

Impressions from Hanoi

August 23, 2001

I just arrived in Hanoi, and was picked up at the airport and taken to the hotel. Now I wait here for my local partners to call at the hotel, and tell me when and where to meet... It is the first time, I came to Hanoi, and I want to use the opportunity to capture those first impressions from the drive into town.

Firstly, there are so many people on the street. Of course there are also many people, or even far more, in Hong Kong, but you wouldn't see many from the car: they are hiding in their cars, buses, metros, houses, shopping centres or what have you. Here the live is happening on the street. Literally, because there are so many people riding their motorcycle that it is hard to get through by car. We seem to have hit the evening rush hour.

On every street since passing the city boundaries, there are small shops one by one. Some areas are busier than others, but there is business everywhere. Most are very small shops, 3 to 5 meters wide and hardly any deeper. Some country folks also offer their ware directly by the street, as much as they can carry themselves.

The very first impression was of course the airport. Great, I thought when entering the bus taking us to the terminal, this terminal looks really modern, and much better than suggested by the somewhat dated 'business in Vietnam' book that I had skimmed last week. Unfortunately, the bus wasn't heading for the new terminal, construction was not complete, and we headed for a small reception building resembling the old one in Budapest, just a bit smaller. Queues at passport control were OK although there were lots of foreigners. Actually, I was surprised how many non-Asians were on board given that otherwise the airport in Hong Kong was really basically all-Asian.

I skipped waiting for my luggage; because I hadn't checked any in, and met the two persons send to pick me up. There whisked me to their car where I had to wait for another person they were to pick up. From the car park, hardly larger than in, say, *Aalborg*, I noticed that some of the bicyclists passing by on the not very busy road in front really were wearing those triangular hats we know from posters or old films. They seem to fit them well.

Driving from the airport towards Hanoi, we passed through an area of rice fields as flat as Holland, which might explain why bikes are popular here. The presence of bikes made the place immediately sympathetic, as I love cycling and haven't really seen cyclists while staying in Hong Kong. Passing through the rice fields, I noticed the activity across the fields. There were always some people somewhere, walking or riding their bike along a path, working in the fields. The moving triangular hats across the fields created a romantic picture of rural live. At some place, horses drew small wagons and some oxes were grazing between the fields or by the roadside. On the 4-way road that we were following, cars, lorries and motorcyclists were competing for space, while cyclists had their own path with horse-drawn carriages by the side.

The first kilometre or so from the airport, large billboards advertised the world leading brands, all presumably having established some kind of business contacts over the past few years. This is very much what one would expect – like Eastern Europe since 1990. However, talking of foreign brands, I have not seen much advertising of global brands, or any large billboards, since coming into the

city. There was no *Carlsberg*, for example, but I noticed one '*Halida*' which is the local brand also produced by *Carlsberg*'s JV in Hanoi.

I can't say much about the building style; there were just too many people to look up. But mostly, buildings are rather flat, not just compared to Hong Kong. Most are simple concrete buildings without much remarkable about them. I noticed a few apparently dating to the French period before WWII including an art gallery and the hotel where we dropped off that women professor from Canada. As she was tried due to jetlag we didn't really talk, so I can't tell you anything other than that she is a social geographer researching children searching through rubbish dumps. I also noticed a grand Soviet Style building with a slogan in red letters on top – which may be the parliament or an art centre donated by the big brother. Opposite to it was a big building from the French period, not in so good shape.

Back to the people. I mentioned those cute triangular hats people were wearing when working in the fields, or riding their bike in the countryside. This picture radically changed when coming into the city. Here, motorcycles clearly outnumber the bicycles; especially young men don't seem to think bikes are cool. Also, people wear something smaller on their heads, the women sometimes quite fashionable hats, while many young men wear only their hair, sometimes freshly styled. It's fashionable, but in the heat the old hats probably have their virtues too. Did I forget helmets? Well, I saw a dozen or so, but there is definitely a market opportunity here ... Later I was told that there is a new law requiring motorcyclists to wear helmets. Well, no one seems to have read that one yet.

There were quite a few good-looking girls too, mostly on bikes or on the backseat of a motorbike. Many women wear some cloth around their mouth, and I was wondering why – is it to protect against pollution? Later I was told that this is mainly to protect against the sun; light skin is considered beautiful in Asia.

