

Vietnam's User-Friendly Communism.

Middle class intellectuals and their values have always served as the bedrock of governance in Vietnam in peace time, regardless of ideology and upper government structures. Successive Emperors might have established dynasties by force of arms, revolts or poisoning, but thereafter always selected their governing mandarins through fair admission exams open to all literate young men, to rule the provinces, to serve the central Court and guide the armies.

French colonialists, conquering Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos by guile and force in the late 19th century, left the system intact, and even reinforced it by multiplying education opportunities in Vietnam and in France for the young and expanding middle class. Peasants, the vast majority of the population, remained poor, but the middle class ran most of the colonial administration.

Even the Japanese military occupation in the Second World War used the French/Vietnamese middle class to run Indo-China. When, at the very end of the war, they broke the system by locking up all Frenchmen in concentration camps, the economy, including the transport system, collapsed so that rice produced in the South could not reach the North. The resulting famine cost a million lives.

Ho Chi Minh and other leaders of the Vietnamese communist party were French-educated intellectuals who led their armed forces, financed and trained by the Americans and Chinese for war against the Japanese, into their own country at the end of the war to create a textbook communist society. In 1954, after the defeat of the French colonial army at Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam was split at the 17th parallel into a communist North and a "democratic" South at the Geneva peace conference. Ho Chi Minh's immediate collectivisation of peasants against their will was a complete failure, alleviated only by massive Chinese food aid, but his army remained intact.

The Vietnamese civil war between the communists and democrat halves escalated, each side supported by major power blocs and results being anxiously followed by other Asiatic countries threatened by communist movements and indeed throughout the world. While the military outcome in 1975 was a last victory for communism in the Cold War, more relevant today is what actually happened inside Vietnam afterwards. Did the new ideology really change the way Vietnam works, or only its superstructure? What happened for instance to farmers and to middle class intellectuals and businessmen? How have the two world ideologies and their supporters intermingled and adapted themselves to each other after the war? A description of the life of one Vietnamese intellectual who lived through these turbulent times may be helpful.

His name is Trung. In the nineteen fifties his parents were business people in Saigon, while also managing rice growing properties in the Mekong Delta. As traditional Buddhists, they, or rather his mother, had to care for the ancestors' graves and several pagodas and to organise the traditional Buddhist festivities under the stern supervision of the paternal grandmother. His father, the eldest in his generation and head of the numerous family selected Trung, an independent teenager, already bi-lingual and first in his class at the local French lycee, to finish his lycee education in Paris in preparation for university studies there. Obediently Trung travelled by passenger ship to Marseille and from there by train to Paris. Vietnamese nationals always find an extensive family network in Paris ready to receive them, a whole neighbourhood in fact which speaks, eats and sings Vietnamese and where they enjoy immediate support. At the Paris lycee he passed his baccalaureat. In those days, medicine being a prestigious occupation in Vietnam, his parents insisted that he should go on to study it at university. When Trung humbly asked permission to study economics instead, his father refused and withdrew his allowance. Trung, by now 17 years old, accepted the challenge and started working in Vietnamese restaurants and later selling refrigerators, to pay for his studies. Enamoured of Paris he met many other carefree young Vietnamese, joking together about their destiny of having to take sides in the civil war upon their return to Vietnam. Most Vietnamese students even from rich families nominally supported the North Vietnamese communist cause in public demonstrations without giving it much thought.

With many other Indo-Chinese students, including Pol Pot and the future mass murderers of Cambodia, he inhaled the totally idealistic communist revolutionary theories retailed by young Sorbonne professors. The fashion in Paris for French intellectuals, writers, performers and university professors in the fifties and sixties was to spout theoretical communism, while living a comfortable bourgeois life with coffee and croissants in the morning and sexy political meetings at night. Communist realities such as Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago descriptions had not yet been revealed, although they were widely suspected. Flower power ruled. In due course, democratic government would prevail in France, but it seemed uncertain at the time. The defeat of the 1968 student revolt was still to come. In the ex-colonies, however, communism was no longer a theoretical but already a practical matter of life and death.

