

A STRANGER IN HIS HOMELAND

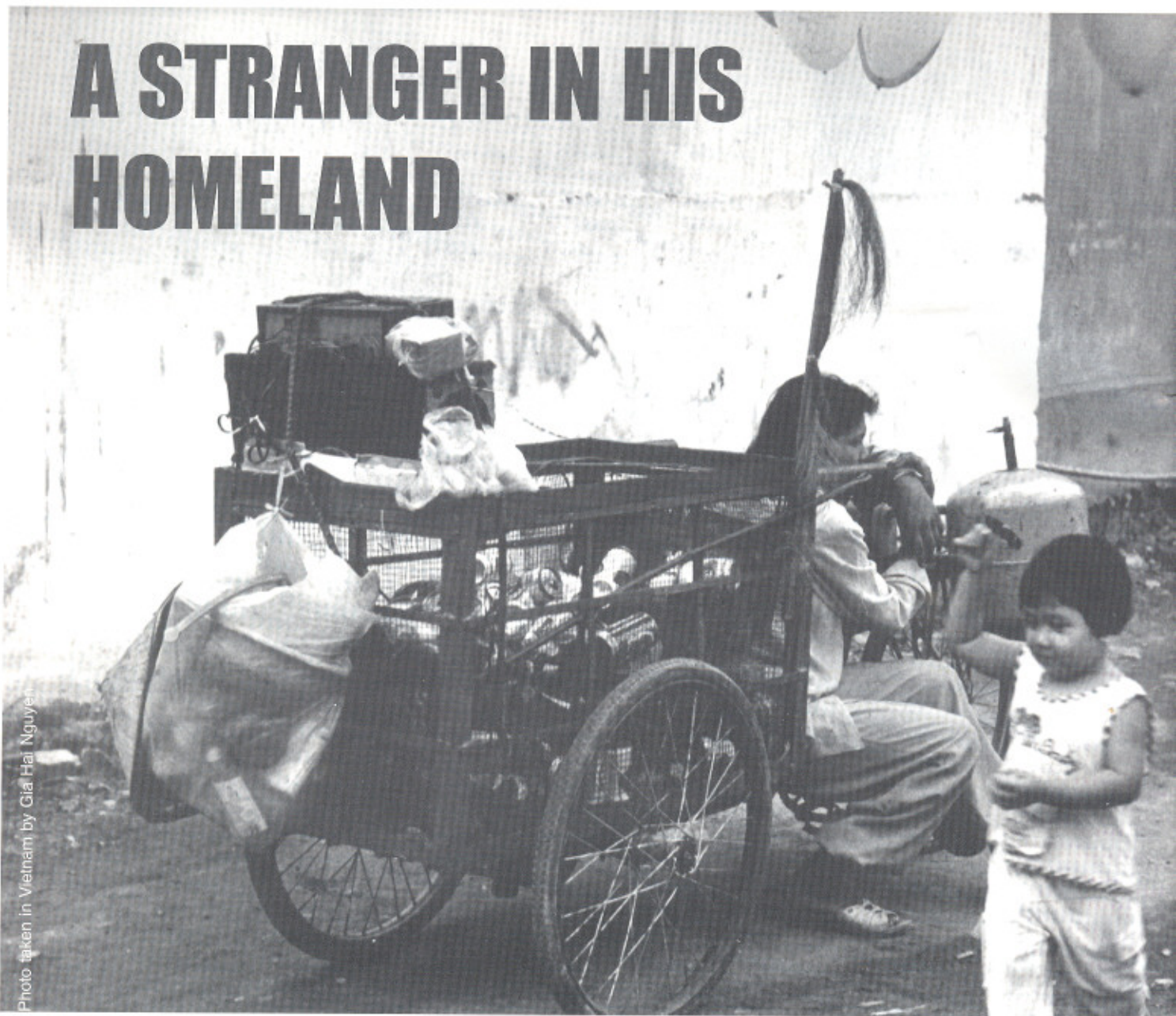


Photo taken in Vietnam by Gia Hai Nguyen

TIEP NGUYEN writes of his experience as a Vietnamese refugee re-visiting his native country.

Many people in the Australian community arrived here as refugees. They had been forced to leave their countries of origin because of the persecution they had experienced there. But when conditions permit, some of them are quite keen to re-visit their original countries. I am among these people. I returned to Vietnam in 1993, to visit relatives and friends, 10 years after a clandestine escape out of the country by boat.

