



A night at the races

by *Michael L. Gray*

written in 2001 for my unpublished
book "Hanoi and the hills beyond"

*A*n accident seemed inevitable, I only wondered if someone would be killed. One after another a stream of motorbikes screamed along the road, within a few feet of thousands of enthralled spectators, cheering the racers on.

It was September 1998 and Vietnam had just beat Thailand in the semifinals of the Tiger Cup football championship.

A highway on the outskirts of Hanoi had become an impromptu racetrack in celebration of the victory.

Although this type of illegal motorbike racing was not new in Vietnam, a winning football team was unheard of. The two were nonetheless connected, as it was the footie that brought people onto the streets – and onto their motorbikes.

Racers would cut their brake cables and wrap white bandanas around their heads

The Tiger Cup pits the top eight Southeast Asian national teams against one another. Held every two years, it doesn't rank very high among international festivals of sport. But its importance in Southeast Asia is unrivalled. This was the first time the event was held in Vietnam.

Thailand were favoured coming into the tournament, but Vietnam had home-field advantage. The Thai team had been shaken by scandal in their last game – a 3–2 farce of a win over Indonesia. (The Indonesians had scored on themselves, intentionally, to avoid a semi-final match-up against Vietnam in Hanoi). Vietnam played with passion, and a little luck, and triumphed 3–0.

The stadium is several kilometres from downtown, but within minutes of the victory a mass of motorbikes careened down Hai Ba Trung Street in central Hanoi. Each carried two, sometimes three or four jubilant fans waving red flags and shouting 'Vietnam, vo dich!' (Vietnam, champions!). Adorned in red clothes and face paint, people of all ages were overjoyed to win in the semifinals – the

first time soccer-mad Vietnam could claim to be the favourites in any league or tournament.

The crowd carried me along for a few blocks, until at the corner of Hai Ba Trung and Ba Trieu streets, in the heart of downtown, I climbed a street pole to get some shots from above the masses. Then I strode out to the middle of the road, bikes whizzing past from all directions. Eventually I returned to my office – I still had some headlines to write for tomorrow's newspaper. I was sweating from the heat and the action, but I knew the night was just beginning. As the evening progressed the atmosphere would change. When the crowds thinned young men would pick up the speed of their bikes, and the racing would be on.

Freedom on the road

Motorbike racing began soon after *doi moi* took effect in the late 1980s. *Doi moi* was a series of reforms, similar to those in China, which freed up the economy from tight state control. One of the first



purchases for most families in this new economic environment was a motorbike – more properly a scooter, as the largest have 100 or 125cc engines. Today, motorbikes have become both status symbols and financial investments, as Japanese-made Hondas and Suzukis hold their value like blue-chip stocks.

Motorbikes are an obvious sign of new wealth. But more than that, the Western notion of ‘freedom on the road’ seems applicable even on the crowded streets of Hanoi. For urban youth, motorbikes quickly became a social necessity for cruising around town and attracting dates. Far more physical contact between young couples happens on motorbikes, moving or parked, than any other public location.

Coming out of the desperate 1980s,

when Vietnam was cut off from the economic development occurring in other parts of Southeast Asia, young Vietnamese in the 1990s found an independence they had never known. This was most apparent when parents handed over the keys to the family motorbike. Young men began racing their bikes around the city at night in what quickly became an underground cult. Some events were organised, and races from Hanoi to Hai Phong were said to offer a Honda Dream to the winner. Some of the racers would cut their brake cables and wrap white bandanas around their heads (a death symbol). People would line the streets on weekend nights to watch them scream past.¹

The government went on the offensive with a barrage of propaganda campaigns



¹ *What did I crave? she wanted to know. Surely I must like a bold and formidable girl such as herself. When she was just fifteen and her boyfriend was sixteen, they both wore white mourning headbands and rocketed around the streets at night on a Win motorcycle with its brakes torn off. Her boyfriend had crashed into a tree and died on the spot, his head smashed open. She had flown through the air for a distance, then jumped up as if nothing had happened. She had dashed back, snatched her boyfriend's gold chain off his neck for a souvenir, and ran away.*

