From Confucianism to Communism, and Back? – Vietnam 1925-95

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Introduction

In the mid 20th century, three states within the Confucianist civilisation of East and Southeast Asia adopted communist doctrines and communist political systems: China, North Korea and Vietnam. The remaining states in the Confucian world, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore became allies of the United States in the Cold War and came out of that "war" as probably its greatest winners, at least in economic terms. Already during the Cold War, and primarily afterwards, several writers -- and some scholars and politicians -- have tried to explain the industrial and mercantile successes of the *non-communist* Confucian states with certain aspects of the Confucianist value system, such as collective discipline, emphasis on education, respect for hierarchy, industriousness, etc., much like protestant culture was once used to explain the success of capitalism in certain parts of Europe. This paper shall not deal with the non-communist part of the Confucian world, but with one of the communist Confucian states: Vietnam. After the great crisis of 1989-91, whereas in Europe, Africa and America (except Cuba), communism virtually disappeared as a political system as well as a doctrine, it prevailed in Vietnam, China and North Korea. Could it be that certain aspects of Confucianist culture may help to explain why communist parties managed to stay in power there? Are they now combining their adoption of a market economy with a cultural and political return to Confucian values, thus recreating a cultural and political identification with the non-communist parts of the Confucian world?

This paper will not give any systematic answers to these questions, but approach them by way of examining a sample of theories formulated during the cold war about the relationship between Confucianism and communism in Vietnam. The purpose of those theories was to explain why Confunianist societies turned communist. My purpose is now to find out if the same elements that formed the bases of the theories in question can also contribute to explaining why the Confucian communist

states were able to survive the 1989-91 crisis and the dismantling of the centralized planning economy. I deal only with Vietnam, but it is my hope that some of what I say will be applicable at least to China and perhaps also to North Korea, although that country has not yet adopted capitalism in the economic sphere.

In debating the issue I will examine the work of seven scholars, five of whom have been personally affected by the 20th century Vietnamese tragedy and all of whom have studied or commented on the relationship between Confucianism and communism in Vietnam from different angles.

Paul Mus

Paul Mus, a great French Catholic scholar who from 1927 was on the staff of the *Ecole Française de l'Extrême Orient* in Hanoi, in 1945 clandestinely visited Vietnam as a Gaullist officer specializing in "psychological warfare", in 1952 published his *Sociologie d'une guerre*, and later inspired several French and American scholars through his teaching, felt a passion for the traditional Vietnamese society and considered French secular ("laïque") colonialism as well as Marxism as fundamentally opposed to the tradition he admired. The communist enterprise was a continuation of the French colonial enterprise, Mus argued; the communists had violently taken over the heritage of French colonialism and were making the same mistakes as "we" (the French) used to make. To the Vietnamese mind, communism was basically a Western and foreign phenomenon. In 1930, the communists had demonstrated their Western orientation by adopting the French name "Indochina" (Dong Duong) in their party name (Indochinese Communist Party), and it did not help that in 1945, the party announced its dissolution and made concessions to the Vietnamese tradition under the disguise of the front name "Viet Minh". This was just an expression of opportunism. Frenchmen arriving in Vietnam usually found it easier to have a conversation with a communist than with other Vietnamese because the concerns of the communists were the same as those of Europeans:

modernization and the creation of a strong, secular state. For the same reason, communism was a foreign doctrine to the Vietnamese, both to the peasants in the villages and to those members of the elite who had been properly educated in traditional Vietnamese values. The true heirs to the ancient Vietnamese tradition were the religious sects in southern Vietnam: the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao.

Confucianist and communist doctrine, according to Mus, had little in common. It was true that they both hailed "communitarian" ideals, but the communist utilitarian collectivism was not the same as the traditional Vietnamese communitarianism. The traditional Vietnamese community was based on a spiritual relationship between Heaven and earth; everyone had a set of obligations, and the ancestors of the living were eminently present. To the Confucianists, the communitarian ideal was something sacred, to the communists just a principle derived from its social usefulness.[1] Communist utilitarianism, according to Mus, had nothing to do with Confucianist communitarianism.

When reading Mus' most famous work, *Sociologie d'une guerre*, one has the feeling that he anticipated, once the post World War troubles were over and Vietnam had returned to its habitual calmness, a resurgence of the spiritual tradition. Perhaps that is part of what is happening now, forty years later. However, in our context, the most important is to see that Mus saw a fundamental contradiction between communism, as a Western phenomenon, and the Asian Confucian and spiritual tradition. If we should rely on Mus, the explanation for the success of Vietnamese communism would reside in French and Soviet influence rather than Vietnamese tradition.

Nguyen Khac Vien

Hanoi's leading intellectual in the 1960s and 1970s, Nguyen

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[1] The above reflects the gist of Mus' arguments in the two chapters "marxisme et traditionalisme" and "chances d'un marxisme asiatique" in *Sociologie d'une guerre*, pp. 248-67.

Khac Vien, held exactly the opposite view. In 1952, when Mus published his *Sociologie d'une guerre* in Paris, Nguyen Khac Vien also lived in the French metropolis where he was an important opponent of the French war. It was not till 1961 that he moved backk to North Vietnam, where he edited the publications *Vietnam Courier* and *Vietnamese Studies* for a number of years, wrote a popular history of Vietnam, and in the early 1970s took over as director of the Foreign Languages Publishing House.

