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The Artistic Mother Tongue

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Translation: "I am"

THE ARTISTIC MOTHER TONGUE

a thesis by Hannah N. Perkins

THE IDEA:

Art is the mother tongue of culture. William Cameron Townsend, pioneer missionary and founder of Wycliffe Bible Translators, once said “The greatest missionary is the Bible in the mother tongue,” (Paredes). But the mother tongue of any people of any culture is more than the spoken and written word. It is found in every artistic and visual expression of that people. How is the Bible, the truth of God, expressed through artistic expression in the ‘mother tongue’ of a people?

Often, Christianity is painted as the Westerner’s religion. Christianity is very ingrained into specifically America’s cultural identity. In some

places, people joke that “there’s a church on every street corner.” For overseas missionaries, the locals will use the excuse that in the same way Christianity presents itself as America’s religion, Buddhism is a part of their own cultural identity.

My goal was to review the historical and contemporary distinctions of Vietnamese culture through artistic expression. I researched what art and images are ‘native’ to the culture --including art as seen from social media--and with that knowledge, I created a social media campaign in conjunction with a missionary working overseas in Vietnam.

THE PROCESS:

Beginning my research, I started by reading through two different art books centered on Vietnamese art, one specifically about the contemporary art of today and one focused on the history of art in Vietnam.

Unfortunately, I faced struggles finding in-depth information on the

graphic design history in Vietnam. Painters In Hanoi mentioned this problem when researching her book, mentioning how most art history in Vietnam is either passed down in stories from generations or entirely wiped out.

From there I had the opportunity to talk with a couple of Vietnamese

artists--an illustrator and graphic designer living in Ho Chi Minh City. I talked about stylistic choices and popular themes in design for

THE RESEARCH:

My two main book sources, *Vietnam Eye* and *Painters in Hanoi*, detailed the art history in Vietnam. In *Vietnam Eye*, I noticed the strong emphasis on locality and honoring Vietnamese roots. Much of Vietnamese art's influence comes from nature, specifically involving water, given how important fishing is to Vietnam. Vietnam is particularly interesting from a modern graphic design perspective.

For instance, an artist created a photography set on the "past colliding with the present". Examples of large advertisements on buildings next to the old architecture, a developing contrast of the modern against history. A lot of overall themes deal with the past and the present mixing together.

The book describes one of the artists, "Born into the post-war generation and growing up during an era of rapid change, he [the

Vietnam. With this, I developed the social media campaign based on the seven 'I Am' statements from John.

artist] embodies the new, confident Vietnam." Many elements in the book acknowledge the general identity crisis Vietnamese artists struggle with. They find ways to create individuality and identity through their art that honors the old but shows the bright new future Vietnam is running towards.

In *Painters in Hanoi*, the author took a historical, more narrative approach in contrast to *Vietnam Eye's* approach of showcasing portfolios and biographies of modern artists. *Painters in Hanoi* gave me a deeper understanding of art history in Vietnam.

It showed how the country's history filled with war and various occupations from other countries both hindered and developed the art scene in Hanoi and, to a larger extent, Vietnam. Nature scenes have often played a strong role in any developing country's art scene, but

in Vietnam, it became their style --both because of popularity with the Western market and because of inward popularity to represent the familiar landscapes and scenes of Vietnamese people.

Alongside my reading, I had the fortunate opportunity to talk with two Vietnamese artists--an illustrator and a graphic designer. They both provided tremendous insight into the modern-day design culture in Vietnam, and they also confirmed a few of my original suspicions when I began doing research.

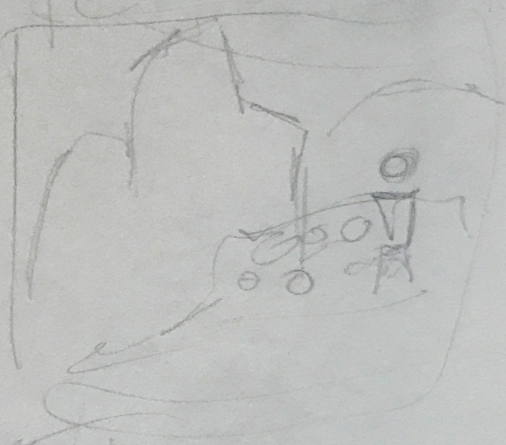
Because of the predominantly Western influence in media, Vietnamese graphic design follows

many of the Western trends we see today. Coupled with the broad reach of social media, most graphic design trends in Vietnam are not Vietnamese specific and are designed to reach broad audiences. The two artists I spoke to mentioned this, but they did mention that when graphic design focuses on reaching Vietnamese audiences, it performs better. They also spoke about how colorful, illustrative styles resonate more among Vietnamese, and they also expressed how the subject speaks more than a generic style. Things like including elements of real life, showing a connection to the Vietnamese people instead of generic objects. Small details make all the difference.

CONCEPT ART:

Following the results of my research, I chose to work within a light-colored, green-toned color palette. I kept an illustrative look to my graphics and used certain symbolism in each of them to resonate with a Vietnamese audience. While not all of the sketches ended up being used, they were all instrumental.



