

**DISCOURSES ON POLITICAL REFORM AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN EAST
AND SOUTHEAST ASIA IN THE LIGHT OF NEW PROCESSES OF REGIONAL
COMMUNITY BUILDING**

Project Discussion Paper No. 20/2002

**Interviews at the Ministry of the Interior,
Hanoi 2000**

by

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Preface to the Paper Series

The present discussion paper series of the Institute of East Asian Studies accompanies a research project entitled *Political Discourses on Reform and Democratisation in Light of New Processes of Regional Community-Building*. The project is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and supervised by Thomas Heberer.

The central topic of interest is, as the title of the project suggests, the influence exerted on the political reform process by political discourse. The papers published in this series address the public political discussion at the national as well as the transnational, regional level. Accordingly, the papers display a variety of discourses that have emerged in different countries and centre round different political issues. Contributions from authors of the region are particularly welcome, because they reflect an authentic view of the political discussion within the local public. By integrating and encouraging the local voices, the project team intends to compile a collection of papers that document some important debates and states of the research process.

The current political discourses in East Asia are primarily analysed in case studies of two authoritarian states (China, Vietnam), a multi-ethnic, formally democratic state with strong authoritarian features (Malaysia), and a democratic state with significant parochial structures and patterns of behaviour (Japan). In addition to these case studies, contributions from and on other countries of the region are included to provide a broad scope of comparable discourses.

While Claudia Derichs and Thomas Heberer are the editors of the paper series, a project team of eight members conducts field work in East Asia and brings forth regular proceedings. Research reports other than discussion papers shall be published in refereed journals and magazines. Detailed proceedings leading to the final results of the research project will be published as a book. The project team is composed of research fellows associated with the Chair for East Asian Politics at the Gerhard Mercator University of Duisburg. The team members are: Karin Adelsberger (area: Japan); Claudia Derichs, Ph.D. (Malaysia, Japan); Lun Du, Ph.D. (China); Prof. Thomas Heberer, Ph.D. (China, Vietnam); Bong-Ki Kim, Ph.D. (South Korea); Patrick Raszelenberg (Vietnam); Nora Sausmikat (China); and Anja Senz (China).

Paper No. 1 of the series provides a detailed idea of the theoretical and methodological setting of the project. Each discussion paper of the present series can be downloaded from the university server, using the following URL: <http://www.uni-duisburg.de/Institute/OAWISS/Publikationen/index.html>. Suggestions and comments on the papers are welcome at any time.

Duisburg, June 2000

Claudia Derichs and Thomas Heberer

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Interviews at the Ministry of the Interior, Hanoi 2000

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Politische Reform- und Demokratisierungsdiskurse im Lichte neuer Prozesse regionaler Gemeinschaftsbildung

Discourses on Political Reform and Democratization in East and Southeast Asia in the Light of New Processes of Regional Community-Building

Zusammenfassung/Abstract:

In a series of talks at the Vietnamese Ministry of the Interior in the summer of 2000, the author asked a number of middle and higher ranking political cadres about the current situation in Vietnam, the country's prospects for the future, and the state of political discourse in light of Vietnam's transition toward an open society.

Still caught up in a world of terms past and concepts forgotten, these cadres nonetheless argue that neither the Party's performance legitimacy nor the widening of political discourse inside the country will have a decisive impact on Vietnam or its populace but that organic development and social stability remain prime issues in light of the country's attempt to catch up with a world it had been isolated from over decades.

Schlüsselwörter/Keywords:

Political Discourse, Political System, Communist Party

Interviews at the Ministry of the Interior, Hanoi 2000

Patrick Raszelenberg

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Interviews at the Ministry of the Interior, Hanoi 2000

The talks were arranged so that questions pertaining to one of the four complexes mentioned hereafter would be asked: a) democracy and socialism; b) concepts of political order, ideas for the future; c) political discourse; and d) transnational issues.

A more detailed view of this guideline for interviews lists the following questions, which were not asked one after another or worded exactly as they appear here. They were taken as a guideline to go by and work with, not as a checklist for political polls or a catalogue for the extraction of seemingly critical answers testifying to a specific potential of dissent among the thinking members of society.

1) *Democracy and Socialism*

- a) Definition of the current political system
- b) Meaning of this definition; is it possible to work with it? --> Example: A particular definition of socialism oriented along official lines is put forth; is this definition dilatable enough to incorporate change or would that lead to questioning the definition itself? --> Aim: To establish a theoretical point of departure
- c) Enrichments and changes experienced by the socialist economy in the course of the economic renovation policy, and how are these judged?
- d) Do the interviewees distinguish between external and internal incentives for change? If so, what does that mean? --> Aim: To establish a principal consensus on the systemic transition Vietnam is currently undergoing
- e) Which forms of political participation have established themselves recently and how are they viewed (sufficient, insufficient)? What kind of consequences can be expected from the answer to this question?
- f) Should there be a distinction between individual and collective forms of participation and why?
- g) Which means of participation in or interference with political discourse does the tradition of Vietnamese political culture contain?

2) *Concepts of political order*

- a) Vietnam's experience with foreign models (including socialism)
- b) Are there any official conceptions regarding the political future, and what do they look like? --> Aim: How are quasi-nonexistent party guidelines dealt with, i.e. guidelines which are implicitly taken for granted, and does the interviewee believe the VCP follows any particular, well-defined notion with regard to this issue?
- c) Indigenous resources for the construction of the future: What kind of set of alternative options are contained within the political tradition of the country?
- d) Which role does the concept of political virtue play in this context? --> This notion is closely tied to political actors who did the right thing at the right time (for their country); their actions were rooted in individual initiative yet succeeded in securing abroad moral and political consensus for these actions. Does this notion possess any relevance for the individual?

