Let Saigon's Be Saigon's


Ho Chi Minh: A Biography

By Pierre Brocheux

Translated by Claire Duiker

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I.

In Vietnam, the United States lost the war but is now well on the way to winning the peace. Could that be Vietnam's real lesson for the American involvement in Iraq? A gateway to both northeast Asia and southeast Asia, Vietnam is a hinge country with enormous strategic significance. Much of the credit for America's positioning to win the peace in Vietnam belongs to communist China. Beginning in 1979, China's Communist Party leadership under Deng Xiaoping tentatively and (many say) reluctantly opened the economy to legal market transactions. Over time, the market experimentation was allowed to deepen, and it was combined with an opening of China to the world. This colossal turnabout--as much as the collapse of the Soviet Union--has transformed the world.

China's incredible success on the capitalist road--alongside Vietnam's desperate postwar poverty through the 1980s and the perceived threat of a muchinigorated China on Vietnam's northern border--induced the Vietnamese communists to launch their own "renovation" (doi moi, in Vietnamese) in December, 1986. Much of the party's old guard in Hanoi resigned. A decade or so of mixed results ensued, nothing like China's boom. And then, around 1999-2000, the Vietnamese economy finally did take off when an enhanced law on private enterprise gave the green light to small and medium-size businesses. Also important, in 2004 the Vietnamese Communist Party encouraged its members to amass wealth openly and on a large scale.

Almost overnight, Vietnam has reacquired a legal private sector. More than half of its private companies are tiny, with fewer than ten employees--very mom-and-pop, or sister-and-brother. Their cumulative efforts have helped the country leap to the forefront of Asia's fastest growing economies, at around 8.4 percent in 2007, just behind blistering China, Kazakhstan (another China neighbor), and India. And whereas China's long spurt still remains largely investment-driven, Vietnam's shorter spurt has mostly been consumption-driven. Out of a total population of more than eighty million, Vietnam's consumer class numbered perhaps three million in 2000, but that group has been growing geometrically. The new slogan has become "Rich people, strong nation."

It is often said that today's global economy amounts to hundreds of millions of Asians being lifted out of poverty and hundreds of Americans being lifted into the ranks of billionaires. Vietnam's poverty reduction has been more impressive than China's or India's. Poverty in Vietnam was estimated to have encompassed just under 60 percent of the population in 1993, when the World Bank arrived, but is now thought to be no more than 20 percent, thanks to a surge in farm exports made possible by freer trade in agricultural products and better agricultural support services. Eager to claim some credit, Klaus Rohland, the World Bank's previous country director for Vietnam, remarked upon his departure that "there's probably no other country in the world that ... has moved its development so far and so fast." The World Bank's 2007 report on Vietnam concluded that the country "has the potential to be one of the great success stories."

Given how World Bank-assisted "development" has failed the world over, Vietnam does stand out. Sure, it is still relatively poor, but its per capita GDP shot up from $170 in 1993 to $620 in 2006, and is on track to hit $1,000 by 2010. Amid the horrendous red tape and corruption--Vietnam affords anything but a level playing field for business--there is a high degree of political and social stability and a powerful sense of
direction, a feeling that Vietnam is on an irreversible rise. Vietnam is poised to overtake Japan in overall population by no later than 2050. What is more, Vietnam has exactly inverse demographics of the graying Japanese: two-thirds of today's Vietnamese are under the age of thirty. A whole country, in effect, has been born since 1975, and these people work hard and want everything a middle-class life promises. These youth wear fashionable clothes, drink coffee in coffee shops, buy computers and mobile phones, seek entertainment, and travel.