Nguyen Khac Vien's most famous text is "Confucianism and Marxism in Vietnam", which was first published in French in 1962 and later republished several times. Vien first describes the classic Confucian man, the scholar with his black turban, ceremonial gestures and flowered manner of speech, such as Vien had observed him in his childhood: the personification of the old official doctrine embodied in the examination system that lasted from 1075 to 1919. Only some 2000 scholars were given full degrees during those 844 years, but the dream of becoming a scholar imbued all those who learned to read and write: "All the young people were obsessed with the dream of passing the mandarinate examinations", says Nguyen Khac Vien. But Vien was not, like Paul Mus, primarily preoccupied with the mandarin culture itself, the official level of Confucianism. Instead Vien focused on an "unofficial, non-establishment level" of the doctrine, a scholarly socio-psychological attitude among those who never passed the exams, but who influenced Vietnamese villages to adopt certain ethical codes that eventually made them receptive to socialist ideals.[2] The mandarins were secluded from their people, thus the dissemination of culture among the populace was taken care of by those scholars who had failed the examinations. Many of them tried anew every third year, studying the classic texts over and over again, but repeatedly failed the exams. Meanwhile they served as teachers, scribes and astrologers in

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[2] Nguyen Khac Vien, "Confucianism and Marxism", pp. 40-1, and George McT. Kahin's introduction to Nguyen Khac Vien, *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam*, p. vi.

the villages where they lived. Tens of thousands of scholars lived like this:

> The law ruled, mandarins administered, and the village scholar, living close to the people, educated and advised them daily. Moral order depended on this large brotherhood of scholars, which gathered together by the thousand in the administrative centers of the country for each competitive examination.[3]

In Nguyen Khac Vien's view, the French colonization of Vietnam widened the split between mandarins and scholars. The mandarins collaborated with the French while the scholars led the peasants in resistance struggles: "...the patriotic scholars saved the honor of Confucianism at a time when it was disappearing from the stage of Vietnamese history. Vietnam approached the twentieth century with a battle-weary Confucianism."

Then emerged Nguyen Khac Vien's own generation of French-trained intellectuals. They knew about science and democracy, two concepts completely alien to Confucianism, but also felt that the old scholars possessed something they themselves did not have, an attachment to the people, to the specifically Vietnamese heritage. Vien and his school-mates learned to write French better than Vietnamese: "We were voiceless before our own people, cut off from our national heritage".

Thus, in the 1930s, the leadership of the national struggle passed to Marxist cadres. The relationship between Nguyen Khac Vien's tiny educated class and the Marxist cadres was like the relationship between the mandarins and scholars in the past: "The first Marxist cadres were, for the most part, "petty intellectuals" who had been forced to end their studies before taking their baccalaureate exams ... Others were village teachers...":

> Marxism thus came to Vietnam not as just another doctrine, but as an instrument of liberation after

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[3] Nguyen Khac Vien, "Confucianism and Marxism", pp. 25-6.

> the Confucian scholars had failed to liberate the country and the efforts of the bourgeois intellectuals against the colonial and feudal regimes had proved feeble and without promise.[4]

The smooth transfer from Confucianism to Marxism was also due to certain aspects of the Confucianist doctrine itself. Firstly, the two doctrines shared a contempt for religion. In Confucianism, "man is above all a social being"; he should not, like in Buddhism, direct his mind to the supernatural. To Vien it was no wonder that Voltaire was attracted to Confucianism; Vietnam, he emphasized, had been secularized as early as the fifteenth century by the struggle of the Confucianists against Buddhism. Confucius, according to Vien, was the world's first humanist.

Secondly, Confucianism and Marxism both emphasized collective discipline and social obligations. Bourgeois individualism is "alien to both Confucianism and Marxism".

Vien recognized that Confucianism was basically conservative, "systematically refusing any change", yet it provided revolutionaries with excellent arguments because it required of rulers that they show exemplary moral behaviour: "In Confucian society, the immorality of the rulers has always provided revolutionaries with their best arguments."[5] Marxist cadres, according to Vien, drew freely from Confucian political morality when composing their slogans. To demonstrate the Communists' adherence to Confucian morality, Vien quoted at length from a Party handbook called *Let's Change our Methods of Work*, and also from a speech delivered by Ho Chi Minh in 1961, the year Vien returned to Hanoi: "The cadres and members of the Party ... must opt for the collective interests first and always be ready to be the first to suffer and the last to find happiness. These are the ethics of communism," said Uncle Ho. According to Vien, "the most vivid example of a Confucian scholar who changed from one

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[4] *Ibid*, p. 46.

[5] *Ibid*, p. 36.

philosophy to the other is surely President Ho Chi Minh."

Is Nguyen Khac Vien himself another example? The answer must be no. Although Vien was an ardent supporter of the Vietnamese communist regime, he never fully embraced Marxism. His ("bourgeois") democratic ideals came to the forefront again in his old age, when he hailed the humanitarian tradition from the great French Revolution and together with other intellectuals circulated letters asking the Party leadership to allow more freedom.[6]

To conclude, Nguyen Khac Vien saw a great continuity from Confucianism to communism, and based this view both on ideological similarities between the two doctrines and on a social factor: the presence in Vietnamese villages of a class of scholars with great capacity for mobilizing opposition against bad rulers.

