

# TRISTES FRONTIÈRES

## 憂鬱的邊界

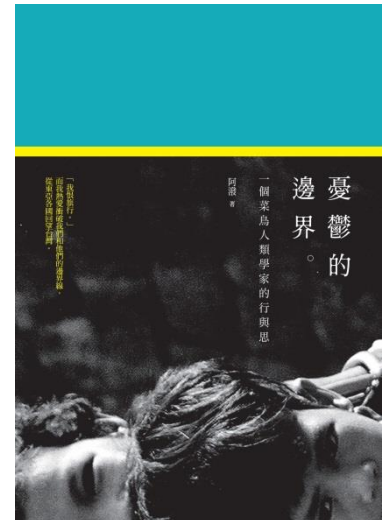
Back in 2002, Annpo decided to make a trip of a lifetime around East Asia. But she was no ordinary backpacker, she was an anthropologist on 'fieldwork,' determined to discover the ways big and small borders are reconstructed by, and reshape, different peoples around the continent. She was there to break bread with the locals, and along the way, she discovered that they were not the strangers of her imagination. Border disputes across East Asia have thrown up similar anxieties to the ones she knows from back home, a country not recognised by the UN, an island in limbo after China's bitter civil war.

And so she travelled. From Vietnam's even heating conflict zone, to the icy cold line that separates Korea north and south at latitude 38 degrees. To Macau, where she stayed not in high rise luxury, but in the shabby wooden shacks that have survived the city's glossy casino makeover. She took the cheapest bus from China's border with North Korea down to Beijing, experiencing the life for the superpower's poorest citizens. Next came visits to a Thai-Burma border town. Daring to go where most tourists don't and determined to get deeper than the surface most tourists see, Annpo was on a journey across melancholy borders.

Paying homage to Levi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques*, the sixteen essays that make up *Tristes Frontières* are not just a record of Annpo's adventures across Asia, of the repeated collisions with borders real and imagined, but also a vivid example of what we might call a 'sensory anthropology.' This book is a conversation about identity and boundaries. But Annpo shows us, there is a world beyond the boundaries we create for ourselves.

### Annpo Huang 阿潑

Annpo is the pen name of Huang Yi-Ying. Trained in anthropology and journalism, she has worked in international development and as a journalist, before concentrating on her writing full time. Anthropological methods shape the very way she sees the world, every day life is fieldwork. She also takes a deep interest in cultural topics and learning Asia's many different languages. Annpo is hungry to know the world, she loves to travel, to talk to locals, and



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judges the success of a trip by how many times she is invited to eat with strangers and new friends. She has previously published *Unseen Beijing* and writes a blog entitled *Hello, Malinowski*.

# TRISTES FRONTIÈRES

By Annpo Huang. Translated by Yew Leong Lee.

## Vietnam: A Misunderstanding at the Border

### 'China, oh China'

On an overnight train returning from Lao Cai to Hanoi, my companion and I were just about to go to sleep when all of a sudden there was a knock on our door, chasing away all thought of rest. An officer in a crisp uniform strode in, shouting, 'Tickets, passports,' which we immediately produced. Taking the two dark green booklets from us, he proceeded to inspect our documents with a look of amusement on his face, except he didn't smile. He scrutinised the cover, which bore the text, Republic of China, for words he could recognise. Standing behind the well-built officer was the train conductor in a white uniform, who seemed indifferent to this inspection and kept quiet from start to finish.

The swaying of the train carriages made a clanging noise that disrupted the night; its friction sparked in the four of us—huddled into one of the narrowest compartments in the train—a silent anger. If the air was already heavy from the poor ventilation, it grew even heavier from the tension. It was hard to breathe.

And then a document covered in Vietnamese words was thrust before our eyes, the police officer indicating that we were to sign it. We didn't know why we had to sign a document we couldn't read, and without anyone around who could explain or translate it for us, I pushed the document back to the police officer and shook my head forcefully. The police officer stopped smiling and stared at us. 'Not China, we are from Taiwan,' we tried to explain, loudly, in English, but the police officer didn't seem to understand. A few more back and forths ensued, but neither one of us succeeded in making himself or herself understood—we were trapped in the Tower of Babel.

'I'm guessing we're being taken for illegal Chinese immigrants,' I whispered into my friend's ear.