No place nowadays, perhaps not even Albania, may be more pro-American than Vietnam. But the United States deserves little credit for Vietnam's stunning, ongoing transformation. Richard Nixon's cynical suggestion in 1973 of $3.5 billion in reconstruction aid--essentially via payments to American contractors for proposed postwar reconstruction in Vietnam--came to naught. Congress barred American agencies and NGOs from delivering even humanitarian aid. Washington cajoled allies such as London into joining its post-1975 containment policy. Still, although communist China is the country that indirectly helped most to unleash Vietnam's entrepreneurialism, the influence of the example of the United States--a rich country with a high standard of living--did kick in at some point. The stunning upshot is that Vietnam is moving briskly in a direction highly favorable to America. In that light, for all the differences, Vietnam may indeed be relevant for Iraq.

I arrived in Vietnam last spring for my first-ever visit. The government was busy with diplomacy. Given how closed and isolated Vietnam had become in the aftermath of its war victory, the level of international activity was astonishing. In one week there was the visit of EU representatives helping to upgrade facilities in the port city of Hai Phong; visits by the South African president, the Kuwaiti prime minister, the Greek prime minister, and a Polish envoy, all looking to buy or sell something; a fly-in by Steve Ballmer of Microsoft to sign a licensing agreement with Vietnam's government, sending a clear signal to counterfeiters across Asia; and the visit of the German president, which blocked out the rooms at the Hanoi Hilton.

Between receiving foreign dignitaries at a dizzying clip, the Vietnamese prime minister, Nguyen Tan Dung, dashed off to South Korea, which in many ways appears to be Vietnam's inspiration and model. Today South Korea, alongside Taiwan and Singapore, has become one of the top foreign direct investors in Vietnam. South Korean nationals enjoy visa-free privileges, and some thirty to sixty thousand South Korean expats are said to live in Vietnam, many in separate enclaves that also house numerous Japanese. South Korean firms are ubiquitous, especially in infrastructure and construction--one is building highway extensions, linking the old Ho Chi Minh Trail. South Korea, of course, fought on the side of the United States in the Vietnam War. Vietnamese appear to be as adept at reconciliation as at capitalism. It remains to be seen whether they can also prove as adept as South Korea in eventually moving from authoritarianism through prosperity to democracy.

Coincidentally, the date of my arrival was Ho Chi Minh's birthday. (He would have been 117.) My port of entry was Saigon--in official parlance, Ho Chi Minh City. Almost everyone there, however, still calls the badly scarred, charmless, but bustling entrepôt "Saigon." Vietnamese émigrés from the south have been returning to the city with their financial and human capital to start businesses, even if their former properties are beyond reclamation and no one is apologizing for any detentions in post-1975 "re-education" camps. In sum, Ho's portrait may hang in Diem's former presidential palace (now a banquet hall), but this is not Ho's city.

Once in Hanoi, a graceful, even elegant, and well-preserved metropolis, I visited the ghostly figure with wispy white beard who lies under glass but above ground, in a smaller version of the Lenin mausoleum. Vietnamese schoolchildren were lined up with their red kerchiefs and exhorted to "be like Ho," that is, to be exemplary in their lives and morals. Despite the cult of Ho as the Confucian scholar-politician promoted by the Vietnamese state, Ho's life seems largely the preoccupation of a tiny coterie of foreigners. Ho Chi Minh: A Journey, published this year in Hanoi in English and written by one "Lady Borton," is typical in its rarity and its piety. Using some recently unearthed documents, it traces Ho's global voyages, beginning in 1911, from Saigon to France, Portugal, Spain, North Africa, New York and Boston, Paris again, Russia, China, Thailand, Hong Kong, and then Russia and China again, before his return to Vietnam in 1941 after a thirty-year absence. Four years later, during the chaotic aftermath of World War II, from Hanoi's old quarter (which survives) Ho declared Vietnam's independence. It was a dream not realized until after his death.
Lady Borton herself arrived in Vietnam from the United States in the late 1960s with a Quaker organization to teach locals how to make artificial limbs. She still lives there, having learned the language and become a dedicated researcher, writer, and translator on Vietnamese subjects, especially Ho. She writes that Ho used an estimated 174 aliases, including Ho Chi Minh (Bringer of Light). He knew four languages--Chinese, French, and Russian, in addition to Vietnamese--and lived in a dozen countries. Her sympathetic, humaninterest reconstruction of his global sentimental education seems remote from the passions that inflamed the world from the 1950s through the 1970s over colonialism and wars of national liberation, communism, and counterinsurgency. "Uncle Ho," who died in 1969, is ancient history--a figurehead.

