

GEOTECHNICAL NEWS

CANADA

UNITED STATES

MEXICO

Vietnam – The Beautiful

Part 1: The Life of a Geotechnical Engineer

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We all have a story to tell and the geotechnical engineer is no exception. The very nature of their work causes geotechnical engineers to travel far and wide to study geotechnical problems and undertake site investigations. In the process they learn more and more about their profession, and at the same time they meet many individuals who have interesting stories to tell about their lives. In reality, everyone has many stories to tell.



I was once invited for a meal to the outskirts of the city of Hanoi, Vietnam. The family was very poor but they had gone to great lengths to prepare their best meal for me, their guest. Following the meal, I asked the hostess, through an interpreter, if she would tell me about her life. Her response was, "I do not have an interesting life; I have nothing to tell". But I encouraged her to start to tell me a part of her story. She could not speak English and in Vietnamese she began to speak about her childhood in Vietnam.

She began by telling of growing up outside of a small village about 60 km from Hanoi. She was one of 4 girls and 4 boys that comprised the children of the family. She told of the hardships during the French occupation; hardship that led to the death of 4 of the children because of a lack of medical aid, poor nutrition and bad living conditions. In desperation she joined the resistance movement and found herself trying to survive from one day to the next on the streets of Hanoi. Later she joined the army to fight against the Americans and was on an assignment in Hanoi. She told playing with a landmine on day that exploded. To this day she carries a piece of metal in her head from that experience. As she told of her struggles, tears began to flow down her cheeks. This was an extremely moving story from a lady of about 55 years old who felt that she had "no story to tell". And through this experience, I learned once again that we all have a story to tell.

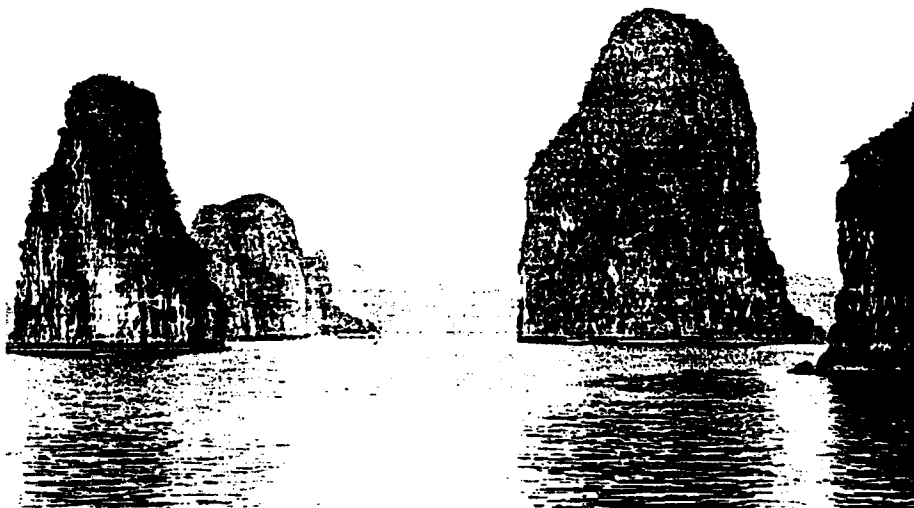
But the reason that I was at her home was equally as fascinating. You see, I also have a story to tell. In 1993, I had come to Vietnam on a personal fact-finding mission to Vietnam. I wanted to go and personally meet the people who had suffered so much, to learn something about them. In a matter of one week, I would learn much about Vietnam: including the fact that it is extremely dangerous to try to understand a people and their situation by watching television. I would find in Vietnam many warm-hearted, loving and hospitable people.

However, I would now like to tell you about one little girl out of many people on the streets of Hanoi who

wanted to practice English on a foreigner!

I was on sabbatical at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and I had mentioned to several of my friends that I deeply longed to visit the country of Vietnam. My desire was real and intense and I felt that this would not simply be another visit to another country.

