

Vera Chiu writing sample- *Memory on Holiday: Summer of 2019- Nostalgia of Hanoi*

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In the heat of last summer, I've booked a ticket early on to enjoy my first Asia artist-in-residence. I chose a place called Hoa Binh in Vietnam, because I like how rural it is. It takes around three hours from Hanoi to this little town. As the drive continues, I feel like I am going back in time to China. The mountains run side by side on a rough highway, while between towns, small stalls selling fruits and foods are seen. To me, this is nostalgia.

Hoa Binh actually means peace (which has a similar pronunciation as He Ping in Mandarin). During the First Indochina War in the year 1951 to 1952, the French soldiers fought the Việt Minh soldiers in the Battle of Hoa Binh. Although the French had less casualties, they lost in the end. One of the sayings was that the French could not cop with the humid weather and were not great at fighting within a river-y area. This might sound like interesting history for history buffs, but there is little information about this era of Hoa Binh. Now, their travel attractions are a newly built dam, lakes and mountains. Those who have been to Hanoi would know, those are some of the things Hanoi sell to their tourist as well.

There is one other selling point for this part of town: the Mường people. Because the area is very close to China, their language is quite similar to Chinese, and so are their clothing: bright patterns on dark fabric. Also, their housings are quite a speciality. According to climate and location, each clan has their own way of house building. Mường housing is within the mountains where flooding and animal siting are common; they built their house higher to avoid being attacked by both. Rooms are big so that the air can get through easily. When the windows are open, it's quite breezy indoors. The wet and humid climate requires more consideration, including building the kitchen outdoors, so that the heat won't be trapped within the house.

The residency I am staying at is an Mường museum, and I live in a luxurious version of the Mường housing. Before I came, the museum representative cautioned me about their facilities, specifying that there is no air-con. Next to my stay, there is actually a housing unit for tourists, which features an air-con in each room. I did not understand why the artists are not allowed to pay a little more to book those rooms. It might be that they think artists should take a little heat before becoming successful? By the way, the owner of the museum is Mường and an artist himself, he decided to go on a seaside holiday during this time. Now you know how tolerable the weather is?

My room came with a huge fan, a queen-sized mattress set on the floor and a winter blanket. I was confused, until two nights later, I understood how great a big-ass fan is. At home, I switch on the fan at night after I got the room cooled by the air-con. In this hilly rural area, I only need to let the wind into the room during the daytime, and let the fan blow all night. The winter blanket is truly needed.

Rural environment, humidity and no air-con were the challenges I set myself with when applying for this residency, but It soon dawned on me that it was no challenge at all. Was I thinking too little of myself while I was applying? Thinking a few heats would break me? The real challenge was becoming reluctant to leave Hong Kong on July 22nd of last year. And then, I soon noticed that I chose the 'wrong' place. I vividly remember on the second day of my arrival, I stood at the exit of the studio after breakfast and thought: "This is totally Guilin (a China city similar to Hanoi)". As I came to the realisation, I quickly switched to relaxation mode, which was much needed at that moment.

Even the most regulated life needs a bit of spark (just like me and you in pandemic times), so I went for a trip to the city centre. The bus trip became the most adventurous part of the journey out, just because I don't know a single word in Vietnamese.

What would you think the city looked like? Sorry, to no surprise, it was not exactly exciting, because again, it reminds me of good ol' China. A calm community with little housing and no skyscrapers. During lunchtime, the hawkers had their afternoon nap. The newly built mall was like the Yuen long Plaza I went to as a kid. Even the street stalls were suspiciously like China, either I get cheated or I get poisoned.

Hoa Binh is not a bad place, but I came a bit too late. In fact, a decade too late. If this was a journey during my 20s, all this would be new and stimulating for me. A little more than a decade ago, I had already gone on solo travel in the not-so-powerful China. I have already tasted the glam, the thrilling and the ugly. I honestly could not go back to this particular kind of pure joy.

Before I went back to Hong Kong, I was joined by a friend staying in Hanoi for a few days. Yes! You guessed it, Hanoi still reminds me of early 00s China.

Although it was my first time in Vietnam, there were a lot of reminiscences. While some memories are good ones, it is always great to leave them as it is. Even if you don't want to move forward, you already have.