André Schönberg

The third theoretician is clearly an outsider. Yet I would like to briefly summarize the arguments presented in 1979 by André Schönberg in a succinct publication from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Schönberg departed from Samuel Eisenstadt's sociological theory with its emphasis on enduring traditional elements within societies generally considered as modern. On this theoretical basis, Schönberg argued that the stability and strength of the North-Vietnamese communist regime did not derive from rejection of tradition, but from "the very continuity of traditional elements in the modern regime".[7]

Schönberg emphasized many of the same points as Nguyen Khac Vien, and made an argument in basically three points:

> first, traditional concepts about the relations between center and periphery, about the kind of

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[6] Nguyen Khac Vien, "L'humanisme des lumières..."

[7] André Schönberg, *Social Structure and Political Order, Traditional and Modern Vietnam*, p. 7.

> activities in which they ought to engage, and the role of morality and altruism have pervaded the model of the modern Communist regime. Second, these traditional elements coupled with the effectiveness of the methods used by the Communists, facilitated the acceptance of their model and rule by broader groups. Third, the social structure promoted by the Confucian tradition appears to be favourable to the rapid spread of Communism, as no intermediate groups developed in the North between a strong political center and the periphery committed to it.[8]

However, Schönberg differed from Nguyen Khac Vien in some important respects:

First, he did not see the same neat cleavage between (unpatriotic) mandarins who had passed exams and (patriotic) scholars who had failed. Schönberg noted that many mandarins had abandoned their government career in face of the French colonization, while many scholars who had failed their examinations had joined the colonial administration and thus come in contempt for acting in their own, private interest.[9]

Secondly, Schönberg emphasized one element in the Confucian tradition that Vien had overlooked (probably because he took it for granted): the insistence on Vietnamese unity.[10] In the long period (17-18th century) when Vietnam for every practical purpose was split in a southern domain under the Nguyen family and a northern under the Trinh family, the fiction of unity under the powerless Le dynasty was still upheld. The idea of Vietnamese unity also survived the French attempt to foster Cochinchinese separatism, to split Vietnam in three and to combine the three entities (Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina) with Laos and Cambodia in a "pentagonal union". The tradition of Vietnamese unity also made it necessary for the South Vietnamese regime (1955-75) to insist on

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[8] *Ibid*, p. 46. On pp. 45-46, Schönberg points out how his hypothesis could be tested, but says (just like I did in the beginning of this paper) that to measure the relative importance of cultural and other factors is beyond the scope of his paper.

[9] *Ibid*, p. 32.

[10] *Ibid*, p. 21.

representing the whole of Vietnam (cf. how Taiwan and South Korea continue to insist on representing all of China and Korea. ST).

A third point highlighted by Schönberg which was not at all mentioned by Nguyen Khac Vien, was the weakness of the Confucian tradition in southern Vietnam; in Schönberg's view this explained South Vietnam's particular fate. The difference between North and South has a crucial place in Schönberg's scheme. In the north, Confucian rule had had the opportunity to assert itself and foster a deep commitment of the periphery to the centre and the order it represented. This prevented the development of autonomous groups and heterodox ideologies. The success of the communist model can thus be understood in terms of a "successful implementation of the traditional Confucian imperial order". In Schönberg's view, the failure of the South Vietnamese regime is a forceful test case of this hypothesis. The southern provinces had been the last to be colonized by the Viet people; they were the least Confucianised and the first to be colonized by the French.

Here I may add something that further strengthens Schönberg's argument: when the French conquered Cochinchina, the mandarins fled north, and the French were forced to set up a completely new administration. Cochinchina was consequentially run as a direct French colony whereas in northern and central Vietnam, which were colonized only in the mid-1880s, the French actually increased the power of the mandarins in relation to the villages, thus rendering the traditional state far more effective than before.

After the French departure in 1955, a situation prevailed in the South where the government had little authority over the villages. There were several more or less autonomous regions where the villages payed allegiance either to the communist regime in the north or to the Cao Dai or Hoa Hao sects. This undermined the South Vietnamese regime and also created serious difficulties for the communists after 1975.

Schönberg's argument about the difference between north and south throws a disturbing light into the dispute between

Paul Mus and Nguyen Khac Vien. Mus had argued that the southern sects were the true heirs to the Vietnamese tradition, but Schönberg correctly affirms that the Confucian tradition prevailed in the north -- not the south -- and that this explains the success of northern Communism. Nguyen Khac Vien criticized Paul Mus for seeing only the official, mandarinal level of Confucianism and not the unofficial lower level, but then it was precisely the official, mandarinal level that was absent in the south, and yet it was in that same south that the sects -- Mus' true heirs -- developed their strength. This does not fit together. Something must be wrong somewhere. I think the error is hidden in Vien's objection to Mus. Mus did not primarily concentrate on the higher as opposed to the lower level of Confucianism. What Mus did, was to concentrate on the spiritual as opposed to the secular side of Confucianism, on the popular Vietnamese blend of Buddhism, Taoism, ancestor worship and those elements of Confucianism that thad trickled down from the court. This was the spiritual soil of the southern sects, the main rivals of the Catholic community in Vietnam, but it was largely ignored by the worldly communists. The southern sects were heirs to the Vietnamese spiritual tradition, the communists to the radical brand of political secularism. In the political warfare of the 1960s and 1970s, secularism prevailed, but in the 1990s, the Vietnam that Paul Mus so much revered seems to be revived -- in competition with global video culture.