Later the first evening, I rode on a motorcycle for the first time in my live. My colleague picked me up, and just told me to get on the back of the motorcycle to get somewhere to eat. Well, if I had said that I had never sat on a motorcycle before, he probably wouldn't understand, so ... off we went. We criss-crossed the traffic, using the horn like everyone else, travelling usually on the right hand side, but occasionally taking a short cut quite far to the left, and arrived. The place he took me to was just past the Opera House – which looks like you would expect an Opera House to look like in Paris or anywhere else in Europe, just a little smaller. My colleague introduced the person at the door as his friend, which seemed to indicate a pattern. It was an outdoor restaurant and café frequented by Westerners and locals, and the food was quite Western.

August 25, 2001

Overnight, the weather changed, and we had a heavy downpour of rain all morning. After some work on the LapTop after Saturday breakfast went out anyway, taking an umbrella and a raincoat with me. I walked mainly to immerse myself in the city and get a flavour of the atmosphere. I took my camera with me, but I found it hard to make good pictures. The most interesting motives are the people here – so many interesting characters, from street traders to country folk to girls on their bikes to motorcyclists – with the whole family on board, or with the day's trading goods. Unfortunately it is almost impossible to take pictures of people in a non-disturbing way because I am myself almost constantly watched, and flashing a camera almost certainly attracts the attention of traders of all sorts. So, I have to move on, avoiding eye contact. It's not that the traders are particularly aggressive or disturbing, like Arab traders are for example, but I just prefer to be left

alone. And I cannot carry souvenirs anyway, and the food they have on offer looks a bit suspicious. I took a few photos 'from the hip', i.e. without raising the camera to focus on an object. Let's see if any turn out.

I have been in one old temple in the middle of a lake, which is several centuries old. I was amused by a sentence in the leaflet "Its last repair and renovation took place in 1865" because some parts really cried out for new paint. The Buddhist temple in the centre of the buildings reminded me very much of Chinese temples, and in fact Buddhism is a common tradition of China and Vietnam. However, the artwork also has many common traditions, such as the intensive red colour in the temple and the types of paintings and sculptures. Also, Vietnam used until the end of the 19th century Chinese characters to write, and adopted Latin letters with all those extra markings above and below rather late. My sense was that this temple could just as well stand on island in Taiwan – but may be this just shows my ignorance for cultural subtleties of East Asia.

Later I went to the National Museum of History, which presents the history from prehistoric times up to 1945. The museum shows a lot of archaeological artefacts, some with text in Vietnamese, English and French. Unfortunately, the larger boards that seem to outline the broad historical developments were in Vietnamese only, such that I didn't really get a good understanding of the history. One fact I did see, however, was that the Vietnamese see their own history as a succession of battles against external invaders, mainly Chinese, but also Mongols. One board showed a map of Eurasia conquered by the Mongols, but they were stopped at the Vietnamese border.

Many of the artefacts look to the untrained observer very much like those I may have seen elsewhere. Every nation traces her history from the Stone Age, and we do seem to have been much different in those days. Later there were especially Chinese influences, including similar types of Buddha statues, Chinese characters and some features of the sculptures and decorations. At some places the Vietnamese text seemed to be the translation of old documents, which makes sense, as I doubt many young Vietnamese can read Chinese – same situation as in Korea. The visitors on this Saturday afternoon, however, were almost all long-noses who didn't understand either.

Talking of language; I was pleased to remember my school French when I sighted a '*plan de ville*' erected at a busy street corner. At last a clear evidence of the French period of Vietnam, I thought. However, I was wrong: On closer inspection, I found inscribed '*VII^{eme} Somme de la Francophonie 1997*' inscribed on the map. It seems, to reassure the French delegates and the host city council alike, the French donated a dozen city maps that survived the *Francophonie* in this part of the world. I also found a French daily newspaper, but I haven't seen anyone reading it. One older person at the airport who tried to talk to me in French, and one rickshaw driver shouting in French, else English rules. Russian, I might add, have I not seen or heard here at all, although many engineers have been educated in the big brother nation. Language learning goes with the money, even in socialist Vietnam.

Talking of socialism; this is the first time since Czechoslovakia 1978 that I visit a country with the red flag firmly in place. You wouldn't be able to tell if you cross the roads, with all the small business activity that is going on, and the wealth of motorcycles cruising through town. But talking to my various contacts, I clearly got the impression that governments, central and local, like to meddle with business wherever they can. Reform is very much a struggle between different generations of politicians leading to piecemeal reform going two steps forward and one step back, generating a legal framework that albeit gradually changing for the better is marked by a very high degree of instability and uncertainty. The old guard is still held in high regard, not only today when

the newspapers reported General Giap's 90th birthday. (To explain it simple, General Giap has been the American's worst nightmare). From the history column in the same newspaper, I could see that he shares the day with the one year younger Erich Honecker, who passed into history by now.