To Trung, an intense and sociable 20 year old, the attractions of Paris were many, but did not include the study of medicine or economics. He felt free to follow his real preference and enrolled into the Paris Conservatoire de Musique, where in 1957 he graduated as a pianist. His Swiss piano professor, Jean Ullern, was impressed on hearing a piece of music written by Trung played by his class mates, and introduced him to established editors and

singers. Trung wrote the music for a film “Les Eaux Vives” and sold other compositions, which produced enough money to rent a studio and purchase a second-hand Renault Dauphine. Ullern introduced him into the artist milieu. At the fashionable literary café “Aux deux Magots” his singular talent for attracting and holding the interest of leading personalities of the day surfaced for the first time. The American author John Steinbeck and his wife befriended him and together with the photo journalist Robert Capra they formed a group which often met and of which he was by far the youngest member. But although Trung was a competent pianist with a lifelong love of classical music, he realised he was not outstanding enough to make it a career. His father’s doubts about his son’s studies can only have deepened at the news of Trung’s marriage, at the age of 20, to a 19 year old Parisian girl and the subsequent birth of a son. Reality set in and Trung said farewell to student life and returned in 1958 to Saigon with wife and child to find a job.

The South Vietnam he returned to had changed its nature from a French dependency to an American protectorate. The playboy Emperor, living on the French Riviera, had been deposed and replaced by Ngo Dinh Diem, president of the Democratic Republic of South Vietnam. Trung, by now a freelance journalist with an international background, was selected by Diem to become his press officer and got involved with the full panoply of American journalism with big names like Joseph Alsop, Robert Lippman, Stanley Karnow, Walt Rostow and others.

North Vietnam, after the exodus of a million dissidents, mainly Catholics, to the South, and after surviving Maoist experiments with land reform leading to peasant revolts and other economic calamities, had stabilised itself as a hard-line communist military regime with total support from China. It began a covert war to conquer the South when it became clear that a peaceful reunification of Vietnam was not on the cards.

Ngo Dinh Diem, a highly respected but unworldly catholic autocrat, ruling as a benign dictator, had meanwhile stabilised the South, after defeating criminal gangs in Saigon, armed religious sects and French supported sections of his own army. The catholic priests were his trusted, though self-interested supporters. The Buddhists however remained rebellious. After the first filmed immolation of a Buddhist monk in the centre of Saigon the situation rapidly deteriorated. Trung’s love of Catholic Church music as well as his familiarity with the litanies of the Buddhist bonzes somehow facilitated his role as an understanding go-between the religions establishments. He maintained effective relations with the Buddhist hierarchy and counselled the President against the use of force against them. Later, the chief Buddhist advisor to the South Vietnamese army, a judo black belt with a samurai mentality, became a close friend. John Steinbeck came to write articles about a leading bonze Thich Tam Giac, staying for a month at Trung’s house in Saigon, while Trung himself organised the building of a large pagoda on the road to the airport, as well as a judo centre in town.

When in 1963 Diem and his brother were killed in an American-authorized coup and President Kennedy was assassinated a few months later, South Vietnam descended into a chaotic period of rule by military juntas. Richard Nixon, visiting Saigon as chairman of Pepsi Cola, having Trung introduced to him by Ambassador Cabot Lodge, warned him bluntly: “It is more dangerous to be an ally of the USA than an enemy”. Disgusted with politics Trung resigned from government service after Diem’s death and turned to managing his father’s business, building a high-rise apartment block for profitable rent to American officers and officials. By now he felt rich and also proud of his integrity. When General Loan, the Saigon Chief of Police and Security, offered him his “protection” in the buying and selling on the black market of stolen containers with merchandise for American troops, he refused because easy criminal profits would have destroyed his independence.