This was the summer of 2002, the summer I found out that I had been accepted by a university to study anthropology and was traveling from southern Vietnam to Lao Cai at the country's northernmost tip. At first glance, you'd be hard-pressed to say how this province differed from the rest—there were the same hawkers carrying small and large bags of goods, hurrying to the market, the same rickshaw pullers, the same motorbike riders for hire, and the same taxi drivers, all jostling for you to use their services. The only thing that was different about it, perhaps, were the faces belonging to the Chinese and other minority groups occupying both sides of the Sino-Vietnamese border.

The reason for this is Lao Cai's proximity to China, which lies just across the Red River, where it converges with the Yunnan River. The province is an important focal point for Sino-Vietnam relations. In 1979, it was occupied by Chinese forces during the Sino-Vietnam War. After the war ended and the Chinese troops withdrew, it turned from tense military outpost to deserted frontier. Only when relations between the two countries normalised in 1993 and the shore opened up again did the bustle of years past return.

For hundreds, even thousands of years, the border between Vietnam and China has never been well defined. When the Chinese invaded Vietnam, they not only erased the cultural demarcations, but also fudged up their physical ones too. Only when the People's Republic of China was established and Vietnam became independent did the process of delineating borders begin. Unfortunately, both parties were unable to come to an agreement and the resulting war turned the 1350 kilometre-long line into a wound awaiting suture. In 2000, after the Sino-Vietnam Land Border treaty was signed, the gash finally healed. As if dividing up a cake, 113 of the 217 square kilometers of land under dispute went to Vietnam, while the remaining 114 went to China. Peace, at least on the surface, was thus obtained.

Although the border markers now clearly defined their territories, both countries' citizens continue to cross the border daily. After all, quotidian life, which has nothing to do with top-level politics, carries on. On the one hand, members of the Thai and Yi minority groups from Yunnan carry home agricultural produce from Vietnam; on the other, the Vietnamese walk back their bicycles laden with Chinese clothes and household products. It's through here that the various products from China are exported to the rest of Southeast Asia. Crowds alighting at the bus stop carry boxes bearing Chinese characters—a reminder of China's proximity.

And precisely because of this, it's not unheard of for Chinese illegal immigrants to sneak across the border. The section of land between Lao Cai and Hanoi is thus a crucial one. No wonder the Chinese on board the train are subject to special scrutiny.

All said, we were holders of Taiwanese passports, with visas and train tickets—it should have been clear that we were tourists. Why were we being mistaken for Mainland Chinese, and why should we sign a document we did not understand? Was it because we were occupying the room reserved for the train conductor? No, that was probably not it. Because the situation couldn't be explained away, I was even more frustrated.

At such a deadlock caused by language barriers, and stubbornness on both sides, I devised a detective story in my mind: Who, on this train, is guilty of creating this predicament?

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I'd long thought that even if the Vietnamese didn't like the Chinese, they didn't hate them. Taiwan's history textbooks start with our 'five thousand years of civilisation,' and that Vietnam has always been a dependent of China—not only did it succumb to our dynastic rule, it has also been positively influenced by Chinese culture. In truth, however, for thousands of years China has been nothing but a menace to its neighbour. Its threat is felt by Vietnam even today.

'It may be hard for you to conceive it as such, but, in fact, China is actually a menace to us.' Many years later, in Taipei, I met a Chinese Vietnamese whom I called Luo, and who liked to tell me stories. I was curious how the Vietnamese in him looked upon China, his ancestral home. He alluded to recent developments in the news to express what was a common Vietnamese sentiment: Although a lot of Chinese capital has been invested in Southeast Asia—including many public construction projects in Vietnam—the Vietnamese are nonetheless wary of the Chinese. Case in point: Vietnam's high speed rail project. Although the Vietnamese parliament voted to turn down Japan's tender because the quoted price was simply too high for them to bear, not one official dared suggest that they turn to the Chinese (who could go as low as a third of Japan's), because of their misgivings. It would be tantamount to

opening one's doors to a Trojan horse.

This fear of the Chinese also manifests itself in Vietnamese street names. During my travels, I discovered that many of the streets in Vietnam's cities are named after local heroes, who have often led resistance efforts against the Chinese. For example, Trưng Sisters Road in Ho Chi-Minh city commemorates two sisters who mounted resistance to Chinese invasion, while Trần Hưng Đạo and Nguyễn Huệ Avenues recall the commanders who fought off the Mongolians in the thirteenth century. Of course, Vietnam doesn't only claim China as its enemy—anti-French resistance leader Chiếu dịch Nam Kỳ is also memorialised in this way. Although Vietnam's numerous struggles and resistance efforts can be condensed into a mere section of Vietnamese history in a travel guide, traces of these efforts are also visible in the sights and architecture of Vietnam, as well as on its maps and in its street names. One can't help being reminded of it with every casual flip of the page or with every turn of the corner, and so Vietnam's tumultuous history leaves a deep impression on any visitor.