Ho Anh Thai “The Man Who Believed in Fairy Tales” *Behind the Red Mist*. Curbstone Press, 1998. Translated by Nguyen Qui Duc, et al.

against 'social evils,' but youth were not responding. Many of the worst offenders, as it turned out, were the sons of high-ranking officials. Eventually, the police cracked down on racing in the downtown area, particularly as a common route passed the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum at Ba Dinh Square. Barricades were put up on some streets, and water trucks sprayed the streets to deter speeding. But there were too many streets, too many bikes, and clearly, too many disaffected youth.

A trail of bikes

The extremes involved in this new-found freedom became evident to me on the night Vietnam beat Thailand in the Tiger Cup. At 2:00am I ventured back onto the streets. There were four of us: myself along with Eric and his friend Giang, who worked as an interpreter for Michael, a wire agency reporter. Leaving our local bar, we immediately found ourselves on a packed boulevard. Vehicles of all kinds

draped with people and red flags formed an animated chain several kilometres long. One could only go with the flow. Groups of bikes a thousand-strong formed huge snakes that would occasionally cross – and collide – at intersections, slowing the pace but not the buzz of revelry.

The trail of bikes eventually led to the highway running along the east edge of Hanoi, near the Red River. Most of the riders were heading across the main bridge to Gia Lam district, a poor suburb of little repute outside the numerous brothels that lined either side of the main road. Michael and Eric did not seem overly thrilled about venturing into Gia Lam. 'Let's not get mugged tonight,' Eric mumbled. But I knew Gia Lam was one of the only places where there would be bike races. The police presence in the centre of Hanoi was too strong, even for those already deranged enough to wind up a 100cc scooter to speeds approaching 100km per hour on crowded streets. We made our way over the bridge, stopping



It was like a European rally, the crowd leaning out onto the raceway only to pull back as bikes whipped by



halfway to photograph a crowd of motorbikes racing back in the other direction.

In Gia Lam the road leading from the bridge was packed. By Vietnamese standards it was a freeway: four lanes separated by a small concrete divider painted red and white. From the top of the road, where it rises up to meet the bridge, thousands of people lined either sidewalk. An almost equal number of riders weaved in and out of the regular traffic, which at that time of night was only cargo trucks bringing goods from

Hai Phong port, as well as some hapless farmers trying to bring their produce into the city. We waited at the top of the road to see what was going on.

The mood had somehow changed from a celebration of victory to something more expectant: A nervous energy filled the crowd, which was now mainly young men, although some women were watching or riding pillion on the bikes. The circuit started at the top of the road where the divider began. The riders continued down about two or three kilome-

tres to an intersection where the divider broke off again. There they rounded the corner and returned to the top.

As we watched from the edge of the bridge the speed of the bikes began to pick up. There were now few people waving flags and shouting about the game. Many of the motorbikes, especially the quick Suzuki Vivas, had their mufflers punctured or entirely cut off, so they howled like formula racing bikes. To get into the heart of the crowd we headed down the road, but bikes began roaring

He smashed
into a second
bike and they both
flew through the air



The crowd went nuts after two bikes collide (just visible in the bottom photo).

past us and for safety's sake we pulled to the side about one kilometre from the bridge. We stuck out: there were no other Westerners in sight. But the attention was soon back on the road. Eric stood on his parked bike to film the scene with his video camera, while the Michael and I ventured a few feet onto the road with our cameras.

'It's not really a race,' one of the spectators later said, 'it's just a sport gathering.'