Another rather un-socialist place that I discovered this afternoon was called the press club, best described as an upmarket place for drink and food in an English style (or may-be New English). The newspapers to choose from included Americans but no Europeans, so I settled for the South China Morning Post. The sandwich I ordered was the best I had in a long while, and not the cheapest, but my stomach was empty and I needed a calm place to relax where I am safe of street traders. I spend almost an hour there being almost the only customer. I could have eaten much cheaper on the street, or at any café where the locals go, but being on my own, I didn't know where to go, what to order, and what food is good, and in fact, how not to be observed too much. So, I opted for the press club, which is an expat hangout.

In the afternoon, I was sitting outside my hotel room by the poolside, where Western tourists are lingering in the sun. In Hong Kong, they say, "mad dog and Englishmen" hang out in the sun at midday. An equivalent saying surely exists in Vietnamese. Why would any rational human being suffer in the sun, and get sun-burned, or dark-skinned, if air-conditioning provides such comfortable cool? Well, if you were a sun-starved Dane you'd understand. I was out too, so, I shouldn't criticize.

I spend the late afternoon reading various bits and pieces about Vietnam, but not with great enthusiasm. There is really very little written about Vietnam from a business perspective. Economists and World Bank advisors have come across the country and dissected the statistics and governmental laws and decrees, but how you really do business little is said. Which implies two things – a good paper on business in Vietnam is overdue, but it is not easy to write.

Amongst the things I read were reports over changes in import restrictions and tariffs for cars, and statistics reporting an increase of over 100% of imports of cars. Which made me rather worried. Given the traffic that I observed in Hanoi, with bikes and motorcycles dominating, but the few cars using a horn to get free way, every additional car is going to make live for bikes and motorcycles more difficult, if not miserable. To ensure the survival (literally) of the majority of traffic participants, a different infrastructure would be needed, for instance with some roads reserved for cars and others exclusively for motorcycles and bikes. And someone would have to police the traffic ... else the rules are useless. May be Vietnam would need first of all modern buses for public transport, and a proper schedule, this might benefit more people and ease congestion.

Some minor observations about the hotel. There were a number of teenagers playing in the pool this afternoon, both foreigners and, I presume, local middle class, yet quite a few of them had tendency towards overweight, so much in contrast to the folks on their cycles on the street. My considerations of weather or not to take a bath were resolved when I noticed that the bathtub was already occupied by a Lizard. So, I went to the hotel restaurant instead, unintentionally disturbing the staff watching TV. I was the only guest, so I didn't expect much of the food, but it was OK. The fresh papaya for desert was actually very refreshing – and something I do not know from Europe. The whole hotel has a little of a socialist 'smell' round it, for instance in terms of overstaffing, or the way they bean-count every item of food and make you sign for it. But compared with experiences in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s and Kazakhstan more recently, I am more than satisfied with the kindness of the service and the quality of the facilities provided.

August 28, 2001

I am back from Vietnam, and although I am a bit tired, but I better round up my impressions of Hanoi now, because otherwise I will never get to do it. On Sunday and Monday I did get to see some other parts of Hanoi, though I should say that Vietnam is said to be very diverse not just between city and country side, and between Hanoi and HCM City, but between the different regions of the country. Many impressions may be entirely different for example in HCM City where business is said to be flourishing and socialism never grabbed the hearts of the people as in the North.

Saturday night (after finishing the notes above), I went for a walk with the local colleague through some of the night market and café areas. There is quite a lot of life at night, and the lake in the middle of the old town that I had visited in the afternoon looked more beautiful with the lights of the night. I was told that in this lake lives a large turtle, which still survives despite the noise around it, and it is occasionally sighted. Eventually we had a beer in a bar where the latest football matches from Europe were shown live on TVs and large screens. Some place were distinctly expat hangout outs, where tourists would also go, while locals frequented other places. Few tourists like eating on those tiny stools standing on the pavement, with passers by almost falling into your soup. I noticed that there is great excitement especially for the British league games. Saturday afternoon games in Europe are evening entertainment here. For European Champions League played on weekday evenings games people get up in the middle of the night, not exactly to the pleasure of their bosses.