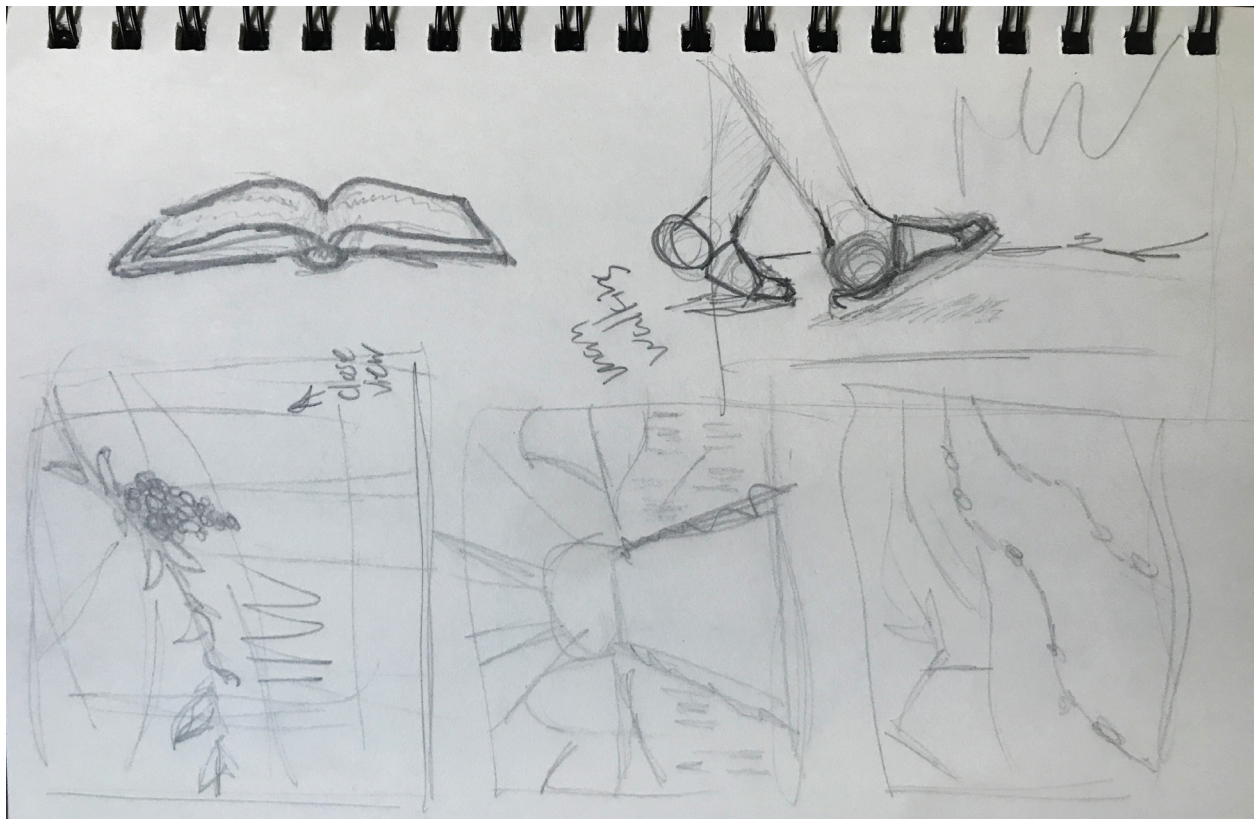
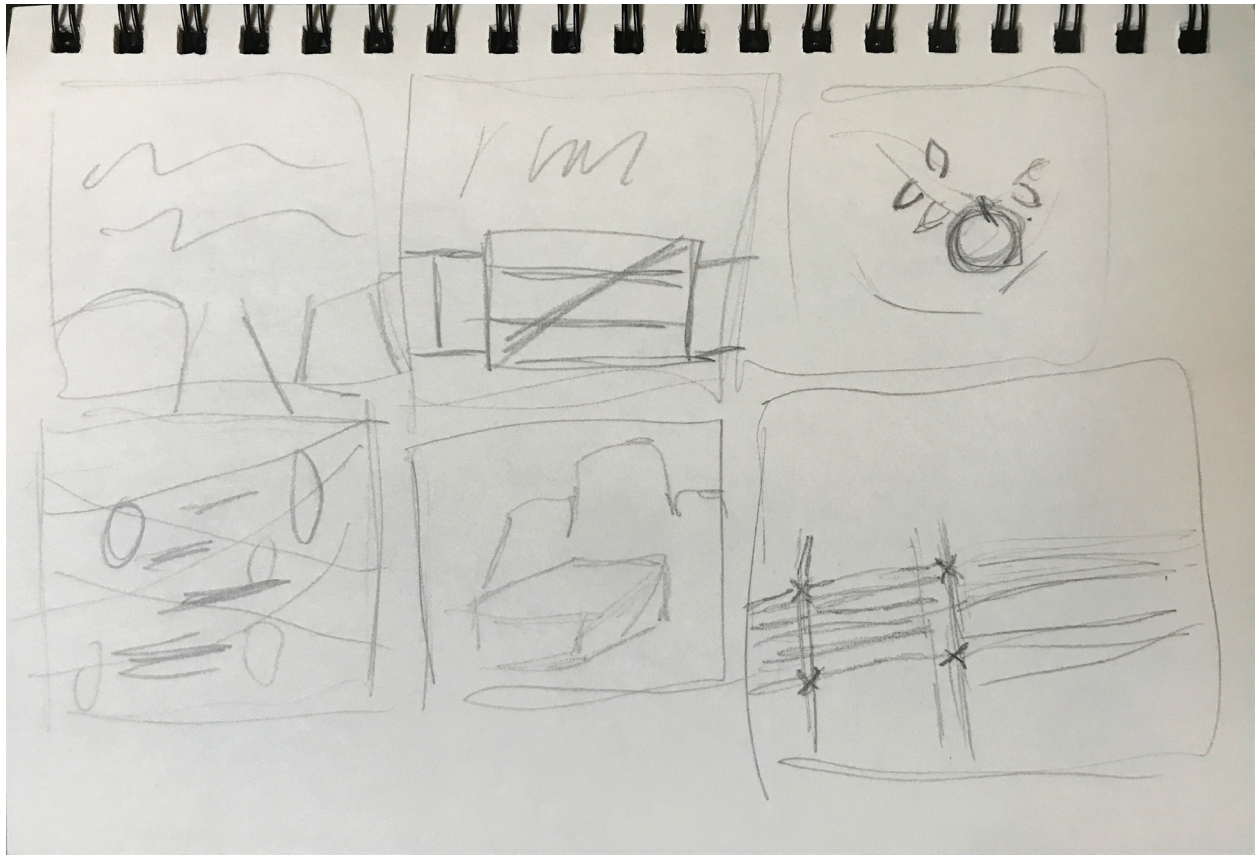