With no finish line and no prize money involved, it was simply screaming around in a circle for show. The scene was like a European rally, with the crowd leaning out onto the raceway only to pull back as bikes whipped by. Through the lens of my camera I saw bikes carrying one, two or even three people whipping past at outrageous speeds. It was not enough for the young men to ride quickly; they also jerked and weaved their bikes from side-to-side to get the full effect of the speed and impress the crowd. Some lowered their kickstands, to send up a shower of sparks whenever they leaned to the left. I have to admit, it was an awesome sight.

After snapping several photos I panned back up the street to see one of the fastest bikes weave and clip the concrete divider. Before the rider could regain control he smashed into a second bike and they both flew through the air.

With first blood spilled, the racing continued at an even faster pace

The crowd gasped collectively, watching as the first rider jumped up onto the divider to avoid any more contact – while the second lay completely motionless on the road.

A few more bikes tore past before someone from the crowd sprinted across the road to check the condition of the downed man. A panicked expression appeared on his face and he waved more people over. Soon the entire street was packed with people surrounding the fallen rider. They pulled him off the road while people surged forward to get a look.

'Chet roi! chet roi!' people yelled, which literally means 'he's dead' but is a common expression whenever misfortune strikes. We pushed forward ourselves, Michael still snapping photos. In the pandemonium I couldn't see the rider, but the crowd was shifting and moving, which made me think the man was on his feet or moving himself. I eventually caught sight of someone with blood streaming from his head, but this could also have been the first rider. Whether serious injury had occurred or not, the crowd soon disper-

sed and the bikes were pulled off the road. With first blood spilled, the racing continued at an even faster pace.

Football madness

Although this type of racing is not as common as it once was, the state media still mentions it as one of the 'evils' threatening social peace. Young men in many nations take part in dangerous sporting events that are more ritual than competition – the running of the bulls in Pamplona perhaps the most famous example. And unlike the rioting that sometimes accompanies European and American sports, there was no threat of violence anywhere to be seen.

But like rioting, part of the attraction for young hooligan-racers in Vietnam is the illegal nature of their actions. In a country where both political and social restrictions limit people's ability to express themselves, any occasion where there is mass celebration – with even the police letting down their guard – youths take the opportunity to test the bounds of permissible behavior. It all starts with



Disaffected youth? Bad parenting? Drugs? “They just don’t get enough sex,” said one pundit.

football, which is by far the number one cause for mass celebration in Vietnam. Many nations around the world are soccer-mad, but I was still surprised at the degree to which Vietnamese people followed European football, from the other side of the world.

Events surrounding the 1998 World Cup should demonstrate this adequately.

In the months leading up to the Cup, Vietnam was wracked by a serious drought. In early May, the director of Electricity Vietnam imposed power cuts as water levels fell drastically in reservoirs around the country. Eighty percent of the country’s power comes from hydroelectricity, and if no rain fell by mid-May, the turbines at Hoa Binh dam would be shut down. The dam supplies power to Hanoi and much of northern and central Vietnam. The electricity director asked people to switch off lamps and air conditioners, and municipal authorities across the country were told to suspend the use of all neon signs in advertising.

Things were getting very grave for people all over the country. Crops were starting to wither, industrial output was down, and the World Cup was approaching. With no rain, the material life of the people is in immediate peril. But this year, blackouts would also mean no television, and no television would mean no World Cup.

Rumor had it the government was worried about major social upheaval if the World Cup could not be viewed by all

Thousands of dollars in agricultural revenue was lost, and permanent damage to coffee trees was imminent. Rumors spread that the government was re-routing power to Hanoi and Saigon, at the expense of the provinces. People were becoming desperate. Tempers flared. Still, no rain.

And the nation waited. The crops were a lost cause – but it was no longer rain that people were waiting for. They wanted an assurance, a guarantee, a strong voice to tell them everything would be alright. This came on June 9, when the public relations director of the Hanoi Power Company called a press conference to say that power cuts would not occur during the World Cup. Fresh rumors had it the government was worried about major social upheaval and instability if the Cup could not be viewed by all the masses.