- e) Own ideas? Which way should Vietnam go/follow?
- f) If the Asian Crisis has demonstrated Vietnam's limited means to deal with the repercussions of such economic upheavals, is worthwhile to spend time thinking about the social consequences of any such crises?

3) *Political discourse*

- a) What does political discourse mean in closed political systems? Where does it take place, how does one participate, and what kind of changes does it go through? Are there different forms of discourse?
- b) Are the means of the ruling elite to perceive political tendencies among the people sufficient? Will they continue to be so in this post-socialist phase?
- c) Are there any tendencies which are deliberately excluded or blacked out? How far does the political perception of these discourses reach?
- d) Is the individual encouraged to become actively involved, either within the framework of orthodox politics or as part of alternative discourses?
- e) Can the successful application of elements associated with political virtue make a difference? --> Election of 'socially better entrenched' local politicians against party candidates
- f) Do these considerations matter for an intellectual keeping in mind the broad picture of political development? What kind of consequences would follow from that?

4) *Transnational issues*

- a) Redefinition of the international community (socialist states --> ASEAN, the West)
- b) If Vietnam is geographically Southeast and politically East Asian, does that translate into any concrete political actions?
- c) Joining the ASEAN: For better or worse?

Why these talks?

These interviews were conducted as part of a larger series of talks with Vietnamese intellectuals and artists as well as members of the political élite in the summer of 2000. The talks with MoI members were of particular importance, since this ministry was chosen as one of the key institutions for interviews about political discourse in Vietnam. Known to be a bastion of die-hard conservatism, the MoI is one of the most powerful ministries in the country. Except for the VCP Politburo and Central Committee, it is here where most decisions regarding internal security and matters pertaining to issues of domestic political development are discussed and taken. Therefore, one can expect to meet with well-informed Party members familiar with the items to be discussed, something which might not necessarily be the case at the Ministry of Construction or the Office of Family Planning. Talks with members of the Vietnamese Ministry of the Interior were held on two separate occasions, each attended by three interviewees. No single member was present at both occasions. A café not normally frequented by any specific

group of people, be they officials, laborers, intellectuals or members of a certain age group, served as the venue for the talks which transpired in a friendly and informal atmosphere each time preceded by questions regarding the interviewer's previous sojourn in Hanoi. All MoI officials were male, between forty-five and sixty-eight, who professed to have been working at the MoI for at least ten years with the exception of two of them who apparently had served their employer a total of almost three decades.

Obviously, no names are provided, since none were given, and if they were, they may or not have been real. It is important to understand that these cadres are in all likelihood not mere MoI members but also members of internal intelligence and security organizations. Hence, the true value of these interviews lie in that they were conducted with people who know and understand the situation Vietnam is facing. Artists and intellectuals may be far more outspoken and frank in their responses but their political leverage leaves much to desire, something which by the way is true of most artists and intellectuals around the world, yet Party cadres at the MoI are more familiar with the mechanisms of political discourse inside the country, albeit that they may view this issue from the perspective of the challenged.

What can we thus expect from members of Foucault's 'discourse police' more interested in channelling, funnelling and directing discourse than participating or expanding it, besides insights into the ways of directing and orchestrating discussions about the country's future? Talks of this format certainly have their limitations - but these limitations are significant in themselves, since they allow us to better understand how members of the political élite think and why they would arrive at conclusions that others might not. In a series of interviews dealing with political discourse in Vietnam, it is important to talk to as many potential participants as possible, just as it is important not to neglect any opposing views or arguments for the continuation of the present, strictly regulated form of discourse. Only then can we gather a more comprehensive picture about the situation inside the country and the way the Vietnamese are responding to the challenges their country is facing.

Democracy and Socialism

Probably the most striking feature of these discussions was the seeming disinterest of all interviewees in what this scholar regards as questions of overriding importance, e.g. the political future of the country, the current domestic situation and the breakneck pace of social change engendered by the reform path since the early nineties.¹ Several reasons might serve as an explanation for this somewhat unexpected behavior: keen interest coupled with deliberate detachment and indifference; disorientation; insecurity; and a sense of aloofness fed by the belief that whatever pace of reform the VCP may accelerate to, this will by no means endanger its actual position in society or its firm grip on people's minds.

¹ Decided upon as early as late 1986 (IVth VCP congress), *doi moi* didn't really take off until 1990/91. While the scholarly literature on the reform process keeps taking 1986 as a point du départ, it wasn't until the collapse of the East European people's democracies in 1989/90 and the Soviet Union in 1991 that an accelerated pace of reform became visible in Vietnam

Asked what kind of political system they are living in, the response was a unanimous 'socialist system'. The ensuing discussion however, demonstrated that such definitions do not, in the eye of the MoI, serve any purpose beyond individual legitimation, i.e. placing oneself, along with one's opinion, within a tightly-knit framework of orthodox approaches upheld by the ruling circles. Relativations are encouraged and harmless. Thus, the suggestion 'post-socialist' encountered as little resistance as 'semi-socialist, semi-capitalist', 'economically capitalist' or 'socialist capitalism'. What mattered, it seemed, were the consequences drawn from this or that definition, a point that was elaborated upon in greater length by one of the MoI members: Call it 'semi-socialist, semi-capitalist', 'economically capitalist' or 'socialist capitalism', it's the VCP's position within society that counts. People are ostensibly free to adopt any definition which is not discriminated against openly and has somehow found its way into the official lingo of party documents, directives, discussions in TCCS², the theoretical organ of the VCP, or any of the party newspapers. The same holds true for the changes unleashed by the reform process since the early nineties: Yes, those changes were dramatic, and yes, they brought about a radical reorientation among many of the upper echelons of the communist party, but they did not affect significantly any of the structural elements surrounding the immediate working environment of these MoI members, i.e. did not appear to leave their mark where it is felt most directly. While the causality of this argument may leave something to desire, at least in the eye of the interviewer, it nonetheless demonstrates a sense of aloofness pervading most of the answers given during these conversations.