Getting into the country of Vietnam



Inland Sea

turned out to be more difficult than I had originally anticipated. I needed a special invitation but I did not know anyone in Vietnam. Then one day I received a telephone call from a geotechnical professor by the name of Kien du Trinh of the Technical University in Lynby, Denmark. He was acquainted with a number of government officials in Hanoi. He had heard of my desire to go to Vietnam and he gave me the name of a geotechnical engineer by the name of Dr. Nguyen Truong Tien. Within two weeks arrangements had been made for me to go to Hanoi.

As I came to the Singapore airport, I looked up at the flight schedule. There, above and below one another were the flights to Hanoi and to Brunei; one of the poorest countries in the world right next to the richest country in the world. But in my heart I said, "It is Vietnam that I want to visit more than ever"! I got my boarding pass and stopped in at a little store in the airport. There on the shelf was a book entitled, "Vietnam - The

Beautiful". I bought the book and I quickly became even more convinced that I was on my way to the place where my heart longed to go.

That week in May, 1993, turned out to be a "defining" week in my life. I met many people ranging from government officials to children on the street. I was welcomed with warm hospitality and treated like a long-lost friend. I visited

universities and went through geotechnical laboratories (with little or no testing equipment), and through libraries (with few books to read).

The few pieces of soil testing equipment that I saw were of a past vintage and the few technical books that existed were in the Russian language. At the end of the visit to each university, I would ask, (as if I were a rich man!), "If you were to write out a wish-list, what would you put on the list?" The answer was obvious for technical books and laboratory equipment were in desperate need in a country attempting to rebuild its infrastructure. And my desire was simply to try to make the technical "playing field" as little more equitable. I had never come with the thought of solving the problems of another country; rather, I just wanted to know how they thought that a person from another country could be of assistance to them.

It was primarily one man who took a week out of his busy schedule to try to show me, an unknown foreigner, the

story of the country of Vietnam, and he was Dr. Nguyen Truong Tien of the Ministry of Construction. He not only showed me a beautiful country but more importantly he introduced me to a world of warm, hospitable and loving people. They were hardworking and creative

their universities in Hanoi since the end of the war in 1975. And as the week came to a close, I realized that my life would never again be quite the same again. One week had changed me forever.

The time of my first visit to Vietnam



Hay cart



Street scene

and in their every day activities. They were showing me a world where everything that could be used, would be used. It was total recycling. And still they had time to show me the greatest of appreciation and respect. By the end of the week, I was lavished with appreciation and told that I was the first engineer to have taken the time to come and visit

was quickly coming to a close; now I had only 2 days left. It had been another busy day of meetings, visiting one government agency in the morning and an environmental watchdog group for the city of Hanoi in the afternoon. Before going for my usual light supper at the Ministry of Defense hotel, I decided to go for a short walk. I would go a few

blocks to the north, circle to the east and then head back to the hotel. The city was surprisingly safe for walking around provided you could make your way through the maze of bicycles, xich los (cyclos) and motorcycles on the street. But my main concern was the possibility of getting lost in the network of streets that seemed to run in all directions with none matching the compass directions, and never intersecting at 90 degrees.

I was walking just across the street from the Flamingo hotel when seemingly, from nowhere, I heard someone say, "Mister. — I practice English — to you". I found it hard to get used to the friendliness of the people. I was self-conscious of the fact that I looked like an American and I subconsciously had assumed that I would be disliked. It was a little girl who had spoken. She looked as if she was about 9 years old but in reality, she was actually 13. I responded, "Yes, I would like very much to practice English". I was quick to discover that the first sentence she had spoken was the phrase she knew best. Obviously she had used it many times in attempting to speak with tourists.

We struggled through a few sentences. I used my hands extensively and both of us laughed as we tried desperately to make each other understood. Each time I attempted to curtail the conversation, she would try more desperately than ever to be understood. Suddenly I realized that the sun had gone down and my surroundings seemed to be darkening. I said goodbye and started to walk away. As I did, the little girl pleaded, "But Mister, — come back — tomorrow, I will speak again". I replied, "I would like to come back tomorrow but I am busy tomorrow evening". And as I turned a second time to walk away, I heard her say, "Come — next night". I tried to explain that I would not be able to speak to her again because in two days I would be going back to Singapore. But her persistence continued, "Mister, take — picture". I was carrying my camera, as usual, and said, "Yes, I would be glad to take you picture". And then I added, "Is your Mom or Dad around here"? She pointed a short ways down the street and indi-

cated that her mother was nearby. I said, "You get your mother and I will take your picture". They posed and I took a picture and said goodbye. I offered her 4000 dong. At this point she strongly protested and it was obvious that she did want to simply get some money.

