



Geoffrey Clifford





The Land We Never Knew

INTRODUCTION BY JOHN BALABAN

For the many millions of Americans who went there, and for the millions who watched on television, Vietnam is the name of a war. Our most troubling war. But a war, even if undeclared. Few of us had any sense of the people, their language, their history, or their beliefs. For many who went there, the landscape was a confusion of crushing heat, monsoons, malaria, bad water, sawgrass, snakes, and leeches, where ambushes or booby traps lay waiting in flooded rice paddies, in bamboo thickets along canals and slow muddy rivers, and under the triple canopy of the mountain jungles.

But take away the war—*subtract the fear from the landscape*—and it was beautiful, as soldiers often discovered when they were safe and dry, and free, for a moment, to look at another Vietnam.

These photographs show that other place, a Vietnam that is two thousand years old, which is tied, as ever, to the growing of rice and to the annual rhythms of the monsoon. A Vietnam that has, over the centuries, gathered cultural momentum from China, from India, and from its own minorities. A Vietnam that, after centuries of wars against foreign invaders, is struggling to achieve prosperity under its communist leadership.

As a 21-year-old Army lieutenant, Geoffrey Clifford had piloted the UH-1 helicopter, flying combat assaults out of Chu Lai and Danang, ferrying troops and supplies into the war zones. Fourteen years later, he found himself in Hanoi among his former enemies. He returned several times with his cameras.

Clifford's photographs offer a look at a Vietnam we never knew, a Vietnam pursuing a destiny two thousand years in the making. Join him by the seacoasts, in Delta villages along slow canals, in crowded cities; take a look at the Vietnamese today, at ordinary people getting haircuts, going to church, summoning ancestors, walking to school, herding ducks, fishing, weeding rice fields, and sitting around in conversation, as they are in this turn-of-the-century folk poem, still sung today:

*Evening, before the King's pavilion
people are sitting, fishing, sad and grieving,
loving, in love, remembering, waiting, watching.
Whose boat plies the river mists?
—offering so many rowing songs
That move these mountains and rivers, our Nation.*





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