

“The Dynamics of Social Change in Vietnam: Capturing the Butterfly Effect”
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Vietnam is one of the fastest-changing societies in the world today. This statement is true if we look at the numbers: per capita GDP growth, turnover in export markets, number of televisions per person. It’s also true at a deeper level. In part due to the aftereffects of war and revolution, in part from external obstacles and opening, and in part from deliberate decisions taken by Vietnamese leaders to engage in a process of *doi moi* (“Renewal”), Vietnam is experiencing almost within a single generation changes that took other countries centuries: from rural to urban, from agricultural to industrial, from rule of man to rule by law. Are these changes irreversible? Predictable? Can Vietnamese society, or external actors, influence their direction or affect their outcomes? Each of us may have our own answers, or partial answers, to these questions. Consciously or unconsciously, we put together mental constructs to explain what is happening, how and why. That is, we construct our own theories of change.²

Part of the fascination of living in Vietnam as both an outsider and an insider is that this process of understanding can never be complete when so much change is occurring. I’ve spent the majority of the last nine years here, working mostly for international non-governmental organizations, with additional experience leading a study abroad program and as an editor and translator for a Vietnamese publishing company. I’ve given plenty of presentations and papers over this time, usually about specific topics in development and international relations, and often with limited space and time. So I am delighted to have an opportunity to take several steps back and look at some broader questions of what changes have been occurring in Vietnam, and how we attempt to understand them.

These questions cut to the core of several disciplines: of sociology, political science, economics and history. I’m not an academic expert in any of these, though I have some background in each of them. What I’d like to offer is my own personal observations as a development practitioner and as a foreign resident of Vietnam. I will do this through examining and critiquing four different theories of social change. I’m using the concept of “theory” in a philosophical, not a physical sense: that is, as one possible mental construct among many for understanding the world around us. (It’s interesting to note, however, that several of the theories have natural science origins or claim to represent scientific truth.) Three of these theories are *linear* in nature: that is, they describe change as progressing in a more or less orderly fashion from a beginning to an end point, passing through distinct stages along the way. The fourth theory is *non-linear*, meaning without a clear beginning, end point,

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² The term “theories of change” is currently popular in the literature on conflict resolution and peacebuilding, such as the work of John Paul Lederach (*Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, 1997), who provided initial stimulation for this paper. I am also indebted to two mentors, Henry Rosemont Jr. (currently of Brown University) and Grace Goodell (Johns Hopkins University) for their work on development ethics and social change/continuity, respectively. See in particular Rosemont’s comparative analysis in *A Chinese Mirror* (1991).

or stage distinction. Before entering into a description and analysis of theories, however, I would like to consider more clearly what we mean by “social change.”

The Times Are A-Changing

When I hear both Vietnamese and international friends comment on the speed and quality of change here, many of the observations have to do with one of two related areas. One is superficial, the way the city and country look. There’s so much more traffic, so many more motorbikes and cars, so much construction and new facilities. The second area is economic: there is so much buying and selling going on everywhere, so many more stores and restaurants, so much visible wealth in what is sometimes hard to remember is still a poor, developing country by world standards. A recent discussion on the lively and indispensable Vietnam Studies Group listserv has reminisced about milestones such as the first traffic light and first plastic bags in Hanoi, while remembering to place the “incredible stories of reconstruction and change” in the context of Vietnam’s postwar devastation.³

Along with these material and economic changes have come many less obvious, but equally pervasive, social changes. —although it’s true that material conditions have an impact on societal relations. Let me give a few personal examples. I visited Vietnam for the first time in 1994 and came to live in Hanoi beginning in 1997, so my memory is comparatively short. But still at that time, I felt that the pace of life and work here was noticeably slower than in the United States. The workday was from 8:00 to 5:00, and everyone arrived at 8 and left exactly at 5. These days, I usually leave the office around 6:00, and I am rarely the last person there. By 9:00 or 9:30 in the evening, the streets were virtually deserted. Over the past decade, I’ve seen the end of the evening move back to 10:00, then 10:30, and now about 11—later on weekends. In 1997, there was still less weekend, because government offices were open on Saturday. The two-day weekend was instituted the following year. As a result of these and other changes, the way that people use their time has shifted dramatically, at least in urban areas. Clearly, available personal disposable income plays a role in leisure time and recreation. But at least in my observation, poorer people also go out more and stay out later than they used to.

Technology also plays a role in changing social relations. In 1994, few houses had their own telephones. To make an appointment with a friend, you went to their house and agreed to go out at a later time—or immediately then, with no advance notice. By the late 1990s, more people had telephones in their homes, so you called first and made an appointment with a day or two of advance notice. Then came mobile phones—at first a luxury, now a necessity. (I resisted for several years, then gave in by 2002.) There are still a few Vietnamese friends I know without cell phones, and I admire them greatly. But like time schedules, mobile phone use is not determined solely by income. *Xe om* drivers and trash collectors own mobile phones. Everyone is texting and calling everyone else all the time. As a result, we all have less time, and people I know are starting to develop the same over-booked personal schedules as many Americans have.

One subset of social change that I do hear Vietnamese friends discuss frequently is generational. In particular, the generation born since around 1980 has not experienced the hardship of the war and immediate postwar years, but instead has grown up in a context of

³ The VSG listserv is managed by the Vietnam Studies Group of the Association of Asian Studies (U.S.) Postings are archived at <http://mailman1.u.washington.edu/mailman/listinfo/vsg>. The sections cited above come from messages by Diane Fox and Michael DiGregorio on May 25, 2006, part of a longer thread about postwar and post-*doi moi* changes in Vietnam.

expanding opportunities and might feel entitled to a share of the good life, rather than fortunate to have escaped poverty. Add to this that with smaller family sizes and longer life expectancies, children born in the last several decades receive proportionally more care from their parents and extended families than those born earlier.

