

# TIME's Asian Journey | Vietnam: Into Thin Air



ILLUSTRATION FOR TIME BY WILSON TSANG

## Into Thin Air

Monique Truong is caught between her country of birth and her country of refuge—neither of which she can yet call home

The conversation usually begins this way: "Are you from Vietnam?"

"Yes."

"It's such a beautiful country. My (wife/husband/significant other/friend) and I were there last (year/month/week). The food was unbelievable. The people were so nice. And everything was so cheap ..."

"Um. That's what I've heard."

"So you haven't been back?"

"No."

Sometimes I follow up my no with an explanation: "I just haven't had the (time/money /emotional ballast) to make the journey."

My explanation is always brief and never adequate, but the travelers are quickly satisfied. They breathe a little easier. The lines of confusion around their eyes soften. I think, for them, hearing that initial, unvarnished no is as perplexing as encountering an American child who is not excited at the prospect of going to Disneyland. The travelers then proceed to share with me

their tales of a vacation paradise: of a land that they—depending on their age—have come to see in a different light or for the first time; of a people whom they admire for a lack of anger toward America, or an openness toward all things American, or both.

More often, though, I allow my no to sit in between the travelers and me like a boulder, an impasse meant to strand words and experiences, to swerve the conversation down another road toward another country. To Italy, perhaps. That country I've been to twice in less than three years. Or how about Spain? I've visited there as well. It's such a beautiful country. The food was unbelievable. The people were so nice. And everything was so cheap.

It's true that if I met you at a dinner party or on a plane the last place I would want to go with you, conversationally, is Vietnam. It's because I'm too often dragged there, politely but insistently, by people who barely know me but who know all about the country where I was born and where I had lived during the first six years of my life. I am now 35 years old, which means I have spent more than three-quarters of my life away from that S-curve stretch of land that I bear on my body like a tattoo.

If Vietnam is a tattoo, then I would prefer to think of it as an S that spans the hollow between my breasts or that hooks around my belly button, a beautiful green dragon that I placed there all those years ago, my secret scar to keep.

The reality is that Vietnam is an S on my forehead, an invitation for anyone to come along and comment on that country's evolving role on the world stage. The S is the start of a public discourse. I am, however, no Vietnam expert. I can barely hold a conversation in its language.

I don't remember the last time I dreamed in Vietnamese, the truest indicator that a language belongs to you and you to it. I have a spotty picture of the country's history. I have even less knowledge of its present conditions. I have not been back to Vietnam since April 1975. Above all, I am, if not angered, then still pained by a war that the land of my birth waged against itself. A "civil war" is one of the most galling oxymorons in the English language. I believe, as with all wars, that no one won, least of all the Vietnamese. I am a relic, unable and unwilling, unlike many of the Vietnamese in Vietnam (if I am to believe the accounts of travelers whom I have met) to move past this sad point.

Remember, I am no Vietnam expert. I am just a one-and-a-half-generation Vietnamese-American novelist, a peddler of fiction, who has not made the archetypal journey back to the land of her birth. I can offer you flowery words about that choice, but in the end it comes down to my inability to forgive and to forget. Corruption; greed; lust for power; domination replacing freedom as a guiding principle and goal; brothers fighting brothers; mothers giving birth to children who grow up to kill one another. Whom do I accuse of these crimes? My own flesh and blood. If this useless violence is my history, a madness that lurks in my gene pool, a propensity that might again show itself, I am not eager to travel back to it—and my—place of origin.

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I have never expressed my unwillingness to return to Vietnam in quite these terms, not even to my Vietnamese-American friends. Many of them have returned home with family members, spouses or even film crews to document the catharsis of touching again the soil that we once carried underneath our fingernails after a day of work or play. The experience of return for my Vietnamese-American friends has never been postcard-perfect. They see past the sunset reddening the rice paddies, past the white borders of the image, to the people who look back at them with eyes filled with anger or envy. Many of these friends have told me about the necessity of slipping a \$5 or \$10 bill in between the pages of their American passports in order not to be harassed and detained by the Vietnamese immigration and customs officials who can, even without the passports, easily identify a returning Viet Kieu [overseas Vietnamese]. When I heard this, I thought: a bribe to be allowed back into a country that we once fled? The irony is thicker than the Saigon—now Ho Chi Minh City—humidity.

This past April marked the 28th anniversary of what most Americans refer to as "the fall of Saigon." This past April I watched the war in Iraq on television from my living room in Brooklyn, "America's hometown" as this borough of the City of New York proudly proclaims itself. To the list of most offensive oxymorons I added the phrase smart bombs. I wept, remembering the remedial ones that shook my family's house in Can Tho, a city to the south of Saigon, on the banks of the Mekong. The high-pitched whistling of death passing over you and landing on someone else's body is a lullaby that no child should have to hear in the middle of the night. I was among the lucky ones. My family had an underground bomb shelter with steel beams and thick concrete walls to stumble into during those dark nights. Bomb shelter or family tomb? The difference was by a couple of backyards. Memory, especially from childhood and war, has a porous selectiveness that enables a survivor to go on living. I have no memory of the faces of my father and mother as they sat there waiting. I have no memory of whose arms carried my sleeping body out of the shelter. Maybe that is why safety for me is still coupled with the urge to hide myself away.