Again, before getting too close to the present-day problematic, let me turn to the first theoretician.

Alexander Woodside

Alexander Woodside is one of those rare scholars who combine expertise on China and Vietnam. He has written extensively on the Vietnamese emulation of the Chinese model, and he is the one who has most systematically addressed the 20th century relationship between Confucianism and Marxism in its Vietnamese brand. Woodside claims that Nguyen Khac Vien's insistence in his 1962 article on the affinity between

Communism and Confucianism was in itself something "very Vietnamese" and that nothing similar could have been said by a spokesman for the People's Republic of China.[11]

Woodside's arguments can be found in several of his publications; here I shall merely summarize a short article where he presents a crystallization of his idea about how the Vietnamese Confucian tradition explains the success of Vietnamese communism.[12]

In this article, Woodside makes three points about the Vietnamese Confucian tradition all of which distinguish Vietnam from China:

The first is that the Vietnamese monarchy was weaker, less effective and had far less resources than the Chinese model empire, even when we consider the difference in the size of the populations. The Vietnamese monarchy was never able to impose itself on the Vietnamese provinces in the same way that the Chinese emperor could in China (except after the French colonization. ST).

Secondly, Woodside repeated Nguyen Khac Vien's point about the village-based "scholars" ("literati"; "lettrés"), calling them "the provincial intelligentsia ... an aspirant ruling class, or ruling-class-in-waiting", domiciled in villages, close to the peasants. No other Southeast Asian country had such a class, claimed Woodside. Nor did China, where scholars without official positions would be more likely to assemble in towns, serving schools or private companies of different sorts. From the Vietnamese stratum of village

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[11] Alexander Woodside, "History, Structure, and Revolution in Vietnam". Paradoxically, Trinh Van Thao makes the exact opposite claim when referring to the way Vietnamese communists denounced Tran Trong Kim's study of Confucianism in the 1930s: "Ce traitement particulier du *Nho Giao*, cette condamnation sans nuance d'une idéologie qui constitute, davantage que le bouddhisme et le taoisme, le socle politique et social de la société vietnamienne -- alors que le logos maoïste ne cesse de s'y référer -- s'explique par le rôle que joue T.T. Kim sur la scène politique..." Trinh Van Thao, *Vietnam du confucianisme au communisme*, p. 270.

[12] Woodside, *op.cit.*

literati, Woodside affirms, came many of the early Vietnamese communists. Although they broke the basic rules of filial piety, left their families to join an internationalist communist missionary brotherhood and replaced kinship structures with political party structures, they never lost their exceptionally solid roots in Vietnamese society:

> They were the bearers of one component of the dual power of the old bipolar Vietnamese political system: the component which had produced the moral defenders of Mencian "benevolent government." ("Mencian" is derived from the classic Confucian scholar Mencius.)

Woodside's third point is that the position of Mencius in Vietnamese neoConfucianism was stronger than in China. This meant that the emperor's urge to be benevolent and to satisfy the needs of his subjects was greater in Vietnam than in China (cf. Nguyen Khac Vien's argument about Confucianism providing revolutionaries with good arguments). The strength of Mencian thinking was not only important in that it legitimised revolt against bad emperors, but also in that it shared the Rousseauist notion of man as innately good, and the communist utopian idea that it was possible to create the perfect society.

Combining these last two points, Woodside asserted:

> The greater proximity of Vietnamese scholars to ordinary peasants, and the smaller country's narrower, more controlled range of Confucian scholarship ... gave Mencianism a greater chance to develop mass implications in Vietnam than in China.[13]

The strenth of Woodside's arguments resides, like that of Nguyen Khac Vien, in the fact that it is not purely cultural, but socio-cultural.

David G. Marr

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[13] *Ibid*, p. 150.

The fifth scholar is sceptical to cultural explanations, at least those purely cultural. A political analyst for the US military in Vietnam in the early 1960s David G. Marr left the service after having been convinced that the war was unjustified -- and having married a Vietnamese. David Marr turned to history, wrote two massive studies of Vietnamese intellectual life between 1885 and 1945, and then turned to a major research effort on the political and military struggles of the years 1940--45. In the process, Marr acquired the professionel historian's sceptical attitude to cultural explanations: "there has been a tendency", Marr laments, "to assume that Vietnamese attitudes toward ethics and politics have changed very little in the twentieth century". Such assumptions, he warns, reflect a failure to understand "the devilish plasticity of words and other symbols in sharply altered historical circumstances." Ho Chi Minh knew "how to take old symbols and use them creatively according to the political needs of the moment."[14]

On this point, Marr resembles Mus who said the communists' use of Confucianist terms was sheer opportunism, but while Mus saw this as evidence that communism was alien to Vietnamese society, Marr sees such "opportunism" as a normal ingredient of any political rhetoric. According to Marr, simple comparisons between Confucianism and Marxism have "received an inordinate amount of scholarly attention with only mixed results". Still Marr has made such a comparison himself. What he found, were four basic differences:

First, whereas the Confucian elite saw the peasants as passive recipients of moral indoctrination, the communists encouraged the peasants to resist their social degradation. (On this point, I would like to add, however, that although aiming at mobilization of the peasants, the classical report of the two communist leaders Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap from 1938 about rural conditions in northern Vietnam revealed a fair degree of elitist disdain for superstitious and narrow-

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[14] David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, p. 134.

minded peasants.)[15]

Second, the Marxists appealed to the self-interests of the oppressed, thus opposing the centuries-old Confucianist stigma attached to selfish motivation.