These changes can be seen, once again, in both superficial and profound ways. On the surface, clothing and dress styles have loosened since even the late 1990s. What was inappropriate or risqué then is now commonplace. Music tastes have also shifted. One market research firm in Ho Chi Minh City divides consumers by, in part, what music they like to listen to. Those born before 1970 listen almost exclusively to Vietnamese music (both classical and popular). Those born during the 1970s favor Vietnamese pop divas and some international music. Those born since 1980 listen almost exclusively to international music.⁴ At a deeper level, the way that young people interact with their elders has also shifted. Youth have more independence; they are less likely to favor living with their parents (or their future husband's parents) when they are older, though this remains a dominant social model.

Another subset of social change is more political: that is, how citizens relate to their leaders and the state. I will leave an analysis of state-society relations to those more practiced in political science than I, but I'd like to point out that significant change has also taken place in this area. There is more public discussion of what might have previously been sensitive issues than when I first arrived in Hanoi. The National Assembly has gained in importance. Since 2001, its debates are televised, with some rather intensive grilling of government ministers, and people do watch this coverage (unlike, for instance, C-SPAN cable television coverage of the US Congress, which hardly any Americans watch). The press, while still under state ownership and thus not considered "free" by Western standards, has become more professional and assertive in its investigative reporting, most noticeably on charges of official corruption. The state still plays a fairly large role in society compared to elsewhere in the world, but non-state sectors have been growing in size and importance, including domestic private business, non-governmental organizations, and religious organizations, among others. The legal status, rights and responsibilities of these groups are increasingly recognized and regulated in the formal legal structure, with its ever-expanding numbers of laws, ordinances, regulations and other instruments.

In sum, the past 20 years since the *doi moi* process began have brought about economic, social and political changes, of which the above description gives a small taste. Not all of these changes, of course, are directly attributable to *doi moi*; it is not as if the Sixth Party Congress developed a plan for cell phone use or generational relations. But I would argue that the opening and reform process have been at a minimum a necessary condition for social change; without *doi moi*, this wouldn't have happened.

This analysis may seem uncontroversial, even simplistic. But I'd pause here to note that it differs from many outside observers' perceptions of what *doi moi* is about. In this common version outside Vietnam, there is substantial economic change going on but less or no political change. Part of the explanation for this, I will argue, has to do with the particular theory of change being applied by these outside observers. Another explanation is that the economic changes are more apparent on the surface, while the social and political ones take

⁴ Cited in a presentation to the American Chamber of Commerce by Ralf Matthaes, Managing Director, Taylor Nelson Sofres Vietnam, 2004.

more time to appreciate and learn about. Thus, the foreign tourist, journalist or business traveler sees only the tip of the iceberg.

On the other hand, many changes are the most noticeable when one has been away from Vietnam for some time and then returns. Several terms describing this effect are “creeping normalcy” and “landscape amnesia,” that is forgetting what the past used to be like because change happens gradually over time.⁵ Living here permanently, one may be aware that a lot of construction is happening or that social relations are shifting, but appreciating the magnitude of the difference requires going away and coming back again. When friends outside Vietnam ask me why I am (still!) living here a decade later, I often give this answer, that if I lived anywhere else there is no way I could possibly keep up with change here—while it is entirely possible to stay abreast of changes in the U.S. or Europe while only visiting once every year or two.

External perceptions, though, also take time to adjust. Up until as recently as four or five years ago, Western media frequently used adjectives such as “stagnant,” “crumbling,” “totalitarian,” or “repressive” to describe Vietnam. This at a time when economic growth rates here were among the highest in the world and pathbreaking social and political changes were occurring. Some of this is pure political bias based on no actual knowledge of Vietnam: since Vietnam is ruled by a Communist Party, all of the above must be true. In some cases, perhaps, geopolitical ignorance on the part of people who confuse the positions of Vietnam and North Korea on a map. Or perhaps some of these negative perceptions were true at some point in the past, but are now no longer true, yet thinking and judgments take more time to adjust than reality. I will come back to this time lag issue later in the paper.

Happily, in the last several years I’ve witnessed substantial improvement in external impressions of Vietnam, as more and more visitors come here to see the changes for themselves, and as relations with the U.S. and other countries continue to improve. When I go back to visit family and friends now, they have a much more accurate (and generally positive) view of Vietnam than when I first started living here. That’s a significant social change, too.

Going back to changes in Vietnam, I am not evaluating whether any of these changes are necessarily good or bad. I’ll leave those judgments to you. You might expect that Vietnamese are more likely to judge these changes positively, since their living standards and levels of personal freedom have improved compared to previous generations, while international observers would be more critical, since they would be likely to compare Vietnam to more developed countries. And surveys do show that Vietnamese people are, by and large, optimistic about the country’s future and satisfied with their lives.⁶ But my personal observations among friends in Hanoi and some other cities is actually the opposite of this. Expatriates living in Vietnam tend, in my experience, to be very positive about changes. They see Vietnam as a good place to raise a family, a stimulating working environment, and a place with more and more of the comforts of their home countries. Meanwhile, some Vietnamese I know who are more critical, or nervous. They face a lot of stress from family

⁵ Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2005).