Meanwhile his marriage ended in divorce. His wife and two children returned to France, where she remarried and her sons became an architect and a concert pianist, unaided by their father. He did not consider it a duty to help those who left his life. In 1965 he married again and had three children, all currently working in commerce in Saigon. His wife came from a well-known family in North Vietnam, which had fled South after the communist takeover. She liked his social standing. To gain an insight into international business, Trung decided to apply for a position in a multinational company as a senior staff member. Shell Vietnam was the largest local business, supplying the fuel needed for modern warfare. Within a year he was managing the vital transport division, dealing with labour union leaders and fighting against the powerful combines of the black market for oil, often involving crooked US and ARVN officers. Runaway inflation caused oil to rival money as a means of payment for the population, the army and the Vietcong. As always, corruption acted as a correction mechanism when inflation made it hard for the government to pay decent living wages to its civil servants and the army.

An international company paying good wages can ensure that its own employees stay mostly above the fray but cannot change the environment. Transport contractors often seduced lower company staff to hijack product and share the resulting black market profits. Oil was stolen in many ingenious ways, by combinations of company labour and supervisors, inevitably sacked when exposed, but more often rotated to less sensitive positions when suspicions could not be proved. Nor was the totally inadequate national legal system ever involved. Sometimes the police did help, more often they did not. It was a tough but private struggle. When Trung discovered that two trucks of gas oil had been “deviated” to the Vietcong headquarters at the Cu Chi tunnels, which had offered to pay an exorbitant dollar price to the Shell chief dispatcher and the lady owner of the transport truck, he had the army impound the trucks before delivery, sacked the dispatcher and blacklisted the transporter. After the communist victory, the dispatcher emerged as Chairman of the People’s Committee of Thu Duc and the lady owner Chairwoman of the Women’s Association of Ho Chi Minh City.

Trung's incorruptibility, and that of most others of his class, was not based on moral principle, but on self respect and pride. He could not accept complicity with people under his orders or be part of a group he despised and whose level of education and social standing he considered well below his own. After an attempt on his life for fighting corruption, as had happened to other staff members previously, and judging himself inadequately supported by the expatriate management, he resigned as suddenly as he had come and began a new career as manager at the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank. With his second marriage also ending in divorce, he hesitated to commit himself to women again, but he never lacked female company.

In 1972, a desperate military offensive by the North Vietnamese, attempting to acquire by force what they could not obtain through negotiation, was repulsed by the South Vietnamese Army. President Thieu's government of the Democratic Republic of South Vietnam, having withstood this iron test, was now popular amongst the people; the Republic of South Vietnam becoming a promising though far from perfect Asian democracy. In the stalemate Dr. Kissinger concluded a peace agreement between North and South Vietnam, enabling the US to withdraw. After Nixon's abdication however, the US Congress promptly turned off vital support to its Vietnamese ally, while China and the USSR re-doubled theirs to their clients. Also, the oil crisis of 1973 tripled the price of oil just as the financial assistance to South Vietnam rapidly decreased. With its air force grounded and tactical mobility reduced, the South could now be picked off bit by bit by the North Vietnamese armed forces. Thieu's military situation had suddenly become hopeless.

In April 1975, the ring of Northern communist troops around Saigon was tightening. Trung, now CEO of the bank, its expatriates having fled to freedom, paid back to the personnel their contributions to the pension fund which would otherwise certainly have been confiscated after the communist takeover. Everyone accepted gratefully and the example was followed by other banks. Trung was also a director of the Bank for Industrial Development and member of the board of the Bien Hoa Industrial Zone and therefore vulnerable to reprisals by the victorious communists. But while others fled the country in their tens of thousands, he did not accept the idea of becoming a fugitive even with his own family and relatives in the US, who urged him to come. He kept milling around aimlessly among the helpless crowds in the extraordinary light and empty minded atmosphere of the impending takeover. The piaster had lost all value and moral values no longer applied as the last American helicopters lifted off with refugees leaving all worldly possessions behind. Officers shot themselves in the streets. A light rain was falling when the North Vietnamese tanks rolled in, followed by trucks with very young wide-eyed soldiers in green uniforms.

