

Vietnamese Chronicle. A Brief Report from a Distant Part of the World

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ABSTRACT

This article is about Vietnam, a place I wanted to visit since my childhood. Forty years ago, I took the road and started to struggle for the accomplishment of my geographical dreams. Simply by coincidence, in 1980, I headed for Argentina, whose name commences with the first letter of our alphabet; my second international trip happened to be a “B” one, as I decided to make for Bolivia in 1982; after four decades travelling around the world and without having found any place to call “home” yet, Vietnam (a “V” country) was visited by me in 2020. The name New Zealand is on the top of my current list and has a capital “Z” within it; does that mean that I am destined to finally settle down somewhere in the next few years?

Keywords: Vietnam, Communism, religion, disability, travels

“So my escort told me: “We Are in Asia, where oneseesevery danger that water and earth bring.””.

Fazio degli Uberti (*Dittamondo*)

INTRODUCTION



Hue (Central Vietnam)
(Photo taken by the Author)

Half of my childhood and teenage years were spent hearing, reading, watching and talking about the War of Vietnam (1955-1975). The subject became compulsive on a planetary scale; its ubiquity in the media made it subject number one in the hearts and minds of everybody. Therefore, I was no exception to the rule; in fact, I was just one more unity to be added to the statistics. Along with the Counterculture and its variants (the Beat Generation, the hippie and the

punk subcultures, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and the rock and roll in general, etc.), Vietnam was the fashion in those days. To tell the truth, the very word “Vietnam” may have been one of the first I learnt to speak, giving my having been born in the very beginning of the 1960s, a time that was “the closest the Cold War came to escalating into a full-scale nuclear war.”¹George Englund’s *The Ugly American* (1963), Alfred Hitchcock’s *Topazio* (1969) and Ted Post’s *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978) – based on Daniel Ford’s novel *Incident at Muc Wa* (1967); are among the few motion pictures that are faithful to the truth concerning this crucial phase of our history.

My first intention in writing this article was not to talk about the war, neither to portray nor convey any political landscape concerning the period spanning from 1955 to 1975. As much as I could, I tried not to delve into many details concerning Vietnam’s communist fate. I could not help, however, saying something about the fate of the Vietnamese people, especially with respect to disability (which happens to be my field of research) and religion, being this sphere of human life the most affected when freedom of thought and of speech are under the constant

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threat of censorship – as in the case of any and all Communist regime, being Vietnam no exception to the rule. The following lines are basically a brief account of a visit I made to Vietnam, besides an overview of some geographical and cultural features of this land described as “one of the most intoxicating destinations on planet earth”. Vietnam, the same literary source states, is “a kaleidoscope of vivid colours and subtle shades, exotic sights and curious sounds, grand architecture and deeply moving war sites. The nation is a budget traveller’s dream, with inexpensive transport, outstanding street food, good-value accommodation and *bia hoi* perhaps the world’s cheapest beer”.²

It remains for me to tell that my childhood and teenage years were also fed by my mother reports of a travel she made to Europe in her youth (more precisely in 1950). Countries like Belgium, Holland, France and Italy were no more than mere sounds in my first years of life – just like “Vietnam”. It was these sounds that started to shape my dreams about travelling and knowing personally some parts of the earth. Vietnam was one of my dreamed targets, all of them geographical abstractions, much like Baudelaire’s “Any wheres”, exactly the kind of place “of which we had no memories and where no one knew our names”.³ The opportunity to make it a reality came in February 2020.

THE LAND, THE PEOPLE... AND SOME RELIGIOUS ISSUES



“A dictatorship is a state in which all fear one and one fears all” (Alberto Moravia) (Photo taken by the Author)

Occupying the easternmost swath of the Indochinese Peninsula, Vietnam is a mostly hilly and forested land. Its 127,882 sq mi make of it the sixty-fifth largest country in the world, inhabited by 95.5 million people, thus ranking fifteenth when compared with other countries’ population. The human presence in what is now Vietnam is a fact since the Lower Paleolithic, as

attested by some 500,000 years old fossils of *Homo erectus* found in the north of the country. Time passed, and different human groups overlapped each other until their combined cultural achievements converged to the Đông Sơn Bronze Age culture, so named after the northern Vietnamese village of Đông Sơn, where their remains were found. What is more, Đông Sơn’s influence “spread to other parts of Southeast Asia, including Maritime Southeast Asia, from about 1000 BC to 1 BC. The Đông Sơn people, who are also known as Lạc or Lạc Việt, were skilled at cultivating rice, keeping water buffalos and pigs, fishing and sailing in long dugout canoes. They also were skilled bronze casters, which is evidenced by the Đông Sơn drum found widely throughout northern Vietnam and South China. To the south of the Đông Sơn culture was the Sa Huỳnh culture of the proto-Chams”.⁴ The *homo vietnamiensis* – if we can name it so – started to be shaped in this cultural scenario. Yet more times than not, the influence from the giant of the North has been unavoidable. Chinese presence is a fundamental constant in the Vietnamese way of life.

