

## Research Note

# Vietnamese Research Practice: Some Reflections on a Sometimes Key Component of Change\*

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### Summary

The paper broaches the general research issue of whether there are distinct characteristics to common Vietnamese methods of knowledge production, drawing upon the author's own experiences. It examines various policy documents, and frames its analysis of the implied methods used to produce them through reference to existing research. It is suggested that Vietnamese are 'catholic' in their gauging of proposed knowledges, but are so at the level of the individual rather than that of the communities of belief found among societies whose histories refer to the Abrahamic traditions. The paper argues that knowledge validation in Vietnam can often be viewed as similar to the following of inductive procedures, with a stress on the requirement that they be related to 'perceived reality'. However 'nous' is felt to be less of a psychological individual experience and more of a social acceptance one, being marked by terms such as *so ket* and *tong ket* (Vietnamese diacritics are omitted). The paper concludes with reference to certain policy documents of major historical importance.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, Vietnamese language, Vietnamese research methodology, policy documents

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## Introduction

In this paper I intend to share various thoughts and observations on aspects of Vietnamese research practices. I am familiar with some of these from extensive consultancy research in and with Vietnamese, use of the results of Vietnamese research as a primary source for analysis of Vietnamese change processes and in part from my own reflections on what I dare call their ‘Western’ counterparts (Fforde 2009, 2013, 2017). I would like to start by making some introductory remarks. I will then discuss a policy document of relatively minor importance, some ideas about how Vietnamese research practices can be framed for a Western audience, some personal experiences in how research has been done, two major policy documents of crucial importance to understanding change in post-1975 Vietnam and, before concluding, I will try to make some key comparisons. I will then finish by discussing what all this suggests for the current situation, and the differences between cognitive developments relating on the one hand to economic thinking in the early 1980s and, on the other, to current thinking about possible political change. I present this paper as a ‘sharing’ with scholars who perhaps also have similar fascinations with how the Vietnamese ‘tick’, and I do not present it so much as knowledge but rather – hopefully – a source of research hypotheses for others.

It should be clear to those familiar with the Vietnam literature that there is considerable debate about the historical importance of policy in Vietnam, and above all the origins of the rapid market-oriented changes that started around 1992. On the one side, something called *doi moi* – linked to the 1986 VIth Congress – is seen as a set of policies that drive change; on the other, arguments are made that the main drivers of change were not policy. Further, a powerful emergence of markets occurred before 1986 and these were not driven by policy – and that policy (as written documents) was largely reactive. The standard work arguing the latter is de Vylder and Fforde (1996), which drew heavily on an earlier study by the same authors (1988; see also, Le Duc Thuy 1993). This argument has never really been resolved, in part as the literature tends not to confront the issue. My personal belief is that there is a high degree of ‘cognitive dissonance’ around the idea that change is not driven by some intentionality, embodied in policy, so that this debate in the literature on one country reflects far wider tensions in how in the West, and those areas that it influences, social ideas of change are constructed. It is also my sense that while research up to, say, the 1970s was heading in a direction that accepted such scepticism, the political reaction of the 1980s – epitomised by the Thatcher and Reagan political projects – bolted onto the emerging scepticism about the prospects of ‘policy science’ powerful forces requiring belief in the predictive powers of evidence-based policy, which we can still see in the politics of austerity since the global financial crisis.

As what one might call ‘dinner table tricks’, I think some linguistic issues related to aspects of Vietnamese research practice are worth mentioning up front. First, that it is rather hard to translate the English words ‘fact’ or ‘facts’ into Vietnamese (‘the facts of the matter’). One of my dictionaries tries hard, and offers *su viec*, *su that*, *thuc te* and *su kien*, none of which really work (‘What are the facts of the argument being made ...’ does not really come across using any of these words). Another offers (with glosses) – *su viec* (*thu nhan da lam viec gi* – ‘to accept what one has done’); *su that* (‘the facts of life’, ‘the truth of the matter’); *su kien* (likely the closest) as hard facts, that which cannot be argued with (*su kien ro ranh khong the choi cai duoc*); *thuc te*, as a matter of fact (see below); and *co so lap luan* – the facts of somebody’s argument, whether they are disputable. ‘Centre point’ translations of some of these Vietnamese words are: *su that* – ‘truth’; *thuc te* – ‘reality’; *su kien* – ‘event’. This means for me that one should be careful of semantics and that translations can be very tricky; or, to put it another way, that life is not at all boring in this part of the jungle.

Second, that the English word (obviously Latin in origin) to ‘posit’, or more technically to ‘hypothesise’, translates rather easily into *lap luan* (which can be glossed as to ‘establish, to set out, a thesis’). One can then see that the dictionarian’s attempt reported above to explain the basis for an argument as being its facts is muddled, as the acceptability of a thesis is not just determined by its facts. I will return to this issue when I try to discuss ‘nous’.

Third, that the word usually translated as ‘reality’ (*thuc te*) is used when one wants to argue about things ‘in reality’ – either as something one can be in, or *something one can be ‘on’*. Thus one can say (and this I think is slightly ‘better’ Vietnamese) ‘on reality, this idea sucks’ (*tren thuc te, y nay khong gia tri gi ca*). This is for me suggestive about the Vietnamese ability to, perhaps more often than others, avoid confusing reality and what is said about it, to avoid confusing model and muddle as ‘reality’ – here the world of essences (‘Yes Adam, you are a dragon, and dragons can fly and are powerful, but they are not real – *Khong co thuc*’). In this sense any transcendental divine is not real; everything in this world is contingent. So what was Christ? Ah.

