

Interview

Return from Vietnam 2000

Thursday 5 April 2007, by [KRIVINE Jean-Michel](#), [TUAN](#) (Date first published: February 2001).

IV: You travelled in the three provinces of Vietnam and you noticed a certain number of significant changes from your previous visits...

Vietnamese workers at a Coca-Cola plant

Tuan: In 1997-1998 Vietnam became a consumer society. Qualified youth sought then above all to go abroad to earn some money. Now the foreign companies established in the country seek local managers and pay them well: in 1997-1998 they could earn a monthly salary of US\$ 200; in 2000 it is US\$ 800 (remember the monthly average is US\$ 100). Add to this the possibility of travelling free of charge to Thailand or Singapore for "training".

These youth now want to stay in Vietnam. Previously the dream was to go to France or Japan. There was also the USA as a model for the middle classes and significant elements of the popular layers. But even if people know that quite a few families settled there have several cars and superb houses it is also known that it is not the paradise so much hoped for: it is hard to find work with an unrecognised Vietnamese qualification, one encounters racism even among blacks and Puerto Ricans.

In short even if the cult of the Yankee dollar persists the idea now is to get hold of it on the ground rather than by travelling abroad.

IV: Did you have the impression that the transition to the market economy is accompanied by an awareness that it will not resolve all problems?

Tuan: Since the opening of 1986-1987 Vietnam wants to enter the international community. It wants to be part of ASEAN (created to contain the Vietnamese revolution) and it currently holds the presidency. It wants to join the WTO. Many leaders are sent abroad and the ruling layer has undergone a transformation: the current ministers are between 50 and 55 years old, their advisers and service and department heads travel everywhere and start to reflect on the effects of the market economy and globalisation. One can distinguish schematically two currents: the conservative current (the "old-timers") who oppose globalisation "highest stage of capitalism" and the younger current who do not reject globalisation as such.

Books on the demonstrations at Seattle have been translated and people know about ATTAC.

On the economic level Vietnam has been less affected than the "dragons" by the Asian crisis of 1997 (it has no stock exchange), however foreign investments have fallen. The priority is now given to agriculture (export of rice) and oil. The sector profiting from regional relocations (for example from Taiwan) has slowed up. Near Petit Lac in Hanoi, where a commercial centre is supposed to be being built, the building sites are silent...

The current desire of the rulers is to make eyes at the US. Clinton's visit was seen in this optic: as a lame duck president he was in fact a commercial traveller for the multinationals. Some months ago a trade agreement was signed with the US which had been rejected less than 2 years ago. Some of the

placards welcoming Clinton were supplied by General Electric.

IV: What's happening with foreign languages in this context?

Tuan: Russian, once obligatory, is no longer spoken... English spreads increasingly and I saw in Hanoi some shops with their frontage in English. French is reviving a little after the Francophone Summit.

IV: Did you notice any significant political changes?

Tuan: Yes, undoubtedly. For about three years now the older generation have been talking about the past and raising hitherto taboo questions. For example, there were references to the nationalist leader Nguyen An Ninh on the centenary of his birth, September 29, 2000. Ninh was much better known than Nguyen Ai Quoc (the future Hồ Chí Minh) in the 1930s and he participated with the Communists and Trotskyists in the episode of the newspaper *La Lutte*. He died of exhaustion at the camp of Poulo Condor in 1943. Although he was rather a "fellow traveller" of the Communists he was little spoken of after Independence: he would have overshadowed the prestige of Hồ. Moreover he suffered the colonialist repression at the same time as Ta Thu Thau, the popular Trotskyist leader assassinated by the Stalinists in September 1945. To speak of him would have awoken inconvenient memories among the old. However, for the centenary of his birth a big meeting was authorised for the first time in Hồ Chí Minh City. More than 200 people attended, mainly the old and party members. The old Communist Tran Van Giau spoke and said, tears in his eyes: "Ninh taught me to struggle for the revolution in a conscious manner"! For two years now many books have referred to him. His son has published a big book where he presents the Trotskyists as revolutionaries who saw things differently from the CP.

IV: There was a lot of talk three years ago of the revolt of the peasants of Thai Binh against the corrupt bureaucrats. Has this movement left any traces?