Seated at the very heart of Hanoi's city centre, and regarded as the very lung of the city, is Hoàn Kiếm Lake. Today, it's a place for leisure; in the morning, old people congregate by it to practice Tai chi, and at night, dating couples stroll along its perimeter. Tourists go there too, from time to time. The casual atmosphere belies its menacing name: 'Lake where the Sword was Returned.' The name originated in the fifteenth century, during Vietnam's Lê Dynasty. At that time, the Ming Dynasty court in China dispatched soldiers south to invade Vietnam. Thanks to resistance efforts led by Lê Lợi, Vietnam managed to prevail. After ten years of fighting, Xuande Emperor at last issued an edict to abort the mission, and Vietnam kept its independence. Legend has it that Lê Lợi borrowed a treasured sword from the Heavens, and upon victory, rode a boat to the middle of the lake in Hanoi, and returned the sword to a Turtle God that resided in the waters, giving it its name.

Hoàn Kiếm Lake's story isn't the only one in which Vietnam's 'resistance against and hate of foreigners' is recorded. There's also the Temple of the Jade Mountain, which commemorates Trần Hưng Đạo, another leader who fought off the Mongolians. This important general of the Chen Dynasty led Vietnamese forces in the thirteenth century and successfully defended Vietnam against Mongolian incursion not once, but twice. Celebrated for his victories, he was later known as King Hưng Đạo and even deified. According to legend, you would pray to him if you wanted to get pregnant or, if you were pregnant already, to avert miscarriage.

The defeat of the Mongolians by the Chen Dynasty's Trần Hưng Đạo and that of the Chinese by Lê Dynasty's Lê Lợi both unfolded in part at Ha Long Bay, a spectacular formation of limestone pillars not far away from the Chinese border. We had a free slot in our itinerary just before visiting Lao Cai, so we decided to take a bus and visit this famous tourist spot. The name Ha Long means 'Heavenly Dragon Descended from the Skies.' According to legend, God in Heaven once commanded all its dragons as well as their descendants to stop the Mongolians from invading by sea. When a heavenly dragon rises up into the sky and thrashes its tail, it causes mountains to collapse and the sea's waters to rise and fill in the newly formed craters. Ha Long Bay was created by accident but favoured by one of the heavenly dragons, and so was permitted to stay. In Thien Cung Cave, one of the scenic locations of Ha Long Bay, there is a dragon-shaped stalactite. Inside the cave is also a yawning hole in the ground; according to folklore, this is the opening from which the dragon rose.

When we were walking around the limestone cave, a Vietnamese tour guide pointed to a few blurry Chinese characters that had been inscribed into the wall, and explained to us that this place had once been a battleground,

and the location of some particularly rousing battle stories. For example, in 1288, Chen Dynasty's Trần Hưng Đạo had buried a trap made of wooden stakes in nearby Bạch Đằng River. Taking advantage of an imminent low tide, he had lured the Mongolian soldiers in. As planned, once the tide turned the ship, pierced by the wooden stakes, capsized and the Vietnamese won. Not two hundred years had passed when the Ming Dynasty sent their naval forces to Ha Long Bay once more. It was here that Lê Lợi, using the same tactic, also defeated the Ming. The characters the tour guide pointed out were irrefutably in Chinese, damning evidence to those of us who knew the language that the Chinese had once tried to take Vietnam by force.

'In the long course of history, we've always been bullied by China.' And with this, the tour guide ended his presentation.

The other tourists turned around to look at us—the only East Asians in the group. My companion and I hurriedly shook our heads: 'We are Taiwanese.' During this trip, we had been taken for Mainland Chinese many times. Rejecting this presumption was by now a reflex action.

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'You're both Taiwanese? I once worked for Foxconn.' We met a Singaporean by the name of Eric on the boat tour of Ha Long Bay. He decided to follow us to Lao Cai after we got along so well. We didn't know it at the time, but meeting Eric and his wife was to be the best thing to happen to us the entire trip.