Fourth, that the valuable English phrase ‘bringing things together so that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts’ is two single words in Vietnamese – *ket hop* – which is used, often quite pragmatically, to discuss for example how plan and market economic relations might co-exist in a win-win situation, or how to manage teams. Lack of variation – seen perhaps as an inability to *ket hop* – is then expressed through the remarkable phrase *ca me mot lua* (‘tench of the same clutch’), or, in popular English ‘same-same, no difference’.<sup>1</sup>

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1 The meaning of this is that, as tench are so similar that they cannot be told apart, there is no effective and accepted social differentiation, and *all* social relations suffer a loss of order. This is an existential concern about loss of meaning, ineffective hierarchy and the inability to act coherently as a political

Fifth, that the creation of socially accepted ‘truth statements’ in Vietnamese research practice are of two basic types. The first is referred to as a *so ket*. This is basically verbal, something that is done. This can be glossed as a provisional ‘bringing together’, or what in English might be called a ‘provisional summing-up’ where the results are understood as authoritative for the moment. *So* here marks this provisional status of the statement, *ket* broadly means to me to ‘bring together’ – so the term has its own meaning. The second is referred to as a *tong ket* or ‘general summing-up’, with more authoritative status.<sup>2</sup> Neither term has an obvious meaning, in the sense that when I first encountered them – and for Vietnamese the sense was quite obvious – it clearly reflected a research practice treated and taken as normal and essentially OK. But this is not quite what we do in the West, where truth statements are – like issues of Party doctrine – treated dogmatically. Before this gets too complicated, let me simply make the point that this terminology clearly marks how the *results* of research practice are validated, as a recognised and recognisable social act. And this then offers a way in to studying what they do, when they do it and what it means to them.

Sixth, that there are at least two alternative translations of the English word ‘order’. One, *trat tu*, occurs in familiar equivalent phrases to ‘law and order’; the other, *tin h the*, came up in discussion of how to translate ‘governance’ while pondering ‘theories of order’. This, *inter alia*, refers to a snapshot of a dynamic process, such as a chess game, and could be glossed as ‘state of play’. This is also not at all boring.

Much fun can be had with such differences; but none is as baffling for my children as a language with one word that means both green and blue – ‘xanh’.<sup>3</sup> And likely as baffling for Vietnamese children when told that English has two words for one colour ...

### A minor policy document

I turn now to look at a policy document of minor importance, but one that is illustrative. This is a 15-page official report of the People’s Committee of Ho Chi Minh City (HCM City PC – # 74/BC-UBND 10/7/2009), which I downloaded recently as I was checking on the history of VCP Central Committee plena 1991 to 2016 (from the VIIth to the XIIth Congresses). It is, I think, quite unexceptional, framed as a *so ket* (‘provisional summing-up?’) of work to ‘rationalise’<sup>4</sup> – and

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community, because suitable forms of power – those that come from authority and confer it – are yet to be created (Homutova and Fforde 2018).

2 See Section ‘Chinese Aid Practice’, Chapter 7 of Fforde (2017), where I discuss what seem to be similar Chinese references to how good aid practice is researched, and so ‘known’.

3 *Khe sanh* – literally ‘green gully’ (?) – is said to be a misspelling by a Frenchman.

4 *Sap xep lai* – this more literally means ‘to re-arrange’; that is, to take SOEs from their current owners and transfer them to new ones (Fforde 2007: 178–182 and 2014: 24).

renovate (*doi moi*) state-owned enterprises (SOEs) of the city over the period 2001–2008.

The document starts by stating the characteristics (*dac diem*) of the city's SOEs before this work was done. It then discusses how the process of deployment (*trien khai*) of the work was based upon Party resolutions and legal regulations. The construction of specific tasks itself entailed 'change in mentality and awareness and resolution in accelerating the reform of the city's SOEs' (*co su chuyen bien trong tu duy nhan thuc va quyen tam trong viec day nhan tien trinh cai cach doanh nghiep nha nuoc cua Thanh pho* (1)). My point here is that cognitive change, of which the report is part, is 'upfront' considered to be part of the process. This for me fits with the idea that research does not sit outside the reality it studies.

The report divides its main text into two parts. The first discusses the situation during 2001–2008; the second looks at the plan for 2009–2010. The sequence of exposition in Part 1 goes from 'task statement' to a discussion of the leadership played by the City Party Committee and People's Committee. This latter emphasises, as its first point, the need to: "Raise the agreed awareness among all Party members and the City's population [...] on the position, role and situation of SOEs and the ideas governing the direction, goals, tasks and solutions of the project" (2).<sup>5</sup> There follows a list of policies and goals, for which there is little justification given. Section III of Part 1 then discusses the city's project, and how it is based upon central government directives – while giving numbers of SOEs to be equitised, sold etc. Section IV then gives the results in terms of how many SOEs were equitised etc. Rationalisation of SOEs (a good thing – AF) is reported as having been caused by the realisation by key elements of the party-state structures – the city's departments, the various quarters and districts and the SOEs – that this was not just a requirement from their superiors but also an opportunity to gain access to investment funds, reduce competition between SOEs and concentrate resources through the mechanism of the 'Mother General Company' (4).

