

# Internet in Vietnam

## Unity of Contrasts: New and old Culture go along

*By Prof. Jörg Becker\**

### **Ho-Chi- Minh-Paths in a Sea of Data**

Vietnam wants to know about it: the country that sees itself as the "Dragon", would now like to belong to the tiger states, finally get rich, and forget their war wounds. The Internet is to be a great help in the fulfilling of these dreams. Today, the Vietnamese have more freedom in the World Wide Web than in everyday life.

A legend tells of a sacred tortoise which lived in the centre of Hanoi's Ho Hoan Kiem ("The lake of the returned sword"). During the struggle against the Chinese Ming occupying forces (1418-1428), it is said that it presented King Le Thai To with a magical sword for his support. The king went to the middle of the Ho Hoan Kiem in a small boat, and returned the sword after his victory. The tortoise snatched it from him and disappeared under the water. The king named the tortoise the guarding spirit of the lake, and a pagoda, three storeys high, was erected after a time, on a small island in the middle of the lake, in honour of the animal.

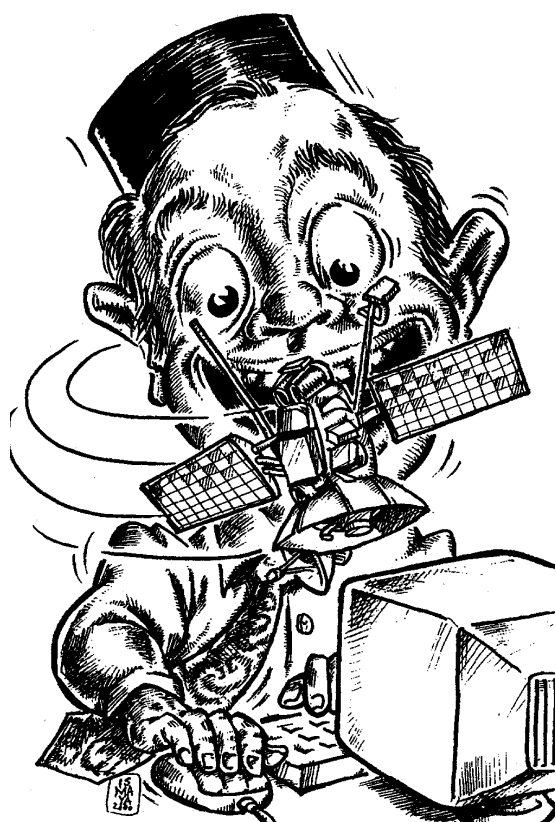
It is also said that if the tortoise ever appears again, something meaningful would happen in Vietnam. The story goes that the golden animal was seen twice in the last few years. It appeared the first time in 1986, as Nguyen Van Linh, the general secretary of the communist party at the time, agreed upon the politics of "doi moi", a kind of Vietnamese Perestroika and Glasnost politic. Doi moi means renewal and is a "fundamental revolution in all spheres of social life". The second time the tortoise appeared in the lake was on November 19<sup>th</sup> 1997, when Vietnam officially connected to the Internet.

Doi moi, innovation, dynamism, Vietnam as the fifth Asian Tiger country: These are not just pious words and glossy brochures. It is also reality. The yearly average income of a Vietnamese has risen 5% annually in the last ten years, the inflation rate has dropped in these 10 years from 20% to only 4% in 1997, and industrial growth is extremely rapid.

The Vietnamese Internet policy has to be looked at in the light of this background. Vu Dinh Cu, Vice-Parliament President, Chairman of the Technology Committee in the national parliament and, that goes without saying, still a dedicated Marxist, comments objectively:

"We have given all information technology the highest priority, that Vietnam may take part in global changes. Our youth will be a youth of information technology. Software, telecommunication, and networking belong to this concept. Internet must be extended for the good of the Vietnamese people".

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### **“In fact, you have censorship”**

“If fact, you have press censorship. So how can you have Internet at all?” My interlocutor from the Technical University in Hanoi looked at me earnestly. His expression said both yes and no. “We don’t want cyber pornography, or a culture of violence, nor prostitution or call-girls, we don’t need asocial sects, Mafia, information pollution, or the escalation of individual hedonistic freedom”. The Internet in Vietnam is first and only an instrument to advance industry, to achieve participation in the global market, and with the possibilities of exchanging scientific, technical and economic information. Now my conversation partner looked at me mischievously and referred to the difference between the law and reality. When the novel the “Sorrow of War” was published by Bao Ninh at the beginning of the nineties, it was soon banned. The portrayal of the psychological traumas of Vietnamese war veterans were too realistic for the officials.

Whilst telling me more about the novel, he whistled a street vendor over, pressed 100 Dong into his hand and bought a copy of the “forbidden” novel. Censorship? The older generations of the scientists of nature and technology, trained in the GDR (East Germany), are fluent in German. “Yes, censorship is a problem here, but also in your country. Wasn’t Comuserve dragged to court on a charge of spreading child pornography? And didn’t the German parliament vote in the majority, for the undermining of the prohibition of censorship for the secret services?” A few days before my departure, he pressed a copy of the satirical magazine “Tuoi Tre Cui” from Saigon into my hand. The cover showed the official government censors eagerly studying pornography: They were masturbating with pleasure.

### **Caught between a Cyber Park and Ancestor Worship**

The Hanoi Institute of Information Technology (IOIT) is the technical nucleus of the Vietnamese Internet. Scientists there developed an early interest in the American military project ARPANet (Advanced Research Projects Network). They received technical help from the German University of Karlsruhe, this university was the mid-wife of the Chinese Internet: As early as 1987 there was an x.25 Gateway linked to the Chinese Academic Network (CANET).

Besides the two pioneer networks, VAREnet and NetNam from the early nineties, the following networks are also very important for the Vietnam of today: Toolnet is the network of the National Scientific and Technological Information Centre, Vinanet is the network of the Department of Commerce, and Vinet offers all Vietnamese laws passed since 1945 in writing. Vinet also provides Vietnam’s Statistical Yearbook in electronic form, and both electronic specialist journals “Thoi Bao Kinh Te” and “Thoi Bao Quoc TE”. The Net Tri Tue Vietnam (TTVN) or “Wisdom from Vietnam” is only two years old. Many