

habit my parents had preserved. But above all, it is laughter and that irresistible desire to tease that is characteristic of the Vietnamese. They burst out laughing at anything, and the laughter is contagious.

They say that travel broadens the mind. For me, this trip was above all a rite of passage that helped me take a new look at this burgeoning country that is characterized by its youth, who make up more than 50 percent of its 85 million inhabitants. Youth, that formidable driver of the country's modernization, is in the process of dramatically changing lifestyles, especially among women. The Vietnamese woman is said to be the freest, the most powerful of all Asian women of Confucian heritage. She has been involved in all wars and battles for survival. Today, as yesterday, she remains a mainspring of support for men. In the countryside, it is still customary to see women working to support their husbands, a Confucian legacy that dates back to the time of the mandarins. It is amusing to note that the majority of women today wear

to import the expertise that these people have acquired elsewhere. How many times have I been entreated to return to my birthplace and help build the Vietnam of tomorrow, which is not so far off? In my mind, I have always thought that I could have the best of both worlds by serving Canada in a country that is familiar to me.

I spent my journey dreaming of some day working for Canada in Vietnam. Would that not be an elegant way of coming full circle? Would it not be the finest proof of gratitude to my parents and to my adopted country?

Since I have lived most of my life in Canada, I feel resolutely Canadian, with Vietnamese roots. I knew at an early age that I would have a more empathetic view of life and people, a view that would alternate between light and dark. Diversity, the bedrock of Canadian multiculturalism, is an asset that is admirably found in other countries, like Vietnam, with its 54 ethnic groups. Diversity is the banner of new Canadians because we can take advantage of our roots and apply it to our respective

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gloves and a mask on their face. They do it because of pollution, of course, but more so to protect themselves from the sun: the paler a woman's skin, the better chance she has of finding a husband!

It is modernism combined with age-old traditions that makes Vietnam so intriguing. In a land where ancestor worship is omnipresent, blood ties are sacred. Altars dedicated to the ancestors are erected everywhere: in pagodas, houses, restaurants and shops. There are even improvised altars along country roads, in homage to wandering souls, or to those who died on that particular road.

In contrast, undeniable signs of modernization are shaping this ancient country, which is quickly transforming itself. Vietnam is falling in step with the digital age of the 21st century. Its membership in the World Trade Organization offers excellent opportunities for the telecommunications sector. Along with education and training, science and technology are a national political priority.

But between modernity and age-old customs, Vietnam offers undeniable charm for tourists. We were told that the Vietnamese harbour no bitterness against their invaders—or against their children who left the country. Under the impetus of modernity, the Vietnamese do not hesitate to court ex-boat people like myself, and they pay special attention to the “Viet Kieu”—the name that designates the Vietnamese living overseas. The Vietnamese market needs

jobs. Our views are drawn from our life experiences, and are not necessarily found in books or classrooms, especially when our cultures or backgrounds differ significantly. This is particularly relevant to my work at Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada. It is not by chance that I came to this department.

I am so proud to be a Canadian working at DFAIT that I asked to be taken to the Canadian embassy in Hanoi. As a photo was about to be taken, the Vietnamese guard posted in front of the embassy gate gestured that I had no right to do this. My guide quickly explained that I was Canadian, and he immediately let me go ahead. I wanted to take a photo with him, but he shook his head, claiming he was not good-looking enough to be in the picture.

I left the land of the dragon with a heavy heart, but carried with me souvenirs to last a lifetime, including memories of the famous smile of the Vietnamese and of their generous welcome. Everywhere I went, I heard the same refrain, said with the perpetual smile: “Come back and see us again!” French humorist Gustave Parking once said that destiny is what life does with our desires. Yes, I will return to Vietnam.

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