⁶ The Pew Global Attitudes Project has ranked Vietnam as among the most optimistic countries in the world. In 2002, two-thirds of Vietnamese survey respondents were satisfied with “how things are going” in the country. 92% felt the economic situation was “good.” 98% felt increased international trade is good for the country. See <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=165>, <http://pewglobal.org/commentary/display.php?AnalysisID=68>, <http://international.ucla.edu/asia/article.asp?parentid=2748>.

and work. Are things changing too fast? Can they keep up? In the process of economic development, is Vietnam losing something distinctive about its culture and political system? When one is on the inside of rapid social change, it can be an insecure and threatening experience, even when the potential rewards are great. This insecurity might be one factor fueling a heightened interest in religion, on one hand, or consumerism and materialism, on the other.

So far I've focused mostly on the first component of *doi moi*: *doi* or "change." The second component, of course, is *moi*, "new." Which begs the question: how new is all this really? How much from the past is continuing? I can't give any definite answers to these questions. But they are important to consider as we review 20 years of *doi moi*. Both proponents and critics of "globalization" sometimes claim that current changes in the global economy and society are unprecedented and far-reaching. This may well be the case, but wasn't European colonialism also unprecedented and far-reaching for Vietnam? The 1945 revolution and the intense war of attempted reconquest which followed? Going back even further, Chinese occupation in the first millennium CE? And yet Vietnamese culture survived and adapted through all of these changes. Why should today's be any different? What is the relationship between social change and cultural continuity, between the old and the new?

On one extreme of this question are social revolutionaries—those who want to forget the past and focus only on the future. I think of a Chinese phrase that captures this attitude: *jiu de bu qu, xin de bu lai*. "If the old doesn't go away, the new can't come." This mindset leads to a type of development in which entire historic neighborhoods of cities are flattened in the name of "urban renewal." And even worse, entire past philosophies and religions are suppressed in the name of becoming "scientific" or "modern." These sorts of aggressive modernism have been attempted in a number of countries around the world, including in my own, and the results have not been good. To the credit of Vietnam, I don't see much of this uncritical destruction of the past happening here. There is, I think, a general understanding that becoming "modern" does not require giving up tradition or one's own culture, but that these are at a minimum compatible with change and can be negotiated, or perhaps even that cultural preservation and awareness are prerequisites for benefiting from development.

I'd like to offer here an alternative definition of "modernity." In a linear model of social change, "modern" is the desired end point, the opposite of "traditional" or "backward." In a non-linear view, however, there is no fixed end point. Modernity is thus not a location or a stage of development, but rather a state of being, an awareness of who one really is in relation to others. A modern person (or nation), therefore, is aware of his or her traditions while fully at ease in the present.⁷ This definition allows us to say some things that the linear one does not, for instance that some historical figures can be considered truly modern in thinking, while some present-day figures are not. Or that a nation can be considered modern at some points in its history but not at others.

These alternative conceptualizations are some of the benefits of non-linear thinking. I hasten to add that this does not mean that linear theories of change are necessarily wrong; all theories explain some things and not others. In attempting to understand social change in Vietnam over the past two decades, we need as many theories as can apply. Here are four to begin with.

⁷ Similar versions of this definition are outlined in Rosemont's *Chinese Mirror* and Jonathan Spence's *Search for Modern China* (1990).

Marxism: The Transition to Socialism?

This theoretical tour begins with Karl Marx, since his thinking, along with that of Lenin and other twentieth-century Communist theoreticians, forms the ideological basis for the Vietnamese Communist Party and the *doi moi* process itself. That last phrase may sound surprising to some international listeners and maybe even some Vietnamese, since there is a common impression outside Vietnam that *doi moi* is a process of moving towards a market system, hence away from socialism. But that wasn't the original intention.

I don't presume to lecture people who have studied a lot more Marxism than I about Marx's theories of change, so I will keep this brief and am willing to be corrected if it is oversimplified. Marx follows a progressive stage model, adapted from Hegel's dialectic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Each stage represents a synthesis of preceding forces and as such is superior to what came before. Capitalism involves the bourgeois classes in ownership, hence is superior to feudalism, which concentrated ownership in a hereditary aristocracy. When capitalist development has run its course, the working classes will rise up and seize control of the means of production, ushering in the stage of socialism.

A few comments on this model. First is that the stages are fixed and distinct; it's clear which stage one is in at any time. The transitions between stages are not gradual processes of evolution, but violent uprisings as one class struggles against another. The main arguments within Marxism in the twentieth century came between those "orthodox Marxists" who believed each of the stages had to be followed in order, and those who believed stages could be skipped (Lenin) and sped up (Mao). Marx himself set no timeline for when a communist revolution would occur. When the proletariat was organized and capitalism fell into decadence, they would revolt organically. In his lifetime, Marx believed that these conditions were ripe in developed Western European countries with large industrial classes, such as England or Germany. Eastern Europe was still ruled by czars and emperors at the time, hence at an earlier stage, and Asia was characterized by a form of "oriental despotism" that might take a very long time to progress to capitalism.

Thus, I think Marx would have been greatly surprised to see the first successful communist revolution in Russia, and then some thirty years later in China. Lenin's innovation was to accelerate the process of revolution through a well-organized party as the vanguard of the working classes. Mao Zedong took this creativity one step further and attempted to skip directly from colonial feudalism to pure communism through the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. The results were disastrous and led to a discrediting of Maoist "ultra-left deviationism" in China and elsewhere, with the nadir coming in Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea.

