

In Vietnam, freedom is fleeting

Laid-off accountant fled Vietnam as an economic refugee, spent five years in a camp in Malaysia, then returned to Vietnam. Now she wants to start a new life.

Saturday, February 18, 1995
Text and photos by Jeff Heinrich

HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam – I found Tran Thi Bich Ha at the end of a long alley, through a warren of back streets, off the wide American-style boulevards typical of Saigon. She was where her sister said she would be, living with her cousin's family, her support after five years in a Malaysian refugee camp for Vietnamese boat people.



A street scene in Dalat

A few days before, in the mountain town of Dalat, her sister had accosted me in a bookstore lined with English-language training manuals, and started up an intense banter in French and English about the deplorable politics of her country.

Vietnam is a dictatorship, Tran Thi's sister said. Political prisoners are only now starting to trickle out of the "re-education through labor" camps where they were kept by the communist victors after the Americans were routed in the Vietnam war.

Diplomatically, Vietnam has made much of what it calls its economic "renovation" since 1987, moving away from international isolation and toward an open market economy. But even with the collapse of its main ally, the Soviet Union, and the end of the Cold War, Vietnam's regime has barely let up against "enemies" of the state.

The country still jails those who fail to toe the communist line: people like 24-year-old Pham Ngoc Son, arrested for singing anti-communist songs, or Doan Viet Hoat, a professor sentenced to 20 years hard labor and five years deprivation of citizen's rights for distributing the magazine Freedom Forum.

Defence Minister Doan Khue has warned that "hostile forces are trying to wipe out socialism (by) using democracy and human rights to distort the role of the

party and urge people to demand a multi-party system," according to the Far Eastern Economic Review.

At the Dalat bookstore, the prematurely middle-aged woman who was Tran Thi's sister spoke urgently. Vietnam, she said, is a place where people are only now becoming free to speak their minds to strangers – not without someone listening in, however, just in case a blasphemy is uttered against the regime.

Then that someone spoke.

"Be careful in Vietnam," whispered the store's owner. "When you talk about politics in this country, it is dangerous."

"I know what I am talking about," he said. His hands were pockmarked with small round scars, what looked like the burns of stubbed-out cigarette butts.

"A metal bar," the bookseller said. "Hot, yes, very hot." When he was a teenager, he had agitated against the communists. He spent the next 11 years in prison. He was now in his mid-30s.

His father, a policeman, was imprisoned, too. Fifteen years and counting.

I had met others like them in my travels through Vietnam.



Tour guide and tourists in the DMZ

There was the tour guide in that mecca for war buffs, the former demilitarized zone known as the DMZ. In a camp, his captors had tried to force him to forget the English he had learned when he worked as an interpreter for the Americans during interrogations of Viet Cong prisoners. "You speak Vietnamese now, only Vietnamese," his jailers told him. But he didn't forget, and held on even to the slang he had used two decades before, laced with the expletives of American GIs.

And there was a bitter man in Hanoi, a former high-up in the South Vietnamese Education Ministry, jailed for five years (until his health gave out) and then exiled to a professional career in Australia. Now – disowned by his wife and friends for

being a "traitor" to their idea of democracy – he had returned to Vietnam to help reform the country's education system to what it was before the North defeated the South in 1975.

"I came back for my country and my people," he said. "Two generations have been ruined because of bad education since the war, education on the Soviet model, and I am not going to let the victors ruin the lives of a third and fourth."

In Dalat, Tran Thi's sister quickly sketched her own story. She had tried to escape three times, and failed. Her property had been confiscated; she couldn't get a decent job; she was living in a garret in the French quarter.

But her sister, she said, was worse off. Five years in a refugee camp was one thing, the ignominy of forced repatriation to Vietnam another.

"You must try to save my sister!" she said. "You will find her at the end of a long alley ..."

A few days later, I was sitting at the kitchen table in the home of Tran Thi's cousin.

Tran Thi's story was not typical of the boat people the West has come to know, the bulk of the two million Vietnamese who fled their homeland after the war ended in 1975. Tran Thi took longer to flee, saddled in her life in Vietnam not with political baggage (such as being cozy with the former South Vietnamese regime), but rather with the crushing inefficiency and poverty of the country's command economy in the mid-'80s.



Girls walk through the surf of the South China Sea

In 1989, Tran Thi decided to leave Vietnam – illegally, of course, the only way. She had lost her job as an accountant when the government closed the printing company where she was working. She had no prospects and she was also fed up.

"I escaped," she said, her voice subdued. "I was looking for freedom, freedom to move; you could say I was an economic refugee. That's why they have sent me back, because I fled economics."

The boat trip over the South China Sea took three days. Pirates and the sea have claimed an estimated half a million boat people over the years, but Tran Thi and more than a dozen others on her boat were lucky; they survived the journey.

They found a precarious freedom of sorts in Malaysia. Like thousands of others before them, they were put in refugee camps, virtual cities that had taken root since the fall of Saigon and which continued to spread as more people fled one of Asia's last communist countries.

"I spent the next five years in that camp," said Tran Thi, now 36. "I got a job as a bookkeeper in the camp pharmacy, and that's what I was doing then they sent me away again."

She had been back for three months.

"It was a hard life in the camp, but if I hadn't left when I did, they would have made me stay there indefinitely. There was no way they would release me into Malaysia. I would not be a free citizen. They wanted to keep refugees where they were, make them permanent refugees, and I did not want to be that."

Instead, she has to report regularly to the state police in Ho Chi Minh City, who keep track of the movements of all returning refugees. The week before I met her, she had been interviewed for a job as bookkeeper at a hotel. She thought her chances were good. She speaks English, and in the new Vietnam, English in the big city is a big plus.

Would she ever think of escaping again?

"It is not possible a second time," she answered. "Now Vietnam is a place where I can live."