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From Tanks to Selfies, Vietnam 50 Years On

A Photo Essay

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Vietnam has evolved from a war-torn nation into a modern, fast-developing country with a young, forward-looking population. Brimming with national pride, it eagerly embraces change—yet it continues to remember the war it fought with remarkable resilience and determination.

Just weeks after getting married, I arrived in Saigon in October 1974. The then capital of South Vietnam was to be my first marital home while one of the most consequential conflicts of modern history was going on, but like many others I did not know the war would soon be coming to a climactic end. For me, the city was both tense and lonely—dingy, sandbagged guard posts were everywhere, the alien smells of durian and *nuoc mam* (fermented fish sauce) pervaded the air, and I did not know a soul.

> The horizon of Ho Chi Minh City or Saigon was crowded, with tall buildings competing against each other to stand the tallest. There were no such structures 50 years ago.

Now, 50 years later, in April 2025, I, along with a handful of journalists, photographers and others who had witnessed the last days of the war, was invited to attend events celebrating the reunification of Vietnam by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee.

Saigon's name had changed to Ho Chi Minh City but most people use the two interchangeably, much as we do here with Bombay and Mumbai, or Calcutta and Kolkata. But some of the old timers in our group were surprised at how lax the authorities were about enforcing Saigon's new name, Ho Chi Minh City.

Whatever people called it, the city was festive, its roads a sea of red. Everyone wore postbox-red T-shirts with gold stars and waved the red hammer-and-sickle flags of the Communist party. The mood was joyous. Navigating traffic was like pushing against a crimson-hued Great Wave of Kanagawa, with a veritable sea of red-clad motorcyclists—sometimes seven abreast—spanning the road. It is estimated that in a city of nine million people, there are more than seven million motorbikes. But everyone wears a helmet and follows traffic rules.

There were selfie points bedecked with fixed floats and huge screens providing scenic backdrops for selfie takers. Taking selfies is the new national sport. Lamp posts and pillars at every corner were festooned with commemorative 50th anniversary flags and posters celebrating reunification. Many of them included pictures of Ho Chi Minh. Curiously, pictures of present-day leaders were absent, even party secretary general To Lam, who presided over the day's ceremony in front of the palace gate that North Vietnamese tanks broke through half a century ago.

The city's horizon was crowded, with tall buildings competing against each other to stand the tallest. There were no such structures 50 years ago. The iconic opera house, the Presidential Palace, and the Continental Hotel had dominated at eye level but were now dwarfed by towering, glittering, luxurious buildings of various sizes.

I was particularly overwhelmed with nostalgia on seeing the Continental Hotel, where I had spent many an afternoon sipping a refreshing citron pressé or Vietnamese filter coffee—on the same terrace where Graham Greene is said to have written *The Quiet American*, his iconic 1955 novel. The then owners, Philippe Franchini and his wife Le Man, and their two adorable children had become friends and were responsible for making me feel at home in Saigon. Over the years, the grandeur of the Continental had faded. Vietnam's economic liberalisation welcomed global luxury brands across every industry. The country's urban landscapes now encompass everything from small street vendors and Uniqlo to luxury retailers like Gucci. Vietnam's locally produced VinFast cars jostle for space on its busy roads with two- and four-wheeled ride share vehicles called Grab Go.

Vietnamese life, then and now, is lived on the street. With the five-day holiday to commemorate reunification, everyone was outside—squatting and chatting, eating *pho* soup, painting nails, and dressing up. The idea of personal privacy, so precious in the West, was and remains non-existent in Vietnam. People even slept on the streets to secure viewing positions for the next day's parades and fireworks displays.

And far from objecting to my snapping photos, people smiled and enthusiastically posed for me. I saw a bride in full white dress on the street at around 7 am before the sun really hit. She and her photographer were carefully adjusting her veil and hair. Her long, painted, bejewelled nails were a work of art.

One day, our group visited the University of Social Sciences and Humanities and Vietnam National University. After a long ride on a pristine metro constructed as part of a Japanese joint venture, we arrived at our destination. Both universities were huge, with various graduate and undergraduate programmes, university clubs, and even a museum and huge housing estates for students and faculty. The universities claim an intake of 15,000 graduate and undergraduate students and about 1,000 international students annually. Due to the holiday, we did not see many students but the few we did interact with were bright, articulate, and curious.

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Everywhere we went, young people asked us about our impressions of Vietnam. They were so surprised to learn that we had lived in Saigon during the war—well before they were even born. I did feel like a bit of a relic but they were sweet, kind, and brimming with national pride. Unfortunately, we were not able to visit a third university, the private non-profit Fulbright University of Vietnam (FUV). The FUV is a joint venture between Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and the governments of Vietnam and the United States. However, we did meet some faculty from there who seemed full of zeal about this wonderful project but were also disheartened by the US funding cuts that the university and other businesses were facing.