In essence, Vietnam’s history is not different from that of other nations we may be more familiar with: we will find there the same cycles of dynasties, kingdoms, internal and international wars, territorial expansion and shrinking. As for particular historical landmarks, July 2 1976 is a date not to be forgotten for all Vietnamese; on that day, North Vietnam and South Vietnam merged by force of arms into one single country (the Socialist Republic of Vietnam). Atheism became the “religion” of the State, being all true forms of religion subjected to persecution. Not content with eliminating all other political rivals, Communist leaders usually do not want competition in the spiritual arena either: no other being can be worshipped but the Communist Party, the Communist People and the Communist Dictator (see North Korea and China). Notwithstanding, religiousness heroically survives in Atheistic Vietnam. Within this small spiritual universe, Buddhists are majority and Hindus minority. Christianity ranks second in terms of number of followers, but leads the ranking of martyrdoms. In fact, “The atheist dictatorship of Vietnam persecutes all kinds of religion. In particular, Christians are most affected. *Open Door* has ranked Vietnam on place 21. The country’s Communist regime can close churches without any reason. In 2012 the regime closed at least seven Catholic

churches. A Catholic orphanage was also closed and a pastor was beaten by the regime's authorities. In the Vietnamese countryside, the situation is worse as in the cities, because tribal leaders discriminate against Christians for their faith".⁵ More: "Christians in Vietnam are targeted by both the government and, especially in rural contexts, tribal leaders. The government has some level of tolerance for Christian groups, particularly Catholics, but if *any* believers are deemed to be politically active, they can be imprisoned. In places where religion and ethnic identity are closely tied, Christians who convert from traditional religions are often victims of pressure and violence from their families and communities. On the state level, villagers collude with local Communist authorities, beating believers, kicking them out of their villages and stoning places of worship during meetings. Local and national government authorities persecute the Christian minority through their laws, and Christian bloggers and political activists have been arrested and sentenced".⁶ It is not of today that Christians have been persecuted in Vietnam. Communism has only continued with a centuries-old tradition. Indeed, since the 16th century, Vietnam has bequeathed to eternity a great number of Christian martyrs; in the West, the best known of them seems to be the Blessed Andrew of Phu Yen (1624-1644), also named the "Protomartyr of Vietnam", and Saint Andrew Dũng-Lạc (1795-1839). As a matter of fact, "The tortures these individuals underwent are considered by the Vatican to be among the worst in the history of Christian martyrdom. The torturers hacked off limbs joint by joint, tore flesh with red hot tongs, and used drugs to enslave the minds of the victims. Christians at the time were branded on the face with the words 'tả đạo' (左道, lit. 'Left [Sinister] religion') and families and villages which subscribed to Christianity were obliterated".⁷

DISABILITY IN VIETNAM



Hòa Nhập
(Photo taken by the Author)

Disability is, among many others, a sensitive issue in Vietnam. The country has one of the world's highest rates of disable per capita⁸, which means that nearly 15% of the Vietnamese population suffers from at least one kind of disability. A simple outing in Vietnamese cities and villages demonstrates that the expression *accessibility*, unfortunately, is not much more than a *flatus vocis*, i.e., a mere abstraction – or, as the nominalist philosophers would say, a name that lacks any individual and objective reality to correspond to. Nonetheless, progress has been made in recent years, as testified by the partnership between the Vietnamese Government and institutions like UNICEF, USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and ILO (International Labour Organisation). Mention must also be made of the Vietnamese institution called *Hòa Nhập* ("Reaching Out"), established in the historical city of Hoi An in year 2000, with the purpose of opening professional doors and windows for the disabled of Vietnam, thus providing them a better quality of life. In their own words, "Reaching Out (*Hòa Nhập*) was established in 2000 with the vision of providing opportunities for disable people to learn skills and gain meaningful employment so that they are able to integrate fully with their communities and lead independent and fulfilling lives. Over the years, our social enterprise, Reaching Out, has grown to a multi-location group of businesses where people of different abilities can showcase their unique talents in an array of exquisitely crafted goods and gracious services. Driven by strong core values and a commitment to quality and integrity, more than 70 employees, both able bodied and disable, now comprise a strong team who, together, have created this world-renowned enterprise".⁹

VIETCONCLUSION



Hanoi (North Vietnam)
(Photo taken by the Author)

Vietnam was not the first Asiatic country I visited in the last 40 years. I have been there before. Among the places in Asia I travelled through, India is, perhaps, the one who struck me most, since, as the Italian novelist and

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journalist Alberto Moravia (1907-1990) used to say, “India is a country where everything that seems real is not real and everything that does not seem real is real”. Absorbed into the orbit of the Indian culture (remember the term “Indochina”), Vietnam seemed to me to fit the same statement more times than not.

Time has come to close these Asiatic lines. Having displayed a tiny fraction of the reality of Vietnam, it leaves me nothing more than to say that in this country one is placed face to face with Asia at its most dangerous and at its safest, at its worst and at its best, at its most ugly and at its most beautiful – just like it was in my nightmares and in my dreams.

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