

PHOTOGRAPHS OF VIETNAM

A Foreward to Afterward

Most of our readers remember Vietnam as a place of horror, despair, and squalor. It was a sordid place halfway around the world that sucked at one's courage, endurance, and even one's code of morality. It's often said that it was a place of prolonged boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror.

But there were other moments, too, most often unbidden and surprising: the way the sunlight pierced the triple-canopy jungle still wet with rain, the flutter of ever-intoxicating *ao dais*, a glimpse of fog skittering up the mountain, the sea pounding the broad sandy beach at dawn, the smell of ripe mangoes. These flashing impressions—along with the Buddhist temples and French colonial buildings, the lone farmer with water buffalo timelessly working the rice fields, and village shrines to previous generations—all hinted at something else, something far richer and promising than this nasty piss-ant war.

Here is the work of three photographers of Vietnam. These are no war images; even so, the photographers remain defined by the war and see the land partially through that lens. Geoffrey Clifford recognized the beauty of the land as a helicopter pilot transporting troops to battle zones. He returned to the States, studied photography, then returned again and again to Vietnam. Clifford was the first to publish photographs of “the land we never knew”—lush, beautiful, images that sang of a rich and timeless culture with startling landscapes. Most of his work dates to the 1980s.

A decade later Mark Erickson began making trips to Vietnam. Erickson was first-generation American. As an orphan, he left Vietnam in 1975 as part of Operation Babylift. Later, at Harvard, he studied Vietnamese history and culture, as well as photography. So he brings the history and mindset of Western photography to an exploration of the homeland he barely knew. His curiosity is matched by the curiosity of his subjects, who recognize him, too, as different but the same.

In December 1999 Vietnam veteran Chuck Forsman returned for the first time to the land that had “confounded and enchanted” him during the war. He returned again and again, usually traveling alone by motorbike. The heavy curtain of war had lifted, but so had the gauzier curtain of beauty and romance. His photographs show a rich, enduring culture struggling to survive the caprices of communism and the emerging desires of an ancient but very young country.

— Michael Keating, Editor

Notes on the Photographs: GEOFFREY CLIFFORD Page 33: *Water Buffalo, Red River Delta near Hanoi; Duck Herder, Lam Dong Province; Le Ly Hayslip and Ky La; Roadside Barber, Vinh Phuc Province.* Page 34: *Lotus Pond in Old Hue; Quan Su Pagoda, Hanoi; Parade Dragon, Ho Chi Minh City; Schoolboy, Hanoi.* Page 25: *Hanoi Conservatory; Sunbeam Bridge at Jade Mountain Temple, Hoan Kiem Lake, Hanoi; Cotton Worker, Son La; Boat on Ha Long Bay.* MARK F. ERICKSON Page 36: *Three Tobacconists, Hanoi; Young People at Ho Hoan Kiem, Hanoi; Cowherd, Hanoi; Coal Worker, Hanoi; Barber and Patron on Pho Hang Chieu, Hanoi; Parallel Bars at Bach Khoa Stadium, Hanoi University of Science and Technology.* Page 37: *Sugarcane Mongers, Hanoi; Boy and Dog, My Duc District, Hanoi; Vietnam-China Border, Lang Son Province; Man with Monkey, My Duc District, Hanoi; Workers in Hue; Two Ferrymen, Yen River, Hanoi.* CHUCK FORSMAN Page 38: *School Boys at Danang Bay; Woman Preparing Food, Village South of Phan Rang; Beach Architecture, Nha Trang; Soccer Between Tam Cac and Canh Nang; Young Merchant, Hanoi; Meat Market, Hanoi; Tabloids and Street Vendors, Hanoi; Between Muong Khuong and Bac Ha; Earth Movers, Down River from Hanoi.* Page 39: *Construction Worker during the Rainy Season, Saigon; Rock Carriers, Near Quang Ngai; En Route to the Perfume Cave Pagoda; Wedding Party, Saigon; Market Scene, Kon Tum.* Page 40: *Bicycles by the Red River South of Hanoi; Ben Thanh Market Plaza, Saigon; Family Transport, Saigon; Soccer Practice, Hoi An; Young Woman with Bowl of Pho, Bac Lieu; Rainy Season in Pha Nhu Lao, Saigon.*