

A venerable master: Professor Nguyen Lan

Heinz Schütte

Professor NGUYEN LAN was born in 1906. Virtually all those younger than 85 years I talked with in Hanoi had been his students at one stage, men and women alike. He has taught Vietnamese, French, history, pedagogy at secondary schools in Hanoi, Hue, in China during the resistance war, and at Hanoi university after 1954. The man is a legend, and he holds the proud title of «*People's Teacher*». He is a member of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Fatherland Front of Vietnam and, despite his high age, President of the Vietnam Association for Promoting and Supporting Education Development.

He is a small, agile, wiry, engaging man who gets up at 5 o'clock in the morning, does his exercises, takes a cold bath, waters the potplants on the little terrace outside his room where stands his desk, and gets down to work. In 1997, he was writing an etymological dictionary, and when I visited him early in December, he had arrived at the letter 'T' on page 4362 of his immaculately hand-written manuscript. He explained that he needed another year of solid labour to complete the task. And indeed, hardly two years later, the book was available in Hanoi bookshops.

●Background Information

Over the past few years, HEINZ SCHÜTE has conducted lengthy interviews with franco-phone intellectuals in Hanoi born between 1906 and 1930 who joined the Viet Minh in the name of French 18th century revolutionary values and what they call 'Patriotism'. One of the outcomes of this study is a series of 'portraits' of members of this rapidly dwindling stratum who are representatives of two great cultural traditions, the Vietnamese and the French, under the title *Les anciens jeunes de 1945/46*.

His first book is a novel entitled «*Le petit campagnard*» (Cau Be Nha Que) which appeared in a bilingual Vietnamese-French edition in 1925. The French translation has been done by one ALFRED BOUCHET, inspector of political affairs in Indochina. Briefly, in this small book he anticipates his life as a teacher, sketching his image of the relationship between father and son, elder brother and younger brother, teacher and pupil in the harsh countryside in North Vietnam which is exposed to the influences of colonialism and to the threatening inroads of the city. It is a melancholy, idealistic and at the same time realistically unveiling document of a young man's awakening who discovers his passion for teaching which, in Confucian tradition, he perceives as a moral task whereby the individual subordinates himself to the patriotic community. The book terminates with fairytale love - the young scholar marries the poor, loving and devoted daughter of his old master (and who, of course, will subsequently engage in trade so as to finance her husband's accumulation of virtue). In a biographical outline monsieur LAN had written for me in his precise yet poetic French in 1997, he pays homage

to the village teacher who taught him the Chinese characters when he was 6 years old. «My schoolmaster was a very honorable old literatus with a white goatee... We were about twenty lads of 6 to 10 years. Yet every morning when he came to class, he would wear a black turban and a gauze robe reaching below his knees. This outfit proved that my teacher wanted to give his instruction a priestly character. This attitude, full of dignity, imposed a great respect on us and, despite our young age, we observed a perfect discipline: never any turbulence nor whispering in class. »

The student develops a life-long sense of obligation and attachment to his teacher. Everybody glorifies his or her teacher as respectable, venerable and meritorious. On teacher's day, November 20, old men and old ladies and girls of honour heaped praise and flowers on professor Lan, and the same happened in all teaching institutions across the country. What is astounding is that the former French teachers are totally integrated into this confucian model. Not only are they to this day held in utmost esteem by their former students and placed on the altar of teacher-worship alongside their Vietnamese colleagues. But they are, moreover, dissociated from any colonial designs. While teaching institutions were readily considered as functioning in the service of colonialism, it is quite unthinkable



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le that individual teachers be considered agents of colonialism - so different from Algeria, for example. Indeed, Vietnamese and French teachers are described and remembered in identically positive terms. I was invariably told that teachers never talked politics and were thus not involved - they were always devoted to their task and to their students, including Jesuits such as the director of young NGUYEN LAN's one-time school: He was «a respectable monk who had only two objectives: worship god with passion and diligently instruct his pupils. As I spoke French rather well, the director liked me very much and treated me like his proper son.» In all the testimonies collected there is only one exception to this rule which is known to everybody and still related with much shaking of heads and utter disgust: Lieutenant-colonel A. L. M. BONIFACY (1856-1935) who taught Vietnamese history is outlawed by all as a slavish colonialist since he committed the unforgiveable sin of insulting his students' patriotic feelings. In fact, he attributed the Viets' victory over the invading Mongols (13th century) not to the ingenuity of their generals and the bravery of their soldiers but to an epidemic of dysentery. Patri-