The section on the results of equitisation draws upon information derived from observation (*khao sat*) of 208 of the 262 SOEs that the City had equitised during 1992–2008. The analysis concludes that after equitisation most SOEs were profitable and workers conditions improved, and justifies this by referring to data (*chi tieu*)<sup>6</sup> (7). Part 1 then concludes with an evaluation (*danh gia*) that examines various issues (it is not so much an evaluation as a discussion). In turn, we learn that: most of the SOEs equitised were actually very small with an average book value of about USD1 million; book values were usually underestimates of real

5 "Nâng cao sự thống nhất nhận thức trong toàn Đảng bộ và nhân dân Thành phố, trước hết là cán bộ chủ chốt các cấp, các ngành, cán bộ lãnh đạo, quản lý các doanh nghiệp về vị trí, vai trò, thực trạng của doanh nghiệp, những quan điểm chỉ đạo, mục tiêu, nhiệm vụ và giải pháp được nêu ra trong đề án."

6 It is striking that none of the dictionaries cited above offered this word as a translation for 'fact'.

value, ‘after re-evaluations’; SOEs tended to prefer asset valuations as a way to value themselves, as use of other methods gave too high a valuation that they disliked; sales of shares more openly through the local stock exchange were increasing, subsidised sales to SOEs’ workers at 60 per cent of average auction price were deemed “too expensive” – not least as dividend payments generated yields below the cost of the bank loans that workers could take out to buy shares; the report raises problems in the use of the receipts from share sales – namely that while in principle these resources should be useable to support SOEs subject to rationalisation, and their workers, there is no concrete state decision allowing this; and, finally, the report asserts that after equitisation management of SOEs is far more active and efficient, and that shareholders’ monitoring of companies requires transparency in the company’s operations. But the sting in the tail is that the state management of equitised SOEs is hamstrung by the lack of any statement as to which state organ is meant to receive their reports, and to deal with any difficulties or proposals from the company (9). After a discussion of various tasks, the report ends with some proposals.

What can one make of this? I think various points stand out. First, the report is rational in the sense that it follows various rules and procedures. The question is only what these are. Second, in terms of its science, on the one hand it refers to evidence gathered to investigate and support its position, and on the other it does not use this evidence however as a basis for an impact analysis with any strong sense of causality. Rather, causality comes in as a combination of the wider national demands of the central party-state organs *and* the clearly reported ways in which local subjectivities evolved as the demands were better accepted and appreciated – as well as how local practicalities helped convince people. The report talks quite naturally of cognitive change processes that are uneven, things that can be reported on, and which play a strong role. The implication is that *if* there is lack of acceptance of central demands, and *if* the centre does not make this a live or die issue, then knowledge will not be accepted and change will not happen.

Third, the report – as a ‘provisional summing-up’ (a *so ket*), as a truth statement – is thus a statement that combines analysis of data with reports of what key actors have come to think about the situation, so far. One can then ask, from a ‘correct scientific’ ‘Western’ perspective, somewhat heroically, what seems to be lacking. I would posit the following:

- It is hard to see in this the idea that policy is something devised, based upon evidence that through research shows cause-and-effect relations in reality, to secure stated outcomes through specified policy changes. There is no ‘black box’ upon which policy levers work to implement (*thuc hien*) some

stated goal through some known cause-and-effect relationships. Rather, policy is ‘deployed’ (*trien khai*).<sup>7</sup>

- It is part of the argument that within the overall structures of the party-state, and within the population outside it, there is variation in awareness, over time and space, and a crucial aspect of a situation is how that variation in awareness is changing. The report calmly greets and reports its fact that people in the city’s departments, quarters and districts as well as SOEs came to a closer agreement with central policy, in part not because of that policy but rather, the report says, because their particular circumstances led them to.

Part of this situation is explained by the verb used to say how the data on equitised SOEs was collected. This was through a *khao sat* (16), which is translated by various dictionaries as to investigate, explore, examine, do research. I read this as ‘open’, in the sense of what could be called a baseline survey – or a ‘wandering about to see what is going on’. What is lacking here is the sense of a research agenda with a pre-existing model of cause-and-effect relations that requires parameterisation. If we try the line of seeing what the Chinese roots of the word are, we find *jiǎn chá*, with the first meaning being to check, to examine, to inspect, to exercise restraint. The second is to research, to check, to investigate, to examine, to refer to, to look up (e.g. a word in a dictionary). *Khao* by itself, according to Bui Phung, 1995, means (1) to do research (on), to examine or to test (students) and (2) to shop around in order to get an idea of prices; *sat* by itself, meanwhile, it has no relevant meaning. This suggests that we can be familiar with Vietnamese rationalities, as deployed in knowledge production, but we need to be very careful how we proceed.

I turn now to, again rather heroically, discuss some ideas that may throw further light on this.

## Some ideas

### No creator?

While discussing with an American Buddhist scholar (Professor John Powers) what I saw as familiar Vietnamese processes of change management ‘not being blueprint based’, he remarked (I gloss): ‘Of course – as they are not monotheists, it makes little sense to them to think that one can be outside of reality to study and influence it’ (or words to that effect). I think there is a lot to this. Consider the following quotes from Gillespie:

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<sup>7</sup> I should add that it is my impression that Vietnamese themselves often do not make this sharp distinction, perhaps as there is less point if *thuc hien* is not really understood as implementation of a blueprint to secure change in a ‘black box’.

