

THE CULTURAL DIMENSION OF THE VIETNAM CONFLICT

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When we look at Vietnam from 1965 to 1975 we see bombing, shelling, killing. In actual fact, it was a War, a military conflict.

But if we look deeper into that conflict, we may see an interplay of 3 cultures, that of North Vietnam, South Vietnam and the United States.

And to dig into the problem culturally, we have to ask 3 questions:

a) Why are the North Vietnamese Communist? Or why does Communism flourish in Vietnam? Another question: Why there is no Deng Xiao-ping, no Tito or Imre Nagy, even no Khrushchev or Gorbachev, but only one Brezhnev after another in Hanoi?

b) Why was South Vietnam weak, and why did it need American military intervention?

c) Why did the Americans cut and run in 1975?

It is my opinion that, to answer these 3 questions we have to look at the culture, and the cultural evolution of those 3 countries.

I. Why Communism in Vietnam?

In *The Paradise Lost*, John Milton wrote:

*The Mind is its own place,
Can make a Heaven of Hell,
And a Hell of Heaven.*

Of course, Vietnam was not a Heaven before 1965, but one cannot deny the fact that it is now a Hell.

We also don't know whether or not Vietnam has been a Heaven some time in its past. But we do know, however, that in the 13th century, Vietnam was the only country in the World that defeated the Mongols, not once, but three times successively, not when the Mongols were in decline, but when the Mongolian Empire extended from the Pacific, to the Indian Ocean, the Danube and the Baltic Ocean, when the Mongols ruled over China, North India, the Middle-east, Budapest and Moscow. (See Map next page).

Then why has Vietnam become a satellite of the Soviet Union? Why is Vietnam now 'ruled' by the Russians? Why is Vietnam now the poorest country in the Far East, if not in the whole World?

We do know that it is because of Communism. But the question still is : Why does Communism flourish in Vietnam? If we believe John Milton, something in the Vietnamese mind has brought about such a big change - *from Confucianism to Marxist-Leninism.*

1. From Neo-Confucianism to Marxism.

Looking at the Chart, we see *Dogmatism*, (-A) and there is a good reason to believe that it is Dogmatism that makes the difference between Japan on the one hand and Vietnam, China, Korea on the other. There is no *Dogmatism* in Japan but a lot of Dogmatism in countries which cultivated Neo-Confucianism, making it the *National Doctrine*. We also know that Neo-Confucianism is highly dogmatic, and that for many centuries Chinese, Vietnamese and Koreans were sleeping the *Neo-Confucian Dogmatic slumber*, while the Japanese were not. They remained awake all the time.

The idea I want to convey is: *Neo-Confucianist Dogmatism* in China, Vietnam and Korea has paved the way for Marxist Dogmatism. People in those three countries who blindly believed in Confucius are now believing in Karl Marx. The bottle is new, but the wine inside remains the same: *High-proof Dogmatism*.

That is to say that when the Japanese kept their eyes wide-open, Chinese, and Vietnamese closed both their eyes. The Koreans had also both their eyes closed, but as they were lately influenced by the Japanese, they could open one of their eyes. Having only one eye closed, the Koreans lost only half of their country to Communism.

Let us look back at the *Cultural History* of China and Vietnam:

China reached the peak of its civilisation under the Tang in the 8th Century, and started declining afterwards. What has changed? The change was in their education system.

Under the Tang, students had to study the so-called *San-Chiao* (3 doctrines) programme that included 3 different philosophies - *Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism*. By studying three philosophies which are complementary but divergent in more than one aspect, the students who later became the literati had an open mind.

The situation abruptly changed when in 845 AD, Emperor Tang Wu-tsung banned Buddhism and Taoism and elevated Confucianism to the rank of *National Doctrine*. Since then, students had to study only one philosophy, Confucianism, and they were taught that Confucius alone was right, permanently right.

