

# ***Travel Monologues***

## **Vietnam: Four Stories**

Mike Violette

*It's easy and natural to make broad observations about this multi-dimensional country (Oh! It's amazing: the traffic, the food, the markets, the hectic pace), but descriptions don't do the place justice until the impact of the past and the pressure of the present are viewed from the perspective of individuals living it. Here, we meet a few ordinary men with extraordinary stories and mingle a little bit of history with the sights and sounds of this fascinating country.*



Our attention is drawn to four corners of an inner room of the House of Vietnam. These four corners are defined by perspectives on four men we met during our visit here: **Tien, Tuan, Kah and Nguyen**. They represent the pith of the country: the center core and they are cultivating the harvest of this quickly-developing nation.



There are parallels between the four that frame projections of Vietnam's future. Tien and Tuan were both born in 1963; Nguyen and Kah were both born in 1980. Although pairs of them share birth years, their time on the planet has been spent in vastly different ways and each of their existences, and prospects, portend the potential and the path that Vietnam will take to her future.

### **Then**

The US famously and hurriedly left in 1975 as Saigon was overrun by the Vietnamese Army from the north and the Viet Cong from within. Vietnam was officially unified in 1976 and the clash of ideologies plunged the whole of the country into a period of chaos and mayhem and further war. The less-than-joyful reunion was exacerbated by the

vacuum left by the departed Western powers (who held sway for over 100 years), retributive fratricide and the ideological divisions arising between the USSR and China.

The spasms of the post-colonial world had long-lasting and damaging effects from which many former colonies are only now recovering. For a long time, the West thought that the world was ours to carve up and proportion according to our preference; this kind of thinking did not serve any of our heroes very well. [For an interesting perspective on Vietnam, refer to the heavily-researched book Approaching Vietnam, From World War II through Dienbienphu by Lloyd C. Gardner--or better yet, come on over and see for yourselves.]

France and the US in particular have to take more than a little responsibility for the outcome of our involvement there. But it is impossible to say that any single decision could have been different and the outcome more positive. The lens of time is tremendously myopic; all we can comment on is what we see today and posit connections between now and then.

Traveling and working in Vietnam lends one some perspective to the question of why Vietnam is the way it is, but answers do not come in black and white, rather, it is like trying to describe the color of rain. A modest observation is that the people that we have engaged and have worked with view their communist past (as defined in Cold War terms) as fully, and thankfully, behind them. They will never go back as populace realizes that their future is brighter than those of their parents and grandparents.

Our tangled legacy there is complex and multi-hued (The OSS, pre-cursor to the CIA, worked with Ho Chi Minh, supporting his efforts to expel the French after WWII). Ho pleaded with Truman for support, but the Korean war and the shift in the balance of power in China (Chiang losing to Mao) made associations with Ho untenable (McCarthy anyone?). Vietnam has only recently emerged (in the last 15 years) from a period of total economic and social malfunction and now enjoys vast and varied internal and external markets

After we left the country, Vietnam's rulers intended to route the regime of wryly-named "Democratic Kampuchea," led by the notoriously murderous Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. Animosity also arose over deep-seated rivalries and competition. The Khmer Rouge attempted to take back the fertile and productive Mekong Delta region, which Vietnam had occupied for three hundred years. Other acts of genocide, practiced indiscriminately by the cultivators of the Killing Fields--the slaughter of 3,100 citizens of the Vietnamese village of Ba Chuc in April 1978--further angered Vietnam. The hardened Vietnamese Army eventually overturned Pol and his demonic associates (and whipped up on China during some expeditions that she conducted).

After forty years of fighting had finally wheezed itself out, survivors emerged to take the next steps towards the future, relieved that their children will not face a war that touched the previous three generations. There are eighty million stories here, but the story of these four represent a wide band of the spectrum of Vietnam.

Two are rich, two are poor; two were born in 1963, two were born in 1980; two have lived overseas, two have never been out of the area; two have children, two have pregnant wives; two are well-connected, two eke out a survival; four run their own business; and all are looking for a better world for their children and have something to teach us about the human spirit.

## Tien

I stepped out on the front steps of the Rex Hotel on Dai Lo Nguyen Hue Boulevard in the middle of “Old Saigon” and surveyed the scooters, taxis, hawkers and tourists. There is a small park across the street and a statue of Ho Chi Minh sits in the square in front of the old City Hall: a French provincial building with much charm to recommend it. Ho was the leader of the Viet Minh during the First Indochina War to expel the French; he died in 1969 at the height of the fighting in the Second Indochina War, or what



Americans call the Vietnam War (the Vietnamese call it “The American War,” naturally enough).

