

German writer's award-winning book depicts Hanoi inhabitants

VietNamNet Bridge – Michael Waibel is the first German to be awarded the Bui Xuan Phai Award, launched by Vietnam News Agency's Sport & Culture daily and the family of late painter Bui Xuan Phai, to honour individuals and organisations who have made great contributions to Ha Noi's culture, arts and society. Nguyen Thuy Binh speaks with Waibel about his book Ha Noi – Capital City, which earned him the award this year.



Congratulation! You are among two winners to receive the Work Prize at Bui Xuan Phai Awards 2015. What do you know about the awards?

It is a big honour for me to receive the prize in the category Best Works for the large-format book Ha Noi – CAPITAL CITY.

This prize is named after Viet Nam's most famous painter, Bui Xuan Phai, and is given to projects which are dedicated to increase awareness and contribute to the beauty of Ha Noi City.

I'm particularly proud, being the first German to receive this prestigious award. I will keep it in my heart for the rest of my life.

It is not only a great honour, but also a personal obligation to continue contributing my energy and personal dedication to offer my modest share to preserve the beauty of Hanoi - which is

still fascinating me, though I came to Ha Noi in 1996 for the first time.

The publication Ha Noi – CAPITAL CITY is the result of the joint effort of many parties. For example, I took only half of the photos. All in all, more than 30 people contributed to this book, not only people submitting photos, but also people, such as local artist Nguyen The Son, who wrote an essay and who gave permission to print one of his paintings.

Also, it was important for me to receive the official endorsement for this book from key Vietnamese institutions in the field of urbanism, such as from the Vietnamese Urban Development Agency (VUDA) at the Ministry of Construction, the Ha Noi Urban Planning Institute (HUPI) or the Ha Noi University of Architecture (HAU).

By involving as many people and institutions as possible, I wanted to make it a project of the city inhabitants themselves, not only of mine. The most important partner during the development process has been the Goethe Institute Vietnam.

In terms of financial resources, I have to mention the massive support we received from our diamond sponsor AUDI Vietnam. Without their generous funding, the book could not have been published, at all.

How is Ha Noi depicted in the book? There are 600 photos in Ha Noi – CAPITAL CITY. Were all the photos taken by you and your co-workers?

It was important for me to show that the city is not only about architecture, but also about the people living and shaping the city.

The professional photographer, Astrid Schulz from London, portrayed over 40 city inhabitants from various ages and social classes and added short narratives about their views towards Ha Noi.

Those photos illustrate the everyday life of urban residents. This is worth mentioning because many other photo books on the market only show a beautified "virtual reality", often achieved through Photoshop editing.

I tried to widely avoid this, but to show the natural beauty of the city. But I also showed aspects of the city which are not so nice, such as the neglect of colonial architecture or the ghost towns in the western part of Ha Noi.

The whole book presents more than 600 photos illustrating urban development and life in the capital from a variety of views and social perspectives. Alongside the full colour photos are eight essays from local Ha Noi residents reflecting on the remarkable qualities of Viet Nam's capital city.

How did you have the idea to compile the book?

Having done research in Viet Nam since the mid 1990s, I thought it was time to leave the pure academic grounds and try to develop a more visual publication reaching out to a wider audience.

A picture is worth more than one thousand words, and I firmly believed such a book might contribute to increasing awareness to preserve the beauty of the city.

The enthusiastic feedback I received generally overwhelmed me. This was a very good personal experience. As a scientist, I was used to publishing within a small academic community. By means of this book, I was suddenly able to reach out to many more people due to the massive interest of the media.

By the way, the Ha Noi book has been the second publication in a series I'm editing, for I'm dealing with recent urban developments within Viet Nam.

The first book was published in early 2014 and had the title TP. Ho Chi Minh: MEGA CITY. Co-publisher of the latter was Henning Hilbert from Vietnamese-German University (VGU).

Right now, I'm preparing the third book with the title DA NANG: GREEN CITY, with similar content.

Apart from Da Nang, it will also introduce the cultural sites of Hoi An and Hue. It will be published in early 2016.

What difficulties did you face to when you compiled the book ?

The compilation of the book required massive efforts of communication among the many parties involved. It took a lot of my leisure time in the course of last year.

This may be labelled as the largest challenge during the development process. Compiling and editing the photos was still, somehow, a creative task.

However, the efforts to convince company sponsors to make this book possible, as well as the extensive editing and proofreading in German, English and Vietnamese languages, did consume a lot of patience.

How long did it take you to compile Hanoi – CAPITAL CITY? And had you found some things interesting about Hanoi when you researched the book?

The whole project took about one year. I was fascinated by the variety Ha Noi has to offer, the contrasts between old and new, rich and poor, modern and traditional, urban and rural, low-rise and high-rise buildings, and so on.

It is exactly the range of those contrasts which make the city a vivid experience. A new experience during the research of the book was the river island below Long Bien Bridge. It is infamously known for its nude beach, but it has the potential to develop into a green lung of Ha Noi City and as leisure and cultural spot.

There, open air concerts could take place, for example. It could develop into a site for cycling and walking. Already now, there is a lot of urban agriculture. For ecological reasons it is good to have such a site for food production close to the city centre because the distances for transportation are small and related emissions are low.

Do you like Hanoi capital?

For me, Hanoi is the most beautiful capital city of Southeast Asia and it is the city I choose to do research about for my PhD thesis.

Hanoi will always have a place in my heart, not only because it is the cradle of urban civilisation in Vietnam.

The capital city has an outstanding tradition, culture and architectural heritage. It also has a clearly defined spatial heart. Such a heart and a soul are something I miss in many other cities in the region. In my opinion, the heart of Hanoi is Hoan Kiem (Sword) Lake with the turtle tower, including the surrounding park area, which also serves as a link between the ancient quarter and the French colonial quarter.

Ba Dinh Square with the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, the National Assembly Hall and the Presidential Palace would be the heart of the entire nation of Viet Nam, but the heart and soul of Ha Noi City is definitely Hoan Kiem Lake.

When I was in Ha Noi in October 2010 during the 1,000 year of Ha Noi celebrations, it was emotionally very moving to see the whole park and surrounding street filled with people from all over Viet Nam who joined together to celebrate this magic event.

For those reasons, it was an obvious choice to put Hoan Kiem Lake on the cover of our book.

In my opinion, Ha Noi should not become like any other modern city in Asia with faceless skyscrapers and a fully globalised urban fabric.

Ha Noi should not become like Singapore and should not look like Seoul. Ha Noi should preserve its specific identity, its culture and its heritage and build on its key assets, namely a unique mix of different architectural styles reflecting a fascinating history, a mix between tradition and modernity, small-scale housing structures in the city centre, tree-lined boulevards and many lakes.

In the case of its city centre, it should follow the model of Paris which does not allow for skyscrapers. Ha Noi has the potential to develop into a major regional centre of education and arts. It should focus on the promotion of cultural and creative industries.

However, this book shall also make clear that substantial and continuous efforts are needed to preserve this beauty.

Air pollution and traffic congestion are prevalent well-known problems and the ongoing switch from two- to four-wheel traffic won't make the situation easier.

The efforts to promote sustainable urban development cannot be taken by the local government authorities alone, but is also relying on the responsibility of the city's inhabitants, themselves, through their own behaviour.

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