II.

A special exhibit at the Ho Chi Minh Museum in Hanoi displayed mounted photocopies of archival documents to illustrate Ho's deep involvement with Chinese comrades, including Mao and Deng, before, during, and after the defeat of the French colonialists and then the Americans. This nod to today's promotion of Vietnamese-Chinese friendship--China briefly invaded Vietnam in February 1979 with some 600,000 troops, more than the peak American force had been--does not signify that the same collections are open for qualified scholars to examine as they see fit. Access to Chinese archives has offered some surprises of late on many subjects, but not always on the touchiest ones. Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, Mao's most recent biographers, made excellent use of declassified Soviet documentation, including transcripts (from the Soviet side) of Mao's many conversations with Stalin. No such good fortune in the case of Ho.

Consider Pierre Brocheux's Ho Chi Minh: A Biography, which first appeared in French. "For all his worldwide notoriety," writes the retired Parisian professor and Vietnam expert, "Ho Chi Minh has remained a figure of mystery and controversy." Brocheux seeks to obviate the controversy while unraveling the mystery, but he adduces little new documentation. He claims to have been told that the declassified Comintern archives in Moscow turned up little of value on Ho (overlooking Russia's foreign ministry and state archives). True, he does cite some French police surveillance files--the French police, every historian's friend--as well as the well-known recollections of foreigners who met the Vietnamese leader. And he uses the two autobiographical excurses published under Ho's name, which if nothing else provide an insight into how he viewed his life. Inexplicably, however, Brocheux makes little use of the new Vietnamese works on Ho. And unlike Chang and Halliday, he did not track down bodyguards, doctors, mistresses, and other survivors who had close contact with his subject.

The result is not a rounded portrait of the "Vietnamese icon" (as he was described in the subtitle of the original French edition of the book), but a Ho- hum portrait. Familiar eyewitnesses are cited testifying to Ho's beguiling charm, but he never comes to life. Ho's marriages and liaisons appear fleeting; indeed, any sense of a social milieu, party or personal, is mostly lacking. Unlike the exhaustive biography published in 2000 by William Duiker, a former American foreign service officer in South Vietnam and a university professor, Brocheux's volume does not present much of a narrative, and his text is hard to follow. Rather, Brocheux has written an interpretive essay. His achievement, such as it is, consists in a discussion of the legend and myth of Ho--that is, of Ho's international image, from his failed efforts at the Paris Peace Conference at Versailles in 1919 through his Pyrrhic success during the Vietnamese Revolution in half the country. Brocheux shows that Ho's innumerable disguises, from a bourgeois to a shaven-head Buddhist monk, also included the Uncle Ho of poster and song.

Ho was born in 1890, five years after the French had consolidated their colonial hold over Indochina, an epoch of European global domination remote from our own era. His father, an orphan of peasant stock, had managed to pass the imperial examination to qualify as an official. Instead of serving at the court, then foreign-dominated, Ho's father chose the life of a teacher back home in Nghe An province, in Central Vietnam's narrow hilly coastline. Ho's mother worked the family's fields (half an acre) and wove silks. Before his father disappeared, under his influence Ho studied classical (that is, Confucian) texts, acquiring knowledge of Chinese, then studied at a Franco- Vietnamese boarding school, acquiring knowledge of French. In 1907, he entered the prestigious National Academy in Hue, where he became politically active. Four years later, wanted by the French colonial police, the rail-thin, impoverished Ho boarded a boat as a cook's assistant and set off to see the world. Or to run away.