Third, communism replaced the Confucianist preference for "quietude, fatalism, harmony and comforting repetition" with elements such as "energy, dynamism, struggle and progress".

Fourth, the centrality of the family in Vietnamese society was criticized by the communists and a more complex model of social interaction put forward with interest groups, classes, "peoplehood", national citizenship and international solidarity.[16]

Instead of thinking in terms of some permanent Confucianist ethic with an explanatory power of its own, Marr sees ethical and political notions as mainly tools of political struggle; notions and values perpetually change in accordance with shifting circumstances and power relations. Culture is a medium through which social and political forces act. If I understand Marr correctly, he recognizes that the communists may have used, and even to some extent have been influenced, by traditional Confucian values, but their basic contribution to Vietnamese history was certainly not to perpetuate the Confucianist heritage, but to generate cultural and political change.

As a fellow historian, I am much tempted by Marr's sound scepticism to purely cultural explanations, but even if we assume that culture is no more than a medium through which social and political forces act, a kind of "meta-language", the actors who use that medium also become its captives. In order to convince their audiences of a certain doctrine, they may accommodate it so much to established notions and values that in the end it is the latter that come out as predominant. The biography of Ho Chi Minh can be seen as the story of a man

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[15] Truong Chinh & Vo Nguyen Giap, *The Peasant Question (1937-1938).*

[16] D. Marr, *op.cit.*, pp. 130-1.

who in his early youth broke violently with the Confucian values he had inherited from his ill-fated father, then through the rest of his life accommodated his youthly embittered communism to the Confucian heritage and came out as an old saint to whom the classical virtues predominated.

Trinh Van Thao

Our sixth scholar, the Franco-Vietnamese philosopher and sociologist Trinh Van Thao, has not focussed on Ho Chi Minh, but has undertaken a generational study of two hundred Vietnamese intellectuals in the 20th century. What Trinh Van Thao himself sees as his basic finding, is the permanence of the Sino-Vietnamese "Confucianist personality". What is it that characterizes this personality? It is *Humanism, Ritual and Order*. They are the three permanent elements that can be applied in different ways. According to Trinh Van Thao there are two main traditions within Confucianism, one conservative focussing on loyalty to the court, and one popular concentrating on the plight of the people.

In Vietnamese history, the two traditions have often been at loggerheads, but on three occasions they have run together because the new "emperor" was someone who belonged to the popular tradition: this was under Nguyen Trai in the 16th century, under Quang Trung's short reign in the late 18th century, and under Ho Chi Minh in the years from the August Revolution in 1945 to the return of former emperor Bao Dai in 1949--50. Even in periods when the two traditions were in conflict, however, such as in the first half of the 1940s when Bao Dai's chief minister Pham Quynh and Ho Chi Minh stood as representatives of each, much the same ethic has prevailed in both camps. Both Pham Quynh and Ho Chi Minh would have subscribed to Duong Ba Trac's description of the ideal scholar (or cadre) from 1925:

> The scholar should be the first to understand and to anticipate, the one without whom the people would be lost: in glorious times, it was he who held political power (chanh); in times of decline or in

> his old age, he took up the function of a teacher (giao); when the country demanded it, he gave his live for the collectivity.

Trinh Van Thao has taught sociology at French universities since 1970 and now works at a newly established centre of Vietnamese studies in Aix-en-Provence, the town where so many Vietnamese scientiests and intellectuals have made their studies. Following the trends of European universities, Trinh Van Thao specialized in the Marxist classics before turning to the study of transition from Confucianism to communism in his country of origin. Unfortunately, the book he published in 1990 is rather an uncompleted manuscript than a finished monograph, but it is an extremely stimulating work in its highly original combination of a sociological and philosophical approach. Thao has structured it as a study of *intellectual generations.* He has picked 222 outstanding Vietnamese intellectuals and divided them into three generations, not on the basis of the year or decade they were born, but on account of the political circumstances of their youth. To Trinh Van Thao, the circumstances ("conjonctures") of the three years 1862, 1907 and 1925 stand out as intellectually formative in that they presented the basic dilemmas that young intellectuals had to work their way out of. Thao's first generation experienced the French conquest. For those of them who remained attached to an independent Confucian heritage, this event interrupted their careers; they either withdrew to live in solitude in their village or mobilized the peasants to resist the French with weapons. Another part of the 1862 generation chose to collaborate with the French in the hope of working out an acceptable compromise. To the second generation the French Indochina Union was an established fact, and the majority decided to work with the French, but this generation also learned of the Japanese victory against Russia in 1905 and the fall of the Chinese empire in 1911. Some members of the 1907 generation thus became pioneers of Vietnamese nationalism, with Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh as the two great names.

