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Modernize or Die

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Political Change in Southeast Asia

2.6.13

Modernize or Die

Take a walk through Khao Lak and you will see what we have done. Explore Hanoi and you will see what we have yet to do. One is a tourist trap filled with potbellied Germans and melted margaritas; the other is an unwavering haven of social order. Southeast Asia is at a crossroads of influence; one path leads to economic viability by way of polo shirts and mocha lattes, and the other preserves tradition but risks global insignificance. In some places, like Siem Reap or Phnom Penh, the dollar and all it stands for is king; crisp pictures of dead U.S. presidents in exchange for complete cultural ambiguity. Just as Bangkok did long ago, there is mounting pressure among the capitals of Southeast Asia to trade cultural tradition in exchange for an express ticket to globalization. The more steadfast of countries in the region, Vietnam, has the potential and might to be an economic powerhouse on the world stage, and is beginning to take advantage of that with the booming industry of Ho Chi Minh City, but the northern Hanoi is gripping to the ideals of communism with all its strength. Southeast Asia must face the dilemma of either giving in to the long noses and deep pockets of the western world or preserve their identity and forge a separate but noble path. From my experience travelling to Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia over the course of a month, I have found that there are many ways western culture has shaped Southeast Asia, and all of them are a shame.

Ho Chi Minh City is a metropolis that is losing itself and finding itself at the exact same time. The old culture of traditional Vietnam is leaving Ho Chi Minh City, becoming less and less favorable as the power of industry takes hold of the city and its people. While it is very much

clear in Ho Chi Minh City that authentic Southeast Asia is all around, the hustle and bustle of motorcycles—and more frequently, nowadays, cars—makes it easy to second guess how much influence the ideals of the city’s namesake still have over the temptation of all-powerful capitalism. This capitalistic influence is exactly what the pre-American War residents of Ho Chi Minh City blame for the westernization of their city and country. Mai Thanh Son, a South Vietnamese native and communist sympathizer, thinks Vietnam’s economy is growing too fast and blames western influence for what he calls a corrupt Vietnamese youth. Mr. Son joined Bo Doi, the revolutionary army, in 1952 and moved to North Vietnam in 1954 in response to the Geneva Peace Accord¹. For socialism to work, Mr. Son claims, the population must be socialist. If they are not, as is apparently the case in Mr. Son’s eyes, the country fails. By spending time in Ho Chi Minh City, it became clear that Mr. Son was onto something. Vietnam, and Ho Chi Minh City in particular, is perhaps the most capitalistic place on Earth. With an overbearing government and rudimentary banking system (70% of all Vietnamese don’t have a bank account²), the masses of Vietnam rely solely on day-to-day hard labor to make ends meet, and as such have a very extraordinary ability to provide for themselves. There are no sick days or pensions when you sell donuts day in and day out to backpackers and American college students in the Old Quarter. The restaurants you eat at and the stores you shop in are not chains; they do not exist outside of Ho Chi Minh City. They are owned and operated by the short men who in broken English incessantly bark at you about đồng. That is capitalism; that is the failing of Ho Chi Minh. It is true that a socialist republic can only stand if its people are also socialist. In Ho Chi Minh City, the new generation of young Vietnamese, born post-American War, seem more irreverent to the ways of their government than the older generations. Perhaps they have realized

¹ (Hai)

² (Andrews)

what a thriving economy can do to a city—and liked it. Where that realization has not yet happened, and where Ho Chi Minh has not yet failed, but rather still stands strong, is Hanoi, the ancient and steadfast capital of what is now a culturally divided country.

To see Hanoi is to see the stark contrast between marble and mud. Ivory towers emblazoned with government propaganda jammed up against ramshackle homes with no electricity or other modern comforts. The massive granite tomb of Ho Chi Minh stands prominently in Hanoi and one would think it a constant reminder of the incongruity of Vietnamese government (Ho Chi Minh wanted to be cremated—instead he got embalmed), but no; the people supposedly love it. Canh, a tour guide in Hanoi, claims the embalming and public display of Ho Chi Minh is in the best interest of the people of Vietnam, regardless of what Ho Chi Minh specifically requested in his will. It is clear from just a short time in Vietnam's capital city that the ideals of Ho Chi Minh stand strong in the minds of the people, but his ideals are not reflected in the current Vietnamese government. As such, no one is actually benefiting from the revolutions Vietnam has long instigated. Take Hoang Xuan Hai, a former member of the Vietnamese People's Army, for example. Mr. Hoang believes firmly in the methods and ideas of his government, the government that beat the Americans and drove out the French. To Mr. Hoang, the blatantly obvious shortcomings of the Vietnamese government today exist only in the minds of traitors, people who are willing to second-guess the government that keeps Mr. Hoang and others in poverty and their basic human rights suppressed. During Mr. Hoang's military career, he played a role in reeducating Vietnamese who did not side with the Communists. Perhaps this brainwashing had an effect on Mr. Hang himself, for no one in their right mind and Mr. Hoang's financial situation could say "Vietnam is like a paradise, much better than the

United States or anywhere else.”³ It is possible that within me exists I bias toward the United States, but to say that the depressive, rampant poverty and oppression among the Vietnamese people is superior to the basic freedoms afforded to almost all Americans is nonsensical. As someone loyal to the United States, I believe in the merits of my country and government; Mr. Hoang, as a loyal Vietnamese, does the same. The western ideals I have come to know and appreciate are manifested most completely in Bangkok, a city with character but lacking in authenticity.

