

WHAT MAKES THEM TICK? or Perspectives on Vietnamese Youth

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What does the youth of Vietnam think and how do they act is a question of primary importance not only to social planners but also to a number of players in the Vietnam context: the Communist Party of Vietnam which wants to mold them, the overseas Vietnamese who wish to work with them in pushing Vietnam towards a democratic future, and last but not least, the young Vietnamese themselves as I am sure they certainly would like to know the visions and aspirations of their peers.

Such a simple question in the West would be answered by scientific polls and behavioral questionnaires that would be carried out periodically so as to give us comparative data over a certain period of time. Yet an approach like that is not something feasible in present-day Vietnam. In order to gauge the feelings and aspirations of Vietnamese youth inside Vietnam, one must therefore resort to other methods.

“Youth is the future of Vietnam” or “The future of the Fatherland is dependent on our youth”: these are articles of faith that apparently are shared by Vietnamese of all political shadings, inside and outside of Vietnam, since at least the beginning of the twentieth century. The communist government of Vietnam, in particular, devotes keen attention to molding the young making sure that they would become solid and reliable socialists, and for that purpose they not only seek to “encadrer” these young people (in “red pioneer” type of organizations, including the Ho Chi Minh Youth League) but also sponsor a large number of youth-oriented publications (such as those put out by Kim Dong Publishing House) and magazines. One of the most popular magazines in the country is called *Tuoi Tre* (“Youth”), which has a Sunday supplement, *Tuoi Tre Chu Nhat*, and a light-humor version, *Tuoi Tre Cui* (“Laughing Youth”). It is widely read because of its lively style and its relatively courageous investigative style reporting but it cannot be said to be a true youth publication.

In such a situation, to take a real measure of the youth’s concerns one has only anecdotal evidence of what is going on in their minds. In what follows I can thus only offer what at best can be called an empirical reading of what the youth of Vietnam are thinking and what seems like the direction they are taking.

Over 60 percent born after the war

The first thing that anyone would observe when visiting Vietnam is how young the population seems to be. This impression is not far off the track since, as U.S. Ambassador “Pete” Peterson was wont to say, at least 60 percent of the 78 million Vietnamese currently living in Vietnam are

born after the Vietnam War (which ended April 30, 1975). This means that fully 50 million Vietnamese are right now 26 or under. As such, some of them may have vague recollections of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia (1978-1989) and the border war with China (February-March 1979) but none of them was an actual combatant facing death and devastation on Vietnamese soil, closer to home.

While some of these 50 million youths may have recollections of deprivation and near famine in the years from 1975 to 1985 and beyond, many among them have lived through periods of great upheaval in the communist world as traditionally led by the Soviet Union. For instance, the great internationalism characteristic of the socialist movement worldwide, and considered a “natural” among communist regimes, foundered with thunderous noise when three countries claiming to adhere to the purest Marxist-Leninist creed went to war and bloodied themselves pitilessly: China, Vietnam and Pol Pot’s Cambodia. It turned out that with the “imperialist Americans” removed from the scene, the old feudal-imperialism reasserted itself with a vengeance. Communist internationalism became threadbare in the face of such a traditionalist challenge.

The return to tradition

If something is consistently reported from Vietnam in the last two decades or so, it is the return to tradition that has been happening all over the country. This can be seen in the revival of traditional festivals, in the revived interest in genealogies and even in the resurrected “huong-uoc” or “village covenants” that are used to reaffirm the ancient wisdom of “Phep vua thua le lang” (“The king’s law [must] yield when confronted with the village *adat* [customary law]”). Some see this return to tradition as something encouraged by the state which since the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union has tried to divest itself of its communist trappings. Such a reading, however, would not mesh with other expressions of the same movement, for instance, the return to rituals, to religion and to what the government would like to qualify as “superstitions.” In other words it would be hard to imagine that Hanoi has deliberately wanted people to go back to such practices as fortunetelling, matchmaking by matching horoscope or zodiac signs, the revival of geomancy (“dia-ly,” especially one aspect of it, “phong thuy” or *feng shui*), or encouraged them to seek religion, especially among the young and the women.