Since I became an American citizen in 1980, the U.S. has fought in two officially recognized wars (Gulf War I and II) and a slew of other engagements (from Grenada to Afghanistan). Because I was in the self-absorbed bog of my early 20s, I managed to all but ignore the first Gulf War. The latest war in Iraq, on the other hand, consumed me. My television was tuned to CNN until I couldn't take for a night-vision moment longer the bombastic Wolf Blitzer and the network's equally bombastic graphics. I can still see the "god rays" emanating from the words Showdown in Iraq (the only thing missing was the exclamation point). I then took refuge with the BBC and its—relatively speaking—buttoned-down broadcast.

Hearing the news of the war delivered to me in an upper-class British accent also helped

distance me from the words coming out of the presenter's mouth, and that was in a small way comforting. The American bravado, the insistent typewriter-keys-hitting-the-paper voice of Wolf Blitzer never allowed me to forget that the war was above all an American enterprise. (I single him out because his first and last names are so remarkably apropos for a war correspondent, but there were also other reporters who had the Stars and Stripes punched into their voices.) I had learned from the national polls that I belonged to a minority of Americans who did not support President George W. Bush's policy in Iraq. I was alienated from the goings-on from the start. The BBC broadcast just made the war all that much more foreign to me. This was, I told myself, not my war.

The paradox was that though I wouldn't allow myself to forget and to forgive my country of birth for imploding itself in an act of war, I wanted desperately to ignore that my country of refuge was taking itself down an equally destructive path. Watching the BBC was just one example of my disavowal. The others included staying at home while many of my friends and neighbors participated in the peace rallies that convened in the streets of New York City. This past April I sat in my living room and hid myself within an impossible geography where Brooklyn wasn't my hometown, where the U.S. wasn't my home, where I wasn't switching television channels while people were being shocked and awed to death on my behalf. If I needed reinforcement that I was surely not a part of this war, all I had to do was remind myself of all those travelers who looked at my face and asked if I was "from" Vietnam. Or I could remind myself of the everyday discourtesy that comes with being Asian American. A few months ago my younger sister was visiting me in New York, and we were riding on a crowded subway train. A man in his late 40s passed up a seat that she then claimed. Maybe ruing his own impulsive chivalry or just his slow reaction time, the man stood next to my sister and glowered at her. She told him that he could have the seat if he wanted it. He looked down at her and said, "No, that's alright. I know you don't have chairs where you come from."

"Where's that?" I demanded of him. "You mean Ohio because that's where she was born. O-HI-O!" my voice rising with each syllable. My sister said a couple of things to him as well (but most of the words can't be printed here). Later, when she had calmed down from the rage that had made her entire body shake, she told me no one had ever said anything racist to her until that day. I was shocked. I asked her if she was sure. She didn't even take a moment to think about it. She responded with a resolute yes. I was still shocked, but above all I was glad for her that she had lived her 23 years of life, in Ohio and now in Texas, without ever feeling the spit of racism on her body. For a brief moment I looked at my sister and saw her as proof that the U.S. I had grown up in had, thankfully, changed. Then I remembered the man's face—and the thought disappeared because I knew it wasn't true.

We were on the subway train together, but, unlike me, my sister would never allow anyone and certainly not herself to forget that she is "from" the U.S. She is Vietnamese-American, a part of Asian America, a citizen of the United States. Both of her feet are solidly planted in a country that she will continue to define. She knows where home is. But I am still lost somewhere in between Vietnam and the U.S. The physical journey was completed long ago, but the emotional one is ongoing. The process of identifying and claiming "home" ultimately doesn't require forgetting or forgiving. It calls for an acknowledgment and then a taking of responsibility for the acts committed in the name of that home. My Vietnamese-American friends who have

made the journey to Vietnam have allowed themselves the opportunity to do just that. To return is to face the aftermath of war (the acknowledgment) and to witness that life goes on (the responsibility). My choice not to return to Vietnam has its consequences. Vietnam is, for me, not a home but a green dragon tattoo somewhere on my torso, metaphoric and absent.

This past April the thousands of New Yorkers who participated in the peace rallies took responsibility for the actions of the U.S. in Iraq by actively registering their dissent. In the ghost shadows of the Twin Towers, they reminded the rest of the nation that an eye-for-an-eye war was not an acceptable solution. Not in our names, they said. What does it mean that I did nothing except tell myself the war in Iraq was not my war? It means that despite my citizenship papers and the gold eagle on my passport, the U.S. also is not a real home for me. In the face of another war, I was again a six-year-old in a bomb shelter. I felt small, insignificant and without recourse, not like an American at all. Whom do I blame for making me feel this way? I could blame the travelers who think of me as being part of the place they have visited as opposed to the place they are from. I could blame the man on the subway. They are the obstacles, not the impasse, to the completion of my journey. In the end, I hold myself accountable for not claiming the places, real and flawed, where I am from.

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