mile, lined with coffee shops and a few Japanese restaurants tucked under the canopies of eagle trees. Here, reputedly, was where many writers lived in the 1940s and 1950s. It's some distance south of the Old Quarter, with narrow shop fronts, congested food stalls and tourist traps laid out like cardboard boxes in a cargo hall. This is where a visitor will feel transported by the exoticism and imaginings of a past life.

I go about my days now without encountering much of that old Hanoi. Like all visitors, I've come to know many of the city's best noodle vendors and tea

merchants. I occasionally search the district for an odd piece of decorative metal on a block named Charcoal Street, or visit the old Chinese woman selling khaki-coloured paper by the kilo on Fish Street. But it's too crowded there now, and I miss venturing into the its labyrinths full of little silk and fake antique shops tucked into a few square metres in the front of a former French villa.

If the Old Quarter is the cherished soul of the city, Trieu Viet Vuong and the surrounding area might be its liver: hidden, humble, but alive and crucial. A few touches and it would be a charming Bohemian area, less upscale than the Beaubourg in Paris, less trendy than the Village in Manhattan, and less an attraction than San Francisco's North Beach. I often imagine the area redone à la Lan Kwai Fong of Hong Kong.

Friends have talked to me about buying a dozen buildings here to build a new neighbourhood, taking a small part in the bustling renewal of this capital city, yet somehow maintaining its original characters. But it would be laughable for me to entertain such a scheme—being neither an urban planner nor a hungry developer with the salesmanship to persuade investors.

On the street outside my gallery, life is an unending piece of theatre: the boys debate future careers, the hairdresser looks for advice on home décor, the mother sells DVDs while nursing a newborn infant. I get involved, too, with neighbours in their battle to keep the cars from parking on both sides of the street. I buy my newspapers from a young woman who also supplies me with cellphone cards and occasionally helps me sweep the sidewalk after the rain. I talk to the shoeshine boys about life at home, when they were younger and

worked in rice paddies—our conversations interrupted often by a Bentley or Lexus roaring by.

Even with smaller motorcycles, there's a new attitude in Hanoi. The Vietnamese have a concept called *Nhường nhịn*—*Nhường* is akin to yielding, and *nhịn* is to tolerate and forgive. Watch the traffic now, and see how no one yields any longer. *Nhường* is outdated. Still, when you don't yield and someone hits you, there's no road rage. The injured and the guilty party simply smile at each other. Nasty impatience and an unwillingness to yield, coupled with amazing tolerance and forgiveness—it all exists together in Hanoi. It's not simply in traffic where this is evident. It reigns in government offices and on construction fields; it is expressed by day labourers pulling their carts of bricks next to the Porsches and Audis.

The occupants of those cars who rush past me on Trieu Viet Vuong are the new moneyed Hanoians, heading to the department stores and spaghetti restaurants down at Vincom Center a few blocks away. I'd been to too many similar malls, in places like Shanghai and Seoul and Seattle. I can't say that I like them being here, much as I understand the appreciation of local people who seem desperate for the convenience and novelty of it all. It's what was there before such monstrosities went up that I mourn. Single bungalows, villas full of history, homes and lives removed forever.

And so, the city changes. For those of us who saw Hanoi in earlier years, there's immense sadness. We've understood for a while now that it's inevitable. With new wealth and means, people will want what has not been available. Private toilets, running water, roofs that don't leak and drains that drain.

I fell under Hanoi's spell on my first visit, and occasionally revert back to a romanticized vision of an old city in the 1940s: red-roofed and yellow-walled French villas oozing with charm, and bicycles—nothing but bicycles—floating silently by. It wasn't a thunderous punch to the heart, it simply seeped into me with each moment of the day, each fedora-wearing old man I see walking along with a grandchild on a tricycle.

My new friends in Hanoi are slowly abandoning the notion of me being a foreigner. I still speak the language, and somewhere in the past four years, enough of the local expressions have become a part of my vocabulary. Some see in me a strange old man with habits and values they no longer adhere to. They can be more expressive and they laugh when I talk of war. We will have our differences, but still they've offered me their friendship. They'll go with me to buy discarded furniture while I'll show them books on new architecture in Tokyo or Oslo where new buildings express a measure of respect for what's been there for centuries.

Hanoi still has enough trees and lakes and old buildings to make it a charming home. It's a dying city, if you will, when you think of what's being destroyed. It will have a new façade, long before its history and ancient customs disappear. New people with new attitudes are charging down its streets full speed, and there's nothing anybody can do. Hanoi, as I know it and have known it, will disappear. I will disappear one day, too. For now, inside my bar with friends, in a seat at the opera house or visiting a gallery in an old home built at the beginning of the last century, I'm grateful for what this city offers.

The flight from my birthplace in Dalat to Hanoi is just over one hour, a distance of about 1,000 kilometres. It's taken me 50 years to cover that distance, across many oceans, many continents, with all the discoveries and longing in between. It's too early to say this is home. But I suspect the journey is ending, and Hanoi will be that final place.

Nguyen Qui Duc is a journalist and the author of *Where the Ashes Are*. He established Tadioto, a bar and art space in Hanoi in 2008.





