A much simpler analysis, one that fits better, would be: with the collapse of Marxism-Leninism as an ideology there was such a void that it had to be filled by something, almost anything. And what is more reassuring that the beliefs of the elders--beliefs that the government took pains to eliminate over the years but never completely eradicated? In fact, with the disintegration of the communist ideology, many of the traditional strains of thought reasserted themselves and in many cases apparently proved to be so much more effective than the barren solutions or even non-solutions proposed by the state. An example in point would be the question of the Vietnamese MIAs, of which there are estimates as high as 300,000. Unlike the U.S. government, Hanoi does not have a program looking for these lost casualties of the war despite the fact that almost no Vietnamese could have peace of mind until their loved ones could be accounted for, one way or another. This is an issue which affects almost every Vietnamese family throughout the land and since it does not have the answer, the government has thought it wise to leave it to people’s “superstitions.” In fact, some years ago, there was a fascinating document circulating

throughout the country telling how some geomancers sitting in Saigon could tell people in the North--via mobile phone--to go and look for their long lost loved ones by giving them precise directions on the basis simply of their visions. The document was written by no less a person than Tran Phuong, the one-time economic tsar under To Huu: thanks to the geomancers' help he was able to find his sister killed by the French in 1947 and thrown into a river.

“We don't want to miss the bullet train to the 21st century”

In such a context it is hardly surprising that the young Vietnamese no longer share many of the ideas of their communist mentors. Let me quote a letter--actually, an e-mail--which we received last July 13 from Hanoi: “I still recall the first time we sat down for our first term at the Hanoi Foreign Languages School. We had to take tests on such topics as Communist Philosophy, Political Science and Scientific Socialism. Before entering the room [to take the tests] we had each one of us to chip in 5000 dong for an envelope called ‘Intake.’ We put all the money in the envelope and left in on the examiner's table. With the examiner silenced in that way, we had a field day copying our answers from open books--totally nonsensical answers for which we later all got excellent grades. [. . .] These are topics, which describe a paradisiacal society, topics which in class both lecturers and students compete in singing their praise. This is, unfortunately, only a most artificial behavior, truly contemptible.”

Actually, the disaffection of youth in Vietnam can be seen in an incident over eight years ago when Vu Kim Hanh, then the chief editor of *Tuoi Tre*, had the magazine carry an article about the fact that Ho Chi Minh at one time had a Chinese wife, a nurse by the name of Zeng Xueming, with whom he had a daughter. This was a discovery made by a French communist historian, Daniel Hemery, who in his book even printed a photocopy of Ho Chi Minh's letter in Chinese to her. The item was already briefly mentioned in *Nhan Dan*, “the organ of the CPV Central Committee,” but only in passing. The *Tuoi Tre* article, being a fuller version, elicited much more attention because it contradicted the image of Ho as an ascetic saint which the Communist Party and government wanted to perpetuate despite all the facts to the contrary. As the main person responsible for the magazine, Kim Hanh was called to order but when she personally authored an article entitled, “We don't want to miss the bullet train to the year 2000,” she was considered to be too unreliable and therefore was relieved from her post. Yet it seems clear that Kim Hanh was reflecting the thought of many youths of Vietnam when she wrote that article.

***Tuoi Tre's* “Role Models” survey**

Even after Kim Hanh was gone, the *Tuoi Tre* team managed to keep the magazine's lively format so that it was one of the most widely read magazines in the country. Its daring investigative reports are also something that gave the magazine a loyal following. In a daring attempt to interest the readers, at Tet this year, the magazine sent out a team to complete a small survey on the importance of idols and “role models” for Vietnamese youth. The sample was not large, numbering only 200 HCMC youths between the ages of 15 and 28, but they were drawn from all walks of life and were evenly divided between men and women, rural and urban population.