Tuan: I'll say! I'll give you an example. At Hồ Chí Minh City, 7 rue Le Duan, there is the office of the National Assembly. For one year now the pavement opposite has been occupied by 200 people who are there permanently, night and day. They have constructed a forest of placards and banners, which say "Long live president Ho chi Minh!" and "Long live the Vietnamese Communist Party!" but also carry complaints against the behaviour of the bureaucrats of this or that village and demand justice. The press does not have the right to meet them or speak of them, there are piles of plain clothes police all around them, one cannot approach them to take photos although I did succeed in getting some... However, the government is disarmed for these are the families of heroes of the fight for Independence and the use of brutal methods would be seen very badly by the people. If the Vietnamese press is silent on this subject, that of Asia speaks regularly about it.

As to corruption, it simply grows and everybody is aware of it. Envelopes circulate before any foreign contract: the job goes to whoever pays the most. We don't know too much about the ministers themselves, but as to their entourage... I have seen with my own eyes (it was pointed out by my taxi driver) the superb princely abode being built for the son of the prime minister. It is more sumptuous than that of former president Thieu.

IV: So there's a certain degree of relaxation of the control of the population?

Tuan: Undoubtedly, the people have less fear. They can speak with each other. The police are showing less zeal and becoming more "professional". The intellectuals are under "discreet" surveillance. Contrary to Russia, there is no opposition press or unofficial trade unions (although there is a desperate need for them...). Thus, the newspapers cannot comment directly on the current

discontent of the civil servants but the "Hô chi Minh City Worker" publishes without comment meaningful "readers' letters".

The new technologies also favour an opening to abroad without any control being possible. Computers all have a free E-mail. One can even have access to *Rouge*... There is a rash of cyber-café in Hanoi and Hô chi Minh-City, you often have to queue. The rates are modest - 400 dongs a minute (1 dollar is worth 14,000 dongs). Recently the authorities seized a book which related events which displeased them (the "Hundred Flowers" of 1956-7), protests soon circulated through E-mail.

IV: Do you believe that there is a perspective for the rebirth of a genuine socialist ideal in Vietnam despite the caricature that the current régime makes of it?

Tuan: There is undoubtedly a subterranean opinion, certainly very much a minority one, above all among the intellectuals of 35-40 years, among the writers, artists, filmmakers, having contacts with abroad. Since 1997 one senses the change: there is a thirst to understand and for some a liberated Marxism can help here. Our translations of Trotsky ("The revolution betrayed", "Literature and revolution", "My Life") have been very well received in the country and we continue to translate. I have already told you 2 years ago how surprised I was in Hanoi to find in a bookshop the book "*Marx l'intempestif*" by our comrade Daniel Bensaïd, translated into Vietnamese. It's not the easiest book to read, yet the first edition of 800 copies sold out in one year, the second of 1000-1200 also, and we are on the third!

We are witnessing a paradox: the market economy needs a certain degree of democracy to function and to a certain extent that allows the real opponents of this economy to express themselves. That was unthinkable seven or 8 years ago, nobody could have a fax machine, access to the Internet or simply the right to make photocopies... However to set up foreign companies these tools are indispensable - every company needs E-mail.

I do not say that thanks to the market Vietnam will know a real democratic blossoming but it will be rid of the previous political shackles. Colonisation itself did not have solely negative effects. Thanks to it, people like Nguyen An Ninh, Ta Thu Thau or Hô chi Minh were able to come to France, absorb the conquests of the French Revolution and struggle to liberate their country.

Certainly, there are the "conservatives", men aged from 75 to 80, but they lead less and less. The historians, even the best known, want to rewrite the history of Vietnam. For example, the magazine "Yesterday and Today" has published a study on the family of Hô where his brother appears in an entirely new light. Until now he had been represented as a victim of colonialist repression for anti-French activities, in fact he was a drunkard involved in some shady rackets. Unthinkable a short time ago...

The renaissance of the socialist idea comes from below, it is still fragile and the big question is: what can be done from outside to help it? The leaders, for their part, extol "Chinese market socialism", ten years late, after having severely criticised it. They translate the Chinese "theoretical" writings on the "market economy with a socialist orientation" at the Institutes of Economy and Sociology with the inscription: "internal circulation"...

It is vital that we make our ideas known to those Vietnamese who review their past with an increasingly critical eye and do not consider the market as the last word in the development of society. The change is certainly still minimal, but it is a qualitative change: nothing will be like it was before.

P.S.

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* Tuan, who has lived in France since the late 1950s, has been returning regularly to Vietnam since 1990.