Under the *Sung*, Confucianism became doctrinaire and dogmatic. It has changed into something *quite different*, and the change was so great that it deserves a new name: **Neo or Sung Confucianism**. The Chinese mind was casted into a rigid mould, and since then, China continuously declined. To this very day, it remains a '*Sleeping Lion*'.

Vietnam also reached the peak of its civilisation under the Tran in the 13th century when it defeated the Mongols. Why? Because during that epoch, the education program adopted by the Tran Kings was also the *San-Chiao* system,

Thus, thanks to the Shang's tradition of flexibility, some Chinese who do not belong to that class of trademen may have some degree of pragmatism. There is therefore, very fortunately, one Deng Xiao-ping in Dogmatic China.

Vietnam had only 3 social classes: intellectuals, farmers and workers. As recently as 50 years ago, all the merchants - or *Shang-jen* - were Chinese. Living in a close-knit community in Cholon, they controlled the economy of South Vietnam before 1975.

To sum up, Vietnam has only the *Shih* who are as dogmatic as their counterparts in China, but - without a *Shang* class - Vietnam cannot get pragmatism from anywhere, and therefore, does not have a Deng Xiao-ping among its leaders.

Who are those *Shang-jen*? Are they Chinese? Yes. But they are not *Han*. Their story is as follows.

At present the term *Shang-jen* is defined in Chinese dictionaries as *Trademen*, but etymologically, that term means *People of Shang race*, who built the *Shang civilisation* and *Shang dynasty* in North China, from 1523 to 1028 B.C.

Then, the Chou who were nomadic tribes from Chensi and Mongolia invaded China and killed the *Shang* in such a number that, according to the Chou Annals, there was a *torrent of blood that carried away grinding stones*. The surviving *Shang* escaped by boats to Taiwan, California and Guatemala. Some came to Vietnam and were driven back by Phu-dong Thien-vuong, a legendary hero in Bac-ninh province.

Having lost all their properties, they had to go from market to market to do some trading. In actual fact, they have become since then *The Jews of the Orient*. Also, not unlike the Jews in the West, they live in their own communities, free from Han interference.

3. No Tito in Vietnam.

In the early 60's, some Americans expected Ho Chi Minh to become a Vietnamese Tito, and if he were, Vietnam would not be a serious problem for the United States. A compromise might have been negotiable.

When they asked me about such an eventuality, I said "No", and the reason I gave was as follows:

Leaders of Communist countries in Europe, like Tito and Imre Nagy, started their political career as Marxist-Leninist. Only when they became national leaders, did they feel it would be a treason to their nation if they continued to serve the political and economic interests of the Soviet Union instead of their own national interest. As a consequence, they converted themselves from Marxism to Nationalism, and revolted against Moscow.

II. Why was South Vietnam so weak?

We have the habit of calling 'nationalist' any government that opposes Communism. It is completely wrong in the case of South Vietnam. For sure, leaders of successive South Vietnamese governments were utterly *Anti-Communist*, but they did not have an ounce of *Nationalism* in their veins.

From Diem down to Thieu and Ky, they were either mandarins who served the French Administration or military officers who fought under the French command. As such they never had the support of the Vietnamese people.

Let me illustrate with a story: in 1945, Diem asked the Japanese to appoint him Prime Minister. Mr. Matsushita a longtime resident of Vietnam and head of the Japanese Intelligence Service told me this: "Diem is asking for our support, but we cannot accept him because we do know that the Vietnamese hate Vietnamese mandarins more than they hate the French." In actual fact, the Vietnamese Revolution was 'anti-French' in appellation, but in substance and motivation, it was essentially 'anti-mandarinal'. In actual fact, the Great Vietnamese patriot, Phan Chu Trinh, did not oppose French rule. He only asked for political reform and the dissolution of the Imperial Court and the mandarinal system.

The Communist side won the struggle because they put emphasis on the 'anti-feudal' campaign of their revolutionary agenda. We lost because the French re-installed Bao Dai, and the Americans brought Ngo Dinh Diem back. Kings and mandarins were symbols of anachronism, and targets of popular hatred.

