

CONFUCIUS, LE VIETNAM, ET MOI



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NDLR : *le présent texte a été envoyé dans un forum réunissant des JJR d'Europe, des USA, et du Viet Nam. Notre condisciple Son, apprécié de beaucoup d'anciens du lycée pour son caractère droit malgré ses facéties en classe (cf http://aejjrsite.free.fr/goodmorning/gm70/gm70_VengeanceDuTet.pdf), s'est réfugié en Australie après 1975, et y a réussi sa vie après des débuts particulièrement durs. Il a retrouvé ses amis JJR via « La Lettre de Jean Jacques Rousseau » de notre amicale en 2003. Opérant un grand supermarché, il a initialement pris sa retraite il y a quelque temps mais en est sorti pour faire des investissements dans l'industrie au pays natal, où il a fait un séjour il y a peu de temps. Le présent texte reflète sa conception personnelle.*

Dear friends,

Back from a month long trip to Vietnam, travelling from south to north I was not surprised to receive some emails from friends (some are refugees like me but who never dare to come back!) who want to know my impressions of the country, what I have seen and heard and the opportunity of investment. (Thanks to the dangerous Yakusa who blew up my cover: everybody knows of my industrial activity in Vietnam now). They want an unbiased opinion from someone they know and not from some political magazine, written by journalists sometimes with predisposed intentions. But what surprised me the most were some emails questioning my integrity, my moral attitude, being a refugee who fled Vietnam and now come back to do business with the communist regime.

It took me some time to write this reply because I have cut short my early retirement and is rather busy now. I will take turn with my wife to travel to Vietnam and look after our business (more opportunities to meet Yakusa if our travels coincide). So, back to a busy life (cây muốn lặng mà gió chẳng ngừng). I will be as brief as possible, trying to clarify my position and present to you some images of a new Vietnam.

There is not a better time than now to invest in Vietnam. To invest in a foreign country, we look at these four conditions:

- 1- The abundance of cheap raw material
- 2- The availability of cheap labour
- 3- A favourable tax system and
- 4- A stable government

1- The abundance of raw material: about this condition I can't tell you much. It depends on your expertise, your market and what you want to produce...In brief, that's the homework you have to do yourself.

2- The availability of cheap labour: there are not many places in the world where you can hire a hard working labour hand for just US \$ 70.00 a month and a technician freshly from university for US \$ 150.00 a month. Vietnam is one of those places now. Of course you have to do a bit of training for them because their way of working is not the same as in a western country and their technologies are not very up to date. But they know all the basics and after a while they can be as good as anyone.

3- A favourable tax system: do you know that for the moment, any newly established foreign enterprise or joint venture benefits a special tax regulation? For the first two years of production you don't pay any tax on the revenues. That will make up for your initial investment money. And for the next ten years you pay tax at the rate of 10%. It's only after those twelve years that you are required to pay the full rate of 28%.

Where can you find a more favourable tax system to invest your money?

4- A stable government: that's the most important condition to look at before you part with your money. We, investors, we are very wary of brusque change of government or regime, of revolution, revolt, protest...Any change in the regime can bring about unfavourable change of rules in the game and that's the last thing we wish to see. And I can assure you the communist government in Vietnam is very stable now.

Sincerely I don't know if it's right to call the regime "communist" any more. Just walk into the nightclub "Ho Guom Xanh" in Hanoi (facing Ho Hoang Kiem) in any night and you will ask yourself " is this the dreadful communist regime we all heard about? " Scantly clad beautiful nymphs wriggling on the stage, young well dressed lads having epileptic fits to the deafening music (music or noise pollution? Truly I can't tell the difference!), expensive brands of alcoholic drinks from anywhere in the world ready on your order...You will think you are in the heart of a western capitalist and democratic country. No police presence around, no one to give you a strange and inquisitive look. Surely you can expect some plainclothes officers in the crowd, but they stick to the rule "you don't bother me, I won't bother you". And don't see yourself as a prosperous Viet Kieu with plenty of euros or dollars: some of those lads have more dough in their wallet than you do!

Vietnam has gone a long way since the dark days of the decade following the fall of Saigon. Gone are the collective farms, the cooperative shops and the long queues for food and basic needs. I was back in the year 2000 and again last year. I saw a big difference even in that small interval of time. Surely a good proportion of the population is still under poverty line but at least no one is starving and no one is eating rotten rice mixed with sweet potatoes anymore (which country in the world hasn't got citizen under poverty line and homeless people? I can't remember...). A new class of "bourgeoisie" is growing by the days. The Vietnamese people are very entrepreneurial, especially people from the south. Give a person 20 euros in the morning and he will go doing business the whole day, buying, selling and come back at night to give you back your 20 and still has enough left to feed his family that day (please be warned: this is only an example to show how good they are in business. Don't try to do it unless you are ready to say goodbye to your 20). The leaders nowadays are pragmatic. Two of the most powerful are from the south. Vietnam can learn from its mistakes and adapt to any new situation. That's why after a thousand years of occupation and being pushed out of southern China we are still a nation and have our own country.