Orthodox Marxist stage theory thus emerged as a more credible alternative to Maoist "continuous revolution." Society cannot change overnight; it takes time for a national democratic revolution to develop to a point that the working class can take full power and the state wither away. In the meantime, a strong state is needed, and market mechanisms can be a stage on the road to communism. After all, some of the greatest successes of the Soviet Union came during the early years of the New Economic Plan, before Stalin's purges and World War II weakened the system.

I can't say if this is a valid representation of the thinking of some of Vietnam's leaders in 1986; probably an incomplete one at best. But it does offer a compelling Marxist rationale for

why *doi moi* might be an effective policy towards the ultimate goal of a transition to communism.

Where this theory is less strong is in explaining changes in Vietnam since the 1980s. Simply stated, no other country has succeeded in moving to the stage of communism to offer a positive example. Vietnam has sought to maintain some of the positive features of socialist ideology, such as equitable provision of public services, in an environment where many formerly socialist countries have abandoned them. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, China remained the largest country ruled by a Communist party, and it has dismantled its system of state ownership and social services to a much greater degree than has Vietnam. European societies that have followed a social democratic model, combining some of the best features of capitalism and socialism into a hybrid stage, are also having difficulties maintaining the welfare systems they have built over the last century. Meanwhile, international capitalism has proven remarkably resilient to crashes and depressions, beyond what Marx had expected. The “creative destruction” of capitalism described by Joseph Schumpeter shows no signs of weakening, and indeed makes increasing demands and pressure on countries like Vietnam that seek to maintain a socialist orientation. Recent electoral victories for leftist parties in Latin America, India and Europe might offer some possibilities for a socialist resurgence, but in order for Marx’s stage model to hold, the time frame between stages would have to be very long indeed.

Democratization: The Transition Away from Socialism?

After the end of the Cold War and the breakup of the Soviet Union, a number of countries that had been Communist transitioned into new political systems, whether multi-party democracy, single-party authoritarianism, or dictatorship. Many Western observers focused on the first result and viewed this as a triumph of democracy over totalitarianism that confirmed their existing ideologies and offered a retrospective justification for the Cold War. In this self-congratulatory vision, Western democracy forms the “end of history” towards which all nations are moving, at various speeds, with the United States as the sole remaining superpower and the “world’s policeman.”⁸

This worldview will be recognizable as that of the neo-liberal “Washington consensus” of free-market economics. With slight variations, it is shared by President Bush and the neo-conservative wing of the U.S. Republican Party—and a good number of U.S. Democrats and other Westerners as well. Surprisingly, democratization as a theory of change is not so different from Marxist stage theory in its construction. There are firm stages and a desired end point. The only difference is the name of the end point. In this theory, communism is not really a stage at all but an interruption between two other stages, say colonial pre-capitalism and capitalist democracy. Once the experiment with Communism ended, countries reverted to their pre-revolutionary societal starting points and became “societies in transition.” Left unsaid is what stages the transition begins from and leads to—these are assumed to be understood and inevitable.

Consciously or unconsciously, I think that most Western observers apply this view to changes in Vietnam and equate *doi moi* with a move away from socialism. Far from lamenting this perception, the media and public applaud it as a clear step forward. At times the expressed feeling is one of relief, that “they” want the same things that “we” want after all and are

⁸ The “end of history” phrase comes from Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Fukuyama has since moderated his views and abandoned neo-conservatism to become a critic of the US war on Iraq.

ostensibly becoming more “like us.” Occasionally one hears a stronger and more worrisome version from U.S. veterans or politicians: “We lost the war, but we’re winning in the long run.”⁹

Scholars use more neutral language, but increasingly include Vietnam (and China) in the new field of “post-socialist studies.” Though recognizing that the concept of “post-socialist” can be problematic for countries still ruled by communist parties, they note that many comparable socio-economic changes have taken place in Vietnam as in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. After all, *doi moi* has allowed a role for private enterprise, personal property ownership, and greater individual freedom. Vietnamese are becoming consumers, investors and owners. As one academic summarized in a recent posting to the Vietnam Studies Group listserve:

“In line with postcommunist transitions elsewhere, the process of change in Vietnam has followed a marked path of decentralisation and opening up, followed by a process of rationalisation and movement towards the rule of law. This process required a fundamental re-assessment of the belief systems inculcated under the socialist regime, including attitudes towards money, the rule of law, Marxism-Leninism, and the inevitability of historical progress...a transformation from teleological rationalisation based on Marxist-Leninist doctrine, to a legal-rational framework.”¹⁰

A frequent corollary of democratization theory is an assumed linkage between economic and political change, not just any political change but moves in the direction of Western democracy. Since capitalism is uncritically associated with democracy and socialism with totalitarianism, then market-based reform today will automatically lead to pressure for democratic change tomorrow. More specifically, establishment of a market system with more economic freedom will create a middle class of entrepreneurs (in Marxist terminology, “bourgeoisie”) who will then demand greater political rights and form new political parties.

Needless to say, this theory has been particularly unpopular in Vietnam, where it goes by the name of “peaceful evolution.” This name has always surprised me, since peace and evolution sound like positive values, not forces to be resisted. But it has been associated with the end of the Soviet Union and the interventionist models of “shock therapy” that did so much damage to the economies of many countries in the former Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe.

One other major objection to democratization theory is its tendency to ethnocentrism. “Democracy” tends to be associated with Western democracy, and capitalism with Western capitalism, particularly the Anglo-American variety. The idea that non-Western societies might develop other forms of democracy or market economies that are more suited to themselves is not taken particularly seriously. Meanwhile, developing countries that have followed Western advice and established multi-party electoral systems, agreed to World Bank structural adjustment programs, and allowed free rein to multinational corporations do not have a consistent record of success to point to. In fact, in some cases these societies are worse off than those that maintained traditional political systems, imposed controls on capital flight or gave preference to domestic firms. Just as with Marxist stage theory, there is no clear evidence that democratization theory works for developing countries. And with electoral problems in Western countries, the debacle in Iraq, declining political participation and a host of other problems, it’s not even clear that the democratic capitalist system is functioning particularly well in the U.S. or Europe itself.