On the distinction between internal and external incentives for reform, there appeared to prevail a view that the structural framework for change was laid at the IVth VCP congress in 1986 and that all subsequent developments were more or less logical consequences of the party's outspoken will to reform the economy and loosen its grip on the mind of the populace. The one example enjoying a favorite status among MoI members was that while before the early nineties, even talking to foreigners on the street could lead to arrest, now everyone was free to rent their entire house to foreigners – which shows that even though these people may end up being influenced by the thoughts of their new guests, it was the VCP which had allowed them to do so. Hence, economic changes would have to be seen in a similar fashion. While the immediate circumstances of, say the import of products successfully competing against Vietnamese ones and thus ending up dominating certain market segments, none of this would have been possible without overriding political guidelines backed by the VCP and creating an environment where such products would find their way into the country. The VCP was portrayed as the sole initiator of and driving force the reform process. Once the door was opened, all the party had to do was control the influx of materials, ideas and people. Pressed to explain whether there was any

Political participation is regarded as a non-issue. All MoI members affirmed that the most pressing problems Vietnam was facing at this time were entirely unrelated to matters of political participation. Nonetheless, it was argued that the current political systems offers multifarious ways of participation hitherto unseen in the country's history, i.e. neither under the former dynastic system nor French rule. When reminded of the

² Tap Chi Cong San, Communist Review

ROV experience, this was brushed away with the usual reference to political cronies and marionettes working or the overall goals of US imperialism.

At this point, it may be useful to bring in a linguistic component. Language molds our thinking, and the way we refer to certain events predetermines our perception of the latter. It is therefore noteworthy that while several segments of Vietnamese society have long ceased to refer to the ROV as lackeys, marionettes or puppets – notions heavily charged with ideological assumptions – the political cadres with whom these interviews were conducted apparently haven't begun questioning the validity of such terms yet. When asked specifically as to why the current standard dictionary of the Vietnamese language would continuously refer to the 'Saigon regime' – a far more neutral sounding term – this was relegated to the realm of linguistic hawkshawishness of apolitical minds, i.e. they didn't know what to say, and their sense of befuddlement provoked a somewhat rash reaction.

We might add that this comes as little surprise, given that language assumed a pivotal role in Vietnam's recent history where some kind of public CV hanging around one's neck existed in the form of charged notions and terms employed by every individual specifying the degree of political involvement, one's standpoint, demeanor and outlook. That some of the petrified lingo of foregone regimes continues to circulate unabated does not necessarily mean these terms would signify the same they used to, since like all things, the employment of these speech patterns changes. We therefore do not assume that a certain reservoir of outdated terminological alternatives would stand for the same kind of assumptions. This holds particularly true in the case of 'marionettes' and other awkward distortions which generally say more about the individual employing them than the actual signified matter. Political terms, arrived at either by consensus or rule from above, are usually constructed (as opposed to inherent terms) and thus linked to a specific kind of usage derived from the context of their original appearance and subject to changes related to re-interpretations and reassessments. Since political discourse is not limited to language but defines an individual's socio-political interaction (of which language is naturally a constituent part), we can derive patterns of political behavior and action from the means by which it is mostly communicated.

However, we should remember that orthodox political language, which is what we are dealing with in this case, is fed by the assumption that it legitimizes and reiterates ideological patterns whose verity is more or less discreetly recognized and continues to be reflected in our cadres' parlance without that they may necessarily be aware of this. Hence, the political discourse of the ruling elite is not fundamentally divergent from that of the ruled in that both rely on borrowed language produced by the ideological discourse of the political system. Its effect lies primarily in failing to link personal experience to perennial truths, since, in order to stick to our example, the full force of the 'lackey character' of the South Vietnamese régime has never been experienced by these people – nor need it be, for that would imply making a factual statement whereas the intention of our cadres' utterance is purely political in that it defines a political standpoint, marks a sphere of ideological veracity and accedes to specific, unquestioned value statements about reality. Politically charged terms derive their legitimacy exclusively from the process of ideological discourse and its modes of production. To regain a somewhat autonomous form of speech behavior within the realm of political discourse, it is of pivotal significance to withdraw from what could be called acquiescent talk or compliant speech and return to a more personal sphere of ethical value statements, since

they are more likely to reflect one's thoughts and ideas about a given situation or event. In so saying, it is assumed that this sphere of ethical standards actually exists and does possess the capability to be consciously communicated. Whether our interviewed are aware of such a possibility cannot be decided here, nor are we in a position to ascertain whether the clustered complexity of overlapping political notions figuring prominently in their everyday working vocabulary impedes any fruitful quest for uncontaminated thought expression meaning that while this may still be tainted by subjective predispositions, it will be cleared of alienating ideological presumptions.