The building is brilliantly lit at night and the glow casts a halo of light around ‘Uncle Ho’, who has the figure of a child on his lap.

Here in the tourism-rich south, there is no shortage of hustlers and opportunists--the good, the bad and the desperate--milling around the streets in front of the tourist hotels. Everyone is trying to scrape together a living "each according to his abilities..." as Karl is oft-quoted, and the swirl is a little disorienting and I blink a few times to get oriented to the surroundings. Usually, there are a few mostly decent folks who freelance near the doors of the Rex. I can imagine that the hotel has some kind of 'code of conduct' and the really nefarious folks are known and have some kind of proactive banishment from the area. Or not.

*"I've been waiting for you for all my life!"*

That caught my attention as I first saw Tien waving and smiling from across the street.

What a line. I waved back and descended the three steps to the street and joked back "I've been waiting for you, too!" This was enough of a connection to sprout the seeds of further association. It also signaled to the laconic security guards at the hotel that one of their patrons openly accepted a solicitation. Tien and I met at the curb.

He was good, his spiel earnest and he smiled a lot: solicitous but not obsequious. He could offer and I was in the market for some (honorable) diversions. Maybe a good run around town on a *cyclo*, ("sick-low") a three-wheel rickshaw of a sort, where the passenger sits on the front and is propelled by a 110 pound driver through the fizzy Saigon traffic.



"You want tour guide? Scooter ride?" Tien proposed.

I shook my head and looked where he came from across the street, saw no scooter. I know he didn't have a car.

"No, no, I need four cyclos for a city tour."

"Cyclos? Yes, I can find them. Not here, no more in front of hotel. Over there." He gestured to the next intersection with Dai Lo Le Loi Street, a busy central artery.

"OK, one hour. Four cyclos. How much?" I ask.

"Fifty thousand for one." (About three bucks).

We seal the deal: "Two hundred thousand, one hour, four cyclos."

"Wait here. Five minutes." He ran off to round up a few other entrepreneurs. He'd make a deal for thirty-thousand each, about two dollars, and keep the markup. Fine.

Tien is forty-five, about my age, and was a boy soldier at the tender age of 16. He smiles and grins a lot these days, but you can tell the weary worry in his eyes. Tien was conscripted and fought the Khmer Rouge for four years. Born in 1963, Vietnam already knew more than twenty years of constant conflict and, after his service, the region would not know peace for another ten years: forty years of almost continuous war. It is no wonder that Tien's generation sees this time of peace and prosperity as a special thing, an almost fragile wonderment. They are preparing the ground for the future citizens to reap a hard-won harvest.

We were each at least double the weight of the cyclo drivers and made a few select stops, which were scripted and played out a thousand times a day (this market, that market). Tien appeared at each stop, almost magically, hovering around us, watching his charges, providing some insulation from harm and protecting his interests. We bought some trinkets and a few nice knock-off shirts and returned to the Rex, alighted the cyclos and paid the agreed-upon amount. We tipped Tien a few and asked him where we could eat lunch. "and do you want to join us?".

He immediately said "Pho 24! Best place and it's close by, just two streets." He gestured up Dai Lo Nguyen Hue. Playing crossing guard to his American patrons, Tien walked ahead, shooing scooters and taxis away from us. Saigon traffic is like a rushing river, the vehicles swerving and flowing around pedestrians and slower moving objects like water around stones. Once in the street, the trick is to keep moving at a constant speed. Except for buses and trucks, the vehicles will flow around you--for the most part.



Over Pho Ga (chicken soup, but so much more than that) he told us about his time in the Army. Tien and most of his friends of the same age were picked up during a sweep of Saigon in 1979. Conscripted as foot soldiers in the War against Kampuchea, they were marched to a rude training camp in the jungle and taught how to shoot a rifle.

Tien fought the Khmer Rouge for four years. "I was fighting far away in the jungle. Terrible. Always rain, no food, mosquitos, snakes. Bullets! Pap-Pap-Pap-Pap-Pap! Right by my ear." He flicked his hand past his right temple. "Most of my friends died. But I am here! I am lucky!" His round head beamed a big smile on his 120 pound frame and he patted his chest lightly.

"But now it is better. It is still hard, but we have some job."

"Are you married? Children?"

"Yes, my wife has a good job. She is a cook at a hospital. My older daughter is in school, in her sixth year. My younger daughter is in the second year."