tism is not an object of critical historical investigation for those who feed on it but a matter of sentimental 'remembering'. BONIFACY simply knew too much and did not give in to taboos threatening such selective collective memory.¹ Not unlike Europe's pre-modern states, Vietnam is not so much a nation but a state. It is constituted by a structure of political institutions, foremost the monarchy, and a structure of vertical and particularistic relationships between sovereign and subject, father and son. The proper political organization consists in perfecting personal relationships based on fidelity.² My impression is that not only Vietnamese, but French teachers also were visualized according to this model which even now excludes for my interview partners an analysis of teachers in Indochina as structurally constitutive of colonialism. If such an interpretation may smack of historically predetermined immobility and pre-figured subjection to the confucian idea of proper behaviour, I wonder whether this attitude to French teachers may rather be indicative of openness inasmuch as it expresses the desire to learn new ways (which should take place in the framework of a personalized relationship), a predisposition

to assimilate new knowledge wherever it may come from - as long as it is useful. In a similar vein, the writing of history for almost all those I talked to, is subject to a model: reality is moulded according to a perception of how things should be, and it thus becomes a moral institution (like Schiller's theatre) and is subject to politics, ultimately an instrument at the service of a given societal order. Thus, historical reality and ideological pre-cripts become indistinguishable. And this excludes the possibility to perceive the unknown in its complexity since the model provides and circumscribes the pre-conceived interpretation.³ BONIFACY violated this very principle. When professor NGUYEN LAN a few years ago went to the United States at the invitation of one of his former students who had in the meantime become an American millionaire businessman, he saw huge cars, elegant houses set in perfectly trimmed gardens with large swimming pools, wealthy universities where students arrived in their private cars and where you just needed to press a button to make NGUYEN LAN's publications appear on the computer sheet. He saw Las Vegas and multi-tiered highways all of which went to confirm

what he had known abstractly in advance, namely that this is «*an advanced country*». He was incredulous when I mentioned social inequality and racial discrimination, poverty, violence and social exclusion as the other side of the coin, saying: «*I did not see any such thing.*» One might add that US soap operas - or German export hits like 'Derrick' - and films now available everywhere in Vietnam through television or videos, present an image which is confounded with reality by a population intent on forgetting a belligerent past of suffering and deprivation and yearning for a better material future - very much like what I remember from the years following the 2nd World War in West Germany. And therefore they will rather see the bewitching brilliance and the luring promise in their former enemies with whom they expect to live a future in solidarity and affluence.

Taking the dream (or the political project) for reality, has considerable practical consequences in the context of Vietnam's dealings with the unknown outside world. Such model-determined interpreting of social and political phenomena extends to the meeting with capitalism. To illustrate the point, I should return once more to the eager veteran teacher and lexicographer who has devoted his life to building a patriotic Vietnam. A few days after their return from the US, the old master introduced his former student to the then secretary general of the Communist Party, recuperating him without hesitation or doubt into the community

Anmerkungen

¹ During his many years as a military commander in Tonkin, BONIFACY pursued extensive linguistic, ethnographic and historical studies and published extensively on Indochina and particularly about minorities.

² see David E. F. HENLEY, *Ethnogeographic Integration and Exclusion in Anticolonial Nationalism: Indonesia and Indochina, 1995, Society for Comparative Study of Society and History.*

³ There is, of course, nothing exclusively Vietnamese in this: P. BROCHEUX has pointed out that «these magnified and pious images... resemble those of every national history such as Jeanne d'Arc... which have nourished our primary schooldays, things which don't exclude the authentic but which do not say anything which is not in conformity with the established model and which... are there to heighten our virtues and the greatness of a people.» Pierre BROCHEUX, *Ho Chi Minh, Paris, 2000, p. 40.*

of patriotic Vietnamese when he explained: «*He is a patriot, he wants to do good for our country.*»

The world is *Wille und Vorstellung*, Will and Imagination, and maybe here lies the key to the formidable energy and stubborn inventiveness of the Vietnamese people who have so thoroughly fascinated my generation in the 1960s and 1970s. We admired them for their boundless pig-headedness and what then appeared to us as the purity of their determination in the fight against a superpower coalition in the pursuit of the Northern model for a Vietnamese society.

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