What is astounding about this survey was that politicians and political leaders were found to be less popular than other kinds of idols. For instance, Ho Chi Minh, the so-called “father of the

nation,” was found to be less popular than Bill Gates, an entrepreneurial genius and a self-made man: Ho was mentioned by 39 percent as compared to Bill Gates’ 89.5 percent. Phan Van Khai, the prime minister, was only half as popular as Bill Clinton, who had just visited Vietnam in November 2000. This is, of course, highly insulting to Vietnam and to the CPV as foreigners, and specifically Americans, are found to be more popular than either Ho or Vo Nguyen Giap, the general credited with victory over both the French and the Americans. (No wonder that all 120,000 copies of the Tet issue of the magazine were recalled at once and destroyed.)

This youth’s willingness to shed the illusions of the past, especially the myths associated with Ho Chi Minh, can be seen also in the recent call by Phuong Nam, pen-name of a young man on a “study abroad” program in Australia, that a thorough review of Ho Chi Minh’s life and achievements be carried out by historians so as to establish the final truth about the man. This was occasioned by the fact that since he went abroad and read more about Ho Chi Minh, he found too many discrepancies between what is being said inside Vietnam and what he could find in books by Vietnamese overseas and by foreign authors. Phuong Nam’s call did not remain unanswered for long. Recently the historian Lu Phuong in Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City just came up with one of the fairest and most profound assessments of Ho Chi Minh’s career.

This tampering with the image of the most revered communist leader of Vietnam is a defining moment. For a long long while and up to the present moment, there are dissidents in Vietnam, such as General Tran Do or the veteran Vu Minh Ngoc, who believe that Ho Chi Minh was above reproach. The difference between them and the Party/government resides only in the fact that they believe the latter have gone astray to the point of betraying the original revolution as conceived and led by Ho Chi Minh. To get the latter to reverse gear and change course, dissidents like Tran Do pound them with Ho quotations. Even a daredevil writer like Duong Thu Huong tries to stay clear of criticizing Ho, claiming that he is too revered a figure: touching him would unleash such a reaction as to bury the critic. Yet it takes the courage of youth to question everything, even Ho and especially the sacrosanct image of him as peddled by the Party/government.

It is instances like this, which makes the Vietnamese youth highly, suspect in the eyes of the communist authorities.

A quiescent youth?

Yet the complaint is often heard that the youth of Vietnam is apathetic. The government—actually, the CPV—laments that the young no longer seem to be interested in idealism, they would rather follow non-political careers, get good jobs and enjoy the good life without much concern for their neighbors. They are also not joining the Party except as a passport to government jobs, of which there are something like 3.5 million in a population of 78 million, and as a way to clear hurdles to travel abroad.

Outside of Vietnam, the comment is no less critical saying that out of the million or so youth among the overseas Vietnamese, how many are potential leaders of the community let alone future leaders of Vietnam. The universal feeling one gets is that the youth of Vietnam, both inside and outside of the country, are much too “ngoan,” too obedient to their parents’ wishes,

and thus have become like robots: one is born to be a good, meaning non-contrary, student, then go to college, get a degree (the higher the better but in a technical field so that one does not get into trouble), get married and have children, buy cars and houses, and live happily ever after.

Whatever happened to the breed of fiery revolutionaries that their elders are so used to see and brush up against? The ideal of “ho-phu sinh ho-tu,” “parent tigers begetting little tigers,” seems to have petered into a situation where “parent tigers,” if any, are giving birth to mice.

It is getting to the point where people amusedly point to the fact that Vietnamese youths are seen as incapable of even emulating their Laotian or Cambodian peers. The Lao students, for instance, have been known to demonstrate for freedom and democracy right in front of the Lao embassy in Warsaw; last year they were willing to go to jail as well by demonstrating for freedom and democracy in Vientiane. As for the Cambodian students, they were ready each time President Tran Duc Luong of Vietnam was about to visit Phnom Penh to demonstrate in protest of the unsatisfactory border conditions between the two countries. Could it be, then, that the long experience of war has taught the Vietnamese to be “nhun nhu con chi chi,” as pliable as the grass in the wind? I doubt it.

A new “prise de conscience”

What happened, I believe, was that the Vietnamese youth, having learned the hard lessons of their elders, are seeking to move into a new age of consciousness—somewhat reminiscent of the Age of Aquarius that people sang about in the sixties in the U.S. To them and their generation there are a number of givens: war and division are bad, gung-ho idealism easily leads one astray, and communism in Vietnam while bad still has enough muscle to crush any organized opposition, especially in view of the fact that the world no longer is bipolar and thus one cannot rely on one side to fight the other.