The context for this particular discussion is the underlying presumption that foreign interference in the Indochina War did not always constitute an invasion (as was assumed to be the case of the PRC which, despite having sent 300,000 soldiers to work on railroad repairs and logistics) yet did in fact do so in the case of the United States. This is an important linguistic reference, since it will allow us to make assumptions about the general political value system of those talked to.

It is therefore quite understandable that political participation is regarded as a *quantité négligeable*, since the MoI cadres would look straight to the upper cupola of the VCP for guidance in matters relating to essential assumptions expressed in unequivocal terms. Thus, the fact that the National Assembly has recently been granted more far-reaching rights than it used to enjoy in the previous decades is taken at face value to mean a broadening of the Party's popular base – which is precisely what the VCP has been arguing in its theoretical journals. The trite truism that most NA members, and certainly those with any political weight. Are VCP members, is not really overlooked but simply not questioned. Politics means VCP, and non-VCP politics is regarded as a *contradictio in adjecto*.

It thus appears evident that current forms of participation are regarded as sufficient. More than that, since the recent opening up of society has contributed to hitherto buried voices being heard and listened to. Participation as it is simply doesn't range high on the political agenda of most Vietnamese policy makers, and the views of those standing in second and third line echoed that. Repeated reference to the primordial goal of socially harmonious yet strong development (*su' phat trie'n lanh ma.nh*) appears to have relegated all questions pertaining to matters of political participation to the realm of ephemeral political dream work.

It therefore comes as little surprise that the distinction between individual and collective forms of participation is seen as somewhat artificial. Asked about the long-standing Vietnamese tradition of individual action in times of national hardship – evidently shunning the crucial point that this concept is closely linked to a failing state apparatus incapable of both representing and satisfying the material needs of the people – examples of such action were looked for primarily within the VCP itself, e.g. Tran Phu, Ho Chi Minh, Pham Van Dong and others. The mentioning of the latter in particular does allow us not only to judge this answer with qualifications but also to express a sense of uneasiness with regard to the lightheartedness with which *prima facie* valid statements are repeated *ad nauseam* despite the findings of recent research available in Vietnam as well, research which has largely reassessed the position of the longest-serving prime minister of the twentieth century.

On the contrary, it may be argued that individual initiative is probably one of the major dangers looming behind the economic renovation process, since a formerly docile collective is suddenly split into individual fragments all claiming possession of their natural political habitat, even though the latter may be acted upon in a seemingly non-political manner such as economic activity.

Hence, the Vietnamese political tradition is viewed as having evolved in an almost one-dimensional manner, with the emergence of individual initiative being immediately canonized to serve the present-day aims of political historiography; what seems unclear is whether any of the interviewees could imagine playing an active, non-mainstream role themselves, and it appears that, having been trained to 'consume' ideas churned out at the top of the VCP, such thoughts don't come lightly – which is to say that there appears to exist a true barrier of understanding and sympathy for those who, whether in classical dissident fashion or in a more subtle manner – have repeatedly opted to take a break from Party guidelines and reflect on the meaning of the somewhat lofty goals the VCP once set out to attain, only to find that, measured against its own demands for achievement, it (the VCP) doesn't come away unscathed. This was the case of several independent-minded thinkers who have challenged authority more or less directly. Within the confines of an environment still obsessed with security concerns and the continuing struggle for goals no longer supported but verbally, however, it is hard to avoid the impression that, while not much may have changed, the perspective of these pillars of the system has narrowed, away from the grand ideological battles of the past to the petty problems of the routine of reform.

Concepts of Political Order

Time has come to pose more fundamental questions such as the sustainability of the present political system or its sustainability in its present form – a more than subtle distinction, given that even party members appear to hesitate when asked to define the current system, since it's not clear whether a coherent answer to that question – or merely the official one, a 'socialist market economy' - will contribute to an understanding of the usefulness of the question. At the Vietnamese Ministry of Interior there obviously is a sense of marked indifference with regard to the subtleties of scholarly distinctions while all those interviewed emphasized the significance of certain fundamental elements remaining unchanged, no matter how well justified they be.

None of this is viewed in terms of foreign models or foreign ideological inspiration, i.e. the current system drawing its major source of ideological justification from the works of European intellectuals - not because it has had some time to become rooted within Vietnamese society itself and may thus be viewed as less and less 'foreign', but because it is still regarded as universal in the sense that the values propounded hold true well beyond the confines of Vietnamese society. On the surface, this argument has a certain tradition (and enjoys a certain popularity) among non-European societies following comparable political models; however, what interests us is to understand how these issues are viewed within the governing and policy-making bodies of society. One thing that emerged with a specific degree of clarity in the talks was that these questions don't

matter. It was pointed out that large parts of Vietnamese society are heavily influenced by traditions originally introduced from the north, i.e. China, and that to discuss political ideology within a framework of national/foreign distinctions would not render any fruitful results which could help us to better interpret Vietnamese reality. To put it bluntly, whether the all-pervasive Confucian element is any more or less ‘Vietnamese’ than , say the Marxist one, simply doesn’t matter. For the tasks ahead, such as modernization, these considerations are held to prove irrelevant.

