

## **The Communist way**

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I was accustomed to being censored as an editor, but not as a writer. It pained me that Lam was the one to do it.

Lam was a senior editor at the Vietnam Investment Review, the most liberal paper in Vietnam's media world, which is entirely government-controlled. In a year and a half as an editor in Hanoi, I didn't meet a Vietnamese journalist as smart and curious as Lam. Whenever I traveled outside of Vietnam, he asked that I bring back copies of The New Yorker and other western magazines that were unavailable there. He often spoke wistfully of a journalism conference he had attended several years before at Columbia University. "Lam gets it. He's not like all of the others," said Emma, a fellow editor from New Zealand, over beers one night at a dingy backpacker bar.

The article in question was a profile I had written of a Vietnamese musician named Minh. Because he incorporated European styles into his work, Minh was in controversial territory with the country's cultural authorities, who insisted that art be as "Vietnamese" -- and free of foreign influence -- as possible. To me this was censorship disguised as national pride. I chose to write about Minh precisely because he was so unconcerned with tailoring his music to fit Vietnam's musical traditions. The problem with my story, however, was not the subject matter. Lam was worried about one word.

"You cannot say 'Communist,'" he said. "It is too sensitive. The authorities will not like it."

I paused, caught off guard and feeling a little precious about my writing. "But this is how the musician explained things," I said. It was true. The sentence -- "Minh learned music the Communist way, through repetition and emulation" -- described his time in Vietnam's state-run conservatories. It was important to the story.

Lam looked down at the paper, surprised to see me putting up a fight.

"Will it change the meaning of the sentence if we take these words out?" he asked, pointing to "the," "Communist," and "way."

I thought about it for a moment.

"Well, yes," I said. I wasn't trying to be difficult, but taking out those three words would render the sentence meaningless. I told him so. We sat in uncomfortable silence for a moment.

"Is there another word we can use?" he suggested, finally. We pretended to think about it, but both of us knew what the outcome would be.

As we stood there, I grew angry. Not, I realized, at Lam. Instead, I was mad that two people who should have been on the same side were being compelled by circumstances to act as adversaries. Lam was forced to argue for something he didn't believe, while I, from a position of relative safety as a foreigner, was forced to pressure him to do something that could get him into serious trouble. Meanwhile, the offsite censors -- who had the final say on everything we printed -- didn't have to risk anything. It was up to Lam and me to fight it out, but neither outcome was really worth fighting for. A win for Lam meant a victory for censorship; a win for me meant endangering one of the few people who might someday make a difference in Vietnamese journalism.

"Okay, take it out," I said.

Lam sighed audibly, with relief.