survey studies reveal that the East Germans are more ethnocentric and less modern. Postmaterialism is naturally less developed in East Germany. The political culture of the East is less participatory, more apolitical and slightly more authoritarian than in the West. The political acculturation of East Germany is lagging behind the organizational and social integration. The social and economic situation in winter 1991/92 is passing its deepest point of recession. The first indicators for a recovery of the East German economy are visible. Long-term forecasts even predict that East Germany in ten years will be the centre of the most modernized industries in Germany. The strongholds of South German industry are already worrying about their pre-eminence. In spite of a deep crisis in East Germany, in comparison with all the other ex-socialist countries, the great experiment seems to be doomed to success.

THE CRISIS OF MARXISM – LENINISM – XII

Brantly Womack

Reform in Vietnam: Backwards Towards the Future

IF THERE IS ANY TEACHING OF MARX FROM WHICH THE leadership of Vietnam might bitterly demur, it would be his claim that society raises only such problems as it is ready to solve. Although this magisterial myth provided solace to generations of revolutionaries (who could conclude from it, ‘We are, therefore we will prevail’), the Communist Party of Vietnam has been buffeted since its victorious national reunification of 1975 – 76 by challenges from within and without for which it was not prepared. As a result, the politics of Vietnam for the past fifteen years has been more a response to crisis rather than the execution of a political vision. Reform and international openness have become essential parts of these efforts at coping with crisis, but they have been strongly tethered to the need to preserve order and to prevent larger crises.

The tense ambiguities of twin commitments to reform and order were apparent in the major political meetings of 1991. At the Seventh Party Congress in June, renewal (doi moi, Vietnamese perestroika) was praised but order, with a distinctive Chinese flavour, had the upper hand. The Report of the Central Committee, cleverly entitled ‘To Continue Taking the Renewal Cause Forward Along the Socialist Path’, gave primary emphasis to perseverance on the socialist path, entailing the unquestioned leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and Marxist-Leninist Ho Chi Minh Thought. The idea of a multi-party system was rejected:

Recognition of a multi-party system with opposition parties means facilitating the immediate and lawful surfacing of the forces of reaction and revanchism

1 This is a thinly-veiled ideological obedience to the Chinese ‘four fundamental principles that must be upheld’ enunciated by Deng Xiaoping in 1979. The Chinese principles are: the socialist path, the role of the Chinese Communist Party, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and Marxist-Leninist Mao Zedong Thought. ‘Marxist

living in the country or returning from abroad to act against our Fatherland, our people and our regime. This is something our people never accept.1

The tone of anxious defence against domestic and international forces undermining the party-state is characteristic of Vietnamese official statements since the summer of 1989. There is of course little confidence left in the correctness of Marxism-Leninism, but conservative emphasis on wisdom and discipline is based on the fear that Vietnam could disintegrate if the lid of party hegemony were lifted.

While the Seventh Party Congress leaned toward order, the ninth session of the National Assembly meeting from 27 July to 12 August appeared to redress the balance and intensify the ambiguity. Constitutional amendments were drafted that would drop most references to socialism and emphasize the building of a 'multi-sector commodity economy according to a State-guided and regulated market mechanism'.2 The amendments also intend to strengthen the role of the National Assembly. The Standing Committee of the National Assembly will be dissolved, and in its place the regular and more intense activity of Assembly members and committees will be emphasized. Four of the seven major ministerial posts went to southerners, led by Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet and Deputy Prime Minister Phan Van Khai. On the other hand, Kiet is ranked third in the Politburo, after two conservatives, and Khai is eighth, while the reformist Foreign Ministry not only lost its outspoken leader Nguyen Co Thach but also its place on the Politburo.3

All in all, the indecisive results of the long-awaited party congress are typical of Vietnamese politics since reunification. Reform measures have proved to be the only viable response to crisis, but they have not been able to transcend the precarious political economic situation. The leadership's fears of rash action seem well-grounded: the economy is still close to survival levels, and there are hostile and disruptive international influences. Political pluralism might well lead to anti-communist and separatist pressures, and yet rigidity and suppression create even broader circles of disaffection. Hanoi wants neither Tiananmen on the one side nor The Magic Lantern4 on the other, and it navigates between Scylla and Charybdis by the winds of the moment. But it is questionable whether the inevitable problems of leadership succession, internationalization of the economy, the end of the communist world, and demilitarization will continue to permit progress to be made by small steps backward.

