

# **The Villas of the New Bourgeoisie around West Lake in Hanoi**

## **A Rediscovery of Colonial Architectural Patterns**

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The following is an essay<sup>1</sup> combining stories and history, proceeding from the former to the latter. The stories are derived from the observations of a sociologist strolling through an old city opening itself up to the globalized world, simultaneously taking in and transforming new elements and rediscovering forms from its pre-socialist past, as well as from conversations with the city's inhabitants. The presentation and theoretically guided reflection of such stories based on experience afford an insight into the contemporary history of the Vietnamese capital.

### **Constructions of the Doi Moi bourgeoisie**

In an attempt to recuperate the French colonial impact for the Vietnamese patriotic-communist project and at the same time to differentiate his country culturally from the eternal enemy to the North<sup>2</sup>, the late writer, musician and senior civil servant Nguyen Dinh Thi told me in October 2002: "The diversity now manifested in architecture is due to French influence and experience. This is not found in China." Reality, as a matter of fact, is much more complex. We can, however, say, that in Hanoi's fluent and evolving, rapidly changing architectural styles there is a (syncretistic) combination of

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Goethe Institute Hanoi during a conference on "Hanoi 2010 – Transformation of a City" on 29/30 March 2007. I am grateful to Allan Rostoker for his critical reading of the manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> In the 40s "of the past century" (as Mr. Ngo Huy Quynh, Hanoi's former Chief architect, nostalgically used to say), I learned at school in a small Westphalian town that the French were "our hereditary enemies".

modern and traditional aspects because here, as elsewhere, “local cultures ‘indigenize modernity’ according to a local cultural logic.”<sup>3</sup> It is obvious that Vietnam is currently undergoing a rapid process of Westernisation comparable, say, to the Americanisation of French society after World War II.

What we can presently observe in Hanoi among the new class of those who have been able to enrich themselves or who had the opportunity to accumulate sufficient funds to build their own homes, is hardly astounding in a society which existed for so long under conditions of economic precariousness and which has come out of decades of wars, generalised poverty, collectivism and political oppression and which is now given the possibility to pursue personal interests. A challenge like this must provoke a social transformation which is nothing less than revolutionary...

Such an inversion of values considered immutable over two generations requires the creation of the basis of a market economy through the accumulation of capital, the mobilisation of human energies and the fostering (or re-awakening) of civic values extolling individual responsibility. A historical project of this magnitude necessitates the transfer of decisions, funds, the conception and realisation of projects from the state to a (atomised) previously non-existing private sector which now needs to be created. In this transformation, the monopoly of the state diminishes gradually in favour of individual actors, leading to a “marketization... in (the) urban social structure of city dwellers.”<sup>4</sup> It has been estimated that in the Subsidy Period (Bao Cáp) which predated Doi Moi, up to 80 % of Hanoi’s population was part of the state sector and, consequently, lived in lodgings owned by the state.<sup>5</sup> We should remind ourselves that during the period of prohibition of private commerce Hanoi was quiet, drab and colourless. There were mostly bicycles in the streets, and only the few official limousines with white curtains would sound the horn, demanding the right of way... The poet Hoang Cam related that in 1960 he travelled for a whole day on his bicycle across the city in the desperate and vain effort to find a few eggs or a chicken – his mother had had a bad bicycle accident and needed nutritious food to restore her health. During these endless years of

<sup>3</sup> Grant Evans, Between the Global and the Local there are Regions, Culture Areas, and National States: A Review Article, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, 1 (February 2002), p. 157. For the (architectural) history of Hanoi, see: William S. Logan, *Hanoi. Biography of a City*, Seattle 2000; Philippe Papin, *Histoire de Hanoi*, Paris 2001; Pierre Clément and Nathalie Laucret (eds.), *Hanoi. Le cycle des métamorphoses. Formes architecturales et urbaines*, Paris 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Trinh Duy Luan and Nguyen Quang Vinh, *Socio-Economic Impacts of “Doi Moi” on Urban Housing in Vietnam*, Hanoi 2001, p. 22. The book by David W. H. Koh, *Wards of Hanoi*, Singapore 2006 only became available to me after completion of this essay.

<sup>5</sup> In the meantime, a large number of these lodgings has been sold to their occupants.