France could have been a lodestar, but it failed him. As a teenager in Vietnam, writes Brocheux, Ho had
"enjoyed the history lessons of Mr. Griffon, who gave fascinating lectures glorifying the French Revolution." Disembarking in Marseilles, Ho would find a civilized people different from the colonial boot he knew. He worked odd jobs, including journalism; wrote an article denouncing French sportswriters for using Anglicisms instead of French; and joined the French socialist party in 1919. But when the French leftists, too, turned out to be reluctant to part with the colonies, an exasperated Ho gave up on them and in 1923 went to Moscow. If first Woodrow Wilson and then the French "radicals" had paid no mind to Ho's urgings to extend the principle of self-determination to Vietnam, Lenin would surely help to do so. But the Soviet leader was gravely ill and soon died. Ho attended the funeral in bone-freezing weather.

Ho got the Comintern to send him to China in the 1920s, and from there over many years he and various comrades in the underground prepared the Indochina communist revolution under Soviet and Chinese tutelage. Many narrow escapes followed, including one with the connivance of British authorities in Hong Kong. How Ho escaped Stalin's purges remains an enigma. Initially, Ho the nationalist feared the Chinese most. "It is better to sniff French shit for a while than to eat China's for the rest of our lives," he said. But he seemed to change his mind, and looked to the Americans, by then backing the French, to prevent the Chinese from swallowing Vietnam, which many Chinese regarded as a "lost" province. And soon Ho was turning back to the Chinese, and the Soviets, against the French and the Americans. In another often-quoted line, uttered to a French official in 1946, he remarked, "You will kill ten of my men while we will kill one of yours, but you will be the ones to end up exhausted." Brocheux suggests that Vietnam was Ho's sole attachment, a pure nationalism thereby laying down another coat of whitewash.

Echoing William Duiker—who wrote the foreword to Brocheux's English-language text, which was translated by Claire Duiker, evidently William's daughter—Brocheux gives us anything but an ideologue. Whereas Duiker's Ho was "half Lenin and half Gandhi," Brocheux's is more a Confucian exponent of Asian values, a fighter for community and nation above freedom and the individual. Brocheux insists that Ho followed simplistic Marxist slogans when organizing North Vietnam's economy out of ignorance. Ho was pragmatic, Brocheux writes, always preferring negotiations to war, and always striving for unity even if in that goal he was undercut by others. Tell it to the corpses.

Exterminating Vietnam's Trotskyites ("unity"), Ho supposedly detested and avoided intrigues. During the "excesses" of collectivization, the Vietnamese leader made speeches condemning the violence. Ho, we are told, wanted to be prudent--after all, many landlords had supported the struggle against the French--but hotheads staged tribunals and, well, Ho acquiesced. And so on. And yet, however much Brocheux strives to distance Ho from the more sadistic types--and from the troika that eventually shunted Ho aside and ruled in his name--the author nonetheless acknowledges that Ho put the oppressive, impoverishing communist system in place through his charisma. Ho, Brocheux concludes, "tried to combine his unifying and temporizing patriotism with a revolutionary doctrine that bred antagonism and violence." This he calls "the tragedy of idealists who engage in political action," not the tragedy of the people of Vietnam.

Ho's insight, what set him apart, was his insistence that Vietnam needed outside powers to help fend off outside powers. His dalliance in the 1940s with the newest power in Asia--the United States--went nowhere because, from Ho's point of view, this proponent of freedom turned out to be another oppressor supposedly just like France. Neither side understood the other. Marxism-Leninism furnished the theoretical and practical arsenal in Vietnam's bloody struggle for national liberation, and Ho dexterously managed to leverage both Chinese and Soviet support, the Sino-Soviet split notwithstanding. But the price of Ho's Bolshevik-inspired anti-colonialism and modernization was high, and the ramifications manifold. "Before, in the Resistance, everybody shared the same life, the same joys, the same sorrow," one witness in Brocheux's book recalls. "Now all of the important jobs, all the positions of responsibility, go to members of the party, so many people want to sign up just to have a highly placed job. Exactly the opposite of what Ho Chi Minh advocated, that we join the party not for personal gain but for the good of the people."