⁹ For instance, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell during his visit to Vietnam (2001).

¹⁰ The discussion of “post-socialist studies” on the VSG listserve included postings by Patrice Ladwig, Thomas Sikor and Elizabeth St. George (May 5-20, 2006).

In critiquing democratization theory, I want to be clear that I am not arguing against democracy or democratic processes. Nor am I challenging the concept of universal human rights, which have been delineated in the U.N. Charter, Human Rights Declaration and Conventions and accepted by the vast majority of countries in the world, including Vietnam. The problem with democratization theory lies in associating these universal principles too closely with one particular culture or political system, and then imposing these values on others. For instance, NGOs such as the US-based Freedom House assign countries yearly ratings on a scale from “free” to “less free,” based on criteria that they themselves decide. The U.S. State Department’s annual Human Rights Report engages in a similar unilateral exercise. These ratings correspond to the stages of development in the democratization theory model. But rather than provide assistance or support to societies perceived to be at lower stages, these organizations and governments often counsel punitive action. Those who do not measure up to the rigid conditions for higher stages become targets for isolation, sanctions or worse, which ensures that these countries remain at lower stages. The most egregious example of the abuse of democratization theory has been the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, under the pretense of bringing “freedom and democracy” to the Middle East but actually making Iraqis less free and less secure in the process. Democracy is all too often equated with the formal procedures of multi-party elections, even if the results of these elections do little to advance the interests of the voters.

Democratization theory does little to explain changes in Vietnam over the past decades. The rapid economic and social changes Vietnam has experienced do not appear consistent with a Communist government and a relatively high state role in the economy, yet these changes have happened nevertheless. Political change is also occurring, but not in the direction that democratization theorists would like to see. Comparative regional experience, most notably in China, does not seem to support any linkage between socio-economic development and an evolution toward Western democracy. If anything, the linkage is a reverse one: some of the countries with the fastest growth rates have political systems quite different from Western democracy and economic policies quite different from the “Washington consensus.” They have grown following their own implicit theory of change, to which I’ll now turn.

East Asian Developmentalism: Catching Up with the Zhous?

Leaders of some of the more successful societies in East and Southeast Asia developed a theory of “Asian values” in the 1980s and 90s. Exemplified by former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, these thinkers rejected both Marxism and Western democracy in favor of a socio-political system that they believed to be more in line with Asian cultures and more likely to bring about successful developmental results. The Asian developmentalist model combines 1960s modernization theory with belief in a strong state, an export-led growth model, relatively low levels of social inequality, and some degree of Confucian family values. Some version of this theory is espoused by many regional governments, as well as embodied in regional institutions such as the Asian Development Bank, Greater Mekong Subregion cooperation, APEC, or the Mekong River Commission.

This is also a linear model, with a starting point of “poverty” or “underdevelopment” and an end point of wealth and modernity. The stages of this theory can be defined as “less developed,” “medium development,” and “developed.” Since these stages are open to some interpretation and definition, developmental theory is not as rigid as the previous two theories in terms of stages. Transitions from one stage to the next are fluid and gradual, not abrupt. Progress occurs when nations and societies adopt appropriate policies and approaches to

allow development to occur. The flexible, pragmatic nature of this approach can be summed up in the motto of Deng Xiaoping, basically a Developmentalist, that “poverty is not socialism” and “it doesn’t matter whether a cat is white or black, as long as it catches mice.”¹¹

The main advantage that the East Asian developmental model has over either Marxism or democratization theory is that it actually appears to have worked on its own terms. Countries that have adopted some variety of this theory have succeeded in posting high levels of economic growth and moving up the industrial supply chain to high-tech, capital-intensive products with excellent export earnings. It’s no surprise that South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Thailand are now leading investors in Vietnam, or that Communist Party ideology besides, this is probably the most popular theory of change in Vietnam today. I frequently read articles in the Vietnamese press, or hear in conversation, that Vietnam needs to “catch up” to other countries in the region, that is, adopt some of the same policies and approaches as other Asian countries have in order to have sustainable growth and increasing prosperity. Along with this ambition is often a note of anxiety about whether Vietnam is really “good enough” to succeed. The recent series of readers’ articles in *Thanh Nien* on the subject of “Is Vietnam a big country or a small country?” is one case in point.¹²

From my perspective, Asian developmentalism offers some good news and some bad news for Vietnam. The good news is that yes, Vietnam can succeed at developing along the model of some of its neighbors. In fact, it is already implementing many of these policies through *doi moi*, demonstrating strong growth rates, and becoming more prosperous. These are driving forces behind many of the social changes that I described in the first part of this paper. Vietnam clearly has the human resources, work ethic and drive to succeed, as demonstrated by the progress of *doi moi*.

The bad news is that “success” in the Asian developmental model comes with some significant costs. First, even as Vietnam continues to grow and develop, it is not clear whether it can in fact “catch up” with other countries in the region. This is partly a mathematical problem: even if a small economy grows at a faster rate than a larger one, the absolute gap between the two may still increase, since the smaller percentage of the larger number is still greater than the larger percentage of the smaller number.¹³ In order for the latecomer to really catch up to the predecessor, the larger country needs to stop growing or even shrink in relative terms. This is extremely unlikely to happen in Asia, since the larger economies in the region are also the leading investors in Vietnam. If they stop growing, so will Vietnam. The more that Vietnam develops and integrates with the region, the more susceptible it will be to external shocks, which should lead over time towards a convergence of economic growth rates. Changing the rules of the game will be more difficult as more rules are set.