VIETNAM IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Retreating from the current dilemmas of Vietnamese leadership to the more comfortable armchair of comparative political analysis, it is clear that Vietnam is at the moment closest to China in terms of both general situation and direct political influence. In both respects, however, the importance and pervasiveness of the differences between the two are such that a careful differentiation is required. Before entering into a detailed comparison with China, it may be useful to consider how Vietnam fits into general theories of democratic reform.

If parliamentary democracy has economic prerequisites, then there are few places in the world further from it than Vietnam. With a per capita income of less than US$200 Vietnam is one of the poorest countries in the world. Its poverty is most obvious in the extent of malnutrition5 and the low level of energy use. In other areas, however, the strength of public organization and its welfare orientation are evident. Life expectancy is estimated at 66 years, infant mortality is 44 per thousand, and the adult literacy rate is over 90 per cent.6 In general, Vietnam's accomplishments are impressive if we compare its societal wealth to its provision of basic services. Out of 160 countries, Vietnam ranks only 113 in Gross National Product per capita, while it ranks 70 on the Human Development Index (HDI). A composite

---

3 For extensive discussions of some of the personnel changes see Asian Wall Street Journal Weekly, 16 August 1991.
4 The theatre in Prague where Vaclav Havel and his associates gathered during the demonstrations against the government in autumn 1989.
6 For contrast, Brazil, which has a per capita income of US$1500, has a life expectancy of 65, an infant mortality rate of 70, and an adult literacy rate of 76 per cent.
measure of the distribution of life expectancy, education, and income. This means that there are 43 countries with a greater societal wealth than Vietnam and a worse HDI score. These statistics are symptoms of a vast and coordinated party-state which pre-empt alternative and autonomous societal organization from the national centre down to the grassroots of the village and the workplace. Therefore, from the point of view of either S. M. Lipset’s emphasis in the 1960s on level of economic development or Samuel Huntington’s on political institutionalization, Vietnam would seem secure in its ways.

The outlook is more mixed from the perspective of potential opposition to the regime. On the one hand, political violence is extremely low in Vietnam, and the security apparatus errs on the side of overdevelopment. On the other hand, there are many sources for feelings of relative deprivation. Although annual economic growth has fluctuated around 5 per cent in the 1980s, the gap between the regime’s promises and its performance is obvious to all. In Saigon especially there is a resentment of opportunities missed, based not only on nostalgic memories of Saigon in the 1960s, but also comparisons with former equals such as Bangkok. Even in the North the fruits of victory have been disappointing. Food production per capita in the North dropped from 300 kilos in the early 1960s to 250 kilos in 1967, and has hovered around that wartime level ever since. Moreover, the economic policies credited with some degree of success have been those of decentralization and introduction of market forces — from the standpoint of socialism and the party-state, policies of omission rather than of commission.

One might anticipate that the very strength and presence of the state would intensify individual feelings of disappointment and alienation.

It would be hasty to leap from such contextual factors to the conclusion that democratic reform in Vietnam is impossible. As

---

Klaus von Beyme pointed out in a contribution to this journal, in Eastern Europe communist countries with a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds and degrees of repressiveness were part of the same sudden wave of democratization. Might not Vietnam face a similar surprise? And if not, why not?

VIETNAM AND CHINA

Vietnam’s divergences from European communism’s context of reform are to a great extent shared by China. Indeed, as different as both countries are, I would claim that there is no country more similar to China in its general political and societal situation than Vietnam, and none more similar to Vietnam than China. Both differ from European communism (now post-communism) in their level of economic development and their rate of development in recent years, in their international context, in their political culture, and in the strength of their party-states. Moreover, the end of the cold war was not as disorienting for the alignments of Asian communist states as it was for Europe, though the roughly simultaneous end of Sino-Soviet hostility was almost as disruptive.

Although it is understandable that the European dominos would stop at Asia, it is clearly the case that the same societal forces that exploded in European communism are fermenting in China and Vietnam. The disillusionment with the failure of the party’s historical mission of achieving communism is a general phenomenon, leading to a post-revolutionary syndrome of alienation, hypocrisy, and corruption. Moreover, the societal pressures for further liberalization, professional autonomy and civil and political rights are roughly similar to those active in Europe, though they are not as well-developed. Lastly, the example of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union provide a concrete model of a possible future, just as the October Revolution did in its time. In short, while China and Vietnam

---


12 See Womack, ‘Asian Communism’.
may be a different species from European communism, they are also — and perceive themselves to be — of the same genus. From its conception the party-state was not supposed to be immortal, but it was expected to depart with a whimper, not a bang.