The third generation, that of 1925, experienced the great failures of the moderate nationalists in working out an acceptable compromise with the French, and turned to more radical programmes; this was the generation of transition to Marxism.

Because he studied as many as 222 intellectuals, choosing persons with the most different fates, and examining their lives not only with attention to political views, but also to family background, social connections and professional career, Trinh Van Thao could not draw hasty or sweeping conclusions about each generation. He relates how each of them faced difficult choices, and chose differently, but always with some kind of reference to the quest for Humanism, Ritual and Order.

Lucian Pye

The seventh and last theoretician is a sweeping generalist with a taste for rash conclusions. For the last three decades Lucian Pye has been the foremost proponent of the term "political culture", at least in the Asian context, and has written extensively on the political cultures of many Asian societies. In Pye's books "political culture" seems to explain everything that ever happened (in fact it could as well explain what never happened at all; it's a wonderfully flexible concept allowing an author to say what he would like without being challenged). However, in the Vietnamese context Pye has the advantage over the other witnesses of being someone who has not himself been involved. Therefore he is able to make the sort of cynical remarks that often are just dumb, but sometimes clarify an issue.

Pye's latest book, *The Mandarin and the Cadre,* has but a minor reference to Vietnam, but in his *Asian Power and Politics,* he devoted a whole chapter to a comparison between what he calls the "Aggressive Confucianism" of Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam. In Pye's view, the Vietnamese came closer than all other non-Chinese Confucian societies to emulating the Chinese system of power. There were, however, two fundamental differences: First, power in Vietnam had a limited regional

base, and family alliances and marriages were openly used to build power. Secondly, Southeast Asian ideas of power prevailed among the great bulk of the population.[17] In the 20th century, says Pye, the Vietnamese demonstrated a remarkable ability to assimilate European culture, and were it not for their "cultural views of power", they could have been at the forefront of Asian modernization. But instead they devoted their energy to accomplishing the unbelievable on the battlefield and to stubbornly pursuing policies less modernized than other Asian countries and actually leading to decline in the people's standard of living.

What is it then about the "cultural views of power" that prevented the Vietnamese from using their energy to modernize? It was not their conservatism, but their Southeast Asian ideas:

> The Vietnamese use of power is like that of the traditional Balinese: they emphasize the drama of power more than its practical payoffs. Historically this has been shown in the Vietnamese dedication to victory without meaningful rewards, or at least without benefits for the vast majority of people who had made the sacrifices.

Pye claims that the emancipation from Chinese rule in 939 led to decline and anarchy for the people in Vietnam, and that the conquest of Saigon in 1975 similarly set the stage for a new general decline.

> The notion of the Vietnamese elite about how power should be used ensured that years of struggle and sacrifice by the obedient masses would bring them only a harsher, more austere standard of living.

The explanation for the elite's insensitivity to the needs of the people, Pye asserts, seems to lie in "the cultural gap that exists between the Confucian, and Westernized, elite's concepts of power and the more popular pre-Confucian ideas of leadership and authority."

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[17] Lucian Pye, *Asian Power and Politics*, pp. 215-6.

Here, Pye runs into the only danger that a political culturalist can ever encounter (since he doesn't have to bother about facts), namely the danger of self-contradiction. First, he has characterized Vietnam as a country with a Confucian elite and a people maintaining Southeast Asian concepts. Then he explains the Vietnamese *elite's* concept of power by Southeast Asian features, using a Balinese analogy. After that he returns to his idea of a "cultural gap" between the Confucian - and Westernized - *elite* on the one side, and the pre-Confucian *people* on the other. Finally he ridicules the Vietnamese people in general by providing a number of examples of the silly things that such "common people" as Pham Van Dong (son of an emperor's chief mandarin and himself prime minister) have said and done since 1975. Pye ends up with a remark which by its folly underlines that the truth is the opposite:

> What is hardest to understand is the Vietnamese elite's readiness to call for ceaseless suffering by the people. The Confucian ideal of paternalistic benevolence no longer exists in the Vietnamese political culture. What does remain is the ideal of duty, or making sacrifices without asking why.[18]

The ideal of paternalistic benevolence has most certainly survived in present-day Vietnam. Indeed the shame of not having been able to accommodate the people's needs, and all sorts of attempts to hide that shame, pervade present Vietnamese politics.

Pye has many strange things to say, but meanwhile also makes some observations that we who love Vietnam have difficulties getting on paper:

- the tendency of the old Vietnamese political elite to wildly exaggerate Vietnam's importance in the world;

- the tendency of that same old elite to feel entitled to large scale assistance from abroad, to feel that it should have been rewarded economically from the outside for defeating

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[18] *Ibid*, p. 246.

the United States in war.

Since Pye published his book, however, Hanoi has reformulated its aims: economic growth is now the overriding goal, and a new foreign policy elite is emerging with a far more realistic outlook than before. Whether this is typically Confucian, Western or Southeast Asian, I don't know, but I'm convinced that it is fortunate.