After returning to Hanoi, we proceeded to a travel agency to book our onward train journey to Lao Cai. We were given a handwritten receipt as our so-called ticket. At that time, Vietnam's tourism industry was booming and fiercely competitive. All scenarios were possible, problems were many. As tourists to a 'developing country,' we could only take these sorts of unpredictable 'situations' in our stride. So even if we felt suspicious, there was nothing else we could do but accept them.

But what about the return journey?

'They'll give them to you when you reach the hotel.' We had bought a hiking tour that included train tickets to and from Hanoi, but except for these handwritten tickets, we had nothing else to show for it. Apparently, both the tour guide and the return tickets would be waiting for us at the hotel.

Indeed, once we had climbed the mountain from Lao Cai and reached our hotel, we discovered that the tour guide had been waiting for us for quite a while. We spent two days hiking in the mountains under his guidance. However, as we prepared to board the train to go back to Hanoi, one of the hotel's employees came over to give return train tickets to Eric and his wife, but told my companion and I to 'wait a while longer.' Why did we have to wait, if the receipt was handwritten? We had booked the same package as Eric and his wife, so it went without saying that our train tickets should be issued together; moreover, with four seats to one carriage, what could possibly delay our handwritten tickets?

With only one train leaving for Hanoi every day, we kept asking them for our tickets, making clear that they would be held accountable if we missed our train. Finally, at the very last minute, we were handed the pieces of paper and we rushed down the mountain, only just managing to board the train departing for Hanoi.

We made it past the countless Chinese-speaking shoeshine boys tugging at our bags and sleeves, and into our

carriage. We walked to the very end only to discover our seats gone, as if the tail end of a train that had been disconnected. The last seat number was twenty-four, but the tickets in our hands said that we had been allocated seat numbers twenty-nine and thirty respectively. A hawker noticed our plight and led us off the train to find the train conductor. He glanced at the paper in our hands and shook his head, 'These are fake tickets.' At that, he turned around and left. The news hit us like an invisible punching bag; we could barely hold ourselves upright. 'Then we'll go to the police!' my friend shouted at the conductor's back.

The train conductor turned around immediately. Gone was the sangfroid of a few seconds ago. Anxiously, he pushed us back onto the train, 'Follow me!' We were quickly ushered into his room. From his broken English, we understood that we could sit here.

Why? If we were indeed holding fake tickets, why would the train conductor take it upon himself to make alternative arrangements for us? He should really be helping us make a police report—not stuffing us into his room. Perhaps he had encountered many such cases before, or perhaps he didn't want to stir trouble? All the same, we couldn't help but feel suspicious, curious and even a little angry at the train conductor's supposed 'generosity.'

Eric, who had been following us, had the same feeling and couldn't fathom why the conductor was helping us. He returned to his compartment and asked the two Europeans who had appeared out of nowhere whether they would be willing to switch places with us, but they said no. It turned out that they had spent thirteen hours riding a bus to Lao Cai in extremely unpleasant road conditions. On top of suffering the bus ride, they had witnessed a bus accident. Traumatized, they had been willing to pay twice the standard rate to buy their tickets—the tickets that belonged to us! So the hotel employee had sold our tickets to them at cutthroat prices, and these dumb tourists had coughed up. And then, to placate the two Taiwanese girls, the hotel issued fake tickets.

But why choose to switch our tickets? Was it because we came from a small country? Or because we were girls? No matter how you squared it, we were in a weaker position. I suppose if you had to pick someone to bully, you would pick the weak—that's only human, I guess.

I'm not sure how the railway policeman had found out about it, but he came into our room and started questioning us about our situation. At that point, the train was quiet, the passengers had all nodded off, and both the shoeshine boys and the hawker who walked up and down the corridor selling food had already left; we were unable to find anyone who could translate our predicament for us. In this foreign language, we had become criminals. Unable to defend ourselves, we resorted to simply staring at our accusers, while adamantly refusing to admit to any crime.

Fortunately, Eric, who had been worried about us, appeared at this moment, knocking on the door. He proceeded to explain that we were fellow tourists who had bought tickets together with him and that it was the travel agency who had issued us the fake tickets. But whether it was because he didn't understand English or just pretended not to, the railway policeman didn't react. Seeing no other way out, Eric finally took out his Singaporean passport, pointed to the travel agency's phone number printed on the back of the fake ticket, and then pantomimed making a phone call and extracting a testimony. At this point, the policemen suddenly had an epiphany: 'Where are you from?' he asked. 'Oh, Taiwan. You're tourists? We thought you were from China.' And with that, they left.