The Hanoi Power Company guarantee had a calming effect, but it was soon the least of concerns for people in the capital city. June 10 arrived and the Cup started. Games were broadcast live in the middle of the night. The first match saw Scotland robbed of victory by shoddy refereeing. There were no power cuts and every single television set in the nation was tuned to the football. Cafes were open all hours, and at night a bright flickering light could be seen every twenty paces or so on otherwise empty streets. A small

crowd would be gathered at each screen, still and silent until a goal and everyone screaming **VAO!!**

There had even been rain on the weekend. A lot of rain. The heavens opened and more rain hit the city in four days than was normal in a month. Downpours of over ten centimeters became a nightly event. Now people wanted the rain to go away. The modernization of Hanoi's drainage system had not kept pace with other infrastructure developments. The city was backed up like a crudely-made toilet. Water up to a metre high swamped streets all over town. But in misery, there is happiness. And in Hanoi, there was electricity and the World Cup.

Television shop owners were making more money than ever, and many started renting out sets by the day. Breweries couldn't keep pace and the price of instant noodles and soft drinks went through the roof. Caffeine-rich coffee saw a 40 percent price hike. Some people had booked annual leave to correspond with the month of the Cup, while others caught a mysterious fever and called in sick. Television sets were provided **for convicts**, such was the spirit of brotherly love and celebration.

Admittedly, some people were losing it. On June 23 a newspaper reported that one football fan electrocuted himself after biting through a live cable in an effort to

restore the reception on his set. A few days later, a man killed himself after losing his Honda Dream motorbike in World Cup betting. Even monks were getting in on the action. They had no money so they bet free breakfasts and dishwashing duty. Karaoke bar owners were cursing the Cup as business dropped off. Prostitutes publicly complained that their customers were either busy watching games or too tired to shag. Trade union delegates postponed their annual conference. Fights were noted and one person was stabbed after the Netherlands-Mexico match. All this and the second round had not even started.

And this was nothing compared to the Tiger Cup.

Lets burn police cars

The Southeast Asian tournament took place only a few months after the World Cup ended. After witnessing Hanoi in the middle of World Cup madness, I thought I was adequately prepared for the Tiger Cup. But I was amazed at the excessive level of danger involved in post-soccer racing. It is an understatement to say that older Vietnamese – witnesses to decades of war and poverty – would have been disturbed by the scene I saw unfold in Gia Lam. The first generation born after the war were putting life and limb at risk for no apparent reason, while looking

on were thousands of hip city youths, dozens of prostitutes from the hotels lining the raceway, and a few absolutely stunned peasants still trying to get their veggies into the city.

Then, at 3:30am, with startling speed, the crowd dispersed. The blue flashing light of a police van could be seen a kilometre down the road. The van eventually went by, with only one confiscated motorbike in the back. No mass arrests took place, but clearly the threat was enough to send people home. The year before, there had been at least one skirmish with police, and heavy sentences were levied on several youths who had burned a police car and injured some cops.

We decided to interview a few people at the scene. Michael talked briefly with one of the prostitutes, while her gold-chain laden pimp tried to push her on me. Then Michael found a young, very beautiful woman who had been on the back of a bike that pulled over quickly when the cops arrived. She answered in curt, short sentences – but clearly liked the idea of being interviewed by a foreign reporter.

‘Sometimes people get killed, but riders aren’t afraid of dying,’ she said.

When asked if any of her friends had died, she said: ‘No, but I don’t care. I would still race if one my friends was killed.’

As the interview continued, the en-

chanted reporter’s questions became less and less newsworthy.

‘So, do you ever drive the bike instead of your boyfriend?’ Michael asked.

‘It’s my bike,’ she replied. ‘I drive it if I want to.’