The uneasiness with which these questions are shirked appears the more striking in light of their unabated significance: Vietnam has ceased to function as a socialist state, and what little is left of it may well be considered to bear the marks of any country in plain transition, be it from socialism to capitalism or, as in the case of a number of South American states some fifteen years ago, from military dictatorship to democracy. Transitions are marked by disorientation that comes with the multiplication of information and interpretations. The same Vietnamese populace which for years stood attentive to the voices of morally superior, correct political virtues emanating from a singular direction, very much like traditional listeners in a concert hall would have their eyes glued to center stage and be exposed to monophonic sound bytes, now finds itself exposed to polyphonic, sometimes cacophonous surround systems of diversified interpretations of political reality, some of them competing with one another for an overdue amplification of people’s listening practices. Within the MoI however, old habits die hard, and the degree of apathy resulting from stunned disbelief – as demonstrated during the discussions which were repeatedly interspersed with utterances such as ‘the collapse of the Soviet Union was quite frankly a near catastrophe for our country’ and ‘if the situation in Eastern Europe has been different, we might not be talking here today’ – strikes one as particularly resilient, given that the triggering external events for Vietnam’s reform course (the internal ones being rooted in economic failures which were timidly tackled as early as 1982) are long past.

Among the official guidelines for future development, one sticks out as the most frequent focal point of attraction and attention, ‘strong and harmonious development’ (su[?]. phát triêⁿ lành ma.nh). The key word in this phrase, ‘harmonious’ or ‘smooth’, ‘undisturbed’ (lành), has been successful in rallying the support of practically all strata of Vietnamese society. Derived from the Sinitic tradition of fear of ‘luan’ (Vietn.: ‘loa.n’) or chaos, the smoothness evoked in this phrase pitches development under the continuing leadership of the VCP against a worst-case scenario of uncontrolled, An Lushan style civil disorder tearing the country apart and resulting in worse turmoil than the three Indochina wars of the twentieth century.

During the period known as high socialism, party directives on virtually every aspect of public life left no doubt with regard to the current stage of development, be it political, social or economic. Single campaigns undermined this sense in coordination with larger mobilizations organized under the same heading and serving the same purposes.

At the cupola of the VCP, this was not seen as simply another means of dominating, controlling and administering the populace but an attempt to forcefully convince people of what was thought to be right, i.e. the right way of governance, of political education, and of ideological guidance. The underlying assumption was that the VCP actually ‘knew’ or believed it knew what was right and good. To be able to know, one has to have access to a specific canon of learning materials, which in this case originated in the

critique of political economy by Marx and Engels. It is of pivotal importance to grasp the significance of this seemingly trite truism. After the collapse of the Eastern European people's democracies, the VCP found that most of what it believed in, or the ideas it subscribed to in order to base an entire administrative apparatus on its ideological assumptions, were questionable. What the VCP lost at the time was no less than the ideological base of its political legitimacy.

We have seen numerous ways to cope with that problem, and each socialist country has contributed its own ideas and followed its own path – however, the essential problem of political legitimacy remains the same, a realm of ideological void turned meaningless by a change in political conditions. Like other communist parties, the VCP doesn't know what to believe in anymore. Official publications will keep talking about the correct application of Marxist-Leninist principles in any given concrete circumstance, but the bland truth is that these applications have become irrelevant, since they don't even conform to practiced standards anymore, e.g. in economic matters.

To cadres used to conforming to particular expectations and following codified standards, the lack of spiritual guidance appears severe. All MoI members interviewed complained that the VCP didn't quite have much to say on a lot of contemporary issues, that it kept reiterating worn out phrases which should have at least been modified to better suit or conform to new circumstances. It was clear, however, that what was expected of the party leadership was no volte face but more intellectual guidance in light of the new openness and people's opportunities to fulfill their own private projects. Needless to say that this call for authority comes as little surprise to those acquainted with the ideological vacuum left behind after decades of forced political 'participation'.

While a lot has been written about people's desires to be told what to think – i.e. intellectual laziness – the MoI cadres interviewed evoked an astonishingly apolitical impression in that their unanimous reaction to people's newly found freedom after the relaxation of forced political involvement was one of mourning a lost canon of codified orthodox attitudes which had been carefully preserved as a guideline for behavior in every situation. Its evanescence into the thin airs of Eastern European political change presented a formidable challenge to rethink and reconsider not only certain details but fundamental considerations almost entirely pertaining to the realm of political conscience.

For a country with a strong sense of its relatively long history, a natural place to turn in the quest for spiritual guidance is the rich legacy of a common experience. In the talks at the MoI however, what could reasonably have been expected to be a critical juncture in the discussions – thoughts reflecting upon indigenous resources of political alternatives - turned out to be just another defense line against individual reasoning: Subjected to the streamlined views on Vietnam's recent history as codified by the VCP's interpretations of crucial historical events and people's attitudes towards them, two of the interviewed laid out their personal visions of textbook Marxist views presenting the entire course of the past two centuries as a series of occurrences serving to prove a number of structural *leitmotifs* under which they 'should be' subsumed, in particular nationalism and communism. Probably the most striking element of this view is not so much its particular tendency but its assumption of collective homogeneity disregarding dissenting voices and discarding divergent developments. As members of the Vietnamese political elite, these cadres appeared almost willfully detached from the country's own tradition of political culture, one which has served as an inspiration to so many within and outsi-

de of the VCP. One of the more prominent elements of Vietnamese 'political culture', the notion of political virtue derived from a combination of personal characteristics attributed to, on one hand, the morally superior scholar deeply steeped in the wider East Asian literati tradition, and the other, the politically superior, righteous cadre of the Communist Party, has been applied to a number of both popular and charismatic figures in Vietnamese history, often in relation to actions safeguarding the common patrimony. While personalities such as Tran Hung Dao and Nguyen Trai have held this status for centuries, it has been Ho Chi Minh who more recently has enjoyed a form of political canonization reminiscent of the popular cult surrounding the aforementioned (and others who fail to be enlisted here). Being the driving force behind the success of the VCP in the north (before 1954), any if only an alibi reference to the founding father of the VCP would have served the interviewed well in arguing for the continuous existence of the spirit of political virtue among VCP cadres, especially given the frequent evocations of Ho Chi Minh in contexts as disparate as political guidance and religious worship. To give an example, southern Vietnamese have been viewed consecrating parts of sacred sites normally used for Buddhist worship to the commemoration of and pledge for spiritual guidance by Ho Chi Minh. This attempt to re-appropriate and thus repopularize a politically aloof figure by drawing him into a quasi-personal world of religious bonds is yet the latest turn in the history of the leadership function of virtuous behavior.