Her mother had a small stand on the sidewalk from which she sold baking that she had prepared each morning. The sales of food would provide barely enough income to sustain a family of 2 children. Later she and her husband would move to the outskirts of Hanoi and raise pigs in the back of their house in order to have a meager, but more sta-



Photo taken of Miss Thu and her mother, Singh, in 1993

ble income. They would leave the little girl and her 6 year old brother in a small room by themselves in downtown Hanoi so they would be able to attend school.

No sooner had I turned to walk away than I heard her say, "Mister, — send me — picture"? I had been asked this question many times and of course, it was always polite to say, "Yes". As I said, "Yes", I also indicated that she would have to give me an address to which I could send the picture. She looked puzzled. I couldn't ascertain whether she did not have a house with an address or whether she had never received anything in the mail and so she did not seem to understand what I meant. She talked to another friend and to her mother, and I could see that no progress was being made on getting her address to me. And so, once again, I turned to walk away. This time she ran after me and tugged at my arm. She signaled for me to give her

a piece of paper. The only paper I had was my business card and so I turned it over and motioned that she could write on the back of the card. I looked at what she had written and realized that I could not read the Vietnamese words. However, by this time the darkness was making me somewhat anxious and so I smiled, put the card in my pocket and went on my way.

I quickly walked across the street in front of the beautiful French designed Opera House. I had to concentrate to get through the traffic as five streets came together at this point. Bicycles, motor-bikes and the few vehicles of Hanoi all seemed to converge on this point from all directions. It was good to see the entrance to the Ministry of Defense hotel and I knew that I was back on familiar ground. In my room, I could not get the picture of that little girl's face from my mind. She had been so persistent. She wasn't in any danger or great need, as far as I knew, but why would she so desperately cling to making contact with me?

Once back in Singapore, I had my pictures developed.



Del Fredlund with Miss Thu

Glancing through the pictures, I noticed that the photo of the little girl in Hanoi, along with her mother, had turned out exceptionally well. I had almost forgotten that I had promised to send her a print. The next day I noticed that the business card was in the bottom of my briefcase, but there was no way that I could make out the address.

An idea came to my mind. Why not

photocopy the address onto a piece of paper and tape it to an envelope and send it. I enclosed a short note which read, "I enjoyed talking to you in Hanoi. If you receive this letter, please write to me". After taping the address to the envelope, I printed across the bottom of the envelope. "HANOI, VIETNAM", in big bold letters. In this way, I thought that surely it should get as far as Hanoi and from there on it was up to their postman.

I waited, not really believing that there would ever be a response. Six weeks later, I received a letter in Singapore and this is what it read, "Thank you, Mister for your letter. Please write again but next time write in Vietnamese. Your English is too hard to read!" I wrote back to her and explained that I was too old to ever learn Vietnamese and that it was necessary for her to learn English if she wanted to write to me. Then I asked her, "Tell me about the weather in Hanoi". A few weeks went by and I received another letter. She said, "The weather, you were here, you saw the weather — it is always the same!" As I looked at the envelope I realized that she had to pay more than 10,000 dong for the stamp. I would later find out that she was encouraged by her mother to save her money and buy a stamp and write to me. Her mother told her, "The man was polite to write to you; you should write back to him!" The little girl's name was Nguyen Thi Hong Thu.

After several letters went back and forth, I began to enjoy the humor associated with the way she put her thoughts together. Then I took a 20 dollar bill, placed it within a black piece of paper and told her to go and study English. And that is exactly what she did. I would venture to say that this is probably one of the best investments that I ever made in my life. Within a couple of years her English began to flow as if it were her native language. It was fascinating to read her letters, although the silly way she used to say things started to pass from her writing style.

