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Hanoi after the war

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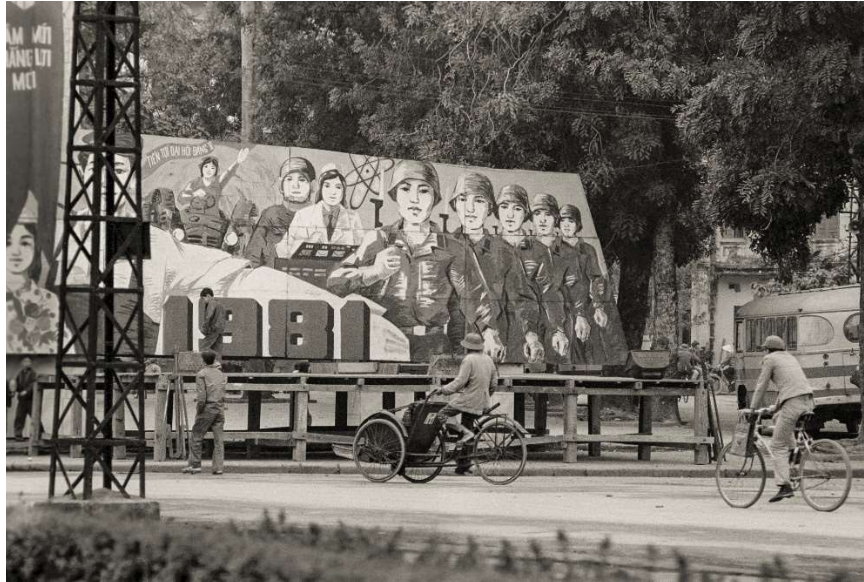


The Vietnam of 1981 was a very different place: isolated, impoverished, still on a semi-war footing and run on Marxist lines. The poster reads “Towards the 5th Congress” — no hint of the *doi moi* (reform) or *mo cua* (open door) policies that would begin in 1986.

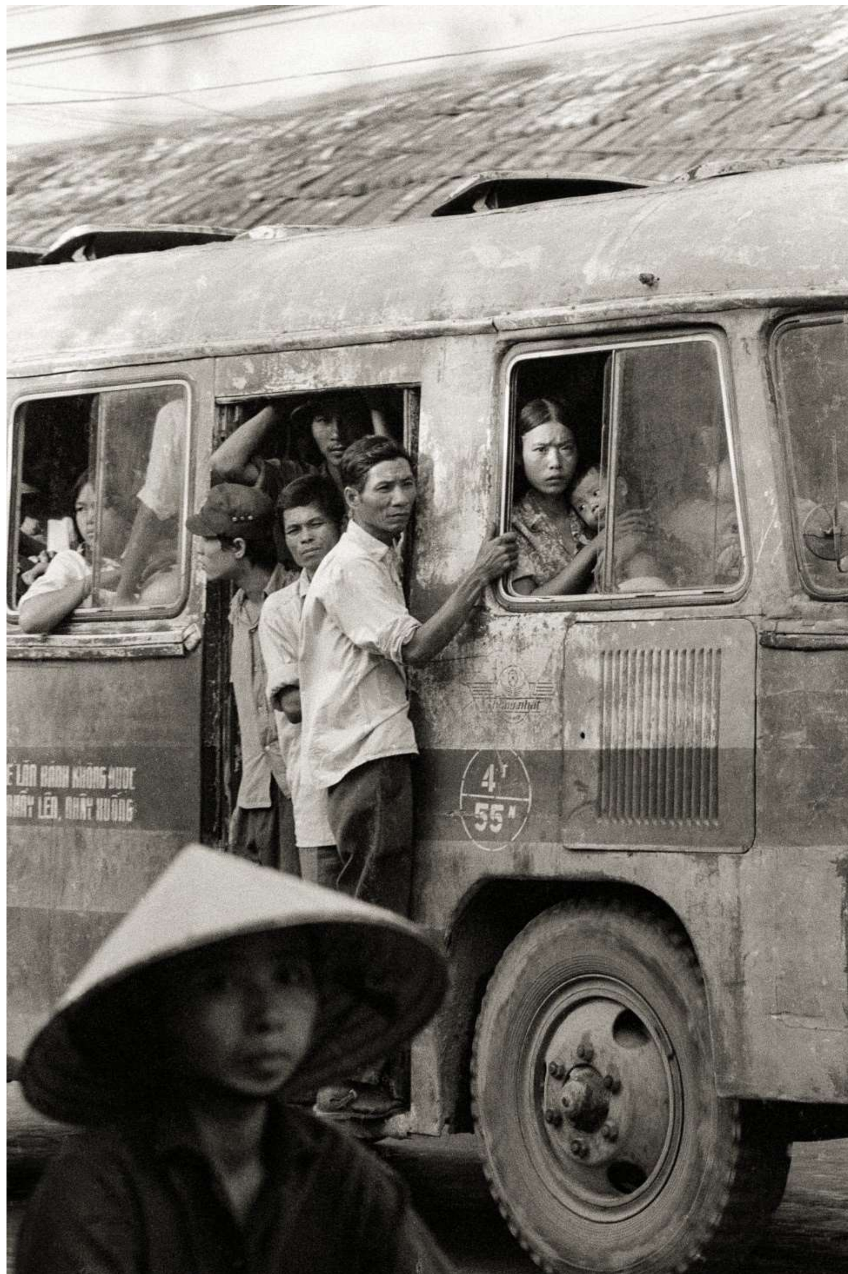
I was one of a handful of westerners living in Hanoi during 1980–82 (with the British embassy). Any meaningful contact with the people of the city was forbidden, but I was free to roam the streets. I arrived expecting a sort of Pyongyang, in line with Cold War stereotypes. Instead I found an ancient capital with a rather wistful beauty. Life was extremely hard for the people, who responded with ingenuity and courage. The reality was far removed from the Soviet-style images on the poster. People scraped a living any way they could: traditional crafts flourished; hawkers and traders filled the streets; the outskirts of the city were a maze of small market gardens. The temples were dilapidated but very much alive.