The next day it was time to visit the Cu Chi tunnels, an intricate network of passages built by the Viet Cong during the French occupation from 1945 to 1954. The soldiers had used rudimentary tools and even their bare hands to dig long, deep, and ingeniously conceptualised tunnels, which included up to three levels of kitchens, medical dispensaries, and official meeting rooms, in interconnected sections with staircases. Bamboo tubes allowed air flow while pipes redirected smoke away from the main cooking areas to prevent detection by anyone on the surface. If you are of even a slightly larger build or, God forbid, claustrophobic, this is not the place for you! It was a sobering reminder of the war that the Vietnamese fought with such tenacity and ingenuity.

The War Remnants Museum houses other reminders of the war that are particularly poignant. The numerous photographs displayed are a gruesome reminder of the brutality of the war. British photographer Tim Page's photographs were heart-breaking. Tim's widow, Marianne Harris, was also part of our group. She was hugged and tearfully embraced by many of the older generation, especially women, who thanked her for all her husband had done for Vietnam. Ut, who took the unforgettable photograph of the napalm girl, was also a part of the group. I saw a woman sobbing in front of a photo of the My Lai massacre.

In the museum, we also saw the wall-size photographs and the camera of Goro Nakamura, who was also part of the group. He had literally brought to light the leafless Camau forest destroyed by Agent Orange, the chemical defoliant used extensively by the US military to denude forests where the North Vietnamese had sought shelter. But the poison entered the water supply, infecting rivers, crops, and forests, causing physical deformities and cancers in those exposed it, including pregnant women, who delivered deformed babies. It also affected American soldiers fighting the war.

There had been many women journalists covering the war in Vietnam. In our group, we were privileged to have Edith Lederer of Associated Press (AP) to represent the women who had been there. Being with these people felt like being a part of a special moment in living history. The sombre history of the war needs to be remembered and retold as the younger generation moves away from the realities that their parents and grandparents lived through to create the bustling Saigon they see today.

The excitement was heady as the day of the parade dawned. People crowded the street to view the smartly marching contingents. They were perfectly synchronised, and it was a riot of colours. There were murmurs of surprise to see Chinese, Cambodian and Lao contingents on parade. I was so reminded of getting up early to watch our Republic Day parades in Delhi. But it was such a hot day!

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Feeling that we wanted to see more of the country than just its biggest cities, we decided to break away from the group and visit Ben Tre in the Mekong Delta, which is about four hours from Saigon. We stayed at a riverside resort where middle- and upper middle-class Vietnamese families came to holiday. An eight-year-old approached me and asked where I was from. He had vaguely heard of India but was keener to tell me, unprompted, that he thought Vietnam was the best place in the world and he wanted to live there all his life. Being older and jaded, I assumed he was parroting lines he heard at home and in school. But I was nonetheless charmed by his unabashed patriotism.

Ben Tre was not as glitzy as Saigon but it was a hive of activity. As we sailed down the river, every household was abuzz with activity. We pulled up alongside a local fishing boat, and were offered freshly caught and fried small fish that were utterly delicious.

This fertile land had cocoa, mangoes, coconuts, and durian aplenty. And every family was industriously making chocolates, candies, soaps, and oils as small-scale businesses. We arrived at a family-style riverside restaurant, where two young daughters, who were probably around six and nine years old, came forward to solicitously help us off the boat and affectionately serve our meal. They reminded me of my own grandchildren. The night market was bustling with the happy sounds of children and their parents enjoying themselves. It felt like a colourful, noisy carnival with food stands every couple of yards.

Back in Saigon, on our last day and sorry to be leaving, I arrived dejectedly at the hotel lobby for my last Vietnamese coffee. I gazed in wide eyed wonder at a bevy of Disney fairytale princesses photographing each other. Around ten young women, between the ages of 16 and 30, were dressed as Disney princesses. I shook my head in disbelief. Here was Aurora, Alice, Belle, and a whole bevy of others. Was this really Vietnam?

These young women apparently gathered together at least once a month to chat about fashion and new outlets for their creative ideas. They coordinated their meetings via Facebook—83% of the population is apparently on Facebook. Dressed in costumes that they most often design and make, including accouterments like pendants, they gathered together. Some sent their designs to be copied in Japan or other countries. Talk of reunification or the war against the French or the Americans was far from their minds. Conversely, it was the soft power of the US, Japan, and South Korea that dominated their thoughts.[1]

One kind girl gifted me a soft, pink sparkling rocking horse pendant she was wearing as a memento. It was all so exciting and light and cheerful. Their *joie de vivre* was infectious and lifted my spirits. This particular group had started about a year ago and many began wearing these clothes when fairly young. They said their parents did not comment much but their brothers initially gave them a hard time saying that they should not wear these costumes out in the streets. But now they had got used to it. One of the girls, dressed as Merida (actually a 21-year-old called Thuy), was studying economics and hoped to create her own brand soon.

Fifty years later, this is a new Vietnam. The change is dramatic. Vietnam is now a Facebook nation and the armed revolution has morphed into a digital one.

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Footnotes:

1 Cosplay as it is called is a Japanified cross between the words costume and play. Although the idea is not new it has caught on especially in East Asia amongst the young and not so young from about the 1980's. Youngsters dress up as characters from movies, anime, manga and, of course, Disney.