As she later graduated from high

school, she wrote and asked me what she should do next. I asked her what she wanted to do and explained that she could whatever her heart longed to do. She told of her desires and I encouraged her to go to college and take further language studies. And so she registered in college and studied languages; English, Chinese and Vietnamese.

During her first year in college she entered an English speaking competition open to all students at the college and won first prize.

This year she turns 23 years old and she graduates from college with a degree. She now does translation work and interprets for foreigners who come to Vietnam.

I made my first return trip to Vietnam almost one year after my first trip. The purpose was to put together a proposal for engineering collaboration between Canada and Vietnam. The desire was to submit a proposal to CIDA for their support. As I arrived at the airport, I picked up my luggage and proceeded through Customs in the usual manner. As I came out of the airport terminal I was greeted by a row of delegates; professors from the universities I had attended as well as government officials. I greeted them, received their flowers and then noticed a little girl at the end of the row. She was holding a large bouquet of flowers and the tears were streaming down her cheeks. It took me a minute to realize that this was Miss Thu. She gave me the flowers and I said, "Why are you crying?" She replied, "Mister, I never thought that I would ever see you again; I am so happy". Her English was already showing great improvement. Over the next 9 years a similar picture would be repeated over and over again. However, there were fewer tears with time!

But she would say, "YOU MUST come to visit my parents in the suburbs". And so I found a free evening to go to visit her parents in the suburb. They lived close to the Hanoi solid waste disposal area and so the garbage trucks formed a continual stream of traffic just by the door. Her parents spoke no English. They prepared the best food they could afford for the occasion and we sat down to eat. I could hear the

grunting of pigs and could see that they had about 12 to 18 pigs in the back portion of the house. Although I was a farm boy from eastern Saskatchewan, this was truly a unique experience for me. Later when my wife came to Hanoi, I would be only too ready to encourage her to pay a visit to this unique suburb home.

As the years went by I made one or two visits to Vietnam each year in connection with the engineering collaboration program. A CIDA program has been completed and 5 graduate students as well as several short-term study programs have been completed at the Uni-



Recent photo of Miss Thu

versity of Saskatchewan. I would also take 5 graduate students from the University of Saskatchewan to Vietnam and, of course, they had to meet Miss Thu.

She loved being their guide and, in fact, became the guide for many of my friends who traveled to Vietnam. She was the guide for one of the top officials from the University of Saskatchewan who came to visit Vietnam and after his return he said to me, "Miss Thu is certainly a very unusual little girl!" And indeed she was, for she would quickly win the heart of all that she met.

As time went on, Miss Thu's monthly letters became a routine in our home. We still write to her but now she goes to the Internet Café to send emails. Hanoi has also changed much since that first trip. I have made trips to Vietnam every year since 1993 and there has never been a time when she was not at the airport to welcome me to Vietnam.

She has welcomed my wife to Vietnam as well as two of our children. One year ago, she came to visit us in Singapore and for the first time got to fly in an airplane (and step onto a moving escalator where she would almost fall for the first few days!). Her world and ours would be forever changed.

Taking time to stop on the street and talk to a child has taught me some interesting lessons. It has taught me that you can change the world by giving a child a chance: one child at a time. It has also taught me that when you have little of this world's goods to give, you still have the precious gift of "gratitude". Miss Thu, in turn, has introduced me to other people in Vietnam who have little of this world's goods, but show gratitude and give hope to others. I have been privileged to get to know other people who have transformed the lives of the blind children, the orphans and the street children of Hanoi. And so, if the world of a child is to be changed, it will be changed one child at a time.

There are so many "forks" in the road of life. It is always interesting to look back and see the things that we have experienced as a result of the decisions we have made as we came to a "fork" in the road. Little decisions like stopping to talk to a 13 year old child!

And there have been so many seemingly accidental introductions to interesting people in Vietnam; people like Dr. Nguyen Truong Tien; people who have opened the doors of the real Vietnam in a most interesting way.

Part 2 of "Vietnam – the Beautiful" will provide details related to doing geotechnical engineering in a country where the amount of money available for geotechnical engineering is extremely limited.