Hanoi was a quiet city. There were no private cars. Motor scooters were rare. People went on foot or by bicycle. There were no neon signs, imported goods or indeed any signs of globalisation. To Tich Street, in the heart of the city, near Hoan Kiem Lake, still specialised in woodwork. The house in the centre, unchanged since precolonial times, was a favourite motif of the painter Bui Xuan Phai (note the loudspeaker on the pillar, for broadcasting propaganda).

A rice mill in the heart of Hanoi. The captions in my book are by the historian Duong Trung Quoc: he speculates that the dust masks could in fact be being worn by “reformed capitalists” — dispossessed former owners — to hide their faces.

A load of bamboo. Bamboo was floated down-river for use as scaffolding on the city's many building sites. Tran Tien, then as now, was the city's smartest street, making the plight of these women all the more poignant.

A whole economy developed around bicycles. People were endlessly ingenious in adapting them and putting them to every imaginable use. In my book Nguyen Quang Thieu explains how a few spokes for a bicycle wheel were a valuable gift. Duong Trung Quoc talks about the "tyre shrinking shop" — if you were lucky enough to be allocated a tyre it was probably the wrong size, so you took it to a specialist to have it altered. In this photo the old man is hoping to earn a few pennies by blowing up bicycle tyres. (The dong had been divided into xu in the days before inflation took off. He might have earned 10 xu, or a tenth of a dong!).



The cover photo of my book. The young mother's expression says it all. Nguyen Quang Thieu describes the ordeal of a bus ride in his essay for the book: "As students, we had to cling on outside or sit on the roof, which we shared with sacks of manioc, potatoes and corn and cages full of poultry or pigs. The stink of animal droppings mixed with the smell of sweat, dried fish and fish sauce turned the bus into a sort of prison."

A medium in her sanctuary. Traditional religious beliefs were flourishing, although frowned on at the time. There is a photo of Ho Chi Minh on the altar. On returning to Hanoi in 2013, I learned that the old lady had been well known for her powers as a medium and had lived into her nineties.

The studio of Bui Xuan Phai — a single room where he lived with his family and produced his famous paintings. The streets of the Old Quarter were often called “Phai streets”. There was a courtyard outside with a communal tap for the whole building. Phai joined Ho Chi Minh in the 1940s and was revered by his fellow artists. But he refused to follow the official style of “socialist realism” and spent much of his life in acute poverty. I used to bring him paints and other supplies.