There were no massacres. The takeover was dull and orderly, but thereafter vindictive communist doctrine and police methods were applied in full force by the victors. Northerners replaced Southerners in all positions of power regardless of previous political affiliation. Through the rigorous collectivisation of small enterprises, production declined and hundreds of thousands Vietnamese of all classes of society tried to escape in un-seaworthy boats to freedom, becoming collectively known as the "boat people". The peasants, some 80% of the population, were forced into cooperatives, which deprived them of rights to their land, buffaloes, cows and tractors. In 1976 and the years following they refused to produce more than their family needs and a 3 year long nation-wide food shortage resulted. The same had happened after the application of a five year plan with Stalinist/Maoist models of development in the North 20 years earlier, but the unreasonable old doctrine still tried to prevail over practical experience. Workers saw their salaries and privileges reduced. What remained of pension funds was plundered. All private property was confiscated and Trung lost everything. When the bank personnel were ordered to reimburse the earlier paybacks by Trung, they showed their empty pockets, maintaining that all had been spent. Trung himself was now a marked man. He tried to escape but was caught by the police and sent to a "re-education camp". Hundreds of thousands of former officers, government workers and religious people rounded up under false assurances were sent to these improvised concentration camps in isolated areas. Accused of "acts of national treason" they had to write "confessions", attend political re-education meetings, construct their own camps, clear jungle, produce their own food and clear landmines. Many did not survive.

Trung remembered his experience as the most miserable but "enriching" 42 months of his life. The main problems were scarcity of food and drinking water and the absence of medicines. Inmates as well as communist cadres ate ersatz food so that 90% suffered from endemic diarrhoea and skin diseases. His efficiency in transporting water from wells 3 km distant from the camp, by fitting a 3000 litre tank on an old engineless jeep and having it pushed instead of carried by hand in containers, thereby halving the number of the team members needed, was duly noted by the camp commander who made him organiser of other services too. He put fellow prisoners to work as mechanics for the repair of motor cycles to earn income to buy food, started the manufacture of wooden furniture for sale in state owned shops in the district capital and operated a small sawmill to produce firewood. All income, after paying a percentage to the camp authorities, went to a fund to buy medicines and food.

His "enriching experience" was the discovery that through high spirits and strength of mind he could survive. At the boringly repetitive re-education sessions, listening to cadres, but reading them like between the lines of an open book, he saw that their socialist ideology was pure utopia because it needed dedicated people concerned more for other people's welfare than for their own. Such people did not exist. He knew that all of us need practical incentives and motivation to produce in order for society to survive. His own bourgeois instincts were confirmed. He saw that even the most Bolshevik communist cadre only wanted personal happiness and a brighter future for

his children, but that their system just could not provide it. This laid the basis for his future life. At the same time he felt ashamed not to have fought harder for his ideas and for his country when it counted and not to have done his duty in the war. But when friends died around him for lack of simple medication, anger and resentment overwhelmed all other feelings.

Early in 1979 he was released after contracting tuberculosis, which put other inmates and cadres in danger. Owning only the shirt on his back and without a penny in his pocket, he was picked up from the side of the road by a truck driver who brought him back to Saigon, where he began a hidden life as a non-person without papers or rations, dependent on family and friends for sustenance.

The Vietnamese communist party (VCP) in Hanoi had meanwhile instructed the government, in its second five year plan (1975-80), to abolish all household economy (small farms and businesses) once and for all in a rapid and forced flight forward to socialism. This resulted, despite confident forecasts of double digit increases in agricultural and industrial production, in actual decreases of all sectors. Most of the agricultural collectives collapsed. Rice deficits came back and another bout of famine was averted only by food gifts from China. However, even the friendly relationship with China began to go sour and reached its nadir over the invasion of Cambodia by the Vietnamese army. In spite of massive support now from the USSR - Vietnam having joined the Comecon coalition to obtain it - the VCP began to realise that winning a war was easier than changing society or running the economy and that a doctrinaire communist Vietnam risked remaining a beggar in peace time. In 1979 and officially again in 1982, the VCP changed course, frankly admitting its "inability to grow the economy, apologising for its lack of economic knowledge". This proved to be the turning point. Local officials took the announcement as a licence to borrow from the previous economic policies and re-install agents of the regime they had replaced.