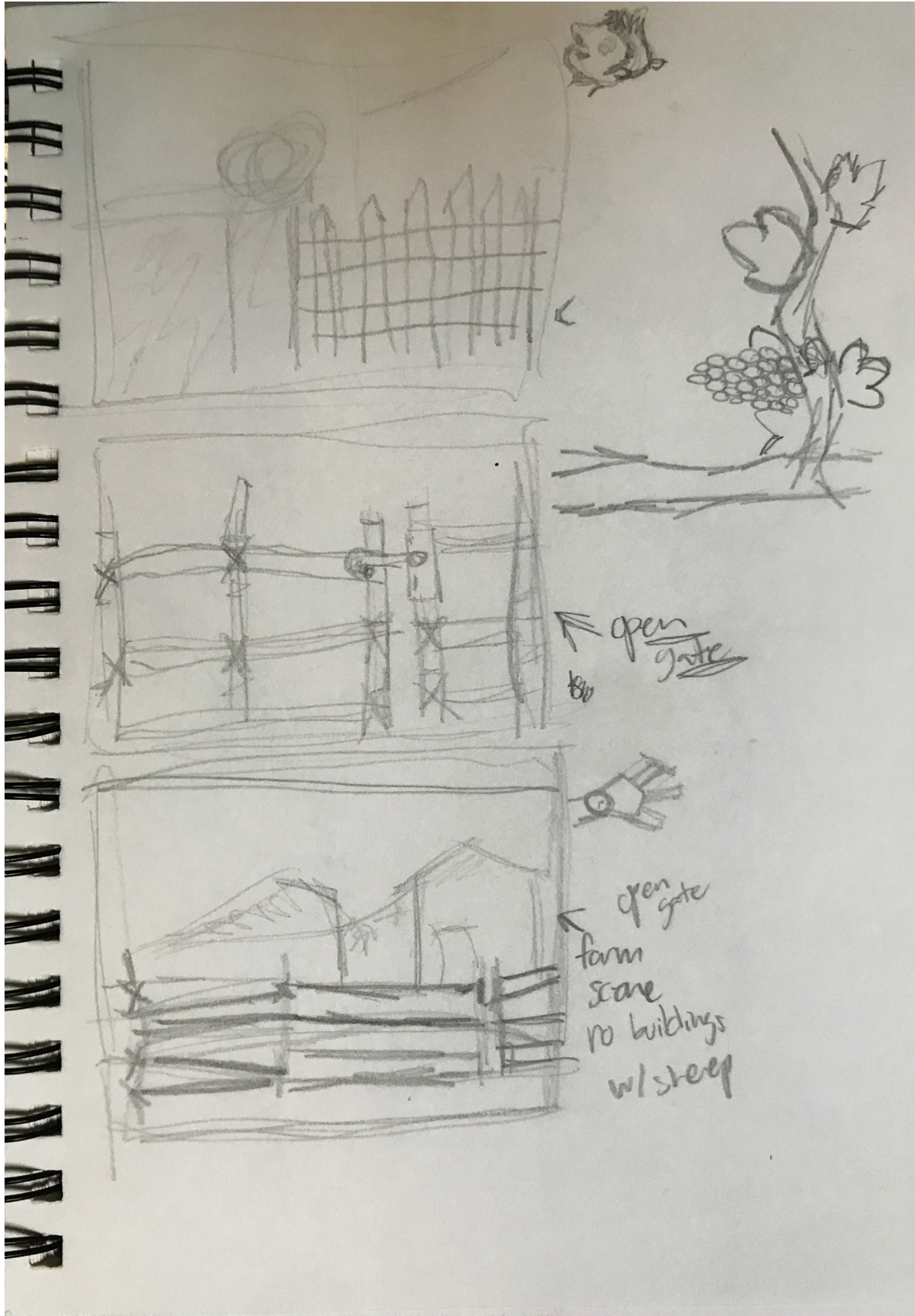
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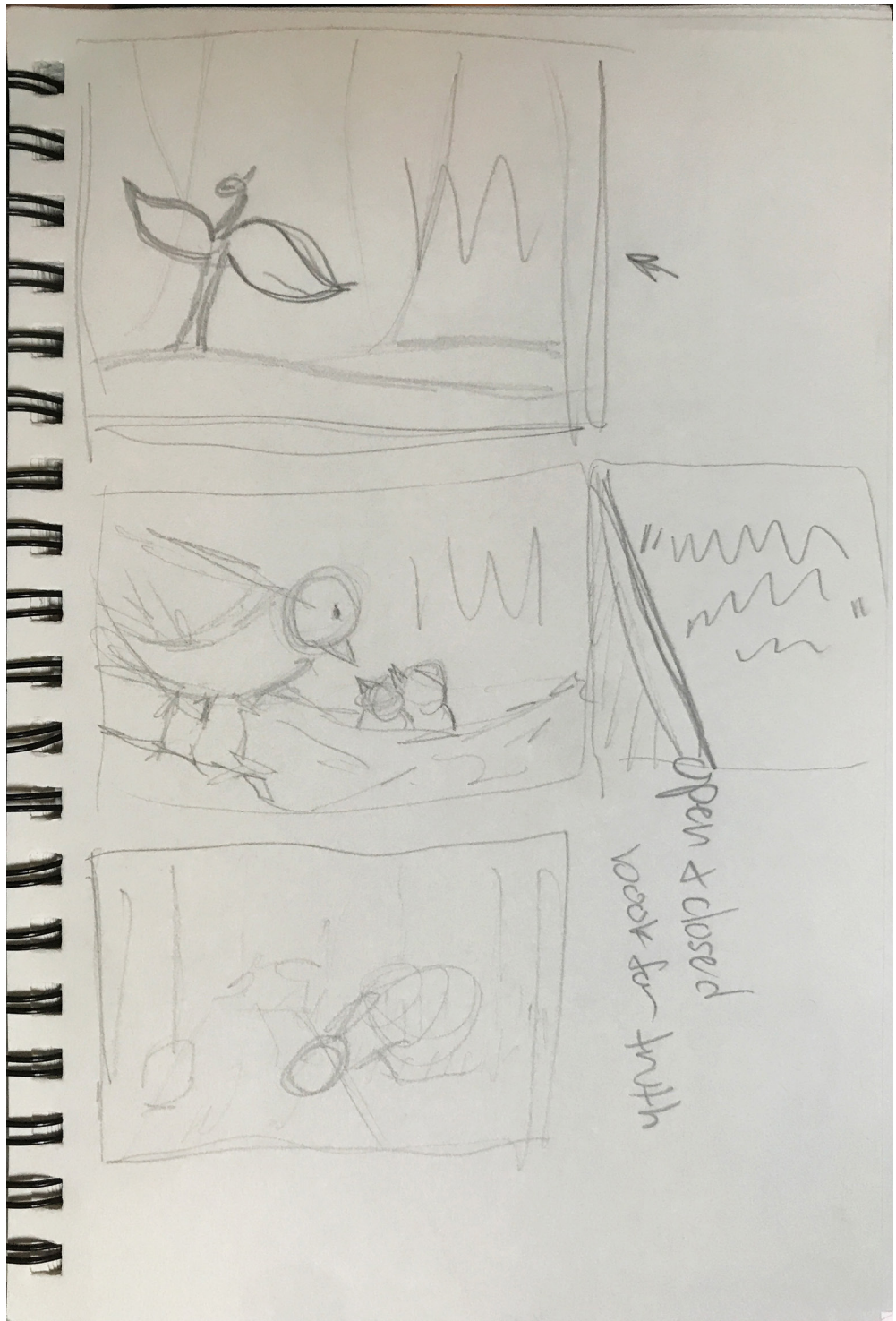


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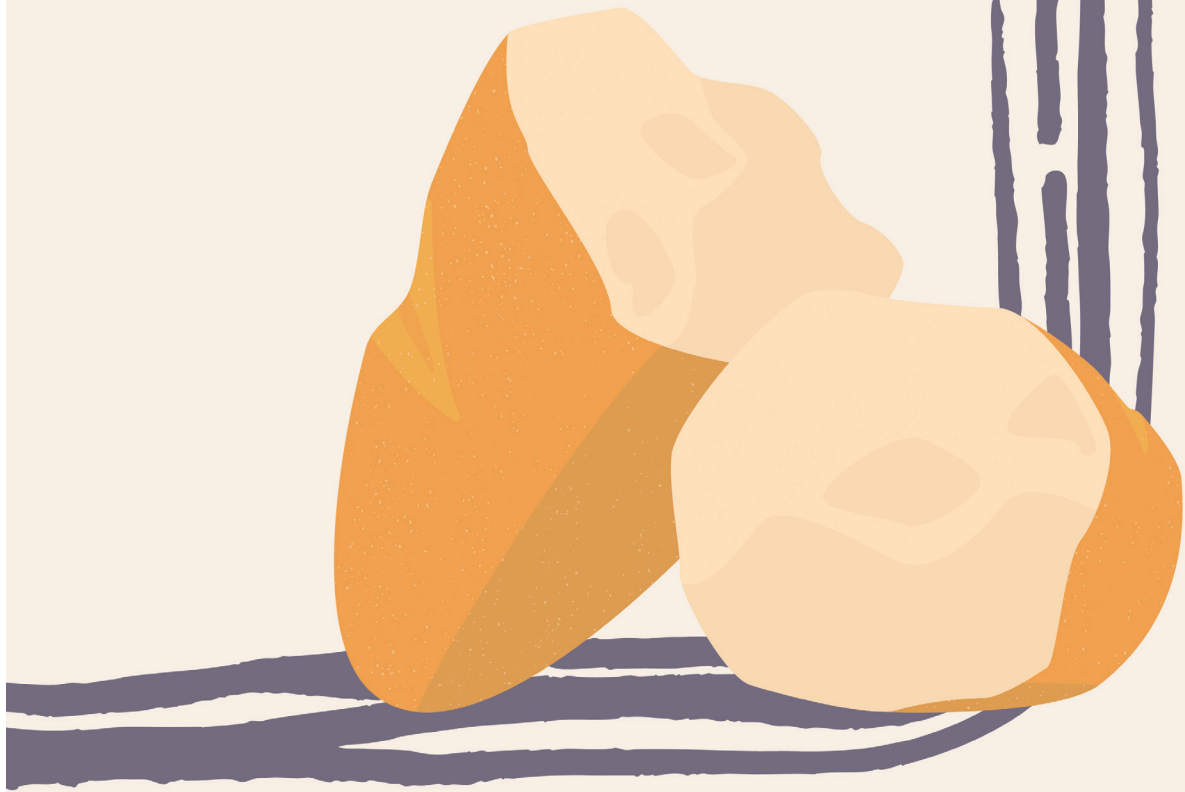