chronic famine, Hoang Cam had in 1979 opened what he calls a “cabaret”, meaning that he sold rice alcohol – “de la vodka vietnamienne” – to clients sitting on his bed in his family’s miserable dwelling in Ly Quoc Su street. He was under *Berufsverbot* (i.e. forbidden to pursue his vocation) and saw no alternative than such black market activity to feed his large family. He was therefore regularly called to the police station in Nha Tho street just round the corner from his home where, over and over again, he was threatened with imprisonment if he wouldn’t give up his illicit trade which, by the way, he continued until 1982 when he was finally arrested and incarcerated (because of his contacts with literary circles overseas) in Hoa Loa prison.<sup>6</sup> Many Hanoians have frequently told me about their difficulties in supplying themselves even with the strict minimum (and very often with less than the minimum necessary to subsist), about the octopus-like bureaucracy and the queues of people waiting in front of state shops from 4 a.m. onwards. People were always hungry; consequently, their energy and their time were not devoted to work but on the frantic attempt to find food, a vicious circle indeed.<sup>7</sup> In 1992, on the other hand, 47 % of the capital’s households already depended on the market economy,<sup>8</sup> a percentage which has since increased considerably. Today it is evident in Hanoi that a new middle class and a bourgeoisie have emerged and that a much larger proportion of the population has been impoverished – social inequality has risen dramatically. While the *nouveaux riches* build their dream houses in line with their new means, the *nouveaux pauvres* cannot find a home. A recent study of the National Center of Social and Human Sciences concludes that “(t)he market economy in housing serves mainly the well-off, while a large part of the poor fail to find adequate shelter.”<sup>9</sup> The current transformation then creates the market and a “modern”, market-orientated and market-dependent population; some gain from it, many fall by the wayside.

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<sup>6</sup> He spent 6 months in the ex-colonial Maison Centrale, then 12 months outside Hanoi; over and over again he had to write his self-criticism. Interviews with Hoang Cam in Hanoi on 26 November 1998 and 24 June 1999.

<sup>7</sup> See the exhibition on the Subsidy Period (Bao Cáp) in Hanoi’s Museum of Ethnology, 2006/2007.

<sup>8</sup> Trinh Duy Luan and Nguyen Quang Vinh, op. cit., pp. 22/23, see also pp. 82/83. A study by Michael Waibel, however, shows that even during the period of central planning and before 1979, there were private economic activities in the so-called Quarter of the 36 Streets, whereas private economic activities in the former colonial part of Hanoi started only with Doi Moi: Michael Waibel, *Stadtentwicklung von Hanoi*, Frankfurt am Main 2002, pp. 245/246.

<sup>9</sup> Trinh Duy Luan and Nguyen Quang Vinh, op. cit., p. 234. – Private security measures have reached a level of almost hysterical obsession, and this in all spheres. See also Heinz Schütte, Hanoi in Transition. From Pre-Modern to Modern Times, *ARENA journal*, New Series, No. 23, 2005, pp. 189–206.

Vietnam, in other words, is getting acquainted with normal capitalist standards in the age of globalisation.

After decades of central planning and almost total conformity imposed by the socialist model, Doi Moi, i. e. (economic) Renovation since 1986 not only permits personal enrichment but the display of difference and individuality, feeble indicators of the evolution of a civil society with all its contradictions and perversities. These phenomena are evident in the sphere of consumption such as home buying or the building of houses which quite often amount to luxury consumption.

### **The villas on West Lake**

This is the case of many of the West Lake constructions situated along Nghi Tam road, beginning at Yen Phu. The most spectacular buildings have arisen on the peninsula of Tay Ho district (Quan Tay Ho) along Nghi Tam, Xuan Dieu, Dang Thai Mai, Tay Ho and To Ngoc Van streets and in the lanes and alleys off these major axes. The poets, scholars and painters whose names have been employed by the authorities in a vain hegemonic attempt to name the streets of the district, would surely not have appreciated the counterrevolutionary spirit which animates the suburb and which hardly does justice to their memory. Rather, these streets bear witness to a social and economic order which has turned its back on the revolution and on socialism: arches, pillars, bay windows and cosy, overhanging roofs abound, pretending to belong to a romantic tradition that denies all that Vietnamese socialism has attempted to build. When I first visited these streets on the back of a *xe om* (a motorcycle taxi), coming from a neighbourhood in the centre of Hanoi, I thought I was in Disneyland. Here you can discover all styles, the most unbridled syncretisms – a Swiss chalet, a northern European brick front, Parisian domes, traditional Chinese pagodas. Potemkin-like façades are also highly appreciated, their ‘Greek’ columns lifting buildings towards the sky and towards unlimited new possibilities; pillars have always signified pride and power... Predictably, there is a small Christian chapel in an alley off To Ngoc Van avenue (Ngach 11/32). Newly successful Vietnamese professionals, businessmen or high party and state officials and Western expatriates live next to each other although they rarely mix. But the former eagerly try out the lifestyle of the latter – their music, their food, their clothes, their department, their furniture, their artistic tastes and the way they socialise, and in a few cases, the sons and daughters of the Vietnamese trendsetters even go to the international schools overwhelmingly attended by young Westerners – a neo-colonial laboratory in effect. Tay Ho is

the chic, fashionable suburb which sets new standards for those who want to be part of the local bourgeoisie and where everything gets transformed, where rurality is tamed and where fresh air circulates freely...