The Communist Survival

A small majority of our seven scholars (with Mus, Marr and Pye as a strong but disparate minority) have tried to explain the success of Vietnamese communism up to 1975 by referring to its continuation of the Confucian heritage. Since 1975, the communists have lost a struggle with the country's peasants over collective agriculture, have been obliged to withdraw their forces from a drawn out war in Cambodia without having obtained the results they sought, and have lost their main ally and sponsor in the world: the Soviet Union. This has provoked tremendous ideological bewilderment and opened up the country to capitalist enterprise, but just like its sister parties in China and North Korea, the Vietnamese Communist Party has remained in power.

While providing the most systematical example of a Confucian explanation for communist success in Vietnam, Alexander Woodside has also suggested that after their gaining power, the Vietnamese communists have broken the Confucian tradition of ending the state's power at the village gate by integrating the country's villages into one national agro-industrial structure. Thus the villages can no longer be the "semi-autonomous" enclaves of Mencius-quoting scholars and premodern religious and social solidarities.[19] When writing this, however, Woodside did not at all feel certain that the integration of the villages in the communist state had been carried out successfully. So much of it was based on Soviet aid, and it would seem that the Vietnamese Communist Party

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[19] A. Woodside, *op.cit.*, p. 154.

itself had come to resemble an all-male "old-fashioned Confucian oligarchy". Woodside's article was published in 1989, the year of the Tien An Men massacre and the great year of anti-communist revolts in Eastern Europe. Since 1986, the Vietnamese Communist oligarchy has loosened its grip, but not even an attempt at revolt has occurred. The communist political system survived in Vietnam more easily than in any other communist state, with a possible exception for North Korea. How come?

Let me first take yet another look at the affinities between Confucianist and communist doctrine. The greatest problem with using an inherent Confucianism to explain the success of communism is that Confucianism prescribed a conservative harmony whereas communism advocated revolutionary change. As David Marr and Trinh Van Thao have both demonstrated, the replacement of 'harmony' by 'struggle' by the generation of 1925 marked a radical mental rupture with the thinking of the older Confucian elite. But in the 1980s the generation that was young and revolutionary in the 1930s had grown very, very old. It was a group of elders who by virtue of their privileged access to television and radio witnessed their red international brotherhood being swept away in anti-communist revolutionary change. In that situation, I would claim, the old Vietnamese communists, just like Deng Xiao-ping, made a final return to the conservatism they had challenged in their youth. They retained the Confucian idea of benevolent government, and realised that in the modern world this can only be accomplished by inviting foreign investment and promoting economic growth, but to achieve this, they asserted, it was absolutely necessary to preserve social harmony and political stability. Over and over again, the need for stability was reiterated in speeches by the communist leaders. The main ideological stumbling block for the transgression from Confucianism to communism in the years 1925--75 had become a major argument for the survival of the communist party state.

What then about the provincial scholars? Do they still

exist, and do they in any way form a critical elite or a "ruling-class-in-waiting"? The answer to both questions is a clear no; they have disappeared. Under the socialist regime, a vastly expanded education system and state machinery created a far greater number of educated people than ever before, but they no longer depended directly on peasant villages for their livelihood. Teaching and other services were institutionalised from above and carried out by salaried civil servants. The communist state effectively penetrated the villages and eliminated the possibility of an opposition alliance between peasants and a critical intelligentsia. The state was unable to force the peasants to work hard on land which was not their own, but in most other respects, the peasants bowed their necks to the wishes of the party and its local agents. If a new intelligentsia is about to emerge in Vietnam, it is not in the villages, but among the young, well-trained, but largely unemployed people in the towns, with artists and authors in the vanguard.

In 1992, I asked the dissident mathematician Phan Dinh Dieu during an interview in Hanoi, if he expected an intellectual opposition to develop in present-day Vietnam. His answer was:

> Before speculating about a possible role for the intellectuals, I would like to ask: Who are our intellectuals? Do we really have an intelligentsia in Vietnam, an independent social and political intellectual force? This is an important question to be asked of all societies that inspire to introduce or improve upon democracy.
>
> Let me first mention the group of patriotic intellectuals who were educated in the French period. Among them there are many respectable and courageous personalities. Some of them are still with us, but they no longer wield much influence. In fact, there are very few left. We should cherish them for what they have done for the nation.
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> Secondly, there is a very large number of specialists educated during the socialist period. In contrast to the French regime, the socialist regime educated specialists rather than intellectuals. We have a great many mathematicians, physicists, biologists, engineers etc., and are now having more and more economists. But they were never taught to

> think about society. The party was to do the thinking for everyone. The political awareness of the specialists is generally weak. The best of them participate in government and, quite naturally, belong to the party. It is possible that many specialists harbour democratic ideas privately, but we don't really have any means of knowing if such is the case.
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> Thirdly, there are the former intellectuals of South Vietnam. Most of them have left the country. They may of course come back and serve the nation in various ways, but to play a significant political role, intellectuals must be in close contact with people. A protracted exile is no good background for a positive intellectual force.
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> Lastly, there are the young, those who were only recently educated or are now under education, and whose formative years have been characterized by Doi Moi ["Doi Moi" is the Vietnamese equivalent to "perestroika"]. These last years, we have had a reinvigoration of independent art and literature. But there still is a long way to go before these tendencies may coalesce into a real political and social force.
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> All in all, I have to conclude that we lack an intellectual class.