The apparent rejection or disappearance of religion or theology in fact conceals the continuing relevance of theological issues and commitments for the modern age. ... [The] process of secularisation or disenchantment that has come to be seen as identical with modernity was in fact something different than it seemed [...] the gradual transference of divine attributes to human beings (an infinite human will), the natural world (universal mechanical causality), social forces (the general will, the hidden hand) and history (the idea of progress) (2008: 272–273).

What actually occurs in the course of modernity is thus not simply the erasure or disappearance of God but the transference of his attributes, essential powers and capacities to other entities or realms of being. The so-called ‘process of disenchantment’ is thus also a process of re-enchantment in and through which both man and nature are infused with a number of attributes or powers previously ascribed to God. To put the matter more starkly, in the face of the long drawn out death of God, science can provide a coherent account of the whole only by making man or nature or both in some sense divine (274).

What I take from this is that what we may see as lacking from Vietnamese knowledge production is what is in the ‘West’ a common belief – according to Gillespie stemming from Christianity – that science is about finding truths knowable to the scientist. In this sense, of course, variation in views is easily taken to mean that some are in error. The Vietnamese report did not say that about anybody; instead it argued that their awareness varied, and changed, and could move towards those of others. There is here an important distinction between saying that somebody else should not believe what they believe and saying that they are wrong.

What I take from Professor Powers’ remark is that monotheistic beliefs encourage this. And Vietnamese culture is not, in any sense, monotheist.

### **Catholicity as a social or individual experience**

A second point, also drawn from another scholar – this time a recent seminar given by Professor Oscar Salemink – relates to variation in the nature of belief. Salemink argued that in the eyes of Western states and religious organisations (namely churches) religious – and to a certain extent also Communist – belief is primarily communitarian. Members of particular denominations are identifiable through their beliefs, can be registered as such by their churches and the state, and would most certainly not be expected to belong to more than one Church at once – though worship at different churches is viewed more lightly. Catholicity, in the Roman Catholic Church, arguably accepts variation within and under the singular authority of the pope. Pertinent comments on the different sectarian tendencies of Latin and North America have argued that the less racist tendencies of the former reflect this catholicity (‘a man stops being Indian when he puts on shoes’) (Morse 1964). Again, though, the single individual is not thought to belong to more than one belief set. In the other Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion, the political hegemony of the church as an established church – through the iron historical logic of demography – ended up with a catholicity of tolerance, where Irish Catholics were not forcibly



converted and non-Anglican Protestants (the ‘non-Conformists’) – though legally barred from office under the Crown – saw these laws usually put in abeyance yearly so long as the political situation (read as their loyalty) suited incumbents. But again, each denomination was viewed in a communitarian way, and one might say the basic issue was ‘one person, one belief set’. Since beliefs were defined through and by the community (in albeit dazzlingly different ways), it is not surprising that primary school children, among others, nowadays in these cultures are often taught in terms of ‘multiple truths’.

If we now turn to one of the best books on the Vietnamese equivalent, McHale (2004), we find two things, both consistent – one with the above, and one with what McHale himself has to say about the Vietnamese.

The key point McHale makes is that Vietnamese beliefs tend not to be – unless and despite the attempt by a state to force square pegs into round holes – communitarian. Rather, a single individual may draw upon them as they see fit, therefore possessing what could be called an ‘internal catholicity’. As he remarks, Vietnamese tend to read not the explanatory texts to classics that define sects and communities in the three great monotheistic religions but the classics themselves. The point of reading is different: in the one, to learn how to fit into a sect, in other, to appreciate what the original contributors wrote.

Yet, the form that McHale’s book takes is classically sectarian in the ‘Western’ sense, with his Chapters 3 through 5 looking in turn at Confucianism, Communism and Buddhism. His analysis is fascinating, arguing for example that there was often for early Vietnamese Communists a “gap between revolutionary theory and its practical understanding ...” He offers a quotation, and then notes that: “This statement [...] begs the question of the extent to which listeners and readers really understood the communist message” (126). He then goes on to talk about how “... the gap between the Communist Party’s intended message and its actual comprehension by peasants and workers was too wide ...” (127). I find this very ‘Western’, in its assumption that there is some truth in the message that its readers can apprehend *and that is the central point*.

### **Go down, young man**

There is a Vietnamese expression, which is to ‘look at flowers from horseback’ (*cuoi ngua xem hoa*) – maybe it is Chinese in origin, or perhaps Russian. This encapsulates what Woodside (2006) seems to be arguing when he discusses, in his book on non-Western modernities, extant wisdoms. He argues that ‘history is not history’ – that the issue of mediation between texts and what they are said to be about is not something treated lightly.

Woodside discusses these legacies in China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan in terms of ‘lost modernities’. A central idea in this tradition, he says, was the value of basing the right to exercise power upon merit. Other ideas were of course also present. This

suggests, then, that one important aspect of merit was the ability of its holders to manage, better than others, relationships between text and reality.

If the European discussion of the hazards of merit-based political power sometimes reflected a fear of the mob, the political analysis of this topic in the East Asian mandarinate, for many centuries, revolved around a fear of the nature of bureaucratically produced words. The treacheries of written texts in a merit-based political order were repeatedly canvassed. [...] Early modern Europe also knew a battle between “words” and “things”, but the difference is revealing: it was an educational and religious battle more than a political one [...]. Western political theory began to acquire an equivalent specialised obsession with the illusory “transparency” of more purely legal and administrative texts only relatively recently (41, quoted in Fforde 2017: 125–126).