Clearly, though, the influence of French colonialism dominates in what seem to have been long repressed fantasies. In architecture, “everything which is French is fashionable”, I have often been told, and I am under the impression that the French colonial shadow is synonymous with what is considered solid and durable. Surely a return to colonial (and pre-colonial) models in architecture implies an acceptance of the past as part of the country’s cultural heritage. But if the roots of the French fashion in architecture are grounded in the past, they equally have a foundation in the present, i.e. the appreciation of Hanoi’s colonial patrimony by foreigners. In the eyes of the newly affluent Vietnamese classes who are keen to be recognised by their foreign friends and business partners, this recognition confirms solidity and beauty.<sup>10</sup> The observer cannot escape the impression that these classes attempt to create a clean new world which rejects the recent political and economic past and the social misery of its environment. High walls, wrought-iron gates, decorative palm trees symmetrically arranged in front of houses (resembling the poplars of southern France), an artificiality which rebuffs nature and rural life, reinforce the impression of a rupture with Vietnam’s history. And equally they constitute a barrier against the potential menace of the rural peasantry and the poor urban masses. Together these attitudes combine a fear of “the dangerous classes” and the collective memory of the misery and difficulties of peasant life.

So, not only do these *nouveaux riches* finally prove to the former colonial masters that they have made it to a level they cannot but admire, they also demonstrate to everybody that they have been as successful, and even more successful, than others, they “show to all the neighbours ‘of what one is capable!’”<sup>11</sup> The construction of these villas is both publicity directed at the world around them and a concrete realisation that one’s dreams have come true and, moreover, that one is well on the path to reclaiming the family fortune lost in the expropriations of the 1950s, the 1960s and the

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<sup>10</sup> Grant Evans pointed out to me this double aspect. – Typically, the *nouveaux riches* anywhere copy – the villa, the painting – since, consciously or unconsciously, they take an idol as their model, and it must be said that such a guiding spirit often gives them the formidable strength necessary to realise what is new and culturally unforeseen. In Vietnam, the decades of socialism had a ‘de-culturing’ effect in that it destroyed the traditions of the non-proletarian, non-poor peasant classes. Only the future generation(s) will, through status, wealth and education, have gained sufficient self-confidence to develop an aesthetic individuality. See also: Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul. Erinnerungen an eine Stadt*, München 2006, p. 271.

<sup>11</sup> Nguyen Khac Truong, *Des hommes et autant de fantômes et de sorciers*, Hanoi 1996, p. 99.

early 1980s. Confirming what is beautiful and worthy of the family, the villas are monuments that glorify it across the generations. At the same time, the proprietors consider themselves the avant-garde of a prosperous, ‘developed’ and more just future in a sanitised and civilised environment. “To become rich is patriotic” (“Reich werden ist patriotisch”) – this was said to me by a successful Hanoian architect and building contractor in his splendid country house in Hoa Binh province which he had designed and built according to ecological principles and with a self-confident artistic taste rarely found in today’s Vietnam<sup>12</sup> – a perfect fusion of a natural environment re-made and controlled by man, architectural harmony and aesthetic creation.

### The Hôtel des Invalides in Hanoi

Mr. Tan, Doctor of Applied Mathematics from Martin Luther University in Halle in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), is a typical representative of the new Vietnamese who move things forward; for him, it is personal merit that counts and not status based on loyalty to family, social group or the Party. Already in the old days in Halle when he wrote his dissertation, he dreamt of a small apartment with a shower of his own in Hanoi – it was the dream of a private space outside the cramped communal apartments which even the relatively well-off inhabited at the time. The fantasy was historically determined, of course, and, by current standards, did not go very far. In 2002, in a narrow alley off Xuan Dieu road, he had *his* dream house built whose dimensions differed considerably from those he had thought of back in Halle. It is modelled primarily on the Hôtel des Invalides in Paris, yet there were other influences as well: the castles of Versailles and Karlsruhe and a Hanseatic mansion in Hamburg. Dr. Tan has assembled a ‘picture chronicle’, a voluminous album documenting the history of the remarkable house.

Born in 1949, Tan is the son of a francophone pharmacist, Dr. Thinh, born in 1924 and a former boy scout; his mother is the sister of the writer Tu Phac who was a prominent figure in the Nhan Van-Giai Pham movement in the 1950s<sup>13</sup>. Dr. Thinh studied in Hanoi where he remained during the war

<sup>12</sup> Ly Truc Dung, 11 March 2007; the house contains a fine collection of regional pottery and artefacts.

<sup>13</sup> See my essays ‘Kurzlebige Hundert Blumen in Vietnam 1955–1957’, *Internationales Asienforum* 33, 3–4 (2002), and ‘Hundred Flowers in Vietnam 1955–1957’, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Institut für Asien- und Afrikawissenschaften, Südostasien, Working Papers no. 22, Berlin 2003.

against the French colonial regime. In 1958, during the ‘Renovation of Capitalists and the Bourgeoisie’ (Cai tao cong thuong nghiep<sup>14</sup>), his pharmacy was confiscated yet not expropriated. He was classified as a ‘progressive intellectual’, probably, as he explained, because from among the 200 pharmacists practising in Hanoi before the war, only 11 were still present in 1954. He was obliged to follow a political course of study; “then we were asked to voluntarily participate in the revolution by becoming civil servants. We were re-educated, but we remained owners”, he related to me. After a long process of requests and demands, rejections and promises, the pharmacy building was restored to him in 1992.