Finally pulling our friend away from his interview, we got on our Hondas and headed for home – drag racing briefly on the now empty road. Back in Hanoi there was still a crowd on the highway running along the river, but the energy had drained away and there was no high-speed racing. We continued in the direction of home, passing an enormous pack of kids on bicycles, pedaling around and banging on drums at 4:00am. Too young and too slow to hang with the motorbikes, they were nonetheless having a party of their own.

A truck then went past us filled with helmeted, stun-gun toting riot police. We turned and followed, but were surprised when they did nothing to disperse the crowd. Some young men were still weaving along the street at a fast pace, but the cops did nothing but throw an empty plastic water bottle at one bike as it flew by. The disappointing riot police soon retired to the top of Hoan Kiem Lake, where many of their comrades were gathered to reflect back on the night’s events.

We headed home as well. There was

still Saturday’s final against Singapore, after all. I thought of the young racer’s last words as we left her:

‘What will happen on Saturday after Vietnam plays?’ Michael had asked.

‘We’ll race.’²

Epilogue

I don’t know how long the motorbike racing phenomenon will continue in Hanoi. It has already lost the desperate edge it had in the early 1990s. But without question, understanding motorcycle culture is central to understanding modern, urban Vietnam.

The market boom has been substantial. Demand sits at about half a million new bikes per year across the country. Cheap bikes from China are flooding across the border. In all, the Traffic Safety Department thinks there were over seven million motorbikes in the country by October 2000, up from 4.2 million in 1996 and 2.8 million in 1990.

Like most Westerners arriving in Hanoi, the first thing I noticed was the traffic. It was everywhere at once, and the only order seemed to be a passive

² Vietnam went on to lose 1-0 in a hard fought final. The nation was crushed – but the action on the streets continued.

*“I don’t care.
I would still
race if one of my
friends was killed”*



chaos where people relied on the random probability of survival to determine their trajectory, rather than looking both ways, for example, or following an established body of traffic laws. This is somewhat unfair, as within days of arriving I was on a bicycle myself and 'part of the problem,' as the truly innocent might put it. I did not have any serious accidents my first year in Vietnam, when there were only a few traffic lights in all of Hanoi, and people coasted through intersections without looking or slowing their pace, let alone stopping. For one month I rode a bike that had no brakes, so I can hardly complain about other people.

Furthermore, I cherish the sights I saw on the roads of Hanoi every day. A frail old man in tweed coat and French beret, swamped by midday traffic on his olive-green Babetto. Or two dead pigs being shipped across town in a cyclo, blood dripping from their nostrils as their fat white legs jiggled up and down from the bumpy ride. I once saw seven human beings on a small 50cc scooter – two adults and five children. Three adults is standard; four, occasional.³

³ Three young men whipped past me on a motorbike, swerving through traffic at a pretty good speed. The man in the middle was holding a large, glass coffee table over his head. And I didn't think this was strange. As they went by I said to myself, 'Hey, that's a nice table, I wonder where they got that?'

But despite this romantic vision of the quaint madness of it all, the reality is that many people die horrible deaths on the road in Vietnam. Traffic accidents and congestion are the most serious social problems in urban areas, after only land conflicts for housing space.

The Hanoi municipal government's efforts to solve traffic problems have not always been effective. Enormous roads have been built that lead nowhere, and the police do not exactly have a good reputation for community service. Unfortunately, people will continue to die, and there is very little that can be done about it. If the experience of Western countries is anything to judge by, attitudes toward safety change only very slowly. Only some people accept the idea that a helmet can save your life.

Of more importance to me here, however, is the culture surrounding the 'motorcycle cult' in modern Vietnam. I am not so interested in what people put on their heads, but rather what they have under their butts. The motorbike that a person chooses to sit on is quickly becoming a reflection of their character. It

is the most visible and important element in the spread of the consumer culture in Vietnam.

People are piling onto a greater variety of increasingly colorful and expensive motorbikes. Remember that Vietnamese society has its roots in Confucian conformism. Like in the West, where cars and motorbikes have long been seen as an expression of their owner's tastes, different makes and models are starting to carry social significance.