But the inability of resisting Communism extended beyond that of the formerly *Pro-French* circle. The whole Vietnamese intelligentsia had to share the blame: There was a wave of Nationalism that erupted in the aborted coup in Thai-Nguyen, carried out by the Vietnam Nationalist Party in the early 1930's and that ended with the execution of Nguyen Thai Hoc and 13 other members. The repression was so severe that from that time onward, the Vietnamese youth shunned politics. What happened thereafter was moral decay instead of nationalist revolution, and as a result there was no large scale Nationalist Movement, until the Japanese came in 1945. It was too late because the Communists had already made a huge advance against their nationalist rivals. They had their party, their leaders, their cadres, and their experience in revolution.

The situation did not improve afterwards because neither the French who came back, nor the Americans who intervened later thought about restoring a true nationalist movement in Vietnam. Besides, that was against their own interest, and in any case, it was too late, because when the war broke out in Hanoi, Vietnamese of goodwill like Phan Khoi, Nguyen Manh Tuong and many other highly competent intellectuals had to join the Resistance movement which had already fallen under the communist leadership. The professional revolutionary Ho Chi Minh had an upper-hand over Tran Trong Kim, a brilliant but naive scholar who knew almost nothing about Communism.

2. Many American political analysts are proud of the *Rule of Law*, and the American system of *Check and Balance* between the executive and the legislative branches of the US Government. They have missed a few points:

a) They do not remember that Rome had the most prestigious Rule of Laws, and yet, Rome collapsed under the heavy weight of its laws. The Rule of Law is a progress in the right direction, but all depends on how good are the laws, and how wise are those who produce them.

b) Those analysts have also forgotten that, in *The Republic*, Book VIII, Plato had predicted that "*Democracy inevitably leads to Demagogy, and Demagogy in turn will lead to Anarchy, and ultimately to Tyranny.*"

There has been a great deal of democracy in the USA during the last 150 years, i.e. up to World War II, but since TV advertisement made electoral campaigns too costly, amounting to millions of dollars, many candidates found it necessary to get money from big corporations, or to get the votes from the so-called 'poor' by promising them a multitude of social benefits -- welfare, medicaid, food-stamps -- out of the tax-payers' pocket. In America, a family of four whose income is less than 1,000 dollars a month is classified as 'poor'. That is more than the salary of quite a few prime-ministers in the Third World. Also, better than in any Communist countries, one can live well in the United States, without working.

At the present moment in the USA, elected representatives no longer lead the people, but are themselves led by public opinion - expressed in the opinion polls. They are also under the constant pressure of some ten thousand lobbyists who live in permanence in the Washington DC area. In fact, *Democracy* has been replaced by *Demagogy*.

c) It is a mild 'check and balance' when the Executive and the Legislative branches are controlled by one political party, but when the President is Republican and the Congress has a Democratic majority, that 'check and balance' is replaced by an uncompromising 'partisan confrontation'. The President becomes a 'lame-duck' and everything goes wrong.

And each time the Congress administered a blow to the lame-duck President, as most recently during the nomination process of a judge to the Supreme Court, the President lost his prestige, while people - both inside and outside the United States - lost their confidence in the capability of the US Government to govern itself. The immediate result has been a severe *downturn* or a *crash* in Wall Street.

At present, in the US, it is neither *Democracy* nor *Demagogy*. It is already the beginning of *Anarchy*, as predicted by Plato. *And if anarchy is permitted to grow in Washington, then where can the Free World turn for leadership and inspiration?*

d) There has never been a true 'balance' in the American system, because the Congress can impeach a President, while the President cannot dissolve the Congress and call for new elections, as in the European parliamentary system. This is why America has 'lame-duck Presidents', while Europe never has any 'lame duck Prime Minister'.

THE CYCLICAL MIND

