

Reading the City

The other night by the lake, I walked among the trees strung with electric lights, humming the tender songs that warbled from the loudspeakers. The air was tingling with sweet romance. Until I asked. War Martyrs' Day.

Reading an unknown city is to look through a prism – appearing as solid space, afloat on its own meaning, yet defined by shifts of gaze: myth, monster, machine, maze; living text, an unstable language, always inventing itself.

Or a site of pavements, kettles, people. No special lights or songs tonight – but as usual the locals walk the path between water and traffic. For sale: tea, rice, fruit, plastic balloons, a red rose in cellophane, gloss photo in frame.

Late capitalism has only just arrived: several traffic lights, a clump of glassy high-rise hotels, offices, and the State's new department store boasting the city's escalator, with curious citizens staggering and tumbling to tiled floors.

As yet, this old red-flag city is no international paradigm, but is mutating daily before wondering eyes. Technology for a few. Soccer. New tourist cafés. The image-makers are renovating again, packaging the latest hybrid scene.

Next year, will the tea seller sit here by her kettle, the men play their board games, boys kick the ball, a beggar sleep? Where will their city go – the people who come at dawn to face the lake, balance, stretch, as the bicycles whirr by?

Nostalgia? Perhaps. It's in the air – as marketing, politics, and art; that tough trinity of slant. Or is it a taste of history now, flowing into the open mouth, colouring the tongue, picking up that *hoa sra* perfume, drifting along the street?