Sunday, the senior colleague took me to the Fine Arts Gallery. I was quite impressed with the paintings. Most of the paintings shown are 20th century Vietnamese, giving a good impression about both the development of the arts but also of the national psyche. Two painting styles I noticed that I have not come across in this form elsewhere, lacquer paintings and silk paintings. Other traditional influences, to some extent also the silk paintings, are strongly influenced by Chinese art – 900 years of occupation left their traces. The main themes from the 40's onwards were the war, depicted in the romantic, ideological perspective with everyone standing together, joint effort, soldiers and village people and the like. In the fifties, there were some picture of socialist realism, motives like we know them from Soviet or East German art yet with a distinct Vietnamese style of painting: 'beautiful' industrial landscapes, industrial workers enjoying their hard work (or their break), and again soldiers and the war. The latter theme was, naturally, most central for Vietnamese up to the late 70's. The selection of pictures however showed an ideologically selective perspective in that the 'romantic' side was depicted, but none of the pictures showed the sufferings of war. Though there were one or two showing nasty Americans.

The artists of the 80's and 90's seem to have enjoyed intense interaction with Western Art. Many picture suggested that the artist had studied one particular European artist or a school – although in most cases I could not recall the names – and combined these ideas with Vietnamese motives and local techniques or themes. The art from the 1990s up to the year 2000 winner of the annual art competition could come straight out of *Louisiana*, the styles were clearly influence by one or more fairly well known Western artist, but the meaning of the painting becomes increasingly difficult to decipher for a non-specialist observer like myself.

My colleague then took me to a historical place nearby that was constructed like a Buddhist shrine with lots of subsequent gates. Here, Vietnamese king's had their children educated, and from the middle ages onwards this was the first Vietnamese university. There were stones dedicated to the scholars; as I understood it, every year, one scholar was awarded the honour of a title that is now

translated as Dr. and a stone was erected in his honour. The actual shrine was dedicated to Confucius. Most of this area had been destroyed by the wars, or by communist leadership rejecting the previous imperial regime, but a major part of it has been reconstructed recently.

We then took a taxi to a restaurant 'between the two lakes', which my colleague wanted to introduce to me for several reasons. Firstly, it is a beautiful site and they serve a special dish 'shrimp cake'. Secondly, this restaurant was one of the first businesses to be 'equitized' – that's what everyone else would call privatisation. Now it is owned by the employees, with a residual stake owned by the state. And, it is widely regarded as a success story. Thirdly, they serve *Carlsberg* beer along with the same joint-ventures local brand *Halida*.

Monday, I had a meeting with the president of a foreign investment company, which was quite interesting even if I do not directly get insights out of it that would lead to a paper. A tricky issue is that 'personal relations with government authorities' are very important (in this case because they mainly sell to the state sector), but how do you report this in a scientifically rigorous way if all you have is confidential sources?

In the afternoon I gave my presentation at the institute and so met more of the researchers there. One of the Vice-directors invited me and my main local partner for dinner in a traditional Vietnamese restaurant in the area with the many small shops. It was fish served boiling in a flat pot on the table over a small stove, to which we added spring onions and other green herbs and then eat with rice noodles and some sauce. It was very nice again, as I like trying different types of food. Not a fancy restaurant, but simple and what Danes may call *hyggeligt*.

This morning I checked out of the hotel, well one grumble I do have – they could not process either of my credit cards despite them having the Visa-sign displayed large and the technology supposedly in place. So, I ended up paying with my third backup, traveller cheques, for which they then charged me 2% commission. Not very professional indeed. But at least they accepted them although they were about eight years old.

On the way to the airport I was glad that the institute had send their driver. The tour was at some stage over dirt roads in suburbs that weren't exactly middle class residencies, and if I had been with an unknown taxi-driver I would have suspected he'd take me to I-do-know-where to rob me in daylight. But we arrived in the airport in less than the one-hour that the travel book had indicated. So, it must have been a shortcut.

What now? Well, I am back in Hong Kong and it is raining ever since I arrived. I would love to go back to Vietnam, to see more than the capital. There are said to be many beautiful places across the country. But it is a country where I wouldn't feel secure in travelling on my own, or even in a small group, without a local friend guiding us. I don't think I would volunteer driving any vehicle in this traffic and without basically any signs of direction. It would be quite a challenge. So, next time, I should find a friend who knows that country a little to travel together. It would be quite an adventure to tour the last socialist country of Asia.