讓回憶旅行：2019年夏，懷河內的舊

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上年動盪之夏，早已訂了到越南小鎮的機票，進行我首個亞洲藝術駐場。選擇了一個叫Hoa Binh的越南省份，原因是喜歡它「山見脊」。從河內機場到小鎮需時三小時，車越遠離市區，越像小時到大陸的感覺；兩邊並列的大山，簡陋的公路，在沙塵滾滾的鎮與鎮之間，偶有小販檔售賣小食生果之類，對我來說，很懷舊。

Hoa Binh，其實是中文的「和平」，它在法越戰爭時有一席位。在1951至1952年間，法軍在這土地上與越南獨立同盟打了一場Battle of Hoa Binh。在過程中，雖法軍傷亡比越南的少，但最後越南還是贏了。聽說法國人未能適應又濕又熱的東南亞天氣，還要在充滿河道的山區打仗，是失戰原因之一。

聽起來很利害的歷史，但當地甚至網上資料也不多。現在Hoa Binh的旅遊景點是上年剛建成的大壩、湖景及山峰。到過河內的遊客大概也知道，這也是河內其中的賣點。

Hoa Binh其二賣點便是它們的少數民族－芒（Mường）族。因為近中國邊境，這族群的語言帶點漢語，服裝也像極中國的少數民族；光鮮的花紋配在深色的布料上。除了這些，它們最大的特色是住屋。各部落會因應地理位置及氣候建屋，山區中的屋都怕大雨水進屋及動物來偷食，所以屋建高了。沒太多間隔，因為一個大房間打通了，再開開窗便很通風。濕濕熱熱的天氣使建屋時多花心思，簡單如把廚房建在室外減低熱氣積聚也是智慧。

我選擇的藝術駐場，亦是在芒族的博物館中。當中的住屋就是上面提及的，不過是豪華版。在來臨前，我已知天氣跟香港一樣潮潮濕濕，並不是旅遊季節。在申請時，館方亦強調房內沒冷氣。其實我的房間旁有另一座屋，是給遊客住的，以是有冷氣的。為甚麼藝術家未能選擇這些屋呢？我也不知道。我甚至上網看過，旁邊的屋子，價差不算太大，但藝術家就是沒有付多點錢住進冷氣房

的選項。大概場主也認為藝術家要捱點苦吧！順帶一提，場主是芒族人，亦是藝術家，他也在我註場時到了海邊渡假，那你就知道這地區在夏天是多難捱吧？

館方為我準備了一座大排檔用的牛角風扇、地上的雙人床褥放著一張冬天被，這組合令我完全想不通。直至睡過兩晚後就明白—風扇是個好東西。在家雖亦有開風扇的習慣，但都會開點冷氣先令房間涼快起來。在這「山見吞」的山區，只需在日頭讓生風吹進房中，晚間開風扇就很涼快，多晚來更要與那張冬天被作伴，好好保暖。

「山見吞」、又潮又熱的天氣及無冷氣的房間是我在申請時，給自己的挑戰。但很快便發現，原來沒甚麼。大概當時我正在掌握著舊記憶，以為自己未能抵抗那點點的熱氣（實在太睇小自己了）。上機當日是7月22日，真正經歷的，反而是對香港的依依不捨。之後要經歷的是原來自己「錯」了地方。我很記得第二天起來，吃過早餐後，我走到studio入口旁，看著山景，心想：「哦！這是桂林。」就這樣，很快接受了是來這處避靜。當刻，又的確很需要。

規律的生活也需點刺激（像大家現在過著抗疫生活也周不時想出下街），所以有天我去了市中心走走。因不懂越南語的關係，搭巴士成為最刺激的環節，在那裡上下車也是猜猜估估。大家想像的城市會是怎樣？不好意思，對我來說，又是沒驚喜，因為又是一個十多年前的大陸。平靜的社區，樓房不多，亦沒高樓。在午飯時段街市攤販多在補眠，旁邊新建的商場跟小時候去的元朗廣場沒兩樣，路邊攤也散發著一種不知應否幫襯的氣氛（生怕被騙，更怕拉肚子）。

Hoa Binh 不是不好，但我來遲了十多年。這旅程如我在二十出頭時到來，一定會覺得新奇又刺激。在十多年前，我已到過一轉未成強國的大陸solo travel，豐富的、失落的也嘗過，現在的我確實未能再次享受這種單純的簡樸。

回程香港前，約了朋友到河內幾天。對，你猜中了，連河內這首都也有十多年前的「大陸感」。雖第一次到越南，但原來這變成懷舊之旅，讓我知有些舊，偶然想起就好了。就算人不願向前看，其實心已走不到回頭路。