THE OUTCOME:

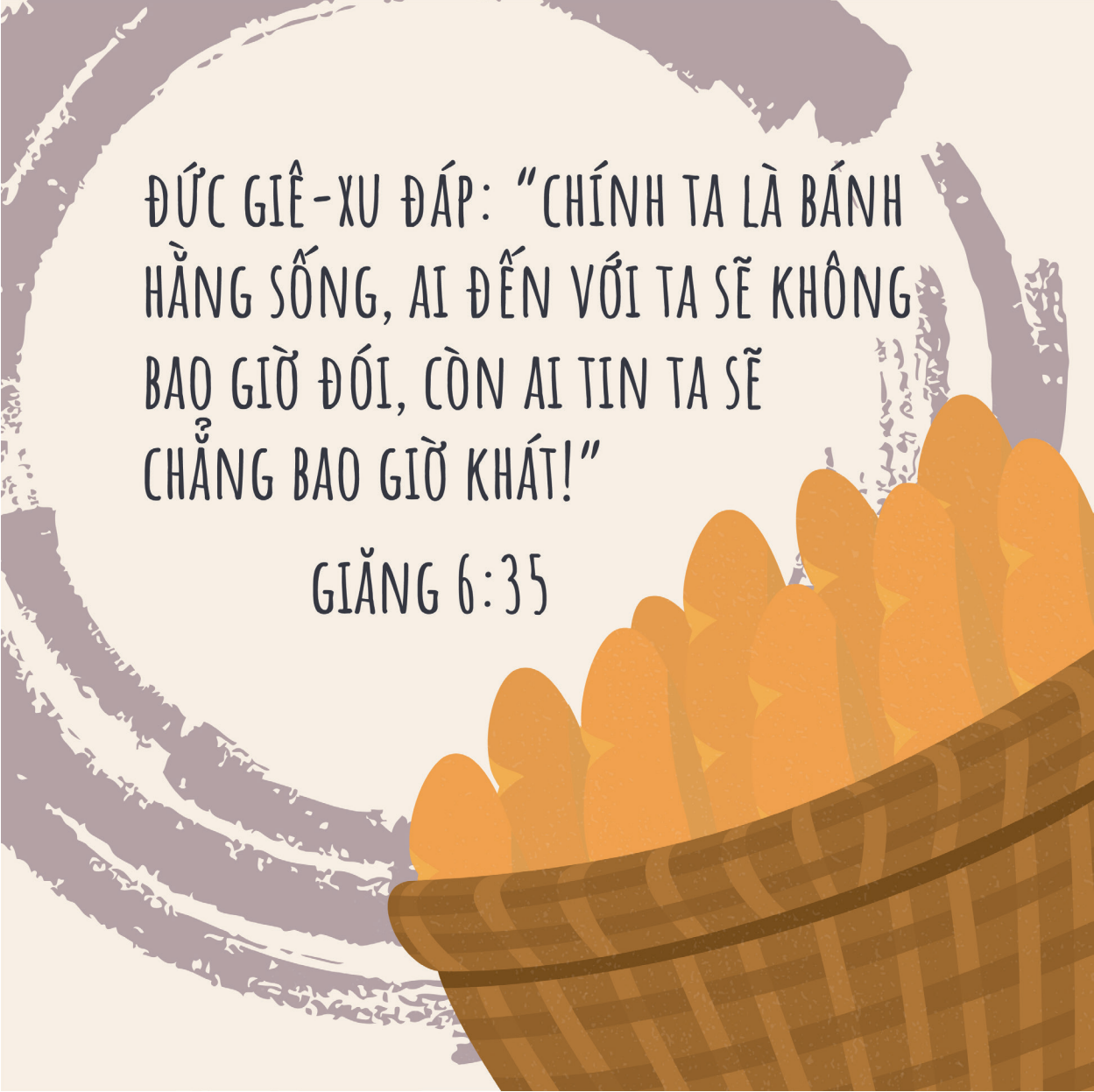
With my research and sketches finalized, I created eight pairs of images, each based on one of the 'I Am' statements Jesus made in John.

TA LÀ BÁNH
HẰNG SỐNG



Translation: "I am the bread"

BREAD



ĐỨC GIÊ-XU ĐÁP: "CHÍNH TA LÀ BÁNH
HẰNG SỐNG, AI ĐẾN VỚI TA SẼ KHÔNG
BAO GIỜ ĐÓI, CÒN AI TIN TA SẼ
CHẰNG BAO GIỜ KHÁT!"