I think we can see this scepticism in the HCM city report discussed above. The research (data collection) used – and probably commissioned – was more investigative than it was trusting in some extant policy model saying that ‘this would lead to that’. In my own experience, this leads to research practice that tends to have three specific moments.

In the first, one gathers information from reports and discusses with the central organ the issues as well as what they have in their heads about reality, varying mentalities and concerns. The tendency here is to get up to sufficient speed to be able to go to the second moment, which is felt far more interesting and active.

In this second moment, one ‘goes down’ to the locality or localities – or wherever that is less general and more particular than the centre. This suggests that the centre is not really at the top of a hierarchy, in terms of power and proximity to Truth, but is that point in the totality that can offer a site for summing-up whatever can be summed up. Given this, the research team looks for variation, ideally locally understood, and tries to see what it can make of it: what change processes can be observed, how they vary, who can be said to be more advanced and who cannot. This can be applied to almost anything. It *assumes* that there is variation in mentalities and subjectivities.

In the third moment, one returns to the ‘centre’ and there is a *so ket* at an informal level to see what expressions of what was observed are seen as convincing.

## Two major policy documents

I now wish to consider two policy documents of major importance in contemporary Vietnamese history, as they played important roles in the shift away from the situation in the late 1970s, when hardline Communist ideas prevailed, to the emergence of rapid market-oriented growth (and severe social differentiation) in the early 1990s. The question is that of what roles they exactly played – their actual impacts, their political meaning, etc, and here – as I have already stated – there is unresolved disagreement in the literature.

They both came out in 1981, five years before the 1986 VIth Party Congress that was and is famous for introducing *doi moi*. Both were clearly research-based. One, 25-CP about SOEs, was issued by the state, the other, Chi Thi-100 about agricultural cooperatives, by the Party.

To follow McAuley's (1977) political analysis, this is likely because SOEs were organically and powerfully present in the structured committees of the party-state – created as Party rule was re-instated after the death of Stalin – while cooperators' interests were not. In her analysis, this meant that policy towards SOEs reflected a politics of associated interests and their conflicts. Meanwhile policy towards cooperatives reflected more a politics of policy logic itself, and so reveals more clearly how knowledge production mattered. As policy documents – in the mainstream 'Western' sense, not the Vietnamese one (Fforde 2011) – both are brilliant.

### Chi Thi-100

#### The document

This is an Instruction of the VCP Secretariat, dated (like 25-CP) January 1981. It is firmly based upon actual practice:

Because of the need to stimulate production, guarantee livelihoods (*doi song*) and raise economic efficiency, recently many cooperatives (including advanced and outstanding ones) have used the form of 'output contracts with groups of workers and individual workers' with many different crops (including rice), for livestock and other lines of production. This new form of contracting has led to an initial step forward that is positive. However, because there is no united leadership (*chi dao*) and direction some cooperatives have made mistakes in implementation.

The 9th Plenum of the Central Committee (December 1980) decided to 'expand implementation and improvement of output contacting forms in agriculture' (1).

Key to note is that the central point here is derived from reality. It is possible to interpret the Instruction as both reformist and radical, in that it argued that the cooperatives had to continue in existence and had to play an active role in agriculture. Those areas seeking de-collectivisation were thus reined in, those perhaps 'red' areas refusing to adopt output contracts were thus pushed to ease up: crucially, "cooperatives had to control output" (1).

This suggests that while the background research was, following standard Vietnamese practice as I have argued it, based upon reality, the conservative stance of the Instruction reflected a policy logic that saw preservation of cooperatives and their control over output as central "through this first step in a general summing-up (*tong ket*) of the actual situation (*tin hinh thuc te*)" (2). This fits I think with the McAuley hypothesis.

### An account

An internet search on CT-100 rapidly turns up the following account of ‘how the policy happened’. It naturally suggests an author, Vo Chi Cong, though ‘how he did it’ is revealing, and it is well-said that ‘success has many parents, but failure is an orphan’. The account is from 2011. Yet, had the reaction of the early 1980s been successful, such activities could have been labelled ‘rightist’ and ‘anti-socialist’, with potentially severe consequences. It is worth quoting at length.<sup>8</sup>

At this time Comrade Vo Chi Cong, Politburo member and Deputy Premier in charge of agriculture (agriculture, forestry and fisheries), responsible to the Party for this area, was struggling night and day to find solutions and measures to the worries and concerns of millions of farmers in cooperatives. The Comrade<sup>9</sup> had directly observed (*khao sat* – NB) and deeply researched the activities of many state farms and state forestry enterprises and agricultural cooperatives in the North, directly meeting cooperators to ask about and discuss production and management, the relative returns from the production and business activities of cooperatives when compared with the 5% land<sup>10</sup> of cooperators. The Comrade had from this realised that the situation was one where production was tending to decline, many cooperatives were working at a loss, negativities (*tieu cuc*)<sup>11</sup> were rampant, workers’ incomes were far too low and many cooperators were even asking to leave their cooperatives to move outside agriculture etc. Many places had themselves modified the contracting system used by their brigades into contracts with individual workers, leading to economic results and higher cooperator incomes that improved work incentives.

