

Vietnam Within Me

Before I ever set foot in Vietnam, my understanding of the country was limited to fragments of history—mainly the Vietnam War and the fact that it was the only nation to have defeated the United States. And yet, here I am, nearly 25 years later, with Vietnam deeply rooted in my life and heart.

My journey with Vietnam began quietly in 2000, through the JSPS Japan-Vietnam researcher exchange program. Then, between 2003 and 2006, I worked with WHO on infectious disease control and research, including Japanese encephalitis and highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1. It was during this time that I met Dr. Nga and Dr. Mai from NIHE. Our collaboration went far beyond professional duties—it was a time when trust and friendship blossomed.

I still remember one particular visit to NIHE when I developed a rather large boil on my backside. Embarrassed and unsure what to do, I turned to Dr. Mai, who treated me using traditional Vietnamese medicine. As a scientist, I tried to remain composed, but inside I was thinking, “So this is authentic Vietnamese healing!”—a mix of surprise and gratitude.

In 2005, Nagasaki University established a Vietnam-based lab at NIHE. After completing my WHO assignment, I officially relocated to Hanoi on July 15, 2007. That marked the beginning of a long battle with infectious diseases—dengue fever, Japanese encephalitis, Zika virus, and bat-borne illnesses. In the lab, we achieved milestones such as identifying target cells for dengue virus, reporting Asia’s first case of microcephaly caused by Zika virus, and isolating a new species of herpesvirus from bats.

But my connection to Vietnam’s healthcare system wasn’t limited to research—I became a patient myself. During Tet in 2014, I suffered a life-threatening intestinal hemorrhage and was rushed to Vimec Times City International Hospital. All Japanese staff had returned home for the holiday, and it was my friends from NIHE who took turns visiting and caring for me. Thanks to a doctor with “miraculous hands,” I underwent a successful endoscopic surgery and survived. That day, the Hanoi sky outside my hospital window looked a little softer, a little kinder.

In July 2020, I was diagnosed with tuberculous pleurisy caused by drug-resistant tuberculosis. I underwent thoracic surgery at Tam Anh Hospital, followed by a grueling 20-month course of medication, battling side effects along the way. Even after that, I continued to catch illnesses—shingles, norovirus, SARS-CoV-2—almost every year. It felt as though I was conducting fieldwork outside the lab, using my own body as a research subject. At this point, it’s less a job hazard and more a way of life.

Still, Vietnam remains irreplaceable to me. The food is delicious, Hanoi is a bustling city with remarkable safety, and I’ve been able to live here peacefully with my wife and daughter.

Vietnamese people are kind, open-minded, and easy to work with. Their smiles and thoughtfulness have lifted me up more times than I can count.

Now, as I watch the endless stream of traffic on Vietnam's roads—buses, trucks, luxury cars, and swarms of motorbikes weaving like ants—I see something more than chaos. I see the spirit of the Vietnamese people: free, gentle, flexible, and always moving forward. Like fish swimming in the vast ocean, they navigate life with grace and strength.

And I, too, continue to live my own chapter in the story of Vietnam, carried along by its current.