GIĂNG 6:35

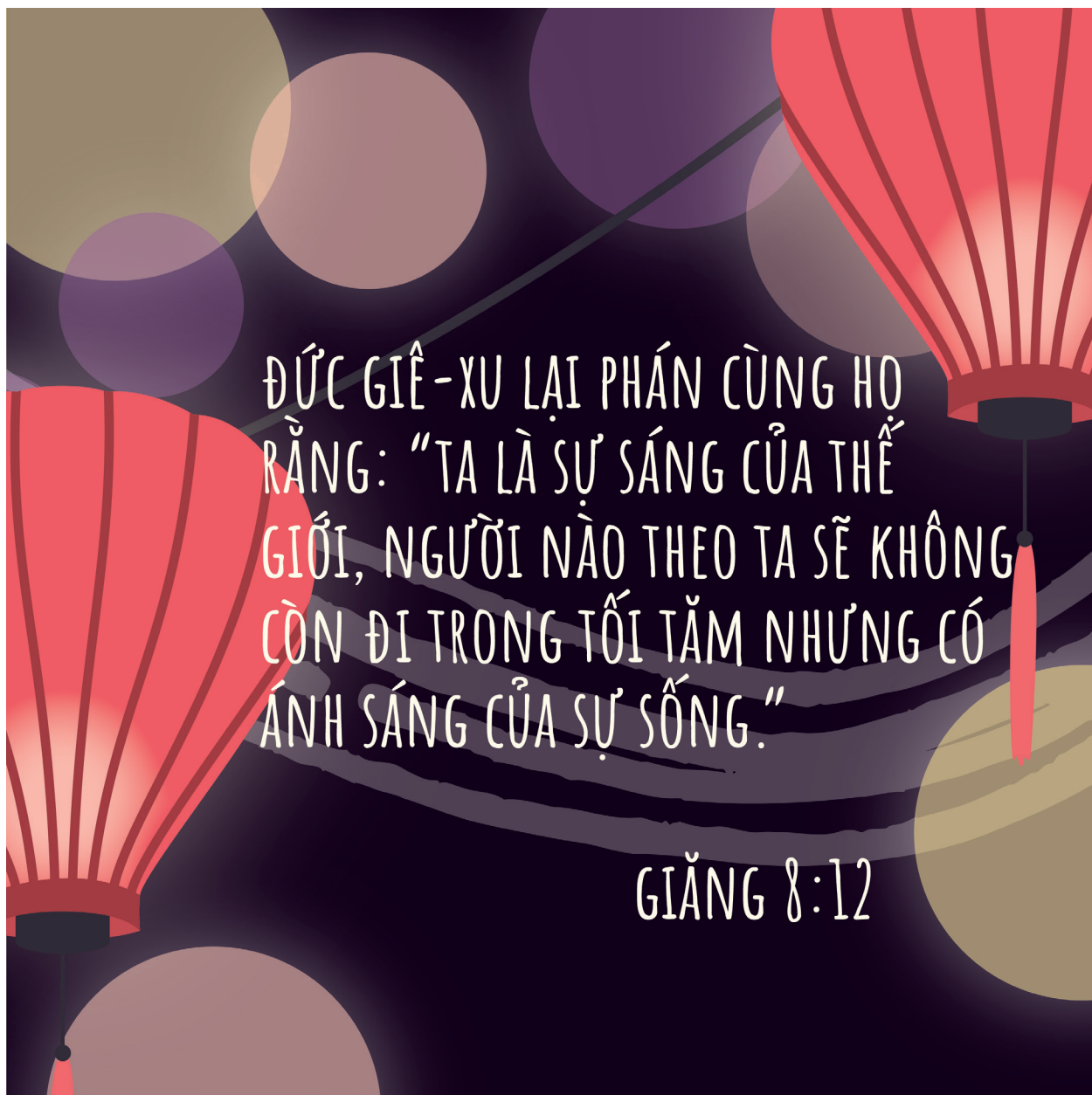
Translation: "I am the bread of life," Jesus told them. "No one who comes to Me will ever be hungry, and no one who believes in Me will ever be thirsty again."

Influenced by the French ruling over Vietnam from the late 1800's to the mid-1900's, French bread is a common staple from street vendors to high-end supermarkets. Banh mi – a local sandwich filled with delicious pork and pickled vegetables in this French-style bread is eaten for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. This particular style of bread resonates and feels the comfort of familiarity to Vietnamese audiences. Woven baskets are also a common sight on the streets of Vietnam.



Translation: "I am the light"

LIGHT



ĐỨC GIÊ-XU LAI PHÁN CÙNG HỌ
RẰNG: "TA LÀ SỰ SÁNG CỦA THẾ
GIỚI, NGƯỜI NÀO THEO TA SẼ KHÔNG
CÒN ĐI TRONG TỐI TẮM NHƯNG CÓ
ÁNH SÁNG CỦA SỰ SỐNG."

GIĂNG 8:12

Translation: "Then Jesus spoke to them again: "I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows Me will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life."

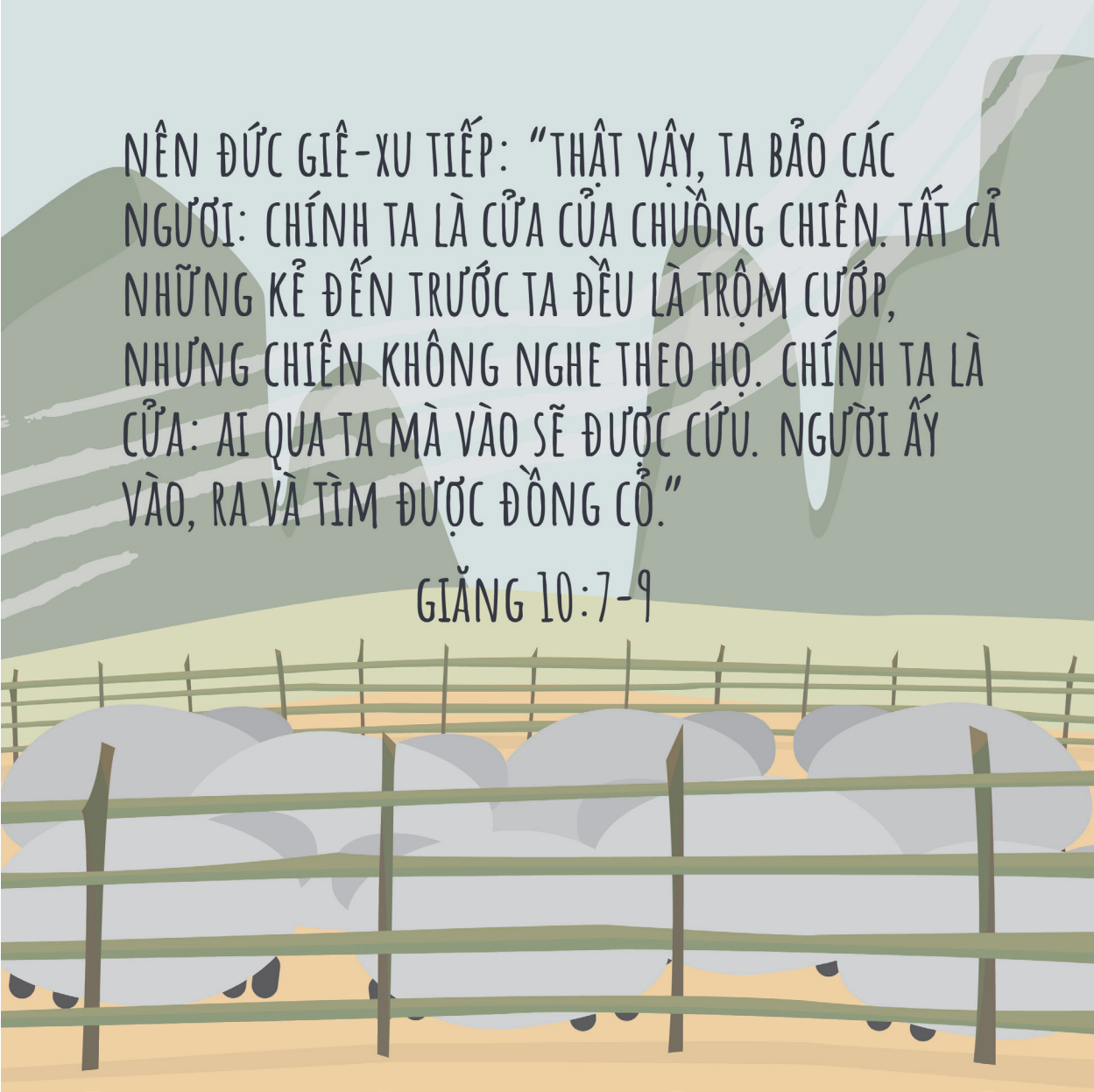
Bright lights and colorful festivals dominate the holidays of the season in Vietnam. Multiple times a year, different cities have their version of a Lantern Festival. Mid-Autumn Festival celebrated in late fall features the end of an agricultural season as dictated by the lunar calendar with a big harvest moon. Lanterns are made and hung representing the light. Big and little cities have their version of 'lantern street' where locals and tourists can walk down with vendors selling lanterns of different shapes, sizes, and colors.