Education, by accounts, is not fully funded in Vietnam. The government provides a subsidy of 50% of the cost until the fifth year of school. After the 6th year, it's on the parent. Teachers are paid \$60-100 per month.

The cost for tuition for Tien's daughter is about \$30 a month, a princely sum, considering the average worker in a hotel or tourist job makes about \$100. So Tien and his wife work two jobs and live with Tien's parents, a not-uncommon situation that preserves the family-based culture of the society. The one change in demographic is a shift towards smaller families, especially in the urban areas. This is not so much of an issue now, as the population is fairly young, but may be a factor in twenty or thirty years, much as it is in the developed world at present.

Tien's daughter is ten years old, of a generation that has known peace and relative prosperity. Born in the 1990s and into an era of new engagement and possibility, she represents a break from a brutal and tragic history in Vietnam. Tien is determined to break the cycle of desperation for his daughter. He hustles all day, bringing in what he can. Talk about competition, too. I can only imagine that most days he goes without steady work. Today he did OK, I suppose. I got a lot more out of a few hours with him than the few dollars for his "fee."

"My daughter is learning English in school. Very important. She will not get a good job if she doesn't learn it."

"How did *you* learn English?"

"Self-study, listening to radio. Talking to people."

"And your daughter: What can she do if she doesn't learn English?"

"She can work for the government, but for small money. And no future. If she can speak English, she can work for American company." He pauses and laughs. "Maybe for you!"

We laugh and say 'Yes, of course'!

Or maybe we'll be working for her.

## **Tuan**

Tuan and Tien are the same age, but Tuan managed to escape the crumbling country in 1979, leaving from Vŭng Tàu near the coast aboard a forty foot boat loaded with over 100 people. Heading south in the open craft, the boat landed in Australia, avoiding pirates and surviving the elements in the semi-enclosed vessel.

The social re-engineering of the victorious communists, mimicking the murderous purges of Stalin and the bizarre excesses of Mao that were fashionable in Marxist circles, left Vietnam in a state of civic and economic chaos.

For many, it was too much to bear, particularly if one was aligned with the US-supported fallen South Vietnamese government; staying meant death.

In Tuan's boat, almost everyone survived.

"Only one guy died during the trip. He just sat in the bottom of the boat, quietly, not saying anything or complaining at all. Before we got to Australia, he just...died."

Maybe of a broken heart, who knows? For the lot of them, everything was left behind: homes, cars, businesses, families and friends. Tuan, only 16 at the time, managed to bring his wits to bear and in 10 years returned to open his first business in a healing Vietnam: fish-farming. Now nearly 20 years after that, he is a model of the successful businessman that the victors in the Vietnam conflict tried to expunge.

Tuan represents another slice of Vietnam's future: the escapee who returned and has prospered. It was only a short time after the US left in 1972 that the determined and Soviet-sponsored North Vietnamese Army, supported by the local forces of the Viet Cong, took Saigon, renaming it Ho Chi Minh City.

Thirty years on, we left Ho Chi Minh city for a drive to the coast, back to the river where Tuan escaped and has since returned. The river that flows in to the South China Sea close to the resort city of Vũng Tàu is broad at its mouth and, as it flows into the ocean, runs very deep. The waters run fast on the turn of the tide, particularly when high tide is waning. The mix of salt and fresh water is perfect for raising fish, which Tuan does, employing about 60 people as fish tenders, processors, boat operators, kitchen and serving staff.



The place is called Long Son, or Dragon Mountain. Dragons as mythological beasts appear in all manner of Chinese and Asian culture. This area is so-named because the

mountain that lies along the coast looks like a sleeping dragon. There are dragons in the sky and in the water, apparently, and to frighten the water-borne lizards, locals paint eyes on the fronts of their boats.



The boat that takes us across the river throbs noisily, sucking diesel fuel and crossing upstream against the fast-moving current. The river is not wide, about the size of the Potomac River at Georgetown, and the voyage takes only a few moments. From the perspective of the river, we see the workings of the fish farming operations up close. The area is leased from the State and the operation raises over thirty different kinds of mollusks, crustaceans and fish: fat oysters; spiny lobster; and fifty pound grouper. Loads of blue barrels support a matrix of nets and walkways. The nets are suspended in square pens and the fish are raised for one to two years, depending on the species, until they are ready for the markets, both locally and abroad, most notably Hong Kong.

The farms are guarded by fleet-footed alarm dogs.