I have heard in the U.S. there are people who form government in exile with president, prime minister and whole cabinet etc... What are they trying to do? Come back, topple the communist regime and put themselves in power? What a big dream! Surely they will fade away with their dream...

I have friends in Vietnam who are big industrialists now. Their fathers were in the re-education camps after 1975. I have relatives who are poor farmers now. Their forebears worked with the South vietnamese old regime and survived the re-education camp too. And this is their view: nobody wants a change of regime anymore! The new generation born after the war (It has been thirty years already!) doesn't give a damn about that war. It has been a fratricidal and a shameful war. We were made to hate each other: The North was portrayed as a barbaric regime whose aim was to destitute the people to satisfy their evil mentors Russia and China. The South was painted as bloodsucker of the people under the influence of its U.S master. The result was the death of nearly 3 millions Vietnamese north and south.

Why didn't we see like this :

- the northern leaders were nationalists who loved Vietnam, who wanted the good for the people but who erroneously adopted a system that will never work in practice!
 - the southern leaders were nationalists who loved Vietnam, who wanted the good for the people, who benefited a good system but unfortunately who were also a bunch of incompetent and corrupted men!
- That's why we got that war. That's how we got a shameful mark in our History.

And that was history now. So it doesn't matter anymore who was the winner or the loser, who was in the right, who was in the wrong. Let's not be a sore loser or a proud winner. Let's forget about that war and let's get together to build a new Vietnam.

I remember when I still had a supermarket in Australia I used to hire some university students from Vietnam to work on the weekend. That put me on a collision course with the local Vietnamese. They said to me: "Don't you know they are communist? They come here to learn new technologies and management processes just to go back and consolidate the communist regime, and you just help them! " To what I replied: " If you want to see any change in the regime, these students are the ones you have to invest in. Make them feel welcome. The more they come, the better. They are the offspring of political leaders, of wealthy government administrators, the cream of the future Vietnamese society. Vietnam is lucky that their parents didn't send them to Cuba, Russia or Czechoslovakia. Thanks God they come to Australia, U.S.A, and England. They will learn about democracy and freedom here. They will take home with them those ideals that you are fighting for. They are the ones who will bring change to Vietnam, not you "

And when some Vietnamese cultural delegations came to perform traditional dance and music, our local Vietnamese ran around with banners to protest. I told them “ Don’t waste your time like that. Just go and meet them, welcome them, befriend them, take them around the city, show them how we live, what is freedom, what is democracy. They are human like us. They know what is good and what is bad, even if they can’t admit it publicly. But when they go back to Vietnam, they will tell their friends and their friends will tell others because they believe their kith and kin, not you.”

At the end the Vietnamese locals avoided my store and I relied mostly on the Australian community for my business.

The sad thing about our overseas Vietnamese communities is that they are made of very patriotic people who cannot see farther than the tip of their nose.

I showed them the way of Confucius and they didn’t see it.. Confucius was a great legislator, administrator, teacher and moralist. He never trusts a quick solution and he is against violence and revolution. When a system doesn’t work, a regime doesn’t deliver the good for the people and the people resent the ruling class, Confucius resorts to gradual change to fix the problem. Look what the Americans are doing in Iraq. They want a quick change, a flip over, an upside down overnight and all they achieve are sufferings, destructions, death and chaos. Confucius preferred to work slowly to create order and harmony in the society. He made people know their place in the hierarchy, know where they stood, their duties, their obligations and their rights. “Quân quân, thần thần “ “ Vua cho ra vua, tôi cho ra tôi “ The ruler must behave like a ruler, knows his role, his duty and works for the happiness of the people. The ruled knows his obligations, obeys the law and is loyal to the state. Only then the system can work. And that can be achieved only by educating the ruler as well as the ruled and not by toppling a government and put another one in its place.

Our history is full of wars. When we were not busy fighting off the invaders, we fought between ourselves or we invaded others (Champa, Khmer). It is now one of the rare moments of peace we have. Let’s make the most of it. Vietnam is in the right direction now. Let’s everybody come and put his shoulder in to help it along.

You may ask: “what about human rights?” Don’t you worry, they will improve with time. As Vietnam enter the international stage and is part of the international community it has to observe the community rules and will adjust its behaviour.

Take this example: a year ago, in Vietnam you could still buy a computer and had any software installed free of charge. Even Windows XP was “free”. For 50 cents you could buy a program worth hundreds of dollars elsewhere. You call it piracy, I call it necessity. The poor Vietnamese student needs those programs for better education and to buy them in the legal way is merely unaffordable. A few more hundred millions of dollars means nothing for Bill Gates but those programs mean a better education, a better future for millions of poor students. But since Vietnam joined the WTO and since G. Bush visited Hanoi we see a crackdown on software piracy. Now you have to pay for your Windows XP like everyone else, and guess what? People are turning to free Linux and Open Office Org. Bill Gates didn’t gain much but the poor Vietnamese students did lose a lot!