His son, Tan, also studied mathematics in Hanoi and then worked in the energy ministry. He had taken it into his head – Doi Moi rendered it possible – to ameliorate the modest building which in the past had housed his father’s pharmacy, and which the family had now recuperated, into a five-floor building, crowned by a high balustrade with imposing pillars. It became one of the first ‘modern’, renovated constructions in Hanoi, and this at a moment when foreign companies, recently arrived, were desperate for office space. Finance for the reconstruction had come from cousins and brothers living in Europe; three years later the loans had been repaid. By then, the tenants had gradually left the building because in the meantime more modern buildings were on the market. At this propitious moment, Dr. Think, counselled by his son, sold the front (yet not the back) part of the building and distributed the money equitably among his five children (including one son living in Luxemburg) all of whom in turn invested in real estate. With his share, Tan bought a 150 m<sup>2</sup> site in Tay Ho district for his future private home.

After having returned to Hanoi from the GDR in 1986, Tan had again taken up his post at the Ministry. Soon after Doi Moi, he founded, under the shield of the Ministry, a publishing house<sup>15</sup> which brought out books he had acquired in the West (mainly in Germany) and translated into Vietnamese, often by himself – books on the market economy, on marketing, the financial market etc. Dr. Tan, like other Vietnamese who had studied in Germany, frequently refers to the importance of (what they consider) ‘German values’ they have integrated as their own: order, discipline,

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<sup>14</sup> Literally: Industrial commercial renovation.

<sup>15</sup> Tan was a civil servant at the Ministry where he created an information centre “Union for New Technologies”, which amalgamates the private activities of civil servants “who have ideas”. These are “parallel activities”, parallel to state services, rendered possible after the 6<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CP under secretary general Nguyen Van Linh. Tan’s publishing venture was called LICOSA-XUBA where he employed more than 20 “intellectuals” for his translations.

reliability, precision, excellence – instrumental values they consider absent in Vietnamese cultural tradition, thus ascribing to themselves (as individuals and as a group), a ‘civilising mission’... In collaboration with like-minded friends, Tan established in 1990 in Hanoi a Vietnam-German centre for culture, language and technology<sup>16</sup> because, as he explained, “under no circumstances did we want to lose contact with our second fatherland”; it became a forerunner of the Goethe Institute which opened its doors in Hanoi in 2000. Soon Tan became advisor and then representative and partner of German investors in Vietnam; with them he founded several joint ventures<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, in 2001 he published a collection of German songs with their Vietnamese translations; ever since, Hanoi children’s choirs sing “Hoch auf dem gelben Wagen” in German and in Vietnamese. He has also published the translation of a big sociological dictionary, a work executed under his direction.

Since about 2000, Tan has become an entrepreneur in a branch of the economy nourished by the food nostalgia of former Vietnamese students and guest workers in the German Democratic Republic. Together with a German friend, Michael Campioni, who is in his late 50s, a technician by profession and in the 1970s caretaker of the embassy of the German Democratic Republic in Hanoi<sup>18</sup> and who now lives in Erfurt, Tan produces Thuringian sausages. Together, Tan and Campioni pursue the aim at bringing “grilled sausages and frankfurters onto every Vietnamese dinner plate and into every Vietnamese cooking pot.”<sup>19</sup> Grilled sausages are the latest hit in Hanoi’s

<sup>16</sup> This centre – ZKST – still existed in 2003, offering mainly German language classes. Its president is Mr. Ngo Quang Phuc, the translator of Goethe’s *Faust*.

<sup>17</sup> One of these societies – a joint venture between Tan and one of his German friends – manufactures copper bicycle lamps according to a Dutch 19<sup>th</sup> century model by hand for export. Tan had brought one of these old lamps back to Vietnam from the Netherlands.

<sup>18</sup> The caretaker (*concierge*) of an organism such as an embassy, a school, a company or a bourgeois building, is a man “in the middle”. He is in charge of lower employees who work under his supervision and whom he dominates and considers inferior; on the other hand, he is in permanent contact with his superiors, white collar workers or members of the intelligentsia. Like every petit bourgeois-intermediary, he is existentially haunted by the fear of falling into the (sub-)proletariat and therefore aspires upwards, i. e. to a superior position. In short, caretakers are typically upwardly mobile... The daughter of Mr. Campioni, now in her late 20s, could very well have decided to settle in her ‘natural’ function as *Wurstprinzessin* (princess of sausages), as she puts it; instead, she studied art history. In late 2003, she spent 6 months in Hanoi working on the restauration of *objets d’art* in the National Museum while at the same time doing a doctorate in Vietnamese art. Mr. Campioni’s son who is a sports champion, had won a scholarship to the United States where he did business studies and now commutes between Germany and Vietnam working in the family business.