III.

Last year, Vietnam's Ministry of Industry sponsored a seminar of experts who proceeded to savage the legacies of state planning and to plump for the revision of tax and customs laws and better enforcement of intellectual property rights. "The government is still doing things which should be decided by enterprises and the marketplace," complained a deputy director of the Vietnam Economic Institute. His comments were echoed by none other than the deputy minister of industry, who said that "Vietnam has been issuing industrial policies in the form of orders" rather than basing policies "on the needs of enterprises."
government apparently wants to divest from state-owned enterprises so as to focus on sectors deemed strategic, but it must first train or find state enterprise directors who can hustle for investment on their own—a matter less of money than of managerial skill, especially the ability to calculate and undertake risk for reward. Several speakers also noted that Vietnam had no shortage of youthful laborers, but it does have a shortage of highly skilled personnel. Inadequacies in the education system threaten one day soon to become a severe constraint on growth, as in Hong Kong, where talent must be imported.

Meanwhile, at 17.5 percent, Vietnam has a significantly higher degree of per capita Internet penetration than China (10 percent) or Indonesia (8 percent), let alone Kazakhstan (2.7 percent)—and Vietnam is 70 percent rural. When it comes to the Internet, Vietnam still trails highly urbanized South Korea, as well as the cities of Hong Kong and Singapore (all around 67 percent). But Vietnam ranks sixth globally in recorded hits on MIT's "open courseware" site, which offers information from more than fifteen hundred college courses—exclusively in English. If nothing else, this testifies to aspirations. Much of this has been made possible by Intel, which partnered with the communist government in Hanoi to get as many computers as possible into the hands of ordinary Vietnamese. Intel is also investing up to $1 billion in a semiconductor assembly and testing facility in Saigon, which is scheduled to come online in 2008. Intel in Vietnam, as one local analyst remarked to me, has brought with it "an entire ecosystem."

Many foreign firms, especially those pursuing a winning pan-Asian strategy, look to Vietnam as a China-plus-one or China hedge approach, meaning a reliable backup and a future growth platform. China itself is looking to Vietnam—bilateral trade with China jumped from $32 million in 1991 to more than $7 billion in 2006 (and that's only what customs statistics capture). In turn, Vietnam is looking to China. The Middle Kingdom offers a colossal and—unusual by world standards—wide open market for Vietnam's agricultural products. China's growth and rising incomes are a godsend for Vietnam's large rural population and industrious poor, provided Vietnam proves able to meet that ever-increasing Chinese demand for foodstuffs, which will require even greater investments in infrastructure. No less important, around one-quarter of Vietnam's economy comprises oil and gas—with large additional deposits suspected—and Vietnam's leaders are hyper-vigilant about not letting those key industries fall into China's hands through privatization. This leads Vietnam to look to Russia, among others, as a possible hydrocarbon partner and counterweight to China.

As a looming Asian tiger, Vietnam is on a path to integrate into the wider region, and into the world. Most analysts there agree that this will require even deeper structural changes, including the introduction of transparency, strong regulatory agencies and courts, and eventually political reform—meaning an end to the communists' monopoly. Good governance, in the end, is what separates all the fast growers from the exclusive club of sustained prosperity, like the Asian tigers of South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Historically, the trajectory of these few successes started with effective market institutions and rule of law in property and contracts, before growing to democracy. Vietnam has its work cut out for it. During my stay, Vietnam also held elections to its National Assembly: 500 deputies were selected from 875 candidates. Even though the assembly has ceased to be a rubber stamp for the party, this was not a real election. Around 150 of the candidates were not party members, and around 30 (out of hundreds who tried) made it onto the ballot via self-nomination. But the ruling party ended up claiming more than 90 percent of the seats (all but 43), remaining firmly in control.