And for those of you who want a multi- parties system for Vietnam, I will say: Vietnam is not ready for that yet. Vietnam now needs a strong central and even an authoritarian government. For too long the society has broken down and been neglected. A strong government is indispensable to fix it. Too many parties is like too many doctors pulling the poor sick Vietnamese Mother in many different ways and hinder her recovery.(You all know the old saying “ nhiều thầy thuốc ma “). Everyone thinks he knows best and that he is the only one who can fix it. The hypocrisy is: their fix is not free! You have to give them power. They have to be the leaders to deliver their remedy. It all boils down to a thirst of power, a complex of superiority, a symptom of early megalomania!

Confucius was better than any king and prince of his time. He knew better than any of them how to govern a country, how to prosper a society but he never wanted to be king or prince. He gave his remedy free to any ruler who wanted it. That’s why he is above kings and princes and that’s why after two and half thousands years people still remember his name but not those of kings and princes of his time.

In 2000 when I came back to visit the place where I was born (Vung Tau), I was appalled to see the state of the beaches. We got two main beaches Bãi trước and Bãi sau. Bãi trước is small but right in the city where we, as small kids, used to run up and down the well lit esplanade at night time savouring khô mực nướng or mía hấp. A small sandy patch planted with casuarinas led to the beach lined with coconut trees where you could unfold

your beach towel and lie down to look at the twinkling stars, basking in the sea breeze. In 2000 the picture was very different: The sandy plot was full of makeshift dwellings. To walk to the beach you had to negotiate your way between them along small corridors, watching your feet to avoid undesirable encounters. The beach itself was littered with rubbish. The water was dirty and a multitude of fishing boats were mooring everywhere. The atmosphere was filled with a putrid smell. I was nearly in tears. I didn't stay long and didn't even bother to see Bãi Sau. I vowed not to come back. But I did come back last year. This time I was for a big surprise. Gone are all the dirty shacks. The esplanade was restored, the street was widened, the view was unobstructed from the esplanade to the sea, the sandy plot reappeared and the beach was clean. There was even a playground for kids.

Now tell me how could we achieve that in a democratic multi-parties system? Will it not likely be this unacceptable scenario? : as soon as the government declares its intention to move the people and tear down the shacks there will be meetings and protests. The politicians from different parties jump in. Everybody wants to be seen as the defender of the people (to attract future votes). Then manifestations in the streets, demonstrations, people tie themselves to their shacks, some definitely won't move, some demand exorbitant compensations, street battles with the police, then the unions join in, strikes are organised. The courts will be involved: lengthy process that waste time and resources. Can Vietnam really afford that ?

Medicine is always bitter. And it takes a strong and decisive government to administer it. So many things have been broken. So many things have to be fixed. Perhaps we won't see a multi-parties system in our lifetime but it sure will come with the next generation. Let's not rush things.

"And about corruptions? " you may ask. We live in a world where Tony Blair is accused of selling peerage, where Tom Delay, the majority leader of the House in Washington lost his job for funnelling illegal corporate contribution money and you want the Vietnamese people to be as clean as distilled water? There will be corruption as long as there are humans in this world. That is a scourge we can lessen but not eradicate. Show me a man that cannot be bought and I will show you a Buddha. But don't be pessimistic. Remember the days when everybody had to cough up 5 or 10 dollars in his passport to go through the gates of Tan Son Nhut? They are long gone now. With the young generation growing up, education getting ahead, the country prospering and the people's life improving we will see a drop in corruption. We all saw the phase " bản cùng sinh đạo tặc " we will have to wait for the next phase " phú quý sinh lễ nghĩa ". It will be a long wait but sure it will come.

Vietnam is on the right track and heading the right direction now. Be patient. If you can't come and lend a helping hand, don't throw a stick in the gears. If you can't say a good word to encourage it, don't criticise in negative manners....

A last a word for those friends who rebuke me for wandering too far into a taboo subject as politics: Please consider the concept of " vô khả, vô bất khả " of Confucius: Don't divide your actions into " Can and can't ", "khả" and "bất khả" and burden your life with strict rules like " Do and don't " Consider each action by its merits at the time of executing. If a thing is " Hợp thời, hợp lý, hợp nhân nghĩa " then do it. If you talk politics to promote violence, to sow hate and discord then it's a "no, no", a "bất khả". But if you talk politics to call for understanding, for tolerance and for peace, then "why not?". It's a "khả" now.

May be you are asking now " Who is this Minh Son ? A communist sympathizer? a propagandist working for the Saigon regime?" No my friends. Be assured, I am none of those. I am only a humble apolitical man who loves his fatherland, a man who is not afraid to speak his mind, a man who tries to learn the way of Confucius and most of all a man without hate in his heart. Tonight when you go to bed, spare a minute and ask yourself: what have you done for your fatherland (or motherland or ancestor's land)? For my part, I have put some food on the plate of some poor Vietnamese people, I have contributed a few bricks to build their house and that makes me feel happy. I am not ashamed to be a refugee working with the communists as you may think.

Amitiés,

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