Tuan claims to ship about 20,000 pounds of fish there every month. Grouper are the biggest, reaching 20 kilograms (forty pounds) in as many months. Other species include fresh-water lobster.



A typhoon a few years ago destroyed much of his infrastructure and cost Tuan \$120,000. There is no hazard insurance for fish (and I hazard other types of) farmers in Long Son and, if one computes the purchasing power equivalent of that sum, it would come to a few million dollars. But he rebuilt and keeps going.

We tied up to the restaurant and alight, walking the narrow wooden planks to the “private” dining room, a spare, but neat, thatch-roof-covered raft. Sitting Japanese-style on cushions, the day settles to an unhurried pace of food and conversation. The usual discussion topics: food, women and soccer.



Tuan runs his Long Son fish farm and floating restaurant with relaxed ease. It's obvious who the boss is and the staff moves to quietly-issued orders as we relax and take it in: *al fresco* dining, fresh fish and a 360 degree water view: what more can you ask for?

We have met Tuan before on a previous visit to Long Son and learned a little of his life. In the space of twenty years, he has made it big in Vietnam, accumulating ten cars and not quite so many wives and children. His manner is humble, but his hospitality is expansive, like his network.

Tuan is low-key and doesn't make too much of his success; it's like he just happened upon his situation, but his exposure to capitalism during his life in Australia supplanted the desperation of the countrymen who stayed behind and suffered re-education camps, economic deprivation and internecine warfare. He's also taken great pains to be "plugged in," making friends with people in the right places, mastering that element of human nature necessary for growing a mini-conglomerate of businesses.

Another of his enterprises is refurbishing cranes from Korea. He takes used construction equipment and renews the guts of the machines and sells them to the Vietnamese government, picking up a doubling profit in the meantime. Other activities

include partial interests in restaurants, trading companies and other webs of commerce. His energy to master the accumulations of capitalism is a direct thrust in the face of the past leaders that would have otherwise crushed his spirit. It's not really clear if money is a motivator as much as seeing the art of the possible. Inevitably, the conversation turns to a discussion about what it would be like to retire, quit working, just relax. He has the nervous energy of a person who will never stop, whatever his internal motivations might be (which I suspect he could not elucidate on). To stop is to drift to the bottom of the river and die.

One of the connections that he has successfully cultivated and is an important part of his life, both personally and professionally, is Nguyen, or Nick (profiled below).

For all his network and clout, though, he was not immune from the poisoned water that flowed downriver a few months ago from a large chemical plant about 6 kilometers upstream. The plant, covering hundreds of acres of land next to the river, manufactures monosodium glutamate for the food industry. In a well-known, but not publicized or prosecuted incident last year, a large toxic discharge swept through the fish farm and killed most of Tuan's fish.

"Did the factory get in trouble?"

They collectively shrug their shoulders; not a hint of outrage in their voices. "No one gets in trouble. The factory owner is related to the mayor! Sure, they had some investigation, but the factory is still open." Tien says.

Nick adds: "But they did close part of the plant. Remember, we drove by it on the way here"

Tuan nods. "Things are changing in Vietnam. Slowly, but they are changing."



## Kah

We meet Kah at the Rex on Sunday morning and drive south west towards the Mekong. Along the way, shops, restaurants, fruit stands and scooter repair services. We've hired him for the day to guide us through the Mekong Delta.



Kah is twenty-eight and grew up in the Mekong, born a few years after the unification of the country. (Old-timers in the South call the period “after the Americans left. Those in the North (or those that supported the North) call it “Unification,” which it was, the divided country finally, but violently, stitched together after thirty years of division, first by the French (after World War II) and then by politics and ideology (after the defeat of the French in 1954). Under French colonial rule, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were collectively referred to as “Indochina.”

This area of the world is rich in many ways: rubber, tea, rice and France’s near emasculation at the hands of Hitler’s Germany meant that there was no central government to continue the control of its Southeast Asian colonies.

The Japanese moved in.

A nominal amount of power was left to the Vichy French government--allied with Germany--during the Japanese occupation.

The Japanese moved out.

Sorry for the compression of WWII; Vietnam was a critical part of the war, most notably as a source of rubber and other products.

As far as fighting, Vietnam was not as deeply involved with the action in World War II between the US and Japan--at least as compared to other nations. Much of the fighting was along the coast and throughout the islands in the Pacific as America steamed and fought and subdued the forces in the territories captured by Imperial Japan. The present day structure of the whole of Indochina is largely the result of policies and decisions made after the war; however, as early as 1942 the fate of the region was hard on the minds of Roosevelt, Stalin, Chiang, Ho and Churchill.