The MoI cadres' failure to draw upon one of the predominant resources for spiritual cohesion in current historiographical orthodoxy attests not only to a heightened sense of both disorientation and uneasiness in light of recent political changes but to a lack of individual initiative and self-assertiveness.

One of the main attempts to fuse resources buried deep in the country's tradition with the challenges of the modern area after the collapse of ideological politics was the establishment of nationalist topics as a means to divert from the sudden loss of clearly defined utopian visions enshrined in Marxist orthodoxy. In other countries such as China, this has become the main vehicle for binding valuable emotional and spiritual forces, which might otherwise look for political alternatives, under the leadership of the CCP.

The fact that the VCP has not yet comprehensively mobilized the resources of nationalist discourse notwithstanding, nation-centered concepts are likely to gain in significance for Party legitimacy, since it allows to exploit an unquestioned attitude taken for granted by the majority of the population: that the Vietnamese actually are a nation, a community of people with similar cultural heritages and traditions. While this notion distinguishes sharply between Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) and other peoples, it nonetheless constitutes a firmly entrenched concept waiting for Party ideologues to be employed in their attempts to convince the populace that specific VCP actions were geared towards better service of the nation, in fact catered to the idea that this concept has, through VCP exploits, acquired the dynamic driving force it possesses today.

Although most Western scholars are quick to find strong nationalist undertones in official rhetoric, we are hesitant to believe that the full extent of nationalist discourse has been utilized as of yet, since it is usually linked to fusing vague ideas about communism and nationalism without being applied in any vigorous manner to specific circumstances where nationalist discourse would allow for a replacement of its purely political counterpart (as has been the case in China). Mostly, 'nationalism' stands for an ill-defined sense of identity with one's own ethnic and cultural community. In Vietnam, this is pai-

red with the overriding leitmotif of the VCP's attempt to incorporate nationalist elements into its own political outlook: the struggle against external threats. Partly attributable to the VCP's own history (being a Party that gained in force and number through the protracted struggle against the French), it is derived from the single sense of boundary that has shaped the course of Vietnamese history more than any other: the one delineating differences and similarities towards China. Hence, strong nationalist sentiments are likely to arise any time China becomes the center of attention. National unity as a tool of resilience and perseverance in political conflicts with other states (the U.S., France etc.) does not acquire the same quality of emotional attachment and willingness to sacrifice. Therefore, utilizing nationalism to replace ideological voids is nothing the VCP can accomplish outright, especially not when relations with China are relatively normal. Too fragile and insecure are the bonds of Vietnamese nationalism, perennially fed by a sense of cultural uneasiness and insecurity oscillating between enthusiastic adaptation of foreign models and currents of thoughts, and the desire to draw strength from one's own cultural heritage, if only to reconcile it with external ideas.

One of the prerequisites for political discourse, the individual's performance within the discursive network as well as the pursuit of implementation of one's ideas, was not merely conspicuously absent from these talks, as mentioned above, but points toward a deeper underlying symptom of resistance. What is meant here is the kind of resistance which undermines initiative, that of a secured environment where political discourse is firmly directed and one's participation strictly regulated. Hence, there appears at least prima facie no need to engage. Central to the development of and movement within discourse however, engagement is one of the prime movers of intellectual action. An undisputed prerequisite is the belief in the necessity to become active, no matter how irrelevant one's own action may be. This belief is not usually related to the concrete possibilities to effectuate change. On the contrary, it is nourished by insight and reflection leading to the will to do something, if only beginning to discuss these matters with acquaintances. The cadres described here are locked in a world of political administration where fundamental questions are rarely disputed and insight into the need for more substantial change comes slowly. They participate and work in a system that functions, has been noticeably improved over the past ten years and seems to be able to hold ground. It is important for us to understand that their attitude is not a matter of daily routine or intellectual inertia but stable, self-assuring normalcy. Pressed to respond to the shape and development of political discourse in general, their reply was both honest and disconcerting: That political discourse is a Party affair, that 'the people' could not fully participate in important discussions due to lack of information (the latter in turn justified by the requirement for good governance and the need to allow people to live their lives free from the sorrows of everyday politics) and that while there are a number of outsiders, mostly intellectuals and artists, attempting to broaden the spectrum of political topics for public discussions, these were single, isolated cases which 'can be dealt with'. Asked what that means, one retorted that their ideas would be picked up in due course but that all decisions rested with the VCP's leading organs. Now what would happen if such ideas came from within the VCP itself? Naturally, that would be a more serious matter, another purported, since it would require a much more sensitive behavior on part of those rejoining: When General Tran Do was expelled, he had simply overstepped the line of good taste by challenging the VCP on fundamental issues such as credibility. Asked how Tran Do could possibly have reached the conclusions he did, the interviewed reacted with unease yet maintained that 'not everything he said was wrong' but that he had simply chosen the wrong way by publishing his ideas and challenging