If you have been to New York, London, or any megacity, you have been to Bangkok. While Bangkok has the street side mango stands and harrowing tuk-tuk’s that can’t be found in any metropolis of the First World, its shopping malls and futuristic sky trains make it so cutting edge and cosmopolitan that it seems notably out of place amongst its neighboring countries. It is clear from being in Bangkok that the city, and Thailand as a whole, has grown into what it is today at the hand of broad western influence; the United States has had close ties to Thailand for nearly 180 years⁴. Unlike Vietnam, Thailand was never colonized and never had a bout with communism, all things that distract from economic development and push away western assistance. As such, Bangkok has blossomed, but in doing so forfeited its identity and heritage. Bangkok has GAP and Starbucks; you can buy boutique cupcakes and eat them on top of a skyscraper. While indulging in such comforts of modernity, it is very easy to forget where you are; a cupcake is a cupcake, a big city is a big city. In Ho Chi Minh City or Hanoi, luxuries can be found if sought, but the incessant urine smell and rampant poverty are keen reminders of Southeast Asia. In Bangkok, there are poor people, a lot of them, and there are pagodas and motor scooters, but the authenticity of Southeast Asia is slipping through the cracks. Take, for

³ (Hai)

⁴ (State)

example, the Chatuchak Weekend Market in Bangkok. In most Southeast Asian markets, there are goods tailored toward tourists—“Same Same But Different” shirts, plastic Buddha’s, overpriced chopsticks—but there are also farm tools and questionable meats. The Chatuchak has both, but the emphasis is on excess rather than necessity; wants outweigh needs. Whereas in Vietnam fresh fruit and vegetables may be the main draw to a city’s central market, people come to Chatuchak to buy cheap, intentionally distressed-looking jeans and ironically plaid button-down shirts. The Chatuchak Weekend Market is like Pike Place with less fish throwing and more gluten; go there for the popsicles and fashionable clothing, not an authentic Southeast Asian shopping experience. The Chatuchak Weekend Market is a metaphor for what has happened to all of Bangkok: business booms and culture dies. The western world has ushered Bangkok onto the world stage, but in doing so made it just like every other city already there. Similarly dependent on the West but without the infrastructure to gain economic legitimacy is Cambodia, a country trying to forget its past and focus on building its future.

No one goes to Siem Reap to see Siem Reap. Siem Reap has nothing worth seeing; it does, however, have hotels and cheap beer only a few minutes air-conditioned bus ride from Angkor Wat. As it happens, Angkor Wat is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and unquestionably a vital piece of human history and a remarkable achievement for mankind; it is also the Disneyland of ancient ruins. You do not know how many Asian tourists can fit inside a Hindu temple until you visit Angkor Wat (spoiler: it is a lot). With this vast amount of sightseers stampeding through what is essentially a broken country post Khmer Rouge genocide, places like Siem Reap react in the only possible way: embrace the dollar, kill the riel. Cambodia has sacrificed its native currency and allowed the dollar to nestle into society in the hope of boosting profit and avoiding the baggage of Cambodia’s past.

From my experience, the Cambodian people have chosen to forget the nearly twenty years of civil war that ravaged their country, and instead focus on moving forward, one crisp dollar bill at a time. A perfect example of this is the late King of Cambodia, Norodom Sihanouk, a man who appropriated the Khmer Rouge when it overtook the Khmer Republic in 1975, yet still held his position after the fall of the Khmer Rouge empire in 1993, when the genocide that had taken place was common knowledge. The Cambodian people did not want more unrest, they did not want a new king; they wanted progress and they forgot and forgave past sins. At Norodom Sihanouk's cremation ceremony, some four million people took to the streets of Phnom Penh. The Cambodian military patrolled the waterfront and shut down every business along the procession route. The atmosphere was electric and terrifying. Nothing makes a white man feel out of place like an army of Cambodians chanting in Khmer. These mourners were not glad the king had died, they were sad they had lost their former leader, the man that had played a prominent role in their country for longer than most of them could remember. For a few days the wad of one dollar bills in my pocket was less important than Cambodian tradition and culture. For a few days Cambodians acted Cambodian and forgot I was there; it was unsettling and noteworthy because it contrasted so starkly with the norm. It is a shame that Cambodia feels the need to cater to foreigners and shun their own heritage for the sake of growth. Though Cambodia's past is full of terrible, unthinkable things, tradition should not be resurrected only when a king dies. When the people of Cambodia show their true face, the one that is scarred and tired but knows its past, Siem Reap becomes more than a paper city thrown together to fulfill the needs of world travelers, Phnom Penh becomes more than the a dirty, smelly, too-hot river town; Cambodia becomes Cambodia, and that is worth seeing.

Of all the cities I have visited in Southeast Asia, the most interesting are the ones that put the least effort into making me feel at home. Though I like comfortable, spacious accommodations and broad boulevards, I can get that where I am from. I cannot get winding, ancient streets filled with unfamiliar local delicacies that may or may not contain dog meat; I cannot get lost where I have cellphone coverage. Take me to a place where no one speaks my language, and I will remember it; take me to a place with swept sidewalks, and I will forget it. For someone seeking the unknown, that is the charm of Hanoi and the failing of Bangkok. For the sake of the cities and their countries, though, there is a huge incentive to globalize and modernize, to suck every possible ounce of productivity out of the hardworking, desperately poor masses that fill every street and alleyway of Southeast Asia's cities. Give a man a history lesson and he will remember his ancestors, give a man some gloves and he will work until he's dead—ancestors be damned. With that in mind, perhaps it is selfish to wish for a Southeast Asia that knows where it came from. If embracing the modern world improves the lives of the Vietnamese, Thai, and Cambodians, then they have every right to take that route. As a citizen of the modern world, I only wish to convey one bit of advice to Southeast Asia as it blazes its trail to globalization: the western world has already lost its heritage; save yours while you still can.

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