The train conductor, who had been pacing behind the policeman, also changed his attitude. Perhaps worried that we would actually make an official complaint, he took out a booklet and issued us with 'new' tickets, collecting the

fake ones. Eric worried that we would encounter more problems, so he instructed us to sleep in his and his wife's bunk beds; they would take the train conductor's room. When the train finally entered Hanoi Station, day had not yet broken—we were exhausted to the extreme and felt as if we had awoken from a nightmare. We stumbled out of our compartment, unsure whether it was all over. The train conductor happily called out to us and we were awake up for good—he inspected our tickets and thus assured, he waved us off.

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I don't know whether our experiences were unique among Taiwanese visitors to Vietnam; were we the only ones to experience such doubt and questioning? But during my travels in Vietnam in 2002, whenever the locals found out that we were from Taiwan, they would usually proceed to ask about one of two topics. The first was Vietnamese brides; the second our then president Chen Shui-Bian, known colloquially as Ah Bian. 'You're from Taiwan? What do you think about Ah Bian?' Chen Shui-Bian seemed to be the only question they had about Taiwan—and the only answer.

That year, during Bush's visit to China, the Chinese Premier Jiang Zemin had reiterated their 'One Country, Two Systems' policy. Chen Shui-Bian had countered with 'One Side, One Country.' Suddenly, cross-straits relations grew tense and even neighbouring countries could feel the heat.

While I was buying tickets from the travel agency in Hanoi, I enquired about the Chinese-Vietnamese border. The employee rattled off the following: 'When you get out of the train station at Lao Cai, take the north-bound road. After a while, you'll reach the border checkpoint. Then, cross the bridge and you're in China!' As he spoke, his finger traced a path on the map in front of him. I saw his finger cross from Vietnam to China—simple as crossing a road. I jumped up in glee; I couldn't wait to try it myself. But he had to go rain on my parade: 'But you can't go there!'

'Why?' my friend and I said together, the sounds of our words swallowed up by the propeller fan. We could only hear a spitting sound. Shaking his head forcefully, he said loudly, 'Because you are Taiwanese.'

'Why can't we go to China just because we're Taiwanese?' I didn't understand. The dark-skinned man before me raised his head from a stack of documents, and said in a mocking tone, 'Because of Ah Bian.'

Truth be told, Chen Shui-Bian was merely convenient shorthand—a shorthand by which the Vietnamese might understand Sino-Taiwanese relations. Whether I could enter China didn't have anything to do with Chen Shui-Bian. It had to do with the fact that I hadn't applied for what's known in Chinese as a 'Taiwan compatriot passport.' Typically, a foreigner entering China need only produce a passport with a visa stamped inside. The exception being if that passport was issued by the Taiwanese, which we use to travel the world over otherwise. No, the Taiwanese passport is invalid in the eyes of the Chinese customs officer, because a passport represents a country and 'Taiwan is not a country, but in fact a part of China.' Yet, what's strange about this logic is that as a supposed citizen of China, a Taiwanese still has to produce a special document as well as a visa to be able to enter the mainland. The number of additional travel documents, as well as the number of extra bureaucratic steps needed to enter the other country, well suffices to describe the 'special relations' between our two countries. The travel agent may well have been aware of these problems as he used Chen Shui-Bian to mock me; perhaps he believed the widening rift to have been caused by



the man himself, that he alone had made 'special relations' even more special.

The Taiwan of 2002 was alight with discussions about nationality and identity, but its importance has never been clear to me. The issue hums in the background, something that should be a priority, but yet has never felt urgent. Only when I cross a border does it appear clear to me, naive denizen of an island-country, that 'Who am I' is not solely defined by 'me,' but by my connections to other people, or lack thereof: I am Taiwanese; the legal document that my country bestows on me enables me to travel into certain countries but not into others—that is the difference between me and people of other nationalities, and that, when I'm traveling, is what tells others 'who I am.'

What is a country? Do countries exist independently? I've been pondering these questions. After my trip to Vietnam, I started my course in anthropology, and open my eyes to a new field of study. For the first time, I was discovering how huge a topic this was, identity and borders (be it between countries or groups), and how these questions don't only pertain to me and my fellow Taiwanese. They have relevance for everyone, as don't we all think of ourselves as belonging to a country or a group of people?