the Party head-on from the outside instead of engaging in discussions within. - Since we know that he tried to do just that over an extended period of time, one is left with the impression that there exists no obvious boundary for the rules of discourse, for otherwise any high-ranking or prestigious Party member would know what the consequences of his behavior are and might re-ponder his actions before risking expulsion and house arrest, both elements entirely unfructicious in light of engaging in political discussions. If middle-ranking officials at a key ministry possess no clear sense of implementing ideas of one's own beyond the realm of the immediate working environment, their expertise will remain reduced to that field, especially if they do not engage in anything from that particular position of expertise. Extrapolating that this may in fact be true for other middle-ranking cadres as well, the perspectives for a broadening of fruitful discussions in the semi-public and public sphere appear more than dim. There is, however, an element invalidating this position, i.e. that of personal and moral integrity. Faced with the excesses of red tape and corruption, ministry officials more than anyone are capable of assessing the political situation according to its predominant challenges – which is to say that precisely those social evils already officially identified (e.g. corruption) should be measured against the standards of political virtue set by the founding father of the VCP himself and canonized in endless reiterations of the more substantial aspects of this political behavior and actions.

While discussing which path of development Vietnam should follow, there emerged first of all a strong sense of loss in various respects: Position, prestige, prospective developments, and spiritual guidance. None of the interviewed had any qualms identifying with the miserable economic situation of the late seventies and early eighties, since it was generally felt that this was the time of greatest prospects. Asked what that means, it was put forth that everything appeared clear and simple at the time: Recovery from devastation, an overriding sense of working toward a better future, and a particularly strong bond resulting from the common sacrifice during the war years. Apparently, admitting that poverty and malnourishment was rampant at the time does not seem to interfere with the spiritual reconstruction of a community bound by common fate. This being the case, own ideas regarding the future and the development of the country as a whole and the political situation in particular may be slow forthcoming yet nonetheless persist: Emphasis was placed above all on political stability and smooth development. This does not, however, constitute anything like 'own ideas' but is a mere reiteration of official Party goals. Digging a bit deeper, one finds out that yes, there are many things which are wrong with the VCP, but at this point, most of the Party's failures are attributed to the kind of incompetence it cannot be blamed for, such as having to find its place in a new environment and seeking new goals replacing past ideological paradigms. It is here where most of the truly individual responses shone through, i.e. what to do about the loss of spiritual guidance. It was unanimously stressed that the situation should become even more depoliticized and more topic-related, which is to say that expertise and knowledge should prevail over political affiliation. Even overseas Vietnamese are included in this category, since like many other Vietnamese at home, the cadres felt that these were well educated and should put their knowledge at the disposal of a common cause. What if the overseas Vietnamese brought in new and fresh ideas? Generally speaking, they should be listened to, albeit that change might be more than a step away and Vietnam has to cope not only with its recent socialist but its more profound Confucian heritage, meaning that what really stands in the way of development is the cultural tradition and how to find means and ways to adapt the latter to a rapidly changing environment.

There is thus a certain amount of thought spent on the shape of political discourse. The real problem appears to be found in people's attitude and the way in which their thoughts are molded and ultimately changed. In this regard, the talks at the ministry provided valuable insights into deeply entrenched

On the Asian crisis and its aftermath, it was felt that Vietnam 'got lucky' in that it wasn't hit that hard, yet due to its poor standards in most fields still had to cope with certain undesirable results. One of them, although not directly related to the economic crisis while still occurring at the same time, was an upsurge in protests against local Party cadres. These were viewed by the interviewed as a result of greater openness and principally considered acceptable. Still, it was purported that these protests were not entirely political in nature but had to do with a phenomenon judged widespread in Vietnam in general, i.e. unreliability, greed and lack of political education. Replacing local cadres may not solve the essential problem underlying the events. It is nevertheless considered conducive to social stability in that the Party demonstrated that it was willing to take concrete measures against clearly defined evils such as corruption. The latter was only partly linked to the political system, and we would be wise not to attribute this fact to the lack of political alternatives (i.e. that another political party might solve the problem more effectively) but to the trite truism that Vietnam has never enjoyed anything in the way of political pluralism. Interestingly, this is viewed both as a certain handicap with regard to people's overall political awareness and as an advantage due to the continuity of tradition.

The crisis itself may have unleashed certain events but the interpretation of the latter as political in nature has not reached any official organs yet although the cadres hinted at internal discussions dealing with precisely this aspect. It would be odd to assume otherwise, since it is a matter political survival, and while events may be couched in economic terms or portrayed as purely social, they do indeed possess sufficient political significance to ensure ongoing discussions within the Party. This was indirectly confirmed during the talks.

Political Discourse

Political discourse appeared somewhat beyond reach for the interviewed, albeit that all agreed that it exists and is in fact widening. Examples cited were:

- 1) discussions in newspapers about topics hitherto off limits (all forms of dealing with the authorities, women's issues, the task of fusing the country's traditions with a concept of modernity no longer derived from socialist ideology etc.)
- 2) Internal Party discussions regarding corruption, prostitution, peasant protests and membership standards
- 3) People's access to foreign media and ample use of internet resources despite firewalls and other protective measures

- 4) Open discussions in public places about 'sensitive' issues such as certain political personalities, foreign influence, ideological questions etc.

