

Saturday, December 23, 2006

We are slowly getting used to the local time and woke today at about 5:30 AM. We showered, ate some of the hotel breakfast, and waited for Ha to come meet us. As part of our wedding in 2005, we had formal pictures taken that costs about \$1000. Ha had told us that we could get much better pictures in Vietnam for a much lower price, so we decided to try this while we are here. I had brought my suit to wear for Ha's wedding, so I unpacked these, and together with Ha, we went to the Anh Vien wedding studio at 8AM. The studio was a three-story building; the 1st floor was a display of wedding dresses, and the top two floors were studios. Ha arranged a package deal for us that consisted of the following. First were several hundred 3.5" * 5" pictures covering three dress changes for Casy (negatives included). We would choose our favorite 35 pictures, and these would be printed in hard stock in a hardcover wedding album. These same pictures would be incorporated into a DVD with music. Last, we could pick one picture to make one large wall portrait. Newton changed into my suit, and Casy had makeup put on, along with hair extensions. The place provided various dresses for women, both wedding dresses and other styles. We then had a series of pictures taken on different backgrounds. The make-up artists, principal photographer and his assistants were all clearly gay, quite similar to what is found in the US. Casy got to change dresses three times to add variety to the shots, and the studio provided all the dresses.

Figure 1: Casy getting make-up put on at Anh Vien wedding studio.



At 11AM, Ha had to go to a flower shop to look over flowers for her wedding. That made it difficult for the photographer and us because they did not speak English and we did not speak Vietnamese. So the principal photographer used his hands to twist, turn and push us into the poses he desired. Everything was finished at 1 PM when the photography crew stopped for lunch. Casy called Ha and asked how to get back to the hotel. She gave us directions but we got lost at a huge 5-way intersection. Casy called Ha again, and she and Phoung rode in on a motorcycle and pointed the way to us.

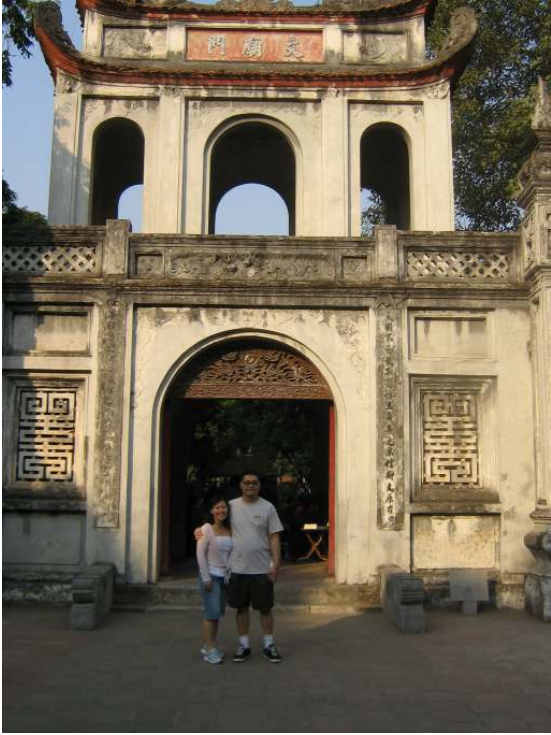
We got back to the hotel and rested. The front lobby of the hotel had posters describing the tours offered by our hotel. We looked them over, asked some questions of the hotel staff and decided to take the van tour to the Perfume Pagoda tour. This was 480,000 VND (\$30.00) for the both of us, which we paid up front. After that we decided to go out to eat for lunch. We walked around looking for Pho, but we couldn't find it. We did not want to eat on the street so we went to the New World restaurant. This was like a bar for Westerners. Casy ordered vegetable fried rice with Vietnamese coffee and Newton ordered stir-fried noodles with meat. The total cost was 137.000 VND. After this we walked back to our hotel.

Figure 2: Lunch at New World restaurant about a 5-minute walk from our hotel



Phong, Heng and Tron knocked on our room at 3 PM, and asked if we wanted to visit the Temple of Literature, which was the first university in Vietnam. We agreed and walked from our hotel to the old University in ~15 minutes. In 1070, King Ly Thanh Tong founded this temple to pay tribute to education and to those Vietnamese individuals who had attained high academic achievement. Six years later, it became Hanoi's first university, and then went on to become Vietnam's first university, and the site where national examinations for entrance into the educated classes took place. The last national exams occurred here over 200 years ago. Today, art students sit on the grass and try to reproduce the traditional Vietnamese architecture on paper. The entire complex sits in the middle of the city and is walled off from the city by a tall stonewall. The complex consists of buildings that look like temples, with courtyards, fishponds and manicured lawns surrounding each building and separating them from each other. Inside the place are huge stone carvings of turtles. Atop each turtle is a stone stela with the names of successful doctorates engraved into them. These stela are basically the archives of Vietnam's educational history.

