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CITY DIARY >>

Beneath the 'Viet-Kieu' label

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In February 2009 during the *Tet* Lunar New Year holiday, I took my first trip to Vietnam. Sitting at a *pho* stall on a Hanoian Old Quarter Street, a man asked me where I was from because he heard me ordering three bowls for my friends and noticed my Southern yet slightly broken accent.

I told him about my upbringing, how my family had immigrated after the American War as it is called here (or Vietnam War). Then, in the middle of my explanation, his eyes lit up as it dawned upon him that I was a 'Viet-Kieu,' or an overseas Vietnamese, and not a Korean tour guide who knew how to speak Vietnamese.

That was the first time I heard that term, and it wasn't until two years later that I fully realized all the connotations associated with it.

I often used that term to identify myself, when people asked me where I was from or what I was doing and why I was in Vietnam. "I'm a Viet-Kieu teaching English in Saigon. I thought it would be interesting to learn more about my family's culture," was my typical response.

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I remember sitting with two American expats in a restaurant in District 1. After I told one of them my purpose for being in Saigon, she responded with, "Oh, you're one of those," in a matter of fact tone and a look that said that she now knew everything there was to know about me.

I guess my identity had become a clichéd commonality in Vietnam. But what is the typical Viet-Kieu?

According to some locals, all Viet-Kieus are supposedly rich and high maintenance. I can honestly tell you that my grandmother desperately tries to live up to that standard when she comes back for vacation, parading in her diamonds and showering relatives with money and gifts.

With most other Viet-Kieus, I felt that there was a mutual understanding as we viewed ourselves in a multi-aspect way, more than just coming back to our roots. I was able to relate and share experiences, not be simply branded as a Viet-Kieu. We came together as Viet-Kieus, but more importantly, knew each other as people.

Now, I don't want to fall into the trap of stereotyping expats and locals as not understanding my journey in Vietnam. I have friends who are expats and locals whom I can connect with and whom perceive the term Viet-Kieu as more than a label. There have also been some Viet-Kieus that I haven't been able to relate to because we didn't have enough common interests.

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The paradox in all of this is that I am against generalizations and stereotypes. Yet, I find myself using certain labels to define my experiences with stereotyping. Keep in mind, these are just my experiences of living in Vietnam and they were shaped by the people with whom I interacted.

To describe my experience of falling under the label of Viet-Kieu without using terms like Viet-Kieu, local, or expat would be impossible and I only speak about some people, not all.

Like with the word 'local' or 'expat,' we can't use the term 'Viet-Kieu' to encompass all overseas Vietnamese. We all come from diverse backgrounds and experiences. There are Vietnamese-Americans, Vietnamese-Laotians, Vietnamese-Germans, Vietnamese-Russians, those of mixed heritage, and the list goes on. Our feelings toward the land of our ancestry are varied as well as our ages, ideas, beliefs, and Vietnamese language proficiencies. We have come to Vietnam for different reasons.

Some come to volunteer and give back; others venture here with opportunistic hopes to cash in on the emerging global market; many come to live a more relaxed and laid back lifestyle; and some like myself, come to find how they identify as someone who has Vietnamese ancestry.

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Stereotyping and labeling people are a means of trying to understand people and sort them out in a way we can relate. It helps us to label a person as 'x' or 'y' so that when we encounter a person like 'x' or 'y' we can anticipate what to expect and how to communicate with that person. I am not going to lie. I do stereotype people quite often. When I meet a person for the first time I try to figure out his/her age, ethnicity, and interests, but I will remember next time to look a bit beneath their label, read the fine print and maybe get to know this individual's story as well.

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