They also learned the rules in a totalitarian society like Vietnam: Any organized opposition would be crushed without mercy, whether it is a church like the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, or a budding party like Nguyen Dinh Huy’s “Movement to Unify the People and Build Democracy” (which even declared its willingness to operate under the umbrella of the Fatherland Front) or a still imaginary association like the one recently proposed (on September 3, 2001) by Pham Que Duong in Hanoi and Tran Khue in Ho Chi Minh City, the so-called “People’s Association to Support the Party and Government to Combat Corruption.” Conclusion: One should not try to organize anything that looks like it wishes to challenge the Party/government monopoly on power.

They are also aware of a rather paradoxical situation: while a certain amount of criticism, especially when it’s veiled, is allowed any organized criticism, for instance, by forming a movement or demanding the creation of an independent organ of opinion, like a newspaper or magazine, would be out of the question. This explains why a writer like Nguyen Huy Thiep, or even the rather outspoken Duong Thu Huong, is tolerated but Tran Do or Hoang Minh Chinh, or the “veteran revolutionaries” (“lao thanh cach mang” in Vietnamese, would not. That is why a young man like the lawyer Le Chi Quang, 33, is seen by Hanoi as a much greater “problem” than

Nguyen Huy Thiep despite the fact that Quang has an audience that is miniscule compared to Thiep.

On the other hand, the youth of Vietnam also realize that they have some clear advantages over the entrenched bureaucrats: they are younger and can absorb new knowledge much faster than the old Party apparatchiks, the computer and the Internet are their instruments of choice which allow them to break out of the information monopoly that the government tries to impose on the rest of the country while putting them instantly in touch with the rest of the world, many of them speak foreign languages, read foreign books and have foreign contacts (if nothing else their families and friends abroad); in the end, their world—including music and fashion, literature and ethics—is a totally different world from that of their elders. In such a world it would be strange if concepts of democracy, fairness, equality, free elections and human rights do not somehow seep in.

Expressions of “civil society”

As a matter of fact, we need not speculate. Anyone watching the Internet traffic would find news and opinions coming from Vietnam that oftentimes are radically different from those propagated by the government information monopoly. This type of information is not meant to sabotage the government so much as to link Vietnam with the outside world for it is characteristic of youth everywhere that they want to be on top of things, to keep themselves alert to new developments not only in their country but also in the world. This “being on one’s toes” is not simply smart, it happens to be good business practice as well as one must stay fully aware of things if one is to be competitive in the world and regional market.

What is particularly refreshing about these expressions of “civil society” is that their authors almost never feel the need to mention “communism” or “anti-communism”—a practice radically different from the abstract way of many overseas Vietnamese who are virulently anti-communist. Young as they are, these authors are sometimes so much more mature and pragmatic when they just deal with issues and try to solve them or comment on them. Let me give you just one example of how a young lady in Hanoi relates a newly decreed regulation to the question of governance:

“Vietnam just forbids all dancing after 0 hour.

“Vietnam is said to be opening to the outside world. Our big cities are not only meant to attract foreign investment, they are also new tourist attractions to the world. And even our citizens, depending on their work situation, have need for night entertainment. Major port cities in the world are known for their nightlife. For nightlife is nothing but an expression of the vigorous growth of such cities. A large city like Saigon or Hanoi would be... very sad if all entertainment must stop at twelve midnight.

“The main issue here is one of application of the current legislation, there being no need for the above regulation if the current laws are being strictly implemented and closely monitored, without partiality or cover-up. In Vietnam it seems that things that are unmanageable get forbidden. That is why the list of banned activities is an endless one.

“One can forbid night activities after 0 hour, it’s no guarantee that people would start being depraved only after twelve midnight. This is a very minor issue but it clearly points to the lack of ability of the CPV. And the people, I believe, in such cases have no choice but to show their unhappiness by asking that such incapable leaders remove themselves from the scene so that the common people can elect their own, more deserving leaders.”

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