A second objection to developmentalism is that it is limited by a fallacy of composition. This is perhaps best illustrated by American writer Garrison Keillor’s joke about a village where “all the children are above average.” Not every country can produce finished industrial goods

¹¹ The “mice” quotation is probably the most famous of Deng’s sayings outside China; it originated in a 1962 speech to the Chinese Communist Party Secretariat, before Deng was purged in the Cultural Revolution. The “poverty” quotation came later, after market reforms started in 1978.

¹² Series of articles in *Thanh Nien* during the weeks of May 10-20, 2006.

¹³ This has been pointed out by Hoang Tuy and Le Dang Doanh, among others, writing in *Tia Sang* (English translation in *Vietnamese Studies* II/2003).

with high value added, since someone needs to produce the raw materials and components to feed more advanced production. The fact that South Korea, for instance, succeeded at moving up this chain to become a developed country does not offer any guarantee that Vietnam will be able to follow in the same path (presuming that Vietnam wanted to do this). The main reason for this is that the *initial conditions* were different for South Korea in the 1960s compared to Vietnam today. South Korea was able to protect many of its key industrial markets, while its military budget and many economic needs were taken care of by the United States in return for political loyalty in the Cold War. In 2006, Vietnam is expected to enter the WTO, where it will find its economic and social policy options much more limited.

Perhaps the largest weakness to the East Asian model lies in its social costs. In other words, even if success is possible for Vietnam, is it desirable? Is it worth the cost? So far we have been measuring “success” by the yardstick of GDP—a very limited measurement, even for economic purposes. GDP does not include any notion of environmental costs, sustainability, or quality of life. A more balanced indicator might be something like the UNDP’s Human Development Index. Here Vietnam scores relatively well compared to other countries at its income level, but this has been the case for many years. Is Vietnam really progressing in human development terms? Other Asian countries that have shown high economic numbers do not all have the social progress to match. Some have managed to keep inequality low, while others have seen high rises in inequality. Many countries have developed megacities with corresponding problems of traffic, crime, pollution, and social problems.

Even if there were a “right” model to follow, next, would this be appropriate for Vietnam? Take Singapore for instance: a highly developed economy with tall buildings, clean streets, low corruption, and a stable one-party government. In many ways, an attractive model. But it’s a city state of a few million people, vastly different from Vietnam in almost every way. Perhaps Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City can learn some lessons from Singapore about urban planning or transportation, but it’s difficult to see how a city state could be a real model for a diverse, predominantly rural country more than 12 times its size.

The ultimate critique of developmentalism lies deeper than this. For a clue, look at the leading source countries for tourism to Vietnam now: Japan and South Korea. Why do they come here? Because it is affordable, in part. But many other places in Asia are affordable too. The main reason, I think, is that they perceive that Vietnam has preserved something of importance that their countries have lost: traditions, vibrant street life, social cohesion, its *soul*. (There is a lesson here for Vietnamese tourism: it’s not about building more and better infrastructure. Tourists don’t come here for the infrastructure, they come for the culture and the experience. If there is too much “modern” infrastructure, the tourists will go somewhere else, like Laos. But I digress.)

Finally, “Asian values” in themselves are no safeguard against social problems. “Values” in themselves can be used for good and bad, whether Asian, Christian, Islamic, even socialist values. And “Asian” is such a diverse term as to be almost meaningless. Which Asian values should one use? The strongest versions of the argument limit it to “Confucian values” or “chopstick cultures.” But then Buddhist and Hindu cultures have been developing strongly too. And—perhaps the strongest counterargument—if Confucianism is such a benefit for development, why didn’t Confucian societies become industrialized centuries ago? Note the irony here, however: in the first two development models, traditional beliefs and practices are associated with lower stages, while here they become a necessary condition to move to higher levels.

Some of the Asian values debate echoes Chinese reformism of a century ago, in what is known in English as the “self-strengthening movement” (自強運動). The principle was that China could adopt Western technology on the outside while maintaining Chinese essence on the inside. The goals of the self-strengtheners were admirable, but they failed in their goals of maintaining China’s independence. Some of their mistakes were conceptual, in thinking that Western societies had nothing to offer China except techniques, that technology is value-free, and that Chinese culture provided essential protection against the potential negative effects of technology. None of these assumptions proved true in practice.

Despite these flaws, Asian developmentalism offers a credible description of the results and changes brought about by *doi moi*. The challenge for Vietnam in the future is to sustain growth while minimizing potential adverse social impacts. If other countries’ experience is a guide, negative side effects of development cannot be entirely avoided and may involve some level of trade-offs between otherwise desirable goals, such as growth vs. equality, environment vs. energy production vs. ethnic minority land rights, and so on.

Chaos Theory: The Hidden Order of Social Change?

