

Fonda's controversial 1972 visit still part of Hanoi's culture

BY KAZUO NAGATA
The Yomiuri Shimbun

Go down an unassuming stairway between the pool and outdoor bar at the luxurious Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi hotel — which opened in 1901 to serve Hanoi's expatriate population — and you'll find yourself in an old air-raid shelter from the Vietnam War.

The basement shelter was rediscovered during renovations two years ago and is now open to visitors. American actress Jane Fonda and other luminaries took refuge here during the war, according to a tour guide leading a group that included some elderly Americans.

Tran Minh Quoc, a former Vietnamese ambassador to Italy, remembers taking refuge in the shelter with Fonda when he served as her interpreter during her June 1972 visit to the city.

Quoc, 65, said Fonda did not appear frightened, and as soon as the sirens stopped, she grabbed her camera and went above ground. But he also said she had a sentimental side, recalling an incident in which she burst into tears upon seeing schoolchildren wearing straw hoods to protect them during bombings.

Fonda gained fame for creating a sensation on the screen in the 1960s, but around 1970 she became an increasingly active opponent of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

She received an invitation to visit Hanoi in May 1972 after criticizing the administration of then President Richard Nixon for escalating the air campaign against North Vietnam. The invitation came from the Vietnamese Committee for Solidarity with the American People, a group that invited several hundred U.S. antiwar activists to visit Vietnam during the war, and by which



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The air-raid shelter in the basement of the Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi hotel in Hanoi, Vietnam, can be toured by visitors. It's where actress Jane Fonda once took refuge during her controversial 1972 visit to the city during the Vietnam War.

Quoc was employed.

At the time, it was unlikely that many North Vietnamese had ever seen a Jane Fonda movie. Yet Chu Chi Thanh, a former cameraman for a state broadcaster, remembers seeing Fonda dressed in an ao ba ba, a traditional Vietnamese outfit.

Fonda seemed very approachable, Thanh said, recalling that it made him realize that while the U.S. military was their enemy, the American people were friends. It reassured him that his country was not in fact isolated, he said.

Fonda was followed by cameras wherever she went in war-torn Hanoi.

These actions on what was then considered enemy territory caused a major stir

in the U.S., with many taking to calling her Hanoi Jane.

Although Fonda was undeterred by the criticism she received, she said, "I will go to my grave regretting the photograph of me in an antiaircraft carrier [sic]," referring to the iconic picture of her sitting at the controls of a North Vietnamese antiaircraft gun. The photograph made it look like she was taking aim at her own country.

When she and Quoc met again in the United States in 2002, she asked him if she had been set up. He answered no, but he later said that the number of U.S. visitors to North Vietnam doubled after Fonda came and that they all organized antiwar activities after returning home.