<sup>19</sup> Christian Tenbrock, Heiße Thüringer an der Vu Ngoc Phan, *Die Zeit*, 14 November 2002, p. 36.



(Western and Vietnamese) trendy society<sup>20</sup> – a resounding success, and in certain *cafés* (such as the ‘Café Goethe’) you can enjoy this exotic dish with potato salad, a popular German meal. In 2003, these enterprising fellows set about the construction of a factory complex consisting of an abattoir, a sausage factory, a factory to cut up pigs as well as a catering factory to furnish cooked meals for offices and enterprises in Hung Yen province, about 30 km from Hanoi.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the opening of 25 butcher and fastfood shops is envisaged for the near future, as are an extensive pig breeding and fattening venture and the cultivation of the mustard plant. Mustard, dear to Germans, is the inevitable ingredient for the consumption of both grilled sausages and frankfurters; to this end, 1 kg of mustard seed had been imported from Erfurt. The undertakings were to create work and employment in this rural province, and agricultural products were to be purchased directly from Hung Yen farmers. When these plans have been realised, the company will reign over 8% of Hanoi’s meat market, and Tan hopes to be able soon to export his products to China.

Due to the success of the enterprise during the first two years of its existence, Tan was able to finance the layout and installations of the terrain at Hung Yen, including a solid wall of concrete slabs surrounding the vast land. The remainder was to be financed by banks with which, as Dr. Tan explained, he is “on good terms”. By late 2005, the site had its own wells which also provide drinking water for the nearby village school. On the southern side of the terrain close to the road there stands a four-storey, elongated administrative building which shields the factory buildings from public view – the visitor stands in front of a magnificent façade which does not reveal the slaughtering of pigs and the manufacture of sausages. On the third floor of the building there is to be a professional training centre where the local peasants will be taught more efficient agricultural methods. The architect of the building, by the way, was the one who had built Dr. Tan’s

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<sup>20</sup> Another roaring success story in the food business is the (originally Turkish) *Döner* which has come via Berlin to Hanoi and now – early 2007 – to Ho Chi Minh City. It is sold in well over a dozen outlets in Hanoi as a syncretistic product with the (originally French) Vietnamese bread, excellent pork, tomatoes, vegetables and spices at the price of 10.000 Dong (50 Eurocents), a wholesome meal indeed. The *Döner* in Hanoi will be the object of a separate study.

<sup>21</sup> Two more industrial projects were at the same time under construction as part of the Tan-Campioni-owned joint venture: an instant noodle factory and a vegetable processing plant. – I was invited to visit the large and highly impressive building site in Hung Yen province in September 2003: On the 3 hectare terrain for which Tan has obtained a 35 year tenure, a huge factory building was under construction where production was scheduled to begin in February 2004. All machines, refrigeration technology and thousands of square meters of panelling were being imported from Germany. This joint venture intends to attain and comply with European Union norms.

house at Tay Ho; it had also been inspired by European castles of the classical period like that of Karlsruhe: Dr. Tan who has provided his architect with books on European mansions so as to inspire him, wants to link the aesthetic, as he conceives it, with the industrially functional.

The complex joint venture is called Duc Viet (German-Vietnamese); its administrative headquarters are located in the backyard building of Hue street in Hanoi where Dr. Tan's daughter, (in 2003) 25 years old who speaks a refined German, is being prepared as successor<sup>22</sup>. Sausages used to be linked with the French past; now they are being perceived differently: sausage – *xúc xích* – rhymes with Germany or, more particularly, with Thuringia. It has become fashionable to consume *xúc xích Thüringen* or *xúc xích duc*, German sausages.

Tan is an intermediary and an entrepreneur. He grasps opportunities and introduces what so far was unknown, reducing the potential risk through detailed planning, absolute reliability and, of course, the will to achieve and become very rich. His former field of action in the ministerial apparatus plus his ramified (pre-revolutionary) family relationships are indispensable instruments in Vietnam's post-socialist bureaucratic reality; they constitute a social (take-off) capital which accords him privileged status in the pre-economic sphere. In other words: He lives an individualism which is not only anchored in and obliged to the family group, but also in the bureaucracy of the socialist state apparatus, thus creating market forms going beyond family and bureaucracy. Tan is a small, solid man with a slightly timid smile radiating energy and confidence. "Always straight ahead, always at work with my whole heart" is his motto... He explained that there was no entrepreneurial tradition in Vietnam. "Therefore", he said, "I would like to prove by my work that one can work independently from the state, unlike the old men of letters or the socialist functionaries." Indeed, the social content of the nationalist project of both Phan Chu Trinh and Phan Boi Chau was to "metamorphose the class of men of letters into a new elite of capitalist entrepreneurs, functionaries and modern intellectuals"<sup>23</sup> so as to produce 'modern' subjects.