After World War II, France, eager to regain claim to her lost territories, struggled hard to re-establish dominance, unwilling to accept that the period of colonialism was essentially finished. While independence would be established in country-after-country through the 1980s in Asia and Africa, the separation of Indochina from its colonial past was catalyzed by WWII. For a brief period of time after the War, the French did have nominal control and divided the country into three sections: Tonkin in the North, Annam in the center, and Cochinchina in the South. The North, where Ho operated (with plenty of interference from China), was essentially left to the Viet Minh and the communists. Western influence hunkered down in the southern part of the country.



Cochinchina includes the area around present-day Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong River delta. This is where Kah's family moved after the fall of Saigon and the "liberation" of the South; they had to flee the city because of family affiliations with the US and the Diem Government. After unifications, those that sympathized with the fallen government were either killed outright or sent to re-education camps where they were subject to intense

physical and psychological abuse. During this time, America, and many other nations accepted hundreds of thousands of "boat people" seeking to flee the country. Those that could not get away, like Kah's father, went back to simple agrarian living, forced to leave behind all they owned in Saigon. Kah's father had a good position in the South Vietnam government administration; after the war, he returned to the land to raise rice.

Kah grew up hooking catfish and swimming in the network of canals that flow into and from the Mekong River.



It did not take long for us to get a bearing on Kah's outlook on the complications of daily life. He is a cynical folklorist, railing against ingrained corruption one moment and telling us of the bounty and the beauty of the Mekong the next.

Taking an open-sided tourist boat from My Tho, which is in the heart of the Mekong Delta, a fabulously fertile area, we note the dozens and then hundreds of fishing craft that are docked and in various stages of off-loading their catches or preparing for the next foray out to the ocean.



We float by a collection of floating shacks at a fish farm. Kah extols with pride the richness of his river.

“A floating house like this,” gesturing to port, “they put in ten to twenty tons of fish. It takes about six months until the fish get to the good size of selling...is about one or two kilograms. And catfish now being export to the United States.”

Raising his voice for emphasis he continues: “Mekong River gives us twenty two species of catfish and the biggest one ever catch by fishing rod and reel it weighed 293 kilograms. (over 500 pounds)” He pauses and notes: “I catch a smaller one.”

“Is there a difference in price between the fish caught in the sea and the fish raised on the fish farms?”

“The free range one is obviously better.” He states emphatically.

“Free range fish?” We laugh--sounds funny.

“No no no, not free range fish, wild fish.” Smiling. “Wild fish.”

Passing a group of fishing boats tied up at dock, it is obvious that it is near low tide, several of the boats lay grounded in the brown muck and list at their moorings. On other boats, women work to mend acres of nets for the next trip to the ocean.



“They go out for one month, with enough food and ice for the fish factory.” Kah says.

We ask the obvious: “How about beer? Enough for a month?”

“Yah, yah sure.” Kah laughs.

“How about women?”

He turns serious. “Oh no, it is bad luck to have women on board. Can you think of it? One month on a boat with maybe just two women and those men?”

One remark strikes a chord:

“We are backward here. South Vietnam would have been better off if it wasn’t liberated.” For Kah’s family, their life went into “reset” after the war and they returned to the land and the river. Kah is rapidly working to play catch-up. He has one child and another one coming next year.

He is looking forward to 2009 because the tourist industry is becoming de-regulated and outside tour companies will be able to grab hold and open up shop. As a contractor, he works month-to-month and if there is no need for his services during the slow season.

“How many days a month do you work?”

“During high season, maybe twenty-five or thirty. That is OK, but during slow times, only ten or fifteen. I have to save money for that slow time.”

If I had to guess, I'd say that he was pulling in two or three hundred dollars a month.

“How was business this year?”

“Not so good. The Olympics in China took many tourists.” He pauses. “But we are coming into the busy time. The rainy season is over and people come to Vietnam for November and December.” Another pause. “If I can work for a foreign company, I can have more steady income. It will be better for my family.”

A long pause.

“Or maybe have my own company. Then everything will be better.”

## **Nguyen (Nick)**

Nguyen is the only one of our four that took a Western name, probably when he studied overseas. He refers to himself as Nick, which is more to the language palette of the Americans and Westerners he deals with during his day job.

