

Children of the Dust

They are kids known as beggars and hustlers. But aside from their pleading eyes and child-like grace, who exactly are the children of Pham Ngu Lao? And are they in need of our help? Words by Will Peach. Photos by Truong Ngoc Lam.



ANY RECENT VISITOR TO HO CHI MINH City's busy backpacker hub will have seen them. They plead for our money, often accompanied with their little basket of goods, and flash us a gleaming smile. The Vietnamese call the way they live *bui doi* (dust of life), but we call them street kids.

They rely on us to make their money, tugging at our heartstrings and appealing to our greater sentiments. Their tactics are wide. They cry, they charm and some even take to tables and dance for us. But as tourists and expats, shouldn't we know better than to simply give them both our money and attention?

◦ To Give or Not To Give

According to Michael Brosowski, founder of Hanoi-based NGO Blue Dragon, there's no easy answer to this question.

"If you give money, you may be perpetuating the problem. If you don't, the child may be beaten for not making enough," he says.

But where Michael's organisation deals largely with those at high risk (usually without a home or family), many of the children in the Pham Ngu Lao area appear okay, working on the street with their families and even living at home.

Preston Rybacki, country coordinator for Children of Peace International (COPI), an international NGO supporting Vietnamese orphanages and youth shelters, knows some of their stories.

"I know a girl who works with her two older brothers; they are dropped off by their parents every night. They go to school and they look healthy," he says.

So how can we differentiate the "real street kids" from school kids trying to earn extra income?

Such stories certainly match the government's survey. According to MOLISA, Vietnam's Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, a 2001 survey on 10,351 children working on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City revealed that nearly 40 percent, in fact, lived with their parents

in the city.

◦ A Deeper Issue

But whether most live with their parents or not, the issue runs deeper. And what's to say those living with parents aren't in real need of help?

Nicolas Pistolas, director of the Christina Noble Children's Foundation (CNCF), suggests that any type of separation between street kids based on a level of needs is somewhat missing the point.

"They are not a production line and we aren't a production factory," he says. "At the end of the day these kids are being exploited. The smiles they project as they sit down next to you, turn to pain, loneliness, trepidation and fear when they go home at night."

Being on the streets as a child is never an easy ride.

Take for example Quyen, a well-mannered 16-year-old bookseller who has been making a living on Pham Ngu Lao from the age of six. Both her parents are



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gone and she works long into the night, with sometimes only verbal abuse from tourists to show for it.

“Life for me is very hard. I started selling gum when I was six years old to support my grandparents who I live with in District 10,” she explains.

Quyen, however, has been relatively lucky during her time on the streets. Scratch the surface and there is a deep underworld of vice and crime, seeking to suck the weak and vulnerable in, she explains.

“Out of all of us that started out here, only a few are left,” she adds. “These kids that work the area now are under control of people, their parents, minders, sometimes even gangsters.”

But while the government has been successful in reducing the numbers of children on the street (according to the Street Educator’s Club, numbers shrunk from 21,000 in 2003 to 8,000 in 2007), problems of drugs and trafficking still persist.

“Child trafficking is on the increase as well as child drug use. These are the two

VICES that will destroy the souls of children,” Nicolas explains.

◦ **Time to Think Differently?**

According to some, the children that need the most help are those that aren’t visible.

Paul Phillips, founder of charity Disabled and Disadvantaged Children of Ho Chi Minh City, sees it this way.

“You wouldn’t call them street kids, only professional beggars,” he says. “If you want to find street kids, they are the ones sleeping under bridges at night. Those working on Pham Ngu Lao – they aren’t poor. Put it that way.”

And while Nicolas agrees that “Pham Ngu Lao is Vietnam’s Hollywood strip – not a real representation of the beauty of Vietnam,” he’s not of the opinion that they should simply be ignored.

For him there is something still deeply troubling about these children. Their general familiarity with strangers. “That’s where the perpetual challenge lies, the way these children are communicating with foreigners.

We see a familiarity the children have with strangers at such an early age and we have to think about where does that lead to?”

But the problem isn’t only physical, as we witness in their attempts to massage us and sit on our laps. It is also psychological.

Take for example Duy, a boy of about five, who works until late selling gum by dancing on the corner of De Tham and Bui Vien.

“What integrity or sense of pride will this kid grow up with? What security can dancing on the table as a five-year-old give him?” says Nicolas.

◦ **The Key Question**

Whether we should buy from these kids still remains contestable. The question is more complex than it seems.

“If there’s no-one giving anything to the kids, then what are they going to do? They will become useless and their problems will only become invisible,” Nicolas explains.

Supporting them, however, isn’t contestable. It’s only the methods we choose that are. **W**