TA LÀ CỬA CỦA
CHUÔNG CHIÊN

Translation: "I am the gate"

GATE



NÊN ĐỨC GIÊ-XU TIẾP: “THẬT VẬY, TA BẢO CÁC NGƯỜI: CHÍNH TA LÀ CỬA CỦA CHUỒNG CHIÊN. TẤT CẢ NHỮNG KẼ ĐẾN TRƯỚC TA ĐỀU LÀ TRỘM CƯỚP, NHƯNG CHIÊN KHÔNG NGHE THEO HỌ. CHÍNH TA LÀ CỬA: AI QUA TA MÀ VÀO SẼ ĐƯỢC CỨU. NGƯỜI ẤY VÀO, RA VÀ TÌM ĐƯỢC ĐỒNG CỎ.”

GIĂNG 10:7-9

Translation: “So Jesus said again, “I assure you: I am the door of the sheep. All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep didn’t listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. A thief comes only to steal and to kill and to destroy. I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance.”

Situated in the central northern highlands of Vietnam, rural sections of the country motivated the karst-like backgrounds. These scenic illustrations are part of the striking outcroppings of the beauty and wonder of the Vietnam landscape. Simple rural fencing and gates are typical for a local farmer.

TA LÀ NGƯỜI
CHĂN NHÂN TỪ



Translation: "I am the good shepherd"

SHEPHERD



“TA LÀ NGƯỜI CHĂN NHÂN TỪ.
NGƯỜI CHĂN NHÂN TỪ HY SINH TÍNH
MẠNG VÌ ĐÀN CHIÊN.”

GIĂNG 10:11

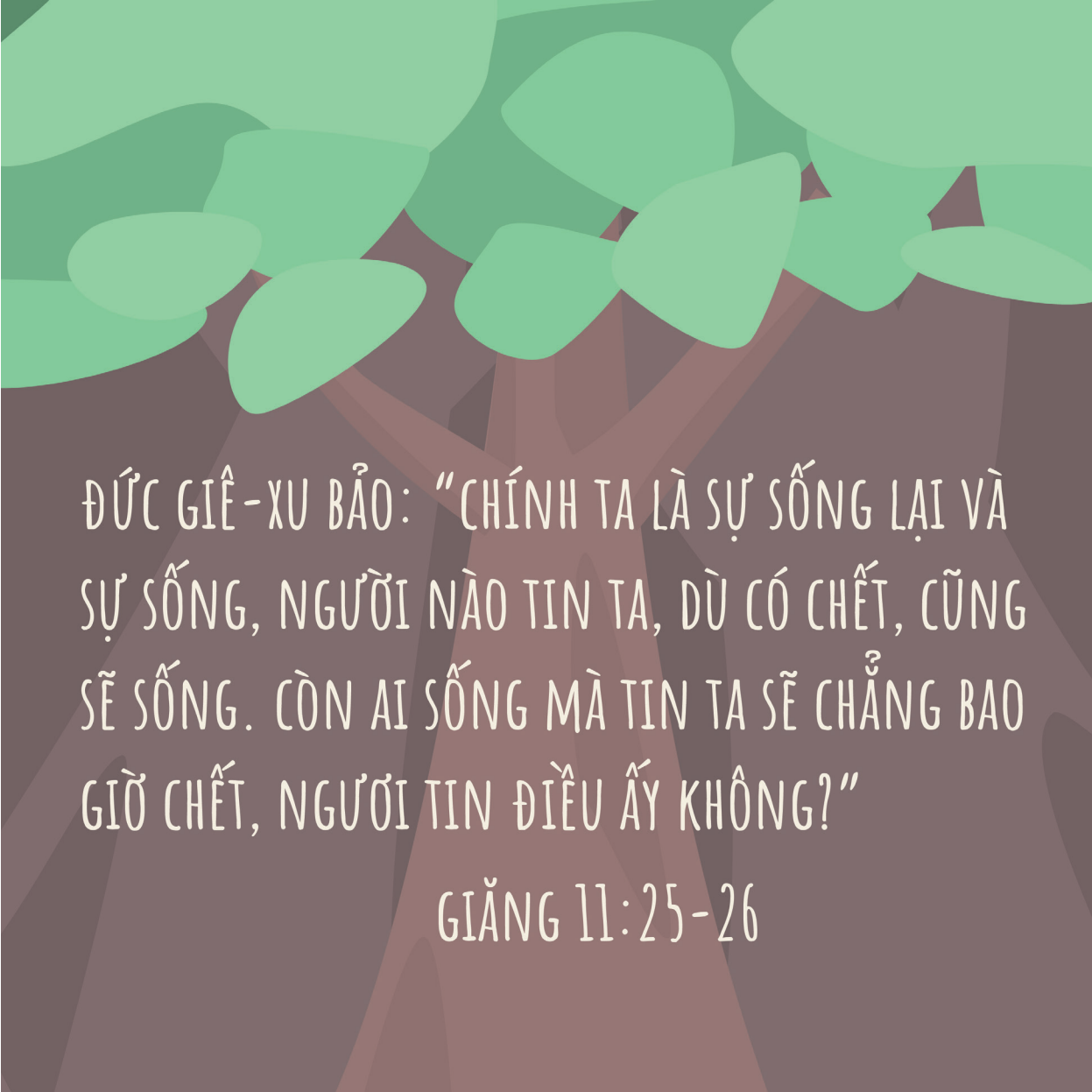
Translation: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

Continuing with neutrals, the Shepherd verse connects with the karst background, and the partial view of the shepherd causes intrigue into the character of the shepherd, a metaphor for Jesus. Lines in both this and other illustrations help focus the eye and give a directional feature for the Vietnamese audience rather than a flat picture.



Translation: "I am the life"

LIFE



ĐỨC GIÊ-XU BẢO: "CHÍNH TA LÀ SỰ SỐNG LẠI VÀ SỰ SỐNG, NGƯỜI NÀO TIN TA, DÙ CÓ CHẾT, CŨNG SẼ SỐNG. CÒN AI SỐNG MÀ TIN TA SẼ CHẴNG BAO GIỜ CHẾT, NGƯỜI TIN ĐIỀU ẤY KHÔNG?"

