Vietnam as a work in progress

New book shows how family anchors the self in ebb and flow of economy

*It's A Living: Work And Life In Vietnam Today*
Edited by Gerard Sasges
315 pages

By ASAD LATIF FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

This book of interviews reveals the raw hunger for a better life, the tremendous personal effort made to achieve it and the entrepreneurial daring that have marked Vietnam since the introduction of market-oriented reforms in the 1980s.

The almost 70 interviews were conducted over two years from 2010 as part of a class that Dr Gerard Sasges, an assistant professor in the department of south-east Asian studies at the National University of Singapore, taught while directing the University of California's Education Abroad Programme in Vietnam.

The mostly student interviewers, both Vietnamese and Americans, have done a masterly job in capturing the economies of everyday life in post-socialist Vietnam.

The refrain running through many of the interviews is that the Vietnamese find their work hard but value it because it enables them to provide for their families, particularly the care of the elderly and the education of children.

Learning English is seen as the passport to that cherished future.
The range of characters in this book is truly astonishing. The more recognizable faces of the economy are seen in a farmer, a butcher, a construction worker, a railway crossing guard, a security guard, a bus fee collector, a nurse, a kindergarten teacher, a KFC employee, a hotel receptionist, a karaoke bar owner, a tourism company director and a wedding planner.

The Vietnamese work ethic is conveyed dramatically by a company executive: "I love my job. If I could change anything about it, it would have to be myself."

But it is the portraits of the informal economy that are the most riveting in the gallery of Vietnamese labour. That economy is represented by a scrap food collector, a motorcycle parker, an art forger, a bookie, a rat catcher, a knife sharpener, a shoe shiner, a grey hair plucker, an itinerant "scale lady" who makes a living by measuring the weight and height of people, and a man who exhumes bodies to clean the bones.

In spite of this diversity, the refrain running through many of the interviews is that the Vietnamese find their work hard but value it because it enables them to provide for their families, particularly the care of the elderly and education of children.

The other motif of the book is the way in which the premium placed on filial ties informs the world of work. A maker of che, a sweet soupy dessert, in Binh Lieu town in Quang Ninh province remarks: "People here really live with a lot of feeling, you know? Just about everyone in the commune knows each other. And with selling che here, I especially get to know all the other ladies in the market; you get to be really close working side by side every day, we treat each other like we're all part of one big family."

In spite of the prospects of being made redundant, the bone cleaner prefers cremation to burial because cemeteries encroach on scarce farmland. His hope is to "find ways that the world of the living and the world of the dead can continue to coexist peacefully in the future".

Rather than treat the living and the dead as belonging to two spheres, he sees the latter as a generation making space for the next one.

Almost every page of this book bears testimony to how communication, companionship and laughter alleviate the captive drudgery of routine work in the competitive anonymity of the market. The family anchors the self amid the ebb and flow of the economy. Indeed, strong family ties mean that the threat of unemployment is not the existential terror that it is in more economically advanced but also fragmented societies.

The value of this book for a Singapore audience lies in the light that it shines on a receding era of history when the hunger for economic survival and success inaugurated Singapore's transition from the Third World to the First. Today, many Singaporeans want a new balance to be struck between the standard of living they enjoy and the quality of life they desire.

The balance reached eventually will reflect Singaporean realities. However, the Vietnamese experience suggests that a strong work ethic combined with sound cultural moorings can enable a people to thrive both economically and socially.

Everyone has to make a living. How one does it makes all the difference.

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The writer, a former Straits Times journalist, is an associate fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. The book will be available in Kinokuniya by early next month at $28 before GST.