Tuan and Nguyen are buddies. Although there is a fifteen year difference in ages, they share a lot in common nowadays, but their pasts diverge: Tuan's fled the Viet Cong and Nick's father is a former “VC”. Nick is the son of the Chief of the Ho Chi Minh Police Department. A good man to know, if you get my drift. Nick was educated in England and received a degree in Business. He's left Vietnam to study, returned to start some businesses and now is ready to leave again to study some more. With an outward vision, he knows things are pretty good here, but he knows he needs to see what else there is around the globe.

He is 28, the same age as Kah. Their lives are parallel, although Nick lives a fast life in Saigon and Kah a more relaxed urban existence. They share similar qualities: a quick wit, friendly style and forward momentum. They are both earnest--and unsettled. The big difference is that Nick's family's association allows much more range of possibilities, including living overseas. He has already lived in England and has been to Singapore and Australia and other Southeast Asia countries. Kah has not been on an airplane, yet.

Nick's father, charged with protecting the peace, recently returned from a two week trip to New York, Washington and Chicago to discuss disaster preparedness and first-responder methods. It is wonderful irony that the former enemies are now consulting each other on keeping the peace. “Ah life,” as Desmond says.

Like Tuan, he is someone who has the perspective from being overseas. He has also developed the business savvy to run a successful restaurant in Ho Chi Minh city, a three story Chinese restaurant near the river.

Nick works hard at his day job at the Rex, handling banquets and conferences. He recently married his high school sweetheart. We meet the two of them and Tuan and his third wife. Nick's wife is pregnant and does not feel well. Over dinner one night he orders a special mixture of congee (rice soup) and six creamer-size pitchers of liquids. He pours each liquid into the soup and stirs. "Chinese medicine," he says, handing the spoon to his bride, smiling.

Of the four, Nick represents the most outwardly-mobile and an up-and-coming future leader. His good fortune, born to a skilled and effective party faithful, and his intellect makes his outlook bright. For his part, however, he is reticent about his anointment as a future leader; restless and eager to do more than what seems to be pre-ordained.

Nick introduced us to Tuan and hosts lunch at the floating restaurant. Generous and eager to engage, it's tiring to keep up as jet lag smothers the brain with its warm fog.



During the two hours drive from Ho Chi Minh City to Long Son, we discuss politics and business. He is openly optimistic about the future of his country. He also has the perspective of someone who has seen it from the outside.

Like the other characters in our profile, Nick has a future vision that is colored by the past, but not bound to repeat it. He told me his story at the top-floor bar of the Rex, which looks down over the center of HCMC. We drink draft beer and share smooth and mellow "555" cigarettes, a British brand popular in Asia.

"My mother and father lived with my dad's parents. Rice was rationed for many years in Vietnam. We were very poor." Nick stabs his cigarette out and exhales out the side of his mouth.

"We were allowed just a few kilograms of rice each month. When my dad and mum wanted to have me, my aunts and uncles gave some of their rice to my parents. Then, they could feed a baby." He withdraws another cigarette from the pack and shrugs, like he's told the story a thousand times. "That's all."

"And now?"

"But now, it's much better." He clicks his lighter and fires up a 555. "We have food, we have jobs. Now people have more." Exhales again. "And they want more. Like Tuan, he has ten cars, nice business, lots of friends..." He pauses and doesn't finish the thought.

"But me, I want to get a Master's Degree. In America. I know there are a lot of good Universities."

"Sure, plenty. Come to DC. We'll help."

"There is a program that the Vietnamese Government runs for members of the Party to study abroad. If I can get that money, maybe you can suggest some schools."

Best idea I've heard all day.



## Ladies of Vietnam

There are, of course, many professional women who are making their mark and rising from and leveraging the past. A future article is in development that directs our gaze at the ladies of Vietnam who are making things happen. For now, two short profiles will have to suffice.



Our friends, both named Huong, are two examples. Ba (Madam) Huong is a long-serving civil servant in charge of International Cooperation for STAMEQ, the standards-body in Hanoi that oversees the development of Vietnam technical regulations. She is from the generation that lived in Hanoi during the war and studied in Moscow under the tutelage of the Soviet friendship. Now, although nearing retirement, she is actively working to modernize her part of the government in support of Vietnamese industry.

Co (Ms.) Huong is the daughter of a Civil Engineering Professor and developer in Hanoi. She studied in Houston, Texas and lived for some time in Australia and now works in the Public Relations and Media company T&A Communications in Hanoi. Huong is world-savvy and excels in her activities. From a top-echelon family, her father's company did the foundation work for the 5-Star Melia Hotel in Hanoi, she makes the connection between the West and, like Nick, seeks engagement in the wider world as a key part of her future.

**Xin Chao**