I would like to begin this personal account of my visit by making two general comments. For some exiles and refugees who feel attached

to their homeland, returning there for a short visit or to live there permanently, is always something desirable. On the other hand, returning to the land that has persecuted them and driven them from their homes and loved ones is in a sense returning to the scene of former trauma.

My trip to Vietnam was a *homecoming*, at least in the physical sense of the word, because it was there that I was born and it was there that I had come from. In other respects though, for instance the historical context of exile from the homeland, my trip home was not like

that of expatriates returning home from service with international organisations, or from confinement in a war prison in a hostile country, or from deportation by a non-accepting foreign government. Though it was a return to the site of past war trauma, my experience was unlike that of many Australian war veterans revisiting their old battlefields in a foreign land. Where was the difference then?

During my two-week stay, I met a few people and saw a few places. People who were children when I left were now adults. The

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adults I had known were now old and gray. Sights and scenes I used to know were either gone or transformed. I passed by my family house, which is now the administrative office of the local area. That reminded me of the evening I had been handcuffed and taken away on foot to the security police station, passing by my house on the way. I prayed for the first time in front my father's ashes, which were contained in an urn and kept in a small building adjacent to the local church. This devout moment triggered streams of memories about a man who had been so attached to the house he had built and to the holy temple he had attended every morning and evening, yet had uttered his last breath somewhere far from where he used to live and pray.

Reliving memories about bygone days, I was not in the same situation as the people around who were hard-pressed to earn a living. My steps were not in tune with the present, but rather with the past. Going in search of the lost and the missing, I became a stranger in my own homeland.

The sense of being a stranger in my place of birth became worse as I acknowledged feelings of danger and insecurity that were vague, yet pervasive, not very strong, yet never abating during my whole stay. The traumatic dreams of imprisonment I had experienced in the past, after being released from a 're-education' camp and emigrating to Australia, reoccurred now, as vivid and distressing as before. I wondered whether these unpleasant feelings and dreams were the residual effects of my past traumatic experiences, or whether they were a reflection of the current institutionalised political oppression endured by the Vietnamese people. It must be one way or another, or maybe both.

Feeling estranged and insecure, I could not find a connection between the 'homeland within' and the

'homeland without'. The former - aspects such as my Vietnamese ancestral past and core Vietnamese values - had not changed, whilst the latter - the environment I found myself in - had become unfamiliar and threatening. Perhaps the apparently inextricable connection between the two had been severed in some way, after many years of my living away from the source and the Socialist transformation of the whole society.

This lack of connection between my homeland within - a psychological space, and my homeland without - a geographical space, had brought me the experience of being both at home and a stranger at the same time.

A particular feature of the alienating environment was the socio-political atmosphere, subdued

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and stifling, generated by a mono-party system. The press and the electronic media treated the essential issues of the nation unanimously; it did not reflect any divergence from the social and political agenda set by the party politburo. Agreement and consensus were promoted at meetings of all levels. Dissidence and criticism were discouraged. For unity and absolute conformity, everyone must tick 'yes'. For diversity and non-conformity, absolutely 'no'. People seemed to have learned to be cautious and quiet. They did not appear to know about the prominent citizens being jailed whom the overseas Vietnamese and the international community had honoured and demanded to be set free. The torture

survivors had to live in silence with their traumas. The victims of discrimination and injustice had no dream of redress. Everybody was forcefully made to become partners in a conspiracy of silence.

This socio-political picture of the country, unvarying in any respect and tiresomely uniform, could not be a better contrast to the hustle and bustle of an emerging economy, or to the boiling dynamics of a popular aspiration for progress, democracy and prosperity.

What was the outcome of my sojourn? What were the gains and losses from the trip?

It is rather paradoxical to acknowledge culture shock when you revisit your native homeland, but in fact I had suffered such an experience. I felt lost, estranged, distanced and split from the cultural and socio-political environment. I went back to an unknown homeland and realised that this was not yet a homeland to which I could return and live in peace. It was rather a pain at heart to feel that my homeland was

not a home. I saw the difference between physical homecoming and emotional homecoming. I felt both attached to my homeland and separated from it as well.

I was quite sure that for the suffering people I became more compassionate. My negative thoughts and feelings about the Socialist ideology were reinforced by external factors, such as poverty and backwardness, that even the staunchest supporters of the regime could not deny.

After all, I perceived myself and felt myself just a visitor, not a returnee. The search for a homeland goes on. ○

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