

Joël Reland – Vietnam and Cambodia, Summer 2013,

One of my key motivations for visiting Vietnam was to see firsthand a country which over the last century has been subject to much manipulation and suffering at the hands of Western Imperialism. I wanted to see to what extent one could gauge the direct impact of the French and the Americans upon the Vietnamese people, in the nature of the economy, as well as the attitudes of a variety of locals. Perhaps, however, I was looking at the country through too much of a western perspective, understanding it to too great an extent within the context of its victimisation at the hands of the west, for what I discovered was a richly diverse country, economically, socially and geographically, with much of the lifestyle affected by so much more than we can read in a history textbook.

Arriving in Ho Chi Minh City, we were instantly hit by the iconographical paradoxes of modern Vietnam. For in a fifteen minute taxi drive from the airport to our hostel, we passed huge posters of Ho Chi Minh, looming above revolutionary acts, yet turn the corner and Starbucks and Nike stores dominate one of HCMC's main thoroughfares. Clearly thus, Vietnam was a nation of multiple identities, at once a nation proud of overcoming western colonisation, yet at the same time many of its citizens rushing to join the globalised capitalist market world. For all the triumph and misery inflicted by war, the bustling nature of HCMC, where nothing ever stops, was a reminder that removal of foreign invaders did not simply mean Vietnam would be reverting to a nation of rural tranquility.

Having said that, it would be wrong to summarise the whole Vietnamese identity within a single city, for as we made our way along the Mekong delta we saw the enduring rural side of life. From the people working in the rice fields, to the floating markets along the river, motorcycling through the southern stretch of the country epitomised Vietnam's complexity. Yes, in many ways it is a nation in which tourism and business interests have let brought it into global markets, yet for the majority of the Vietnamese people, life continues as it had done for their parents. Perhaps what united many of the people was their warmth, imperialism did not seem to have made them withdrawn, yet neither had it definitively turned them hyper-capitalist or seen with a withdrawal into agrarianism.

Cambodia is another point of contrast, for as soon as we crossed the border, some differences were stark; main roads are often made of dirt and unpredictable, indeed our first taxi journey was halted whilst we all got out to remove a massive log which was blocking the road. This was a nation less secure than Vietnam, tourism still a fledgling industry, materialist lifestyles less prevalent. Perhaps Angkor Wat sums it up best. For it is the most renowned of the nation's attractions, and rightly so, two days of exploration was not enough to climb through the great variety of ruins in the ancient city. On its own level it is a site of wonder, yet there is intense political debate over it, for the many feel that a majority of its earnings go into the pockets of Vietnamese owners, rather than helping repave Cambodia and the both metaphorically and literally wobbly paths the people tread. For we were in Cambodia during the election season, the ruling government, in power since the overthrow of Pol Pot clearly had a monopoly on propaganda, yet there was an incredible energy about the young people, less scared by the Khmer Rouge, who supported the CPP opposition party, for whom a main argument was about the redirection of Angkor's earnings. Thus, like Vietnam, Cambodia was a similarly diverse and complex place. Yet, it served as an interesting counterpoint, often a side note in western conceptions of history, despite the suffering under the Khmer Rouge arguably being worse and more enduring even than that suffered by the Vietnamese. For although Vietnam suffered at the hands of the west, it has also sought to develop economically alongside since, whereas Cambodia is still in a more embryonic stage.