Democracy aside, what about more basic governance? Here, too, China-Vietnam comparisons are instructive, as Regina Abrami of the Harvard Business School explained to me. In an echo of China's boom, Vietnam's provinces are competing with each other to woo private investment, but having studied the Chinese case, the Vietnamese appear determined to avoid the mistakes they perceive China to have made. When a developer in Vietnam is found to have exceeded a legal height limit with a new construction, the offending floors are lopped off. In China, there are essentially no building limits or development restrictions of any kind. (The sad fate of old Beijing and the anarchy of Shanghai's Pudong district provide confirmation.) Vietnam can claim not just much talk but also some government action about environmental impact and sustainable development, workers' housing and living conditions, safety, and commercial piracy. All these questions are viewed, in the context of the extremism of China's vastly larger example, as fundamental to economic performance—and as critical social issues in their own right. In Vietnam, the current latitude for consultative policy-making is greater than in China.

Despite dissident arrests, the Vietnamese communists appear to be a bit less afraid of their own people than their Chinese counterparts are. Vietnamese communists are also far more socialist than their Chinese counterparts. (Communist China is probably the least socialist country I have ever seen, even less socialist than the United States.) At Hanoi's Museum of Ethnology, founded by the French, a remarkable ongoing
exhibit on daily life conveyed the dark-tunnel grimness following the war, which involved severe shortages and rationing (bao cap). "After unification and during the days of bao cap," one person is quoted on a panel in the exhibition, "people's dreams often consisted of such simple things as to eat a bowl of fresh, non-moldy rice, to own a small fan, to ride a Chinese bicycle, or to be able to wash oneself with a sweet-smelling bar of soap!" Now, just a short time later, Vietnam has a cornucopia of food and consumer goods—but the Vietnamese leadership has been careful, for political and ideological reasons, not to allow inequalities from a welcome boom to get out of hand.

North-South Vietnamese reconciliation over what is called "the American War" remains unstarted business. The communists razed the South Vietnamese military cemetery in the heart of Saigon, and to this day Vietnam lacks any proper war memorial to the southerners who perished in the country's civil war. But despite some bitterness and lingering issues, including long-term effects of wartime chemical poisoning and defoliation, Vietnam is amazingly future-oriented. Unmistakably, an era has passed—the era of decolonization and of the dismal failures of the immediate aftermath. The site of Ho's early Association of Annamite (Vietnamese) Patriots, in Paris, the Impasse Compoint in the twentieth arrondissement, was torn down years ago. Moscow's University of the Toilers of the East, the Stalin School, where many Vietnamese studied, is a distant memory. The Indochina "Tea House" in the southwestern Chinese city of Kunming, exiled home to the Vietnamese Communists plotting revolution, still stands, but for how much longer seems uncertain. Globalization and rapid economic growth continue to strike all across Asia like a wrecking ball on the past.

In Hanoi on May 4, before I arrived, a forum took place titled "Vietnam--A Bright Future for U.S. Companies." Eighteen U.S.-based businesses sent representatives, the largest single delegation to Vietnam since Congress granted that country "permanent normal trade relations." Press reports of the event hailed Vietnam as "the promised land" for American business. In fact, the United States is now Vietnam's top trading partner, at more than $10 billion annually. That is one reason why, for the first time since America's helicopter evacuation, a Vietnamese head of state arrived in Washington last summer for an official visit. Who foresaw such a turn of events during the apocalyptic 1970s, or the 1980s? Impossible as it now seems, such a future may one day await Iraq.

Of course, Iraq and the Middle East are different. Everything always is different. And no country in the Middle East possesses Vietnam's remarkable qualities. Still, if Vietnam's experience provides any guide, the United States may do little directly to bring about a resolution in Iraq. Who among Iraq's neighbors might serve as Iraq's China and South Korea (and Iran's as well)? If not China itself, look to fast-developing Turkey, Russia, and above all India, whose economic and increasingly geopolitical influence stretches to East Africa and the Persian Gulf. This is not prophecy. It is just possibly the dumb luck, undeserved, that is often hard to see, let alone foresee.

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