Whereas in 1995 everyone aspired to own a **Honda Dream**, by 1998 people were buying bikes for the 'look' they wanted to present. The Dream is the classic 'family sedan' that very often carries dad, mom, grandma and two or three kids all on a three-foot long cushion. It is the conservative choice – available in any color you want, as long as it's brown. But while the Dream is the dependable and reliable option, it's not the cheapest – the Honda name always comes at a price and the Dream goes for about US\$2,400 new (Hanoi's per capita GDP is somewhere just under \$1,000 year).

The **Honda Wave** is the choice for slightly hipper, younger people who still want the Honda name, but attached to something with brighter colors and a peppier 110cc engine. The Wave was Honda's answer to the **Suzuki Viva**, which in 1998 was the hottest thing on

The Dream is available in any colour you want, as long as it's brown



Young men and mopeds always spells trouble, although here a bicyclist gets it from a truck.

the road. Flashier than the Dream, the Viva came with a 110cc engine and most models had a front disk brake instead of a drum. Now the Viva is old news. It was supplanted by the Wave, which is so popular there are now several Chinese copies, including one that looks exactly like the real thing except it is labeled 'Hongda Wife.' The Chinese copies cost about \$500, which makes them hard to resist despite their dubious quality.

An extremely expensive bike is the **Honda Spacy**, which has small, fat wheels like the classic Italian scooters. At over \$4,500, the Spacy is a favourite of yuppies who want the super-comfortable, almost-hands-free ride. In mid-town traffic you can file your nails or gab on your cellphone no problem.

The Honda I love is a Thai-built model called the **Weasel**. Another of my favourites is the **Babetto**, used by very old men and farmers. It's a tiny Italian scooter that looks like a bicycle, and even has pedals.

The main machine for hot young punks who want to race around town at break-neck speed is the **Suzuki FX125**, a two-stroke, 125cc, five-speed pocket-rocket. Young Vietnamese men who ride bikes like this weave from side to side, even when driving down a straight, empty road. Late-night racers rely on this model above all others to scare their own pants off.

Another Suzuki is the **GN125** – the man's-man bike. Motorbikes in Vietnam are gendered, and registration cards for this bike say it is a 'male' motorcycle. This is because it actually has a clutch, and looks almost like a real motorbike. Still, only 125cc. Others in this category include a range of bikes made to look like Harley Davidson choppers, except when you look close you realize they still only have 125 or 150cc engines. These are the 'tough-guy bikes' favored by cops and other gangsters.

The **Minsk** is a Russian bike, very popular with young expatriates. It is extremely loud and unreliable, but although small (125cc) it at least *feels* like a real motorbike. Vietnamese do not drive this bike, except farmers. They also do not seem to understand why foreigners love it so much. There is a 'Minsk Club' in Hanoi run by a group of young expats who do a lot of riding up in the mountains. So it's the cult favourite.

Another expensive bike popular with yuppies is the **Piaggio Vespa**. Piaggio also has a number of smaller, brightly colored models that are very popular with young women. They're like the Honda Spacy, but more fun to colour-coordinate with your shoes. Finally, there is the **Yamaha Majestic**. This thing looks like a spaceship, and is clearly intended to blow the Spacy off the road. Incredibly

expensive and quite large, it is perhaps the ultimate ride for the nouveaux-riche – at least those who can't afford cars.⁴

⁴ **Daewoo Matiz**: This is a car. It's the size of a shoebox, but it's well-built and stylish. A Matiz costs only a few thousand dollars more than the most expensive bikes, so more and more wealthy families are zip-ping around town on four wheels, rather than two. But there is simply no space for this trend to go on forever. Traffic is going to kill Hanoi. Construction of a 'New Hanoi' in Gia Lam is set to begin. Will this allow the older parts of town to be preserved, or will it all have to be knocked down? Public transport, anyone?

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