Figure 3: Different places at the Temple of Literature. At top left is the front gate. At top right is a bronze bell. At bottom left is a gong used to begin the school day when this place was a functioning university. At bottom right is a courtyard.



We paid our admission of 5,000 VND per person. We walked around and took pictures. Phong told Casy various myths and legends about this place. One famous story is about two twin brothers and a woman who lived hundreds of years ago. The older brother met and married a beautiful woman, and they moved into their own hut on their own farm. Every day they would walk out to their farm together, worked in the fields, and walk home together. One night, the wife got pregnant. The next day she started feeling sick while working in the fields, and walked home early by herself to rest. As she rested, she came to realize that she was pregnant, and was overjoyed to the point of tears. Unfortunately, right at this moment, the husband's twin brother stopped by to pay a visit. Since both brothers looked exactly alike, and both were farmers who wore plain work clothes, the overjoyed wife thought he was her husband and hugged and kissed him. Before she could collect herself, the husband reached home and saw what happen. He saw his wife in his brother's arms, and she proclaiming that she was pregnant. Distraught to the point of despair, he ran away as fast as he could. The wife realized her mistake, froze in shock for several minutes, and finally realized she must find her husband. Too late it was, for when she went outside, her husband had already fled the village in silent rage. In tears, she wandered of in search for him.

Figure 4: The picture at left is the basis for the famous legend of the twin brothers and the wife. The tall tree is the husband, his wife is the creeper vine, and the brother is the stone at right. The picture at right is supposed to be the oldest tree in the city, and sits at one corner of the Temple.



The brother knew he could not join the wife in the search for rumors would fly that they were really a couple, so he did the only thing he knew he could do safely; sit in the lawn in front of the house to watch over their property for them. Hours turned into days, days into weeks, and weeks into years. The brother stopped eating, sleeping, and his heart withered away as the plants grew to envelop him. Finally, he became a stone, sitting alone with no other trees

or bushes beside him. Decades later, the husband returned, a broken man with nowhere to go except the only place he knew he could sleep at safely. Seeing the strange tree growing in his yard, he sat down opposite of it to rest and ponder its origins. Rest he did, for this was the first time in decades in which his mind did not revisit the scene of his brother and his wife locked in embrace. The anger and sadness that fueled his heart died away, and he passed away that very night, sitting upright facing his own brother. The next day, by chance, the wife returned home to see her husband's body. She rushed to him and embraced him promising to never leave him. She also passed away there; her arms locked around her husband's body. Nature soon took over as his body became a tree, and her body became a creeper vine wound around his trunk. The tree and the stone, one for each brother, and the creeper vine around the tree, sit in one corner of the Temple's complex.

Figure 5: On top of each stone turtle is a stelae inscribed with the names of alumni from this university. A local tradition is for current students to rub the head of a turtle for good luck on their tests.



As we walked around the complex, we saw many other tourists, both foreign and local. We also saw one Vietnamese couple getting pictures taken there. One Vietnamese tradition when a couple gets married is for the couple to have their pictures taken at various famous sights, dressed in their wedding clothes. This place stopped being a university several decades ago, and is now a tourist attraction. As such, there was a gift shop, and Newton bought the following souvenirs; stamps for his mother (48,000 VND), an English – Vietnamese Dictionary (32,000 VND), and a beautifully decorated book about Vietnam titled “Under the sign of the Blue Dragon” (640,000).

Inside one of the buildings there was a musical performance by local ladies using traditional Vietnamese instruments. There were several western tourists watching the show. Beside it was a gift shop selling replicas of the instruments. After the demonstration, the ladies went straight to the gift shop to try and sell some of the instruments to the tourists. We spent about two hours walking around the university.

Figure 6: Newlyweds getting their pictures taken at the Temple of Literature. They are in the background at right. At left in the background is the gift shop.



Figure 7: Music demonstration using Vietnamese instruments



After that we walked out and around the complex. We took a taxi to meet Ha and Phoung at Phoung's family coffee shop. Beside the coffee shop was a small art gallery. The artworks were very expensive. We sat there and chatted for two hours and checked our e-mail using Ha's laptop. After that we got invited by Ha's father to eat with his family. We took a taxi (30,000 VND) to Ashima Restaurant, a nice family restaurant that specialized in mushrooms and steamboat. The dinner consisted of steamboat with sixteen different types of mushrooms. We also met Ha's brother, Heng, for the first time, along with many of Ha's aunts and cousins. After dinner finished at 10:30 PM, we took a taxi back to the hotel and went to bed.

Figure 8: Dinner with Ha's family at Ashima restaurant