During the summer of 1998, Dr. Tan and his wife went on a trip to Paris where they took many photographs and visited all the monuments that

<sup>22</sup> Her future husband also works in the enterprise. After completing his studies in management, he worked with Metro, the German chain of commercial centres type cash & carry which has set up business in Vietnam, exploiting several giant centres from the South to the North, always outside cities. According to Dr. Tan, Metro proves to be a remarkable success, especially among the new middle and upper classes.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémyry, *Indochine. La colonisation ambiguë*, Paris 1995, p. 288.

shouldn't be missed. Also, they bought a whole series of illustrated books on the Hôtel des Invalides, Versailles, Hanseatic mansions in Hamburg and other European historical buildings. They were especially fascinated by the Hôtel des Invalides. The family album features a photo of Tan in front of Napoleon's sarcophagus with the emperor's shadow cut out from a brochure and hovering over and around Dr. Tan; his father, Dr. Think, confided to me that his son had been fascinated with Napoleon ever since his earliest youth... Back in Hanoi the couple showed books and photos to Tan's francophone father, and slowly the idea evolved of building a house imitating one of the Paris monuments. As Tan loves music, the house was to have a music room, preferably in the form of a dome like that in the Hôtel des Invalides in Paris or the colonial opera house in Hanoi (now the Municipal Theatre) to which the romantic could retire. In 2000 Tan found his architect, a nephew of his wife, Mr. Tran Duy, showed him the assembled documents, and over the months they discussed the project and made plans.

The family moved into the house in 2002. The architect had insisted on large, open rooms so that the house be airy and full of light; the dwelling has a solar installation that provides hot water. Due to the narrowness of the terrain and the alley, it is difficult to get a general view of the front with Pegasus the winged horse over the main entrance – very different from the original Parisian monument with its splendid perspective. The façade is painted light green. Apart from a narrow stretch of tiles which serves as a mini courtyard and symbolic separation between inside and outside, the 150m<sup>2</sup> plot is completely built over so that there is no room to stand back and survey this marvel nor does it permit the laying out of a garden in whose midst one would like to imagine the house like a *bonbonnière*. The perforated floral crossbars crowning the pointed arch windows have been copied from the lattice-work in the castle of Karlsruhe. Along the entire length of the left side of the house, opening on the narrow courtyard and thus right next to the flamboyant entry, there is a big empty room which reminds one of the “compartment” of traders and artisans in the old part of Hanoi – a *compartiment-villa* in Christian Pédelahore's terminology, though reminding me of the original form of the primitive house. This spacious room could serve as a garage, but in the early years when profits were immediately re-invested in the various business ventures, the master of the house did not yet avail himself of a personal motorcar; therefore and for the moment, this multi-purpose space is a little useless, housing just the motor bikes of the family. The idea of “compartment” comes to mind as it evokes the artisan and merchant past of the family, and the locale could easily be fitted out as a sausage shop for example.



The imposing iron portal which separates the property from the miserable alley, leads, across the mini courtyard, almost immediately into the large hall which serves as kitchen, recreation and family room where visitors, associates and employees of lesser importance are received. In the centre, in front of the kitchen unit occupying the wall to the right, is a round dining table with a lace table cloth protected by a glass plate – symbols of a domestic culture typical of the Vietnamese and German petite bourgeoisie.

Behind this spacious room are a sauna and a 9.50 m interior swimming pool; the outer wall of the pool is decorated with the Venus of Milo and several life-sized bas reliefs of Greek heroes. The Venus was purchased in Hanoi and subsequently painted in the *faux marbre* ('false marble') technique by a local artist. In the centre of the large ground floor room, marble stairs ornamented by a sculpted balustrade – the replica of the Hanseatic trading house – lead to an enormous gilded mirror half-way up between the two floors. The first floor which features numerous 'Greek' columns, comprises the salon<sup>24</sup>; furniture, sofa and easy chairs, a little worn from long use in the former family dwelling, are in the 1950s style, the heavy curtains are held back by tassels. A glass-door cupboard full of family knick-knacks, contains a stuffed cat, the pet greatly missed by the entire family.

The first floor – the formal, ceremonious floor, the floor of all the honours – also contains the bedroom of Dr. Tan's parents because, naturally, it is this son so crowned with success who has the privilege of housing and taking care of his old parents... Family bedrooms are on the second floor. The landing between the two floors displays a painting "in veritable oil" of about 2.50 m by 3.50 m, showing the Hôtel des Invalides as seen from Avenue de Breteuil with the Tan couple in front of it. The work was executed by a Hanoi painter from one of the photos taken in Paris – an enlarged version of which hangs next to the painting so as to demonstrate how perfectly the painter has succeeded in rendering reality.