GIĂNG 11:25-26

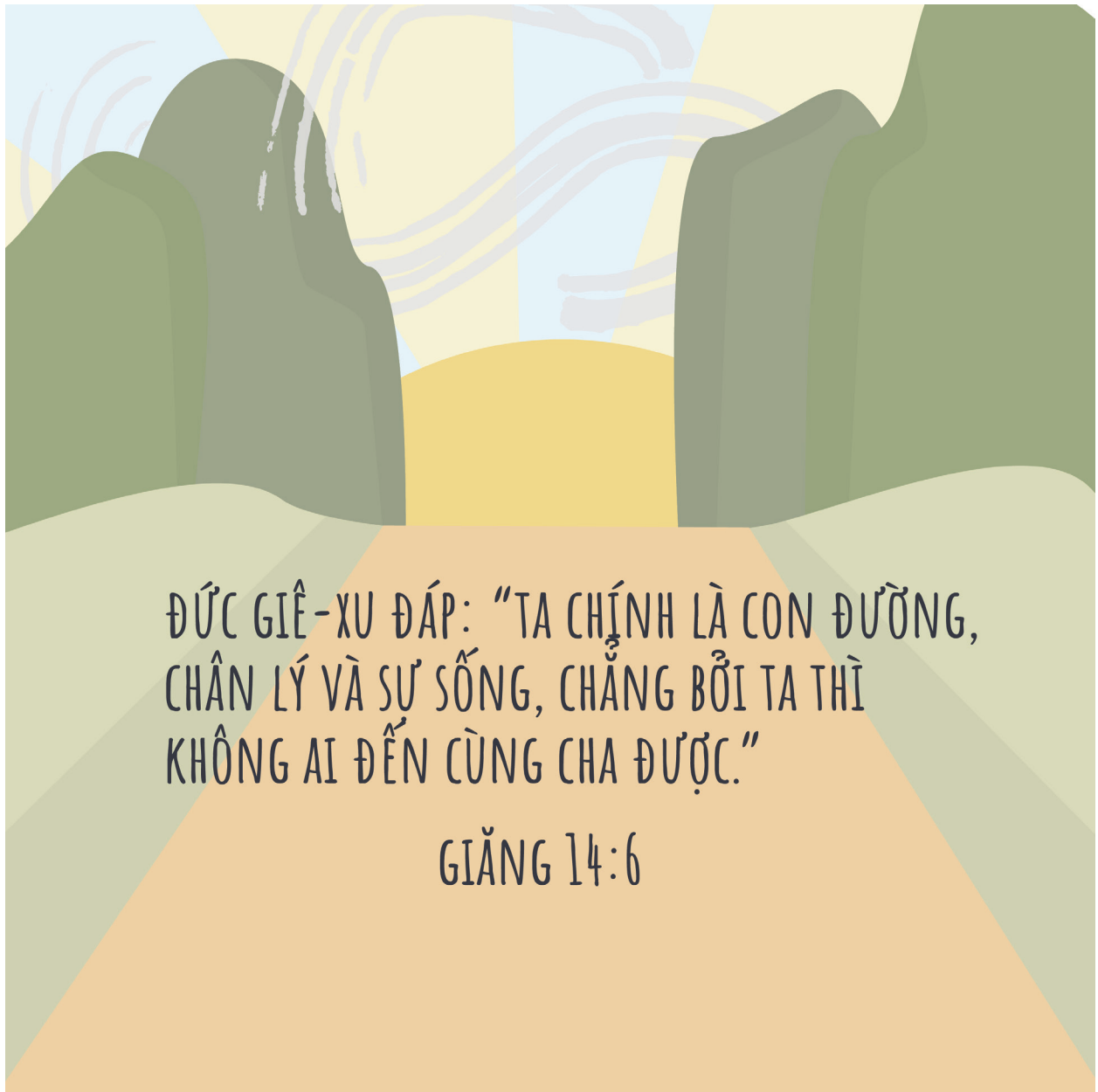
Translation: "Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in Me, even if he dies, will live. Everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die—ever. Do you believe this?"

Intense cities like Ho Chi Minh City filled with 10 million-plus people, relish the quiet and tucked away natural spaces around the metropolis. Beauty and nature find themselves in the most unassuming places, down a hidden alley, along a canal through a district, or under overpasses and beside highways. People flock to these gems of life and appreciate the feel and view of greenery, trees, and flowers, connecting Vietnamese, culture, and nature in a breath.



Translation: "I am the way"

WAY



ĐỨC GIÊ-XU ĐÁP: "TA CHÍNH LÀ CON ĐƯỜNG,
CHÂN LÝ VÀ SỰ SỐNG, CHẰNG BỞI TA THÌ
KHÔNG AI ĐẾN CÙNG CHA ĐƯỢC."

GIĂNG 14:6

Translation: "Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

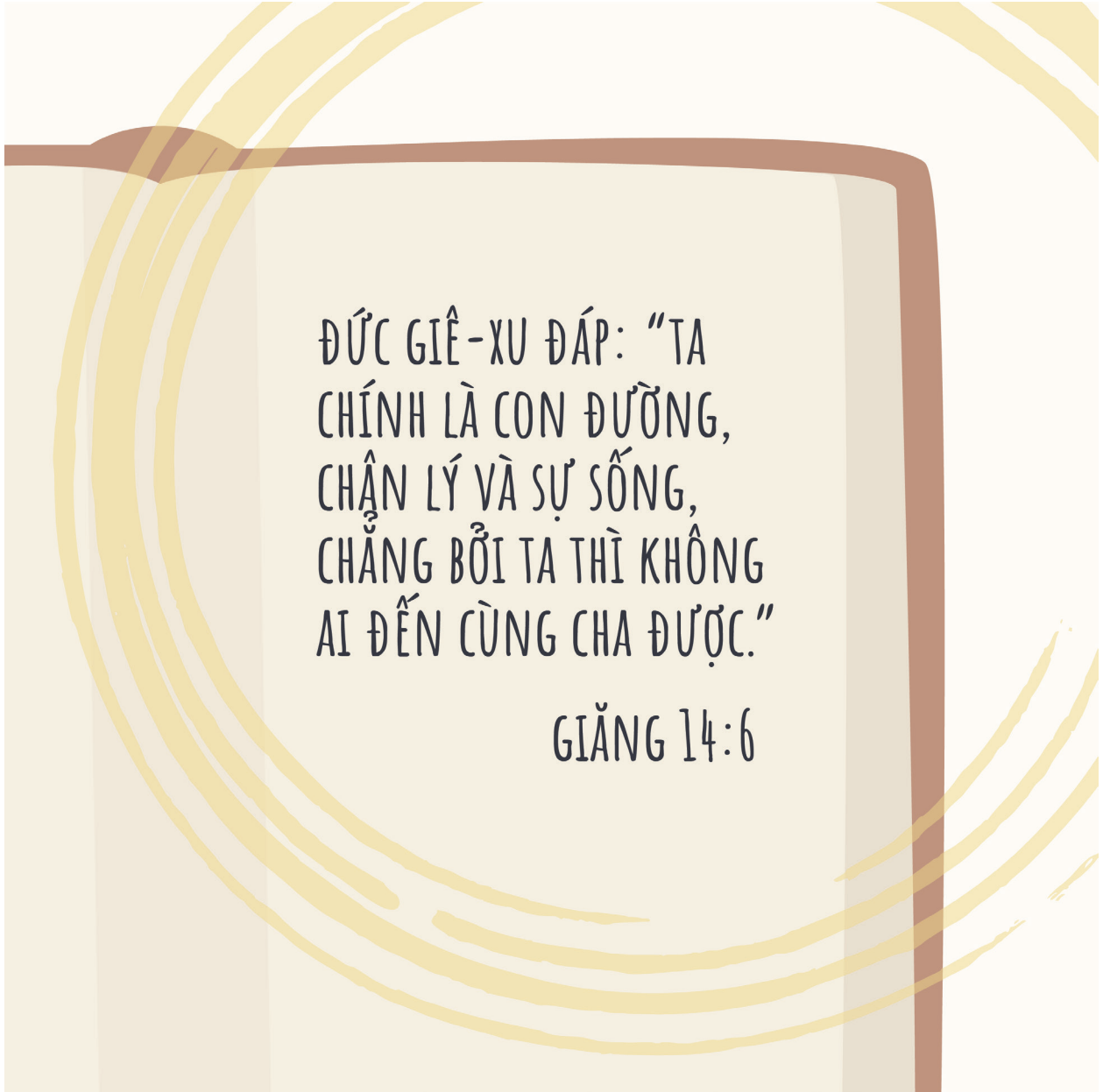
Slip on a sandal and head out the door, recognizable footwear for Vietnamese with the skin tone and path in the same color palette of the series. There's a moment for Vietnamese to read and contemplate what path they are on--there's not much to reflect from the past, that is, cut off from the partial back leg, but there is the now and a linger to anticipate their future path.