This answer by Dieu should be related to Trinh Van Thao's generational study. The youngest generation in Trinh Van Thao's book is now on its way to die out, and the generation who was young in 1945 is in power. After this generation, there is the one which was sacrificed (or sacrificed itself) in the Vietnam War. The less heroic sides of the war experience are now being voiced in Vietnamese fiction; among those who fought on the side of the NLF and North Vietnam, there is a great feeling of sadness, first because so many of their relatives and friends were lost, then because of the somber outcome of their long struggles. Vietnam remains one of the world's poorest countries (although that will not last long) and intellectuals enjoy very limited freedom. There is a widespread feeling that the great sacrifices of the past have lost their purpose. Let us listen to a passage from a novel by the former communist propagandist Duong Thu Huong (in French translation):

> Cette guerre n'était pas simplement une lutte contre

> l'agression. Elle était aussi l'occasion d'une résurrection. Le Viêt-Nam était l'élu de l'Histoire. Après la guerre, notre patrie deviendrait le Paradis de l'humanité, notre peuple aurait une place à part, nous deviendrons des hommes honorés, respectés... Nous pensions et nous nous étions détournés des larmes de faiblesse.
>
> Dix ans avaient passé. Personne n'en reparlait. Personne n'avait oublié. Plus nous nous enfoncions dans la guerre, plus nous déchirait le souvenir de ce premier jour. Les larmes de nos mères nous brûlaient davantage au fur et à mesure que la conscience de notre atroce indifférence nous torturait. Pour la gloire, nous avions tout renié. Cette mauvaise conscience nous liait, comme le souvenir du temps où nous gardions les buffles ensemble ou coupions l'herbe.[20]

Finally, there is an enormous generation which now constitutes more than half the Vietnamese population who has never known anything but absolute Party rule. Last year I met a young lady from Hanoi's highest social strata, who was just about to marry. I expressed my admiration for Ho Chi Minh and my interest in the August Revolution of 1945. She listened attentively, told me her father had admired Ho Chi Minh as well, but that she could have no feelings for a dead body who in his lifetime was responsible for creating the miserable society she had grown up with. -You are a historian from far away, she said, and may fancy something that happened a long time ago. My revolution is happening here and now.

Perhaps a new intelligentsia is about to emerge, after all.

Is Confucianism Back?

"Today", wrote Nguyen Khac Vien in 1962, "Marxism has replaced Confucianism as a doctrine of political and social action, and a new revolutionary ethic has replaced Confucian morality in Vietnam. Any attempt to revive Confucianism is useless."[21]

Thirty years later, in 1992, the Vietnamese had not yet

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[20] Duong Thu Huong, *Roman sans titre*, p. 32.

[21] Nguyen Khac Vien, *op.cit*, p. 52.

taken to the Chinese fashion of summoning international workshops on Confucianism in present day Asia; but the classic Vietnamese study of Confucius that the great Vietnamese scholar Tran Trong Kim published in 1932 and which at that time was denounced in the Saigon press by leading Vietnamese communists, was reedited, that year, in Ho Chi Minh City.[22] The "new revolutionary ethic" of 1962 had become old-fashioned. To many of those who were strongly attached to the idea of a particularly Vietnamese heritage, old Confucian and popular spiritual values seemed the only possible defense-line against Western materialist influences.

There are at present a number of symptoms of a renewed interest in Confucianist thinking among the Vietnamese:

1. Inspiration from the successful "Confucianist economies" of South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore is seen as a counterweight to the temptation of falling in the same liberal trap as the Russians and East Europeans.

2. Reactions against Western materialism, individualism, pluralism and exaggerated liberties are manifest among the older generation.

3. More and more Confucianist elements are included in the rhetoric of the Party leaders to back up their quest for stability. It would seem to be quite significant that the latest congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party broadened the classic peasant-worker alliance to an alliance of workers, peasants *and intellectuals*, and that the report from the Congress boasted the number of professors among the delegates.[23]

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[22] Tran Trong Kim, *Dai cuong triet hoc trung quoc, Nho Giao,* [Overview of Chinese Philosophy, Confucianism]. Other recent publications about Confucianism include Nguyen Hieu Le, *Khong Tu* (the preface was written in 1978 but the book was published only in 1991), and *Lao Tu Dao Duc Kinh*, Ho Chi Minh City 1992 (an annotated translation from the Chinese in several volumes). The collected works of Phan Boi Chau, the Confucianist scholar who became one of the two pioneers of Vietnamese nationalism, were also published in 1992, by Nha xuat ban Thuan hoa, a publishing house in central Vietnam.

[23] S. Tønnesson, *Vietnams politiska utveckling*, p. 8-10.

According to Nguyen Khac Vien, Ho Chi Minh's transition from Confucianism to Marxism was "not easy or simple ... He reconstructed his entire thinking".[24] For the present generation, a transition from communism to Confucianism may be far easier than it was the other way round, but then also the temptation from a globalized "bourgeois individualism" is stronger than ever before.

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[24] Nguyen Khac Vien, *op.cit*, p. 51.

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