On the third floor is a large terrace overlooking the lake; a double door made of precious timber leads into the domed room. For the pleasure of the master of the house who likes to withdraw to listen to music, it is equipped with a couch with cushions, wooden armchairs and a huge video machine; the wall is adorned with the framed portraits of famous European composers. This is a room of contemplation to which only privileged visitors are invited so as to listen to classical music from a video cassette. In his childhood, Dr. Tan played the violin. The dome, symbolizing heaven, features a

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<sup>24</sup> The columns are of concrete, and they have also been painted in the *faux marbre* technique. The 'real' marble of the stairs is of two kinds – the middle of the steps is made of a darker material so as to simulate the carpet which covers the original wooden staircase of the Hamburg mansion.

Raphael painting executed by a Hanoi painter who, from a photograph, copied the original which is in a Roman church. Passing through a double door onto the balcony facing the alley, the visitor can admire well over a dozen golden Greek statues on the balustrade which surrounds the exterior of the dome.

I met old Dr. Think, the father, on the restful terrace with its view over the lake where he is busy hanging up the washing – the maid has left and the family has so far been unable to replace her. (It seems to be difficult to find domestic servants who are prepared to work outside the city. While masters and mistresses are motorised or call a taxi and can easily travel into the centre of Hanoi, this is not so easy for their domestics.) His son, Tan, has had a traffic accident and nurses a broken knee<sup>25</sup>; he is immobilised on the old living room sofa on the first floor where, over a mobile telephone, he is conferring with his closest collaborators. His mother, Dr. Think's wife, has had a bad fall in the house when feeding the dog and has a broken arm. This, after all, cannot surprise anyone because they – mother and son – share the sign of the buffalo<sup>26</sup>, and this year, that of the goat, is not propitious for people born under the buffalo.<sup>27</sup> That is why Dr. Tan's wife who, after having given up her job as a schoolteacher and who normally also works in the company office in pho Hue, is now obliged to look after the household herself. Chatting away on the lofty terrace, Dr. Think tells me that the village was formerly specialised in floriculture for the Hanoi market. On the opposite shore of the lake there are two elongated buildings: the old Lypro – Lycée du Protectorat, now Lycée Chu Van An – where Think received his secondary education.<sup>28</sup> A neighbouring pagoda-style villa belongs to the director general of an important Vietnamese IT-company, the (former) son-in-law of General Vo Nguyen Giap and his wife, Mme. Dang Bich Ha, daughter of professor Dang Thai Mai after whom one of the main avenues

<sup>25</sup> As a matter of fact, the accident (in 2003) was a collision in the alley near his house between Tan on his motorbike and a peasant woman on her bicycle – the latter was ignorant of traffic rules – a collision between civilisation and backward practices, as it were.

<sup>26</sup> “The buffalo is condemned to an ungrateful life – works a lot, enjoys himself very little”, said Nguyen Huu Dang (1913–2007), also born under the sign of the buffalo. Interview in Hanoi on 3 June 1999.

<sup>27</sup> I wonder whether the mother's accident was not a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy in the sense that it obliged the old lady to fall and hurt herself because of the shared sign.

<sup>28</sup> Think's father had already attended the Lypro; he had been the representative of Nestlé in Saigon (1911/12) before working as an accountant for the Schneider printing house and the journal *Trung Bac Tan Van* (Central and Northern News) in Hanoi until 1944. When François Schneider left for France in the early 1920s, the printing office and the journal were taken over by Nguyen Van Vinh (1882–1936), one of the major reformist, pro-French intellectuals.

of the neighbourhood is named. And a group of not very high buildings just below the Hanoi version of the Hôtel des Invalides constitutes a guesthouse for the members of the politburo of Vietnam's communist party. Other surrounding villas are occupied by American, Australian and other Western tenants. It is a peaceful, modern, civilised neighbourhood with only a few patches of the peasant past still intruding.

## **Provincial France**

On several occasions I had the opportunity to visit an elegant, 3 storey villa in the French provincial style in an alley off Duong Tay Ho. It has a large, welcoming tiled courtyard; a 'Japanese' garden, some old trees and exuberant bamboo patches surround the building on a 500m<sup>2</sup> site. The house was built in 2000 by a peasant family owning various plots of land in this old flower and cumquat-growing village for several generations. The gracious building has been financed with the proceeds of the sale of one of the family's plots and without any outside finance. One of their friends, who owns a hotel in the area, served as architect, simply applying his personal experience. When asked about the choice of a French model for the villa, the owner, without the slightest hesitation, told me that the French style was eternally valid: the French shadow, to repeat, represents what is *solid*, and my admiration confirmed the choice of the contented builder.