The final theory I would like to discuss is radically different from any of the first three. Chaos theory arose in the 1970s and 80s as an abstract branch of mathematics to describe natural phenomena that occur in identifiable patterns, yet are not predictable. “Chaos” as used in the sense of chaos theory should not be confused with anarchy or complete disorder; the main feature is unpredictability. Chaotic systems are non-linear, meaning they do not progress toward a goal. They may appear to be random, but actually function within defined limits. Some of the natural and man-made systems that exhibit chaotic properties include the weather, plate tectonics, turbulent liquids, stock and commodity prices, and population growth.¹⁴

Chaotic systems exhibit a number of fascinating properties. One key property is extreme sensitivity to initial conditions. Even the tiniest shift in the starting point of an experiment can result in a completely different result. A “bifurcation” results when a small change in the parameters of a system leads to a qualitative break in the resulting patterns.

A popular example of dependence on initial conditions is the so-called “butterfly effect,” whereby a single butterfly flapping its wings in, say, New York could lead to changes in world weather patterns resulting in a dust storm in Beijing. The flapping wings represents a minute change in the initial conditions that creates large-scale divergence in the result; if the butterfly had not flapped its wings, the dust storm would not have occurred. Given the number of butterflies in the world and the complexity of the forces and processes at work, the weather can never be predicted beyond a short period of time ahead.

The relevance of the butterfly effect to social change is rich and intriguing.¹⁵ First of all, some types of economic systems exhibit direct properties of chaos. Price bubbles and speculation, such as in real estate, stock markets, or commodities such as gold and oil are chaotic by nature. In classical economic theory, supply equals demand, and shocks to the system result in the formation of a new equilibrium. In a speculative bubble, however,

¹⁴ This is a simplified summary of chaos theory by a non-mathematician. Some of the more accessible published sources include James Gleick’s *Chaos: Making a New Science* (1988) and Edward N. Lorenz, *The Essence of Chaos* (1996). Internet sites such as www.wikipedia.org also contain a wealth of information.

¹⁵ For instance, Euel W. Elliott, *Chaos Theory in the Social Sciences* (1997).

demand consistently outpaces supply, leading to unpredictable distortions in prices—unpredictable because no one knows how long the bubble will last or when it might burst. Both price bubbles and the butterfly effect are examples of positive feedback mechanisms, in which a small change leads to a greater change, which leads to an even greater shift until the results are vastly different from what could have been predicted at the outset.

That is a direct application of chaos theory: some economic patterns actually do behave this way. Besides this, chaos can also be applied as a metaphoric concept to describe social and historical events. Some exercises in counterfactual history can verge on the ridiculous, such as speculation as to whether war X or Y would or would not have occurred if politician A or B had or had not been assassinated. But taken as a whole, the fact that such hypotheses are possible indicates that history, like actual chaotic systems, is not inevitable or predictable, and that an extremely large number of butterflies affect history's making. Retrospectively, historians can identify proximate causes and longer-term trends and patterns that explain why a certain change did or did not happen. But no historian has yet been able to predict the future.

Applying principles of chaos theory to the experience of Vietnam since *doi moi*, then, offers the following conclusions. First, the set of circumstances that gave rise to *doi moi* was not predetermined and could not have been predicted in advance. Second, timing is critical in determining initial conditions. The fact that Vietnam began a process of reform and opening after China, for instance, has meant that Vietnam's trajectory has been distinct in being able to study and learn from the Chinese experience. Likewise, the fact that some ASEAN countries had begun a process of regional integration that Vietnam could join has offered numerous opportunities that a country in a different time or place would not have enjoyed. The Soviet experience of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, followed by disintegration and crisis, also acted as a feedback loop, strengthening some Vietnamese policy decisions and limiting others. These are a few examples of external, macro-level determinants of the *doi moi* trajectory that, if any one had not been present, might have led to a vastly different result. A similar analysis could be made of internal conditions in Vietnamese politics and society at the time, from the leaders to the grassroots.

In the previously described linear models, external shocks, cycles and trends, as well as small internal variables, are peripheral to the main stages of development. Here they are central. The examples of social changes mentioned in the beginning of this paper could not have been predicted or controlled in their entirety by anyone, whether political leaders or outsiders. Again, chaos does not equal anarchy; I do not mean to suggest that society or political leaders have no influence or effect on change, merely that results cannot be foreseen in advance. Turning again to the example of the weather, it is usually reasonable to assume that the immediate future will resemble the near past; if it is sunny this minute, it will probably be sunny the next. And the number of possible weather results is also limited: it is extremely unlikely ever to snow in Hanoi. Patterns noticeably exist. There are rainy periods and dry periods, but no one can predict exactly when the weather will change. Finally, there may be a warming or a cooling trend over time, but the weather is not moving toward any fixed goal.

Turning to the future, a non-linear, chaotic model of change assumes first of all that change will constantly occur, that it can be influenced but not predicted or controlled, and that the way to influence change is by making small but crucial corrections in initial conditions. At the same time, the so-called "law of unforeseen consequences" will still apply, and bifurcations in the system might occur just when we expect them the least. What is

potentially troubling about this model is the fact that two similar systems can meet very different fates, and contradictory results can be found in the same basin of causes.¹⁶

As with the previous theories, this “postmodern science” is not perfect and is open to criticism on a number of fronts. First of all, the economic behavior of price bubbles aside, it is mainly based on an analogy from the natural sciences that might or might not be accurate. After all, not all natural systems are chaotic, only some of them. Chaos theory itself is also open to interpretation or misinterpretation. Marxist theorists have likened the butterfly effect to Hegelian dialectics, while capitalist apologists have extrapolated from chaotic stock markets to a defense of laissez-faire economics.¹⁷ Neither conclusion seems justified. On the other hand, chaos theory can be used to imply that patterns in society are static and that progress is impossible. This does not fit the available evidence particularly well, as my analysis of social change in Vietnam indicates that in addition to new renditions of old patterns, new patterns have also been created that did not exist before. In sum, the butterfly effect analogy is useful, but like all analogies it should not be stretched too far.