The next task in specifying Vietnam’s reform environment in a comparative context is to differentiate it from that of China by discussing their similarities and differences. The task is complicated by the uncertain situation of reform in China and by the direct bilateral influence of China on Vietnam.

Any discussion of similarities between China and Vietnam must begin with their shared cultural environment. To call this environment “Confucian” is too simplistic, since both regimes are Marxist-Leninist and reject the traditional Sinic heritage as feudal. Vietnam’s rejection was not as adamant as China’s, because the progressive revolutionaries there could grasp the baton of patriotic resistance to the French directly from the hands of the last mandarins, while the ‘new youth’ of China saw the dead weight of the past as their principal antagonist. Nevertheless, life in both countries is shaped by family-oriented social structures, avoidance of adversarial conflict, and acceptance of authority limited by virtue and self-control rather than by contract. As Ken Jowitt has observed, Leninism is neo-traditional in some of these respects, and I would add that the neo-traditional character of Leninism is strongest in Asia. It is important to note that reform, opposition, and post-communism in China and Vietnam would all continue to be shaped by this cultural environment.

Although culture is more basic, the most important similarity between China and Vietnam is the rural revolutionary heritage of their regimes. Revolutionary success in both countries was achieved in a protracted struggle in which the main resource of the party was the cooperation of the vast majority of the rural population against the previous regime. Both party-states were established with a level of popular credibility and political institutionalization unimaginable in Europe. The problems of state and society are not those of the state’s domination of a self-conscious and pre-existing society, but of a fundamental lack of distinction between party and state, between party-state and a society structured by the party, and between society and the individual. Such a party-state is much stronger than its externally imposed counterparts in Europe, and its values are shaped more by popular revolutionary roots. This difference is clearer for North Vietnam than it is for the South, but in any case it shapes the mentality of national leadership. Because the entire societal fabric is shaped by the rural revolutionary party-state, the only alternative to continued party leadership appears to be a total destructuring of society.

China and Vietnam have also shared the same basic approach to modernization. China’s pre-Great Leap rural policy was North Vietnam’s model for land reform and collectivization in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and Vietnam showed comparable patterns of infrastructural improvement and increased productivity. From the 1960s, however, the industrial economy of North Vietnam became dominated by aid dependency on the Soviet Union and China, leading to inefficiencies and imbalances in the state economy. While China experimented with Maoist leftism, North Vietnam pursued a more bureaucratic path within a war context. After victory in 1975 a strong attempt was made to socialize the southern economy and to continue aid dependency in the state economy. However, the southern economy resisted collectivization and went into decline, China scaled back its aid, and the United States refused to provide the expected reparations payments. By 1980 the Vietnamese economy was in a severe crisis, with food rations one quarter less than during the war. It began to lessen pressure for collectivization and to adopt decentralizing measures similar to Deng Xiaoping’s reforms in China. In 1986 Vietnam fully committed itself to Chinese-style market reforms and in some areas (for instance in ending

---

subsidies to state enterprises and in fiscal policy) has gone a bit ahead of the Chinese model. Like China, Vietnam is eager for foreign investment and probably will be increasingly successful in attracting investment from other Pacific-rim countries.

Vietnam also shares some of China’s political liabilities. It, too, is waiting for an older generation of leaders to pass, and as the introductory discussion of the Seventh Party Congress suggested, it has made rather scant provision for inevitable changes. Although Vietnam is deeply fortunate not to have had a bloody incident of repression like that of 4 June 1989 in China, it is maintaining the same pattern of desperate rearguard repressiveness. Events in Europe have convinced Vietnam of the dangers of reform, but it does not have an alternative to reform except controlled delay. China and Vietnam in 1991 both give the impression of superficial and temporary calm in a context of deep uncertainty about the future.

The strong impression of similarities, however, can mask important differences between China and Vietnam. Despite its nationalism, Vietnam is a more cosmopolitan and externally sensitive state than China. It has diverse ties to China, the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, France and the United States. Its ethnic Chinese population (the Hoa) in Ho Chi Minh City actively participates in the Nanyang ethnic Chinese economy; forty-two thousand Hoa businesses in the old Cholon districts of Ho Chi Minh City have relationships with twenty or more countries. Vietnam’s state economy has been dependent on the Soviet Union for such vital inputs as refined petroleum products and fertilizer, as well as for concessionary terms of trade. With the shift to hard currency trade and the virtual collapse of Soviet supply, the Vietnamese economy is in a more acute crisis than could occur in China. Vietnam now has no choice but to develop more extensive economic ties with China and with the international market economy.