Behind the portal made of simple black iron plates decorated with lily-shaped arrows, a front-court (shared with the next-door property) serves as a parking lot for motorbikes and cars behind which, separated by one more high iron gate, lies another generous courtyard, covered with bright red tiles, leading to the entrance of the house. The double entrance door is made of solid dark timber. So as to protect and symbolically mark the entrance, there is, right in the centre of the ground floor, a landing with three steps on each side. Above it on the first floor is a balcony behind which is the master bedroom. The spacious, open-plan ground floor-living room with its gleaming marble floor is subdivided by a staircase behind which is the open kitchen, separated from the dining area by a bar; half of this hall serves as a grand salon. On the two floors there are bedrooms, bathrooms and a large terrace overlooking peasant gardens, several similar villas and, a bit further, the lake – the view is increasingly threatened by new villa constructions. On the outside of the building, small towers and decorative gables have been added so as to break the monotony of the façade and the roof, and the door of the first floor balcony features several columns. Yet the interior has clear, simple lines and large windows which allow for much light and enable the

air to circulate. The banisters with their remotely *art nouveau* copper floral decoration, a gracious design, are held in position by a simple wooden balustrade as if one did not want to be carried away by the display of an all too flashy luxury.

In the alley opposite the house and in front of his small cabin outside another villa, a watchman takes a rest in his deckchair. The presence of this peaceful ‘sleeper’ is both reassuring and misleading – in fact, day and night the friendly man does not neglect his main function which consists in informing the state security services about the movements and activities of certain foreigners, and to this end he interrogates the household personnel of those buildings about the inhabitants: some are officially considered ‘partners’ – *dôi tác*, whereas others are classified as ‘suspect persons’ – *dôi tuong nguy hiem*.

In the immediate neighbourhood hardly anything reminds one of the old village which has disappeared with the recent luxury constructions mostly let to Western foreigners working in Hanoi. But walking down Duong Tô Ngọc Van/ngo 67 (coming from Duong Tây Hồ, turning right into ngo 67) only about 150 m, one reaches the well-kept village square with its old communal house, the Đình Làng Quang Bá, shady trees and a pagoda-style memorial with a richly sculpted, red and gilded ritual table and a big censer for President Ho Chi Minh who watches over the newly affluent neighbourhood. Lotus-crowned pillars decorated with inscriptions fence in a basin which in fact is the village pond and former communal reservoir. Around it, proprietors who collect hefty rental payments in US-dollars from foreign tenants, continue to live in small dwellings on plots of land where they cultivate the traditional village products (flowers and cumquats) for sale in Hanoi. Near this idyll lies the lake on whose shores in 2005 there still were several rustic restaurants where, in small bamboo huts built over the marshy water, four-generation family groups would boisterously celebrate their get-togethers – at the end of 2006, they are gone, and there is only a vast open swamp-like lake waiting to be ‘redeveloped’... People relate that, during the Subsidy Period (Bao Cấp), villagers who enjoyed the privilege of working in the GDR or in Czechoslovakia, would send their savings back in the shape of one or two motorbikes or some bicycles to be resold in Vietnam. Twenty years ago, the proceeds of such a transaction were sufficient to buy one or two plots of land whose value represented a considerable fortune ten years later in the Doi Moi period.

The former peasant-farmer and now proprietor, Mr. Thang, met me outside his lovely villa which has for the past 5 years been let to the director of the German cultural institute; he is about 50 years old and rides a Japanese motorbike lavishly studded with brightly shining aluminium leaves. He explained that nowadays he lived “on the fruit of his labour”,



meaning that he no longer needs to work. But his sister who, in the 1980s, worked in the GDR and who speaks a little German, is employed by the tenant as a domestic servant. With his elderly father and mother<sup>29</sup>, his wife and children Mr. Thang inhabits a four-storey house which looks like a vertical compartment; this house he had also built only a few years back in the labyrinth of alleys of the old village hiding behind the sumptuous villas where the dollar-rich foreigners live. The formerly very modest family exhibits all the marks of prosperous petty bourgeois suburbanites with private means: In the big ground floor room, there is plenty of heavy furniture in the Sino-Vietnamese style, copiously sculpted and inlaid with 'landscaped' marble, several sumptuous wooden armchairs, a veritable bed of state – the symbolic centre of the house – and a beautiful, lavishly decorated ancestor altar – it is evident that the forefathers have accumulated much virtue which has not been lost on the current generation, as proven by the family's fortune today...

The former peasantry's collective memory retains the awareness and subconscious knowledge of the hard and miserable life of country folk from which (sub-)urbanites prefer to dissociate themselves. Thus they cultivate potted plants and shrubs bought at the market which, on the impeccably clean tiles of the courtyard, represent distant nature; in these new circumstances, nature has become controlled, tidy and domesticated. The mud and dust of the surrounding alleys not yet sealed with concrete, reminders of the past, are not allowed to enter. This has gone so far as to alter the appearance and shape of flowers such as the roses so highly treasured by the Vietnamese: garden-grown roses which come in bizarre shapes and multiple colours have been replaced by industrially standardised roses without any perfume, straight as an arrow with one single blossom, cleansed of the unevenness and multitude of forms that nature provides, and wrapped in glittering cellophane paper decorated with plastic streamers.

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<sup>29</sup> At the beginning of every month, this energetic lady appears very early in the morning to demand payment of the rent in cash from her tenant.