

Proud Tilt of the Masses



Off the street today
a small album of Vietnamese stamps
—100,000 dong, or
“Seven dollars US, sir”.
It reads like official history
but is much more
colourful.



For a few years the peasants,
trades-people, nurses and conscript
soldiers got a good run in
Vietnam’s philatelic record.
They appeared in groups, heads
tilted proudly, the tallest soldier or
bureaucrat or worker at the rear,
and always
shoulder to shoulder with
male and female comrades.
And gainfully employed—
dressed to realize the material dreams
of their soviet educated elite.
The symbolism?
all for an independent Vietnam.



100



In the days
 after the Chinese invasion
 the hammer and sickle functioned
 as semiotic foundation—
 or should we say watermark?—
 giving legal tender to a regime
 intent on invading Cambodia.



The old soldiers who run the government
 justify much by resort to history. They
 have known B52s and unimaginable
 hardship and loss. They are not easy
 to dismiss as the country lurches
 toward Adam Smith, tabloid papers
 and the internet—if only to feed
 the thirty percent still malnourished
 after decades of victorious living.



The semiotic favourites are factories and
 machinery, military hardware, bundles
 (or baskets-full) of freshly harvested
 fruit and vegetables—
 a philatelic cornucopia to mock a people
 wracked by starvation—

and industrious men with hard hats
 (though the ethic of safety
 absent
 among the country's millions
 of motorbike riders).



Go-getter stamps! Hammers poised to
 bash nails into communal constructions,
 and women tend to noisy machines as
 farmers work idyllic rice paddies
 (though the taxes and kick-backs
 are harsh and random like
 colonial oppression).
 All this industry is tiring! Thankfully
 the humble water-buffalo
 features often.



So much for the stamps of the subsidy economy.



By the mid-eighties native flowers, fish, birds,
 insects and animals began to reappear,
 likewise—away from paper—traditional
 Vietnamese cooking.
 Soon after, a final irony,
 alongside the flora and fauna we note
 resurrected scholars and military leaders
 (so much history!)—at least

this new nationalism is mostly indigenous,
(though tinged with China).



After contemplation: these
paper signifiers
accurate enough—



a mandarin is
a mandarin after all,
regardless
of the changed
dress code.