Vietnam is also more externally dependent than China in its ideology. Independence has never meant the exclusion of foreign ideas and national idiiosyncrasy has never been a particular value. When in the early nineteenth century Gia Long, the first emperor of the Nguyen dynasty, wanted to express architecturally the grandeur of reunited Vietnam, he hired French engineers to build an imperial city in Hue on the model of the imperial city in Beijing. While Ho Chi Minh’s primary goal was national liberation, participation in an international movement was necessary to his confidence that the revolution could be successful. Faction in Vietnam have tended to form along pro-Soviet or pro-Chinese lines because Vietnam does not have its own paradigm. Vietnam was far more upset than was China by developments in Eastern Europe in 1989 and from that time it became ideologically dependent on China by default. It can be inferred that the self-confidence of Vietnamese conservatism now rests strongly on the success of Chinese conservatism.

Another important difference is that the Vietnamese Communist Party has been milder toward internal opposition, toward intellectuals and toward the population in general. In contrast to Mao Zedong’s imperial model of rule and his elimination of collective leadership in the 1950s and 1960s, ‘Uncle Ho’ maintained a persona of inclusive cooperation and abided by collective leadership even when it reduced his power. Moreover, North Vietnam’s policies concerning intellectuals could not be as harsh as those of China without alienating possible allies in the South, though after reunification southern intellectuals were treated with suspicion. Vietnamese intellectuals were spared the drastic attack upon their persons and their status that their Chinese colleagues suffered in the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution. As a result, and perhaps showing French influence as well, discussions in Vietnam are noticeably more frank and opinionated than in China. Lastly, Vietnam has not treated the population as harshly. There are no parallels in Vietnam of the tens of millions who died as a result of the Great Leap Forward, or of the chaos and crippling leftist associated with the Cultural Revolution. The most oppressed groups have been the Hoa and those associated with the Saigon regime, but the anti-Hoa policies were rescinded in 1984 and the feared bloodbath against the losers never materialized in 1975. Neither Vietnam’s accomplishments nor its mistakes have been as great as China’s.

A third difference from the Chinese pattern is that economic reforms in Vietnam, though similar to those of China, were

---


adopted under different circumstances and have had different results. Vietnam adopted reforms out of bleak necessity, facing a crisis of subsistence. Whereas decollectivization in China occurred after thorough and long-term collectivization, in Vietnam it was abandoned as a result of resistance in the south. Vietnam did not have China's established collective infrastructure, and its new policies were not liberating long-suppressed entrepreneurial yearnings. Although production improved, it did not manifest the surge forward that occurred in China. Except for rice production in the Mekong delta, where production in 1989 reached 631 kilograms per capita, the Vietnamese economy lacks the surpluses necessary for domestically driven growth, and it is starved of investments. It can respond to foreign investments, but rapid, externally-oriented growth in Vietnam will be less balanced than in China.

The last major difference could turn out to be a fateful one, namely regional disparities between north and south in Vietnam. Regional disparities are also important in China, but they are of a different order of magnitude in Vietnam. The country's shoestring geography has contributed to a historic oscillation between consolidation and segmentation. In 1975 southerners were displaced from responsible positions by northerners (in universities down to the position of department head), and the national government in Hanoi tends to be one of the northerners with a northern perspective. On a recent trip to Hanoi, I could not locate a single employee from the south in a variety of units dealing with foreign affairs. The south, especially Ho Chi Minh City, is more prosperous than the north and the interregional transfer of resources appears to favour the north.

Moreover, the economic prospects of the two areas, while both positive, lie in different directions. Trade between southern China and northern Vietnam is expanding rapidly, while the natural trading pattern of Ho Chi Minh City and the south will be more like other South-east Asian countries. The China trade will strengthen the northern economy, but not transform it through capital inputs, while foreign investment may well transform the economy in the south. It is hard to imagine that the south will simply remain as quiescent politically as it is today, but it is even more difficult to imagine the national government tolerating separatist tendencies. Prosperity, in a word, might well prove divisive. If it does, it may happen that China would be on the side of the north and a variety of other powers would be sympathetic to the south. Current Vietnamese politics is quite a distance from such troubles, but as the decade progresses they may become more apparent.