By abandoning the collectivisation of agriculture in the South and allowing farmers to return to their land and farm it as they saw fit, the rice shortages disappeared and Vietnam became an exporter again within 2 years. The dismal results of the government's industrial 5 year plan also made liberalisation for higher production inevitable. So far the managerial and economic posts in the South had been allocated on the basis of party loyalty. Head of Saigon was a mediocre agronomist party member educated in Moscow; the Chief of Police and later Vice Minister of Interior Affairs was a loyal party member whose work included collecting protection money from the Saigon criminal establishment. Official corruption now being worse than under President Thieu, younger communist officials began to seek help from the people they had formerly locked up.

One of Trung's former students of economics was Chairman of the People's Committee of the important First District of Ho Chi Minh City (as the government had renamed Saigon). He traced Trung and one evening visited him in his hide-out to explain the new "open door" economic policy, offering him a position as first assistant for foreign investment. Trung accepted on condition that no surveillance would be placed on any of his contacts with foreigners and no accusations of political sabotage levelled against him if some of his projects failed. He obtained an employment contract legalising his position, a free apartment, an official car, entertainment allowance, an air-conditioned office and a monthly salary of 2 million VN Dong, twice that of his boss. In this position he promoted a joint venture with a Korean company to build the first new office block opposite the cathedral and a second building facing the old US embassy. At that point, as was his wont, he left to set up his own consulting company earning dollars by writing feasibility studies for new industrial projects and introducing new investors. The industrial park outside Saigon grew impressively, although foreign investors kept complaining of arbitrary changes in working conditions by the government, of the non-convertibility of the Dong, the absence of a fair legal system and the lack of a stock exchange. When the 1997 regional financial crisis hit, business went flat and Trung switched to advertising, working for a few years for Coca Cola, Bayer, Unilever, Motorola and other returnees to Saigon. At his peak he employed 80 people, six of them expatriates.

Using his overseas connections and new contacts within the Party hierarchy, he worked hard to normalise relations between former enemies. At his instigation US Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, Commander of the US navy whom he knew during the war, came to shake hands with his former communist opponent General Tran van Tra over a lunch in Saigon attended by high party officials who applauded both his and Trung's speeches. Less successfully he tried to obtain American help in compensating agent-orange victims of the war.

The next recession however bankrupted Trung. He was now a frail diabetic, smoking several packets of cigarettes a day and cared for by two ladies who took pity on him. A few years later he died leaving ex wives, concubines and children to fend for themselves. His controversial life, from rags to riches and back again, reflects the ups and downs of the resilient Vietnamese middle class. Communist Vietnam and certainly the South, which contains 70% of the population and most of the nation's economic power, had to restore his class to their historical moderating role in order to survive.

The younger generation in the cities find the communist superstructure in Hanoi something of an anachronism, as far away as the old imperial court, all-powerful in name, but in practice leaving citizens free to set policies in a fairly democratic way, with freedom for business and religion on condition that they do not become politically active or challenge the superstructure. Economic growth, peace and public order, not ideology or a free press, are the priorities of most people in the new Vietnam. Popular elections with all candidates nominated unopposed by

the communist party are a public joke and many of the young do not even bother to apply for party membership because they already live as they please.

To be in government or an officer in the army you need to be member of the communist party, however, and to join that exclusive club you need parents who have been party members themselves. An advantage for the personnel of the armed forces is their involvement in big and profitable businesses, communications, export of agricultural produce etc., to supplement modest salaries. However they are completely incapable of preventing the Chinese military occupation of Vietnamese offshore islands, important oil exploration territory. There is now open speculation that only a defence pact with the US could ultimately restrain Chinese regional hegemony. How things have changed!

Ordinary life in cities and towns has taken on the bourgeois pattern of before. Local businesses which exceed a certain level of profitability attract the attention of the tax man who can impose arbitrary fines, so local entrepreneurs remain cautious. Both young businessmen and old style communist cadres agree that life and prospects in Vietnam, in spite of all the improvements, have lost some interest and glitter. Life is less exciting. "There is no love for each other any longer" an old cadre complains. Large foreign companies, making profits on exports outside Vietnam, use specialised lawyers to influence bureaucratic decisions. In many ways it is like old times in Saigon; Communism has finally become user-friendly.

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