TA LÀ CHÂN LÝ



Translation: "I am the truth"

TRUTH



ĐỨC GIÊ-XU ĐÁP: "TA
CHÍNH LÀ CON ĐƯỜNG,
CHÂN LÝ VÀ SỰ SỐNG,
CHẲNG BỞI TA THÌ KHÔNG
AI ĐẾN CÙNG CHA ĐƯỢC."

GIĂNG 14:6

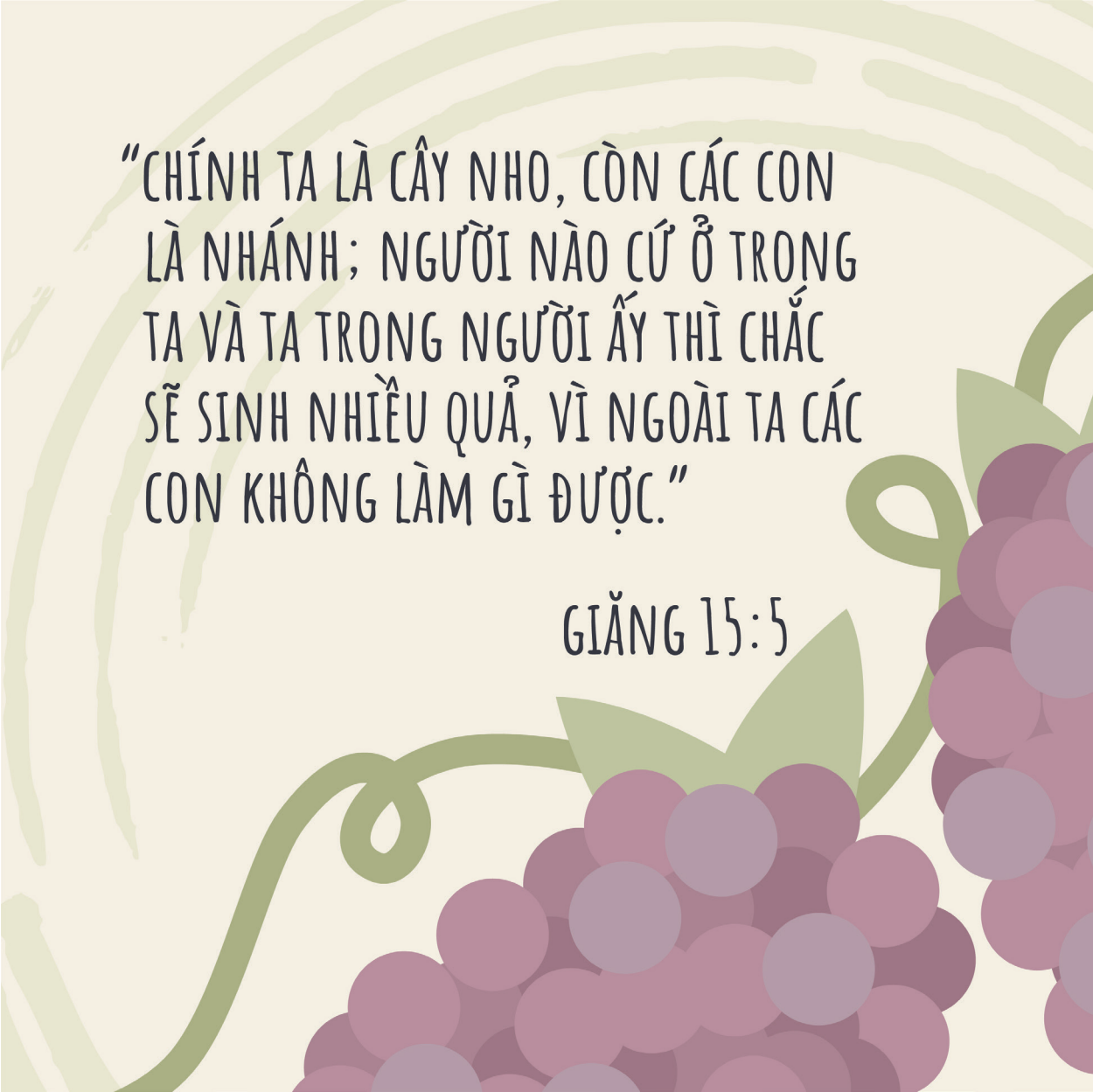
Translation: "Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

The history and culture of Vietnam depict respect for academics, optimism for the future, and a longing for trust in relationships. Truth in this illustration is found in the writing within a book, the Bible, and highlighted by the lines.



Translation: "I am the vine"

VINE



“CHÍNH TA LÀ CÂY NHO, CÒN CÁC CON
LÀ NHÁNH; NGƯỜI NÀO CỨ Ở TRONG
TA VÀ TA TRONG NGƯỜI ẤY THÌ CHẮC
SẼ SINH NHIỀU QUẢ, VÌ NGOÀI TA CÁC
CON KHÔNG LÀM GÌ ĐƯỢC.”

GIĂNG 15:5

Translation: "I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in Me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without Me."

South and central highlands of Vietnam are ideal climates for vineyards, and grapes and vines are quite recognizable to the Vietnamese audience. The Scripture lends itself to a thoughtful reflection on comparing vines and branches to people and produce.

CONCLUSION:

Digital media in Vietnam has grown astronomically both in the past decade and specifically in 2020 throughout the pandemic. With fewer outreach options available, missionaries in Vietnam utilized a Facebook campaign to introduce the Gospel to people. My “I Am” campaign depicted seventeen unique illustrations, targeting Vietnamese audiences for nine weeks from October 13 - December 11, 2020.

Before the campaign launched, the “Light” images advertised Vietnamese Mid-Autumn festival parties, hosted by the missionaries for college students in the city. The lantern illustrations served as the cover on a Gospel tract that was distributed to 1,000 people.

The “I am” illustration of Jesus with open arms (featured on the cover) was used as the cover for their Facebook Page throughout the campaign, posted to the page with the prompt of “Before we consider who Jesus is to us, we should consider who Jesus said He is.”

Subsequent images were published on Facebook with an average impression rate of 1,043 for each post which was at least 30% higher than their previous standard posts.

The entire collection of illustrations were combined into a roughly three and a half minute video, becoming part of a highly successful social media campaign. This video was seen by over 250,000 Vietnamese, with over 10,000 engaging with other social media channels. People who watched at least 25% or more of the video also resulted in 6,000 new visits to the missionary’s core website.

Working alongside the missionary and creating this campaign has encouraged growth for me personally, and it has inspired me to pursue international-driven digital media. This has been a wonderful and memorable experience, and I look forward to creating meaningful content in the future.

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