The direct bilateral influence of China on Vietnam is almost as complex as the similarities and differences. At one level, the conservatism of both regimes makes them natural partners in defending communism. Vietnam has become by default the second largest communist country and ceasing hostility with China has been the key to resolving the deadlock over Cambodia and ending economic isolation. However important the consolation of Vietnam's ideological company might be to China, the obeisance implied in Vietnam's shift from Soviet to Chinese formulations must be gratifying.

But Vietnam has not become a Chinese client. There is too much fear in Vietnam and distrust in China for an alliance. Moreover, both countries see the improvement in relations as part of larger policies of attracting investment and expanding trade with all interested countries. An exclusive relationship would be absurd for both sides and it would be threatening to the South-east Asian region. As observed earlier, the economic relationship between northern Vietnam and southern China, especially the provinces of Guangxi and Yunnan, will become especially important. Unlike the prospects in South Vietnam for foreign investment, the growth of trade with China should be relatively insensitive to the world economic climate.

The economic relationship of China and Vietnam will probably not be bound to the ideological relationship. Both countries have tried to retain their economic relations with European post-communist governments. Although the two might compete for foreign investments, it is unlikely that either would join in a boycott of the other, especially if it were led by the United States. However, if China shifted to a reform course it is difficult to imagine Vietnam persisting for long as the world's largest communist country. Reform forces within the Vietnamese leadership are at least as strong and probably somewhat more radical than reformists in China and, unlike Cuba, Vietnam is not tied geopolitically to anti-imperialism. In the worst-case scenario of a regionalization of Chinese politics, the Vietnam connection would probably become even more important for Guangxi and Yunnan. On the other hand, if separatism developed in Vietnam it is quite possible that China would favour the north, though neutrality would likewise be an option. If it transpired that China favoured the north, then Vietnam would be slipping back into the traditional pattern of Chinese patronage.
Such speculations only serve to illustrate the point that, despite the mutual benefit of the current normalization of relations between China and Vietnam, the future is not necessarily a plain and straight road.

CONCLUSIONS

The reluctance of Vietnamese leaders to experiment with radical political reform and the crisis-driven pattern of their reform efforts to date are a not unreasonable response to their domestic and international situation. The elements of Vietnam’s future prospects are as contrasting as the lines of a fortune-teller’s hexagram from the Book of Changes, and the outlook as equivocal. On the one hand the state is strong, societal demands are basic, and the economic outlook is good. On the other, the era of the post-revolutionary party-state is over, there is no option other than reform and prosperity itself threatens to awake divisive forces that cannot be appeased.21

The present caution of the leadership in Hanoi should not discourage the improvement of relations with China and the West, and these external stimuli in addition to the market-oriented reforms adopted since 1986 should create a boom throughout the country, though stronger in the south and with different regional characteristics. But the forces creating the prosperity will be ones licensed by the party-state rather than created or controlled by it, and so its capacity to control and lead may be expected to slip. This could mean that the guarantee of the old order and stability would require more overt repression, which would adversely affect internal societal forces and possibly also external relations with the United States at least. Perhaps Vietnam could manage yet another smooth bend in its politics rather than a sudden break, but the arc of the bend would be more acute than hitherto.

Beyond the momentary satisfaction and optimism stimulated by a sudden, deconstructing political change, a post-communist situation in Vietnam would face enormous problems with little leeway for mistakes or failure. The passing of the party-state would leave a much larger hole in the middle of Vietnamese society than the demise of Eastern European party-states. The victory of the market periphery might well be a Pyrrhic one, because Vietnamese society is close to the margin of survival, especially in central and northern provinces, where the periphery may not be capable of providing a self-regulating public structure, and ensuing chaos might frighten away needed foreign investment. The path taken by Eastern Europe itself has not been smooth, but the same path applied to Vietnam might be an irreversible disaster.

The past is familiar and comforting to party leadership and it is understandable that it would provide the orientation for present policies. But it is the only direction towards which Vietnam cannot go, and it remains to be seen if the politics of controlled deterioration of the party-state can serve the same gradualist function as meliorative politics in capitalist states.

21 Purely by chance, the hexagram of three unbroken and three broken lines is pi, stagnation, stoppage.