MISCONCEPTIONS OF VIETNAM

Amy Ruhter
Exploratory
Hong Kong International School, Tai Tam, Hong Kong

[Assignment: Compare and contrast your expectations towards something with your actual experience of it. Remember to have a reason for doing so and to keep the audience in mind. Write to show how your mental picture changed.]

Visions of death and destruction are often associated with Vietnam. I suppose that is why my parents were somewhat wary when I chose to go to Vietnam for eight days on a school trip my senior year in high school. Vietnam has always been considered a war-torn nation struggling to keep its economic head above water. I know I thought so. That is why I chose to go there. I wanted to see what the war was all about, and I thought I could understand it from the land it was fought on. Vietnam was nothing like I expected it to be. It was the most incredible place I have ever been.

It wasn't incredible for any of the reasons I thought it would be. We were required to do a considerable amount of research about the history and culture of Vietnam before we were allowed to leave on the trip. I read a book by Tim O'Brien called *The Things They Carried* that gave me a distinct mental picture of Vietnam. We watched a number of documentaries that caused me to envision fields marred by bomb craters and men walking around with missing limbs. In the back of my mind, I think I expected to see this war still going on. Whenever I thought of Vietnam, I saw war scenes filled with lifeless bodies and bloody, staggering soldiers. I pictured a barren land crawling with enemies. I saw what television wanted me to see. How quickly I learned once we got there what a poor image of Vietnam my mind and the media had created for me.

As soon as our plane began its descent, my eyes searched the land for traces of bombs. I wanted to see what this country was all about, and I thought it was about the war America fought there. I couldn't see anything except fields, and it disappointed me. As we disembarked from the plane, I realized that the countryside was breathtaking. Endless green fields and sweet-smelling air welcomed us. I was stunned. Vietnam wasn't supposed to be beautiful. The only time I ever saw any indication that a war had been fought there was more towards the south near Ho Chi Minh City. As we rode the train from Hue, the vivid green rice fields flew by our windows. Every few minutes there were huge craters in the middle of the fields. By this time, I didn't want to see any more indications of war. On the contrary, I wanted to forget there ever was one.

I assumed that the Vietnamese would hate Americans because of all we had done to them. It seemed inevitable that the Vietnamese would resent the Americans for meddling in something that wasn't any of our business. I thought they would hate the U.S. for bringing so many weapons into their country and killing thousands of their people. On top of all this, the U.S. put a trade embargo on Vietnam that is still economically wounding them. To say the least, I was shocked when the Vietnamese welcomed us with brilliant smiles and open arms.

Although a group of students from an international American school seemed a likely target for hatred and prejudice, the people in Vietnam were warm and helpful wherever we went. I was appalled after I went through a war museum that the workers there could even bear to look at us. Grotesque pictures of American soldiers holding up mutilated carcasses of Vietnamese soldiers hung in the museum, and a variety of American planes, bombs, and helicopters were scattered throughout the courtyard. It made me sick to my stomach. I was so ashamed of the actions of my own country that I no longer thought of the one I had been conditioned to fear. The people there were so friendly and open to new ideas. They were trying their hardest to forget the war that had ravaged their lands and to move on with their lives. My respect for them and their country is immeasurable.

I respect the Vietnamese people for many reasons, but most of all for their ability to heal themselves. I had always pictured Vietnam as an underdeveloped country complete with thatched roofed huts as homes and dirt roads. A countryside stripped of trees and foliage because of all the Agent Orange that had been dumped over the country is the mental picture that I maintained. I had imagined the cities as small and nonindustrialized. How quickly I learned again that what I had thought was completely different from how things really were.

Vietnam is by far the most beautiful place I have ever been. I have never seen so many shades of green as those blanketing the fields and hills. The heat and moisture contribute to a tropical climate that maintains those greens throughout the year. China Beach was the most breathtaking place I have ever been; the crystal clear water shimmered like gold, and the white sand seemed to stretch on endlessly. The cities, tossed amidst the rolling hills and shores, were large and bustling. There were tall buildings, huge traffic jams, and hundreds of neon signs that taunted tourists into little pubs, bars, shops, and nightclubs.

Vietnam is slowly emerging from the tumultuous past that has hindered its economic and social progress for many years. It has developed an identity separate from that of a nation scarred by war. Often considered the epitome of war and hardship, Vietnam is slowly healing itself, and the violence festers only in the minds of those who survived it.