Naturally, these statements have to be viewed with qualifications. One would be the effectiveness of such 'open' discussions while it is not specified who participates in them and why. In fact, it was maintained that mostly the politically educated and interested élite of either administrative officials, VCP members or intellectuals and artists would fall within this group. Hence, while there is much talk about 'the people', this option boils down to a 'happy few' when it comes to the rules and regulations of serious political discussions.

At the same time, it became clear that individuals were ill-advised to take specific initiatives of their own. Practically any outspoken members of society was identified as part of a group, and it is by and via groups that most interaction takes place. These can be informal, e.g. within the Party, not necessarily constituting a faction of its own, and they may be more loosely organized (if at all), such as artists' and intellectuals' groups gathering at certain cafés.

We would like to add that the cultural reflex against individual action, while not altogether unfounded, rests largely upon shallow assumptions of group dynamics and network collaborations, since in the end what holds any group together - especially undefined, informal ones, as is particularly common among intellectuals - is nothing less than conscious personal participation and active engagement, even at a minor level, and that it is the presentation of ideas for general dispute within known networks which shape most people's political attitudes. Hence, the cadres' views are determined by their own experience where such initiative is not regarded as favorable as it is in an environment where members of a groups will exchange views in order to inspire new thoughts and ideas about the shape of Vietnam's political future.

According to the MoI cadres, change and alteration of political discourse depends largely upon two factors, initiative from the top - leading to more forceful and rigid while sometimes artificial changes of direction - and strong pressure from outside the Party - identified mostly as mass movements or widely held opinions conflicting with official views. Clearly excluded were all attempts by small, factionized groups actually viewed as potential troubleshooters rather than critical and open-minded citizens.

This view is more or less dependent upon the daily working routine of VCP members attempting to identify individuals targeted by Party directives, and we should be careful to attribute such emanations to bland political orthodoxy, since the same mechanisms are at work in other countries and people in similar circumstances, viewing to protect an established order threatened by undesired assumptions.

That the kind of discourse we are interested in may not be readily found at a random conversation is obvious. However, recent internet initiatives have demonstrated that there are numerous Vietnamese intellectuals eager to engage in discussion forums whenever such a possibility emerges.

The effect of such discussions lies in linking people within and outside of the country, producing increased exchange and raising awareness among the political élite that such

activities possess great political significance in that they contribute to shape the minds of those involved. To provide an example: In a recent written contribution to an international web forum organized in Germany, a Vietnamese intellectual otherwise unable to participate in similar discussions within his immediate community, argued that the Asian Values debate merely served to veil vested leadership interests and that human rights issues cannot be linked to specific Western traditions but constitute universal values. Specifically, he argued that while, say workers fulfill their debt to society by producing what is asked of them, intellectuals too should comply with demands related to political consciousness, and one of these demands is a discussion of human rights.

The MoI cadres were somewhat divided on the question whether the VCP actually does possess sufficient means to perceive changes in attitude among the populace and whether these changes require political action or not. One of the interviewed stressed that recent rebellious activities, while classified as entirely apolitical and strictly related to issues of corruption, greed and embezzlement, demonstrated that apparently the Party could not always anticipate such events and did not have to, either, since despite the fact that they constitute a dispute for control at the local level, they do not question the legitimacy of the political system or the ruling party. Therefore, these events have to be regarded in a different light and cannot be compared to the situation in Indonesia or Cambodia where open power struggles are fought out on the streets.

The question of locally entrenched and rooted, virtuous politicians vs. well-trained Party cadres as a matter of criteria for ballot casting was viewed with great interests by the cadres, holding that it was understandable that certain Party experts in communal affairs were no match for charismatic local personae with generation-old connections not serving or playing a role in political legitimacy but helping their cause to represent their district. It was argued that if the VCP could manage to integrate these people into its own ranks, this could prove rather valuable for its own degree of representation among the populace. However, sometimes Party experts had to be preferred over local strongmen due to better knowledge and education as well as a more open-minded view towards fundamental issues such as modernization or education and women's rights.

Party intellectuals following the situation closely are deeply interested in how to maintain a certain level of legitimacy, and local elections with defeated Party candidates are an alarming symptom. One of the reasons for the official reaction to peasant unrest, strengthening Party discipline, was targeted precisely at the kind of legitimacy that must be attained if the Party wants to survive at the local level.

Concern was raised with regard to the fact that a lot of people might draw the wrong conclusions from popular reaction to local deficiencies, in particular the 'thinking populace', i.e. intellectuals. It was pointed out that those with affiliations to overseas Vietnamese may be more endangered in terms of 'unwise' conclusions than others, although they may not necessarily mean bad. Intellectuals, the cadres emphasized, were particularly vulnerable to new, interesting perspectives, and change could easily become an end in itself. What mattered, however, was stability and socially harmonious development.

Hence, what we have seen is that the mechanics of discursive interference on part of certain VCP members are not always a conscious attempt to regulate and restrict but

rather an unreflected adherence to borrowed language and alien thought patterns which are simply acquired and preserved.

They do, however, allow us to reiterate that within the mechanisms of political discourse, borrowed language is easily replaced, since it is intrinsically linked to various and alternating dominant suppliers of ideas and thoughts, depending on the political situation and the context within which certain concepts are formed and formulated.

There were but glimpses of hope in these talks that would allow us to ascertain that there might be traces of independent thinking at the Vietnamese MoI. This might have been expected - and still, we are well advised to understand these talks for what they stand within their admittedly limited scope, the attempt to reorient, to reassess and to come to terms with a reality that no longer corresponds to the value statements replete with factual assessments and imbued with a sense of self-assertiveness derived from ideological superiority which were adhered to for decades.

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