One possibility worth considering is that change that appears chaotic to outside observers is actually predictable to insiders who understand their own cultural patterns better. A leading retired Vietnamese journalist recently told me that he finds nothing at all surprising in the country’s progress since Renewal began, and that these changes were all anticipated by the Party in advance. In his view at least, there is nothing chaotic about the system at all. But it is also possible that insiders’ perceptions suffer from the “landscape amnesia” effect described earlier: that is, changes do not feel dramatic to those living through them gradually, but appear so to outsiders who experience them as snapshots in time.

Yet another possibility is that some observers do not actually realize how much change is occurring, either because they are sheltered from it to some extent, or their own theories of change exclude the possibility of chaotic unpredictability. This could happen to insiders or outsiders just as easily. If one is convinced that change is explainable using linear stage models, but the dynamics in question are actually chaotic in nature, eventually reality will step in as a corrective. The cognitive dissonance between theory and actuality will lead to a break in thinking, a “paradigm shift.” Thomas Kuhn argues that scientific theories do not evolve gradually, but rather continue in place until the preponderance of the evidence supporting them leans towards another explanation—at which point paradigms change quickly.¹⁸ Thus, there is a time lag between scientific evidence, which does accumulate gradually as discoveries are made, and thinking, which changes in sharp, revolutionary breaks.

It may be that we are all, insiders and outsiders, caught in such a thought bubble now. Change is happening all around us, and our theories of change cannot keep up. Chaos theory offers one possible way to describe processes of social change that transcends the boundaries of linear stages. But it, too, may be insufficient to explain complex social realities, in which case we need yet another paradigm.

¹⁶ T.R. Young, “Chaos Theory and Social Dynamics: Foundations of Postmodern Social Science,” <http://www.etext.org/Politics/Progressive.Sociologists/authors/Young.TR/chaos-theory-and-social.dynamics94>.

¹⁷ “Chaos and Dialectics,” <http://www.marxist.com/science/chaostheory.html>; Stephen H. Keller, “Chaos Theory and the Social Sciences,” <http://www.hamline.edu/~skellert/sample.htm>.

¹⁸ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). The classic example of a paradigm shift is from the earth-centered (Ptolemaic) to sun-centered (Copernican) view of the solar system.

Conclusions: Capturing the Butterfly Effect?

On one level, this paper's subtitle, "capturing the butterfly effect," is impossible by definition. If the butterfly were captured, the system would no longer be chaotic. But in another sense, that is exactly the point. Initial conditions can be influenced, patterns described and foreseen to some extent. If internal and external variables can be taken into account, social systems could possibly exhibit less chaotic and more predictable tendencies, though absolute predictability is an illusion that is neither possible nor desirable.

The question I would pose is thus the following: what changes in present conditions would enable Vietnamese society to influence future outcomes in a positive manner?

The first of these is to continue something that Vietnam is already generally doing well, which is to harness the entire population in the process of development. Since no one knows which butterfly might produce an innovation that changes the future, it is wise not to leave any potential source untapped. This includes those groups such as rural women, people with disabilities, remote ethnic minorities, or migrant workers that have historically had difficulty accessing the benefits of *doi moi*. The more participation and involvement of society, the more innovation that will result. This is one area where the efforts of non-profit organizations (such as the one I currently work for) can contribute added value, particularly through education and disseminating successful local development models. NGOs should seek, in essence, to become agents of the butterfly effect, making small and innovative adaptations to initial conditions, some of which will produce large-scale results later on.

Secondly, chaos theory suggests that Vietnam cannot succeed by simply becoming more like other countries. It is actually impossible to recreate the earlier successes of the "Asian dragons," since the initial conditions have shifted and socio-economic change is unpredictable. Instead, Vietnam will achieve the best results by becoming more like itself, promoting its unique identity and cultural heritage, and finding its comparative advantage. In ecological terms, Vietnamese society will find its niche that differentiates it from other societies and allows its particular strengths to grow. This may include so-called niche markets such as handicrafts, fashion, tourism, and computer software, not only traditional manufacturing industries.

Success in these endeavors, of course, does not depend on Vietnamese society alone. External shocks that have nothing to do with conditions in Vietnam could change the future drastically. Some possible shocks currently on the horizon include the spectre of global terrorism and war; deadly health pandemics; a spike in oil prices; global warming and associated natural disasters; or a global downturn in trade that could be caused by any of the above or other unforeseen events. One prediction that can be made with confidence is that natural resources such as water and forests will be scarcer, hence more valuable, in the future, and that Vietnam can do future generations a large favor by conserving as much as possible of these resources today.

After having considered these four theories of change, you may be now asking yourself, "which one do I really believe?" The answer could be all or none. Each theory has its strengths and weaknesses; each is only a partial description of reality that cannot be captured and is larger and more complex than any of our attempts to describe it. I do hope that the presentation of a non-linear theory of social change, in particular, stimulates your thinking and raises useful questions about Vietnam's future directions.

All four of the theories I have presented have one thing in common: they each evaluate the process and experience of *doi moi* to be overwhelmingly positive. Renewal is a step towards building an equitable society; it is also a step away from central planning and toward greater democracy; it is also a step towards Vietnam becoming a more developed economy. Finally, *doi moi* is a creative, unpredictable process that has brought a positive loop of feedback to the large majority of Vietnamese people who have taken part in determining its trajectory. If the near future does indeed resemble the near past, this trajectory will continue to be inspiring to people from all theoretical worldviews.