

WALTZ of The MACHINE EQUESTRIANS

*"I wanted to change the world. But I have found that the only thing one
can be sure of changing is oneself."*

- Aldous Huxley, Point Counter Point -

For 13 years, I was away studying in the United States. Coming back to Saigon, I dared not ride my own scooter for 3 weeks due to the crazy traffic and not knowing half the new streets. Sitting behind a hired scooter driver during that time gave me a sense of how things have changed and how beautiful and meditative it can be when one can flow with the traffic. Then I began to see the traffic as an exquisite and complex choreographed dance of scooters. Vietnam has changed and so have I.

At 3% annual rate of increase, industrialization has brought more countryside dwellers to big cities like Saigon. Scooters are the main way to get around the city and to the surrounding rural area. I fantasize the riders and their mechanized "horses" are modern "equestrians." There is an awesome energy in the air watching columns of thousands of scooters waiting to advance at the signals. It is equally amazing to cross one of the streets and see that river of scooters slowly flows around you. One senses that these machines symbolize the country's firm march on the path to be a new Asian "Tiger". Viet Nam's industrial production is about to be even with its agricultural production.

The scooters and their riders remind me of the story of Saint Gióng (Thánh Gióng), a Vietnamese folk hero from around 1690 BC. He was conceived when his mom imposed her foot onto a huge footprint she found in the field where she worked. She got pregnant the next day and later delivered a boy. She and her husband were very happy, but the handsome boy did not move, talk, or smile until he was 3 years old. But one day, upon hearing the news of his country being invaded, he suddenly spoke up, asking for an iron horse that can spit fire, an iron armor and an iron rod. With those, he defeated the invaders and ascended to heaven.

How interesting to think Saint Gióng story might have foreseen Vietnam's industrial future from nearly 4000 thousand years ago. Now, the new iron horses are the scooters. However, such development and globalization comes with a price. The new visible enemies they now fight with are the gap of poverty between the rich and the poor, pollution of information and dust, natural and man-made heat, and ultra violent storms. These riders also battle noise, toxic rivers, unclean water and food, and real after effects of far-flung financial disasters. Their iron horses don't blow fire; instead they spew out smoke. There is no hard iron armor but flexible plastic ponchos, no iron rod but the latest knowledge for the new demands of global economy jobs. The Vietnamese now share the life of people who live in big cities in our contemporary world. This is universal battle happening worldwide in Dubai, Melbourne, New York, Tokyo, Singapore, etc.

In this video and photography works, a group of twenty-eight riders are choreographed to perform against the backdrop of the Ho Chi Minh City skyline. This place (Thu Thiem) is across from the Saigon River which separates new and the old developments. Thu Thiem was once a land lush with green water coconut trees, and makeshift thatched cottages. Now, it has changed into big streets and city parks. Twenty-eight iron horses and their riders ride in formation, maneuvering graceful turns on that very ground. Here, empty streets became a stage; riders transform into performers. Colorful moving shelters of ponchos replace the thatched cottages. They all together became a moving river. The transformation of Viet Nam, from a boy to a man, from a farmer to an industrial soldier is resonant. Saint Gióng fought against visible invaders. But his new countryman's heroes will fight with a more difficult and often invisible enemy, themselves. The Vietnamese machine "equestrians" fights will continue far into the future, onto the stage of a brave new world.

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