



### All our yesterdays

**In cities with vastly differing cultures and histories, from Seattle to Saigon, the past is here to stay, whether it's in the cocktails we drink or the cushions we sit on. But what does our aesthetic appropriation of a pre-digital world reveal about where we're at now?**

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In January, I sat with a Vietnamese couple in a top-rated Saigon restaurant, grazing on wonderful authentic food, when I noticed two cushions beside them, rendered in artful black and white. One depicted a woman in old Indochina gazing impassively from under her conical hat; on the other was an image of the Opera House from the same era.

Though seemingly innocuous, they reminded me of an old poster I'd seen three days earlier on a cruise ship operated by the company that rebranded the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, a colonial Burmese ferry service. It showed a crude caricature of a rickshaw runner, his skin bright yellow, energetically transporting two porcelain-white Europeans as hapless natives toiled on fishing boats. The less-than-subtle overtones of racial supremacy were reinforced by the title, "M memoir of the French Colonies".

Of course, this kind of warped retro-romanticism is not confined to one country. Nostalgic objets d'art are a lucrative industry worldwide, as anyone who's witnessed the rise of hipster culture – with its beards, typewriters, gin distilleries and bicycles – would surely attest. Yet nostalgia, beyond simply sentimentalizing the past, holds deeper ambiguities. Trace its etymology and you'll find its Greek roots – *nostos*, which means "homecoming", and *algos*, which means "pain" – connote not a yearning for the past but melancholic anxiety borne of displacement.

Fervently patriotic with rose-tinted spectacles, Vietnam's version falls somewhere between the two. Nostalgia here isn't just about fetishizing Leicas or Walkmans; it's an acutely political phenomenon. Visiting the War Remnants Museum, with its unflinching drawings of Viet Cong soldiers suffering at the hands of their aggressors, tells a one-sided story of a complex, emotionally charged conflict. In socialist Hanoi, Cong Caphe's servers don

army outfits and adorn your coffee with a creamy Communist star next to an "interrogation room".

Saigon's very name, used by so many locals (just as many Mumbaikars still refer to "Bombay"), betrays a latent rejection of Communist ideology. Yet my favorite restaurant there, sandwiched between Notre Dame cathedral and a street named for a French chemist, is alive with socialist murals and slogans. Meanwhile, outside Da Nang at Ba Na Hills, an entire French village has been re-created 1,500m in the sky, complete with mini-cathedral, hotel and bakery.

While it's easy to read too much into "gentrification", it remains one of the great ironies of our age. Older residents of Shoreditch in London and Tiong Bahru in Singapore are finding the hipster universe that's blossomed on their doorsteps – a wistful world of pipes and Panama hats they'd recall themselves – has pushed rents so sky-high that they can no longer live there. And all across Asia, while heritage conservation projects of lasting value take hold in cities like Yangon, the superficial reclaiming of painful historical periods by those too young to remember them has never been so trendy. In the Caribbean, Cuba's 1950s cars and suddenly fashionable streetscapes are drawing tourists in unprecedented numbers.

Anti-globalisation protesters surely never foresaw such old-time pastiches as speakeasies, hipster cafés, Lana Del Rey and *La La Land* becoming as culturally omnipotent as McDonald's. Whether it's reacting against modernity or simply a formula that works, revivalist-chic implicitly suggests life was once so much better. Anyone of my generation, or my father's, can tell you that's simply not true. The rising tide of global nationalism may yet boost its appeal in the West; in the former colonies of the East, it may seal its fate. – **Julian Edwards**