From observing (*khao sat*) and researching (*nghien cuu*) the reality of ‘under the table contracts’<sup>12</sup> and output contracts in cooperatives had a clear results, but were the spontaneous work of the farmers, so they needed leadership (*chi dao*) and close monitoring, and objective evaluation, and a general summing-up (*tong ket*) of reality (*thuc tien*) so as to have proposals for the Centre, so it could have a correct position to advocate (*chu truong*). From such thoughts, the Comrade wrote a letter to Comrade Hoang Quy, Party Secretary of Vinh Phu, to show his support and requesting that Tho Tang Cooperative, Vinh Tuong District, Vinh Phu Province act as a leading point so as to evaluate and provide a general summing-up (*tong ket*); at the same time he requested the Ministry of Agriculture to send cadres down to agree with the province and district what would be done concretely so as to carry this out. The ministry selected Comrade Tran Ngoc Canh, deputy head of the cooperative management section (*ban*) of the ministry

8 Its tone is very much in the Khrushchev tradition of ‘direct observation’ rather than sitting in offices reading reports (*cuoi ngua xem hoa* – ‘looking at flowers from horseback’) [Frankland 1966 passim, and e.g. 41 et seq]. The initial stages of Soviet technical assistance to Vietnamese Communist cadres ‘in power’ after 1954, and then during the Three-Year Plan (1958–1960) and the first Five-Year Plan (1961–65) of course coincided with Khrushchev’s period in power (say 1953–1964).

9 Here the text uses ‘Comrade’ as the third-person pronoun, and it seems useful to translate it so here.

10 That is, the private plots ideologically accepted by Stalin and to be found in most collectivised agricultures in the Soviet world. Output from these plots was by right sold on local markets and generated a high share of both farmers’ incomes and certain outputs (Wadekin 1973, Fforde 1989).

11 This euphemism usually refers to corruption.

12 The term here for ‘under the table’ is *chui*, which is often encountered; it has a first (less colloquial) dictionary entry of to steal, creep, slip in through a narrow opening [Bui Phung 1995].

(the man who had personally delivered Vo Chi Cong's letter to the minister); also working with Comrade Tran Ngoc Canh was Comrade Le Huy Ngo (at the time head of the cooperative management section (ban) of the province (Pham Quoc Doanh 2011).

Still more fun can be had from a report somewhere in the large KX-08 study of rural issues (e.g. Dang Tho Xuong, ed. 1992) on the circumstances of the research prior to the writing of CT-100. The point here is that Vinh Phu Province under Kim Ngoc, a rather hot-blooded ex-military commissar, had itself introduced output contracting with families in the late 1960s, and had been condemned for doing so (Van Thao 2010). As it is put in Dang Tho Xuong's edited volume (1992):

[...] in September 1966 in Vinh Phuc (now Vinh Phu), the province Party Committee issued a resolution on family contracts covering the whole province. Family contracts in Vinh Phu showed results in the development of production, the enthusiasm of farmers and some negativities were overcome. This was a sign predicting a new direction for agriculture and the rural areas, a new form of cooperation coming from reality [literally: *cuoc song* – 'life']. However, the Party rectified and stopped this new form (Notification #224 of the Party Secretariat 12/12/1968).<sup>13</sup>

As I recall (I have not yet managed to retrieve the exact reference), the account says that in 1980 a team from the Party Centre led by Vo Chi Cong visited the Party leadership of the province and asked if there was any concrete experience there of family contracts. He was told that there had been, but as the Party had told them to stop, they had. Reassured by the team that the Party very much wanted to research concrete experiences, the province leadership said they would try. The next morning they reported to the team that in fact there were indeed some concrete experiences still in operation.

### Discussion

The picture one gets from such evidence is of knowledge production that somewhat enthusiastically gains persuasive power from observation (*khao sat*) and the sense that, amid all the complexity, the direction of movement of reality can be sensed and some rational story generated from it.<sup>14</sup> This then feeds into policy, and of course policy has then to generate an account of itself that influences that direction of movement – in this case by requiring that the process be led (*chi dao*) and guided (*huong dan*).

<sup>13</sup> For details of the macro politics of the decision on the form of the Tet Offensive of early 1968, see Huy Duc (Chapter 15 *passim*). Some very powerful political forces were in play.

<sup>14</sup> Strong assertions that the knowledge is robust sometimes refer to 'laws' – *quy luat*.

## 25-CP

### The document

This is a document of the Government Council (the then name for what is now the Council of Ministers), entitled “Decision of the HDCP #25-CP 21/1/1981 On a number of positions and measures aiming at development of the right to be proactive in production and business and to be financially autonomous of state enterprises.”

The word translated here as ‘positions’ is *chu truong*. Policy is said to concretise such statements (Fforde 2011 *passim*, and 171); this is the function of, for example, ministry policy departments, who are not therefore in the strict sense places where policy is meant to be made but where it is to be written.

Compared with CT-100, 25-CP is less ‘research-oriented’. It rather mediates between powerful interests within the party-state. However, to do so it references reality far more than it references ideology or theory. Like most such documents, it has an introduction – a section that overviews the situation, refers to key policy statements and grounds the Resolution in such statements of the nature of the situation and what to do about it. These are Party statements, maintaining the traditional stance that intentionality resides with the Party, which leads the state in action. These assert the acceptance of the importance of strongly developing the rights of enterprises.<sup>15</sup>

On the one hand, central planning had to be the guaranteed basis for enterprise activities. On the other, all state organs superior to enterprises (ministries, province and city people’s committees etc.) had to re-establish what was required of their enterprises and categorise them according to their importance – and the extent to which the state could, through its own resources, guarantee them supplies so they could meet their output targets. Those enterprises that could not be guaranteed inputs were to be left to sort things out for themselves. This was expressed, in a well-crafted phrase, in terms of the three elements to an enterprise’s plan:

- The part where the state allocated guaranteed materials
- The part where the enterprise did it itself (*tu lam*)
- And minor products (where it was understood that the enterprise would again ‘do it itself’ (2–3))

Now, this meant that enterprises were allowed to operate outside the plan wherever the state could not guarantee inputs. As such, market relations were now permitted within the core of the socialist economy *and for those list goods enterprises had been built to produce*.

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<sup>15</sup> There is, of course, a track record of this in the various reforms in the USSR under Khrushchev, and then what are usually known as the ‘Kosygin reforms’ under Brezhnev. 25-CP goes far beyond these, and also is far more extensive in coverage (*all state enterprises*) than Chinese experiments at the time.

One can conclude that 25-CP was mediating between a 'state business interest' and those elements of the party-state opposed to such commercialisation. It was signed by Do Muoi.

### **Evidence**

Now, in terms of research practice, I argue that 25-CP is drawing upon an experienced reality where enterprises operated both in markets and to suit planners' demands. Further, this dates back to the First Five-Year Plan (1961–65); but, crucially, this was widely reported in the Party Press, such as "Nhan Dan". Fforde (2007) draws upon these vivid reports extensively. Referring to Hai Phong:

The city had started to produce over 200 new lines, especially household metal goods, bicycle spares and toys. Some parts of the city had allowed a sharp rise in individual artisans and artisanal groups, and output from waste and by-products had doubled. However, among rising numbers who had sought registration for private sector activity, service and repairs had been more important than producers. Furthermore, there was competition between cooperatives for technical workers, who often wanted to work for themselves.

The city continued to permit this expansion of activity through early 1980. It was extremely active in issuing regulations and lists of goods subject to its management, but it eased private goods circulation and tried to improve producer incentives (Nhan Dan, 1980a). It allowed SOEs to dispose of output freely 'if the state trading organs did not buy them' (Nhan Dan, 1980a). Output growth continued, and gross industrial output was up around 9 per cent on the year over the winter of 1979–1980. The city's producers had started to establish links with suppliers in other provinces, and this had helped it to start production of new products such as pens, bicycle pedals, paper and rubber sandals. This apparently sustainable but rather controlled growth process was marked by the asset census of late 1980 (Nhan Dan, 1980q). In early 1981 the city's small and artisanal cooperatives were over-fulfilling the plan for disposal of output to the state trading organs.

Many SOEs were keeping back surplus materials to sell at a high price or make minor products themselves. As a result of the input shortages, very many producers were increasing their searches for new products and abandoning unprofitable putting-out contracts. Needless to say, under such conditions 'the question of taxation and purchase pricing is not clear' (Nhan Dan, 1979r). The city tried to argue that it was closely guiding this explosion of extra-plan activity (Nhan Dan, 1979t). To support its own position, it had opened up trading links with mountainous and southern provinces.

Towards the end of 1979 the output response in some local industries was spectacular: the city's gross industrial output in October was reportedly 10 per cent up on September, and there was a similar rise in November. Over an undisclosed period, paint output went from 250 to 900 tonnes and plastic sandals from 200,000 to 1 million pairs. There had been a sharp rise in such activities as the opening of minor plants by SOEs to produce extra-plan output. A number of shops had opened to carry out 'domestic export' of cultural objects. Most of these changes had occurred during the early autumn. They continued to expand rapidly during the winter of 1979–1980 (Nhan Dan, 1980b). Exports seem to have grown

markedly, especially in carpets (Nhan Dan, 1980c, 1980e) and embroidery (Fforde, 2007: 157–158).

### Discussion

I quote at length to make the point that the logic of 25-CP clearly reflected an apparent logic in the experiences that papers like *Nhan Dan* (and others) were reporting: the co-existence of plan and market, the powerful forces of commercialisation and the ease with which alternatives were compared in terms of issues such as levels of production, workers' real incomes, supplies of consumer goods etc. Though we need to know far more, it is clear that research drew easily upon theorised, experienced reality rather than upon ideology or extant theory.

### Findings

What I find most striking about these two policy documents is:

- Extant Communist theory is clearly not the driver of what they have to say.
- There is considerable evidence that how they address issues reflects considerable textured knowledge of empirical realities, which is then theorised, or generalised, into sense making that drives the position taken, its rationalisation and, in part, the policy direction.
- The *actual* policy direction seems to suggest that McAuley's (1977) view is fruitful: the closer the issue to associated interests represented (in some sense) politically, the less important is policy logic and the more important is policy's ability to mediate between those interests. CT-100 uses core positions on the need to preserve the agricultural cooperatives as part of the rural political set-up. It was not until NQ-10 in 1988 that cadre positions were attacked and perhaps 500,000 lost. 25-CP is far more pragmatic, reflecting the political power of the 'state business interest'.

### Induction as practiced by the Vietnamese: 'Nous'

I want now to discuss how one might analyse Vietnamese research practices of the types I have discussed in what one could call more scientific terms. My argument is that they can be seen as working, supported by their 'individual catholicity', comfortably within inductive processes. The key issue here is how we can understand their equivalent of nous — that is how they decide upon what is and what is not good theory, inductively derived and so as yet untested through deduction and prediction. I think I can say that the common 'Western' understanding of nous is that it is the sense on the part of the individual theorist that their theory 'makes sense' and is capable of being true. The idea that knowledge is socially constructed then tends, I think, to involve asserting that what is experienced psychologically has its social aspects, and that to understand properly 'what happens next' also requires attention to social factors. But it remains the case that



theorisation can be and is seen as individual creativity. This seems similar but also different from what we see through Vietnamese accounts.

The key here is clearly the notion of the summing-up – the *so ket* and the *tong ket* – and their associated statuses. Vietnamese see these research practices as quite normal, but consider the following:

[...] it appears that whilst evaluation of large externally funded scientific research programs often started off seeking to create agreed numerically based narratives of 'what caused what and what it was worth', important practices have tended to move away from this:

Technology assessment was originally conceived of as an analytic activity, aimed at providing decision makers with an objective analysis of effects of a technology. Early in the history of technology assessment, it became clear that assessment projects must involve multiple perspectives. In the United States, this led to stakeholder involvement in the analysis. In a number of European countries, however, forms of technology assessment developed in which the analytic product became of relatively minor importance compared to the interactive process: consensus conferences and constructive technology assessment developed as alternative forms (Van Eijndhoven 1997: 269).

This can be read as reflecting a major shift in the expertise sought (and hired) to carry out and facilitate assessments. Analysts who produce 'objective analyses' would have been replaced by those deemed skilled in the facilitation of 'consensus conferences' and constructivist assessments. Since the former had been thought to be saying what the truth of the matter was, and no longer were, this arguably would have required 'thinking the unthinkable' (Fforde 2017: xii).

The point here is that it is *not* normal or universal for impact assessments to be treated as subjective – aid is a stark example (Fforde 2017 *passim*). But if, as we have seen, order (*tin h the*) is thought to be no more than the current 'state of play', then it seems to follow that, as Woodside (2006) suggests, scepticism about relations between text and reality implies that social activities to 'establish for the moment the truth of the matter' be framed as a 'summing-up', whether preliminary (*so ket*) or general (*tong ket*). This seems to me to offer a rich area for research into how such activities are socially moderated; to put it another way, how nous – for the Greeks, as for many in the 'West', an individual and psychological concept – is seen instead as social and practical.

### **Reflections on the differences between political and economic change**

Before concluding, I want to make some very quick remarks about the current situation and the somewhat extreme lack of ballast in Vietnamese discussions and research into possible political change.

Fforde (2007) draws heavily upon the rich primary sources we find in newspapers like *Nhan Dan* in 1979 and later that tell us, and the Vietnamese at the time, much about change processes. These processes – let us call them the commercialisation of the state economy – were discussed and argued through. There was much disagreement. Eventually the areas seen for the moment as persuasively positive won out, and 25-CP was passed. After a conservative reaction, 306-BBT returned to the direction of 25-CP in early 1986 – months before the VIth Congress. Since then, of course, SOEs have played a contradictory and increasingly contested role.

But my key point is that while one can see, if one searches for them, new forms of political power in Vietnam emerging throughout the ‘noughties’, *these are at present not easily accessible for study in the mass media*. Free informal trade unions clearly exist, though not called that, as do a rich range of informal farmers groups and a wide range of other societal activities. These confer authority on their leaders, and too upon politicians who can support them. Yet it is not easy to find out about these, in stark contrast to the commercialising activities of state enterprises before January 1981. This contrast is suggestive. If Vietnamese knowledge production tends towards the inductive, with a social sense of nous – that which makes theory believable – then change will either be driven by hardline ideology as it was before 1979, or it will require ‘something to chew on’ – which is at present largely absent.

## Conclusion

"Which are the scientific concepts employed by research about Vietnam today and are there any specifically Vietnamese approaches? Are there alternatives to “western” concepts and approaches? Where is the emphasis of research regarding Vietnam by international and Vietnamese research?"

My analysis has the following implications for how we think about these questions, and indeed for further research:

What works rhetorically, what gives research conclusions persuasive power in Vietnam, seems to be not so much their conceptual aspects but the practice that they come from. Good practice in this sense appears to have two main aspects: First, that it is closely associated with perceived reality. How reality is perceived is believed to be subjective (*chu quan*), varying from observer to observer, but good ‘objective’ (*khac quan*) accounts gain persuasive power if they seem to come from somebody who came down off their horse to look at the flower.

Second, if the research conclusions have been tested in open argument and debate, then that is more important than their being endorsed by those in authority. 25-CP and CT-100 are not powerful because they are the product of the Party, but because they reflect, in the audience’s eyes, perceived reality. In this sense, one might say that Vietnamese knowledge production practice sees nous as a social rather than as an individual psychological capacity. Social understandings are, then, rather simplistically characterised as inductive theorising, coloured by the ‘catholicity at

the level of the individual’ – but then to be validated, if they are to be widely persuasive, by debate. If this is the case, then social knowledge development is likely to be more robust and productive when there is a combination of the availability of relevant facts for induction with the availability also of an audience and competitors for a good debate. It is then rather obvious that this was the case in the early 1980s with matters of economic reform, and is not nowadays with matters of political reform: there is not much to chew on, and the public rumination lacks both a decent debate and a decent audience.

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16 Note: as it fits perfectly with how a computer lists Western names when the surname is given first, normal Vietnamese names are given here exactly how they are written in Vietnamese: the family name (*ho*) is first; the ‘cushion name’ (*ten dem*) second, and the personal name (*ten*) last.

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