

THE QUESTIONS OF MY LIFE

As we walked along the streets, they were silently glancing around, exchanging meaningful looks. Then they started complaining about how much litter was on the pavements. They pointed at houses, murmuring: "They exclaimed at how many motorbikes here were, and asked how we ever managed without cars. I was still too confused to speak as we turned a corner I wish we had never turned. We suddenly found ourselves surrounded by nearly a dozen beggars, in rags, stretching out their hands, asking for money in a pathetic tone. Alas! I will never forget the sight, the way they disgustingly threw money on the pavement, staring with astonishment and scorn at those miserable beggars vying with one another for the handout. In retrospect, I can still feel my shock at those people's attitude toward my hometown.

It was on a Saturday morning back in 2001, when some students from my class, including myself, were appointed to be the tour guides for a group of students from Aubury High School, Australia. We were expected to show them around Hanoi and tell them about Vietnamese culture and people. How much I looked forward to their coming, as I assumed this would be a great chance to travel, relax, and make friends. These thoughts, to a girl whose sole interests were chatting on the phone and going to parties, were so stimulating. I could never expect that things would turn out to be so unpleasant. I don't remember what happened next, since my mind had been wandering from that moment until the end of the tour. That night, for the first time I found myself pondering about something really serious, my head was full of questions. Why didn't those foreigners recognize the historical value of pagodas and mausoleums, but could see only litter and ramshackle buildings on the streets?

Why should we be considered inferior when we didn't live in magnificent houses and drive in convenient cars? Why were there so many penniless people among us? What would they tell their friends and families when they return home? Would they keep forever in their minds such bad impressions of Vietnam? Did all foreigners despise my country? Would we always be looked down upon? As I sank deeper and deeper in questions and doubts, more new thoughts flooded my mind. I panicked at the limitation of my knowledge. I had been studying since age six, yet now I was unable even to explain issues that directly related to myself and my country. I questioned the meaning of all my perfunctory learning hours during the past few years. The changes produced by significant events are not always immediately apparent. In this case, however, I have been able to see how the tour with the Australians directly altered me. By the end of the year, I found inside me a strong determination to make up for years of rote learning, motivated by a burning desire to answer the "haunting" questions, which had echoed in my head since that unforgettable day. In the pursuit of knowledge, many times I have found circles around my eyes due to late night study, yet I also realize that when learning is inspired by real enthusiasm and consideration, it can be the most sincere happiness. My efforts are paying off. Throughout the two years of maturing and serious studying, the answers to many of those questions have been shaped in my mind. The Australians I met that day were just kids and were too inexperienced to understand the plights of developing countries. Not all foreigners are scornful of my country; many do recognize and appreciate Vietnamese values. I have also realized how much its economic status affects a nation: Vietnam can be respected; Vietnamese can be seen as an equal when we can build a wealthy and prosperous country. But one of the miracles of learning is that the more you know, the less satisfied you are with your knowledge. As I came up with answers to my previous questions, new more complex ones

were raised. How can a poor country lift itself up? Surely there are many things to do, but where should we start? Where should we go? Why is it that even when the same amount of energy and time is devoted, our work is never as effective and our results are never as rewarding as compared to other countries? The experience with the Australians has taught me a lot, and I'm anxious to learn more from foreigners. What else does the rest of the world know about developing countries, about poverty, about world religions, about peace and war, about discriminations, about environmental pollutions...?

Last month, at a career advising workshop, students in my class shared their future plans. Surprisingly, I am the only one who intends to study somewhere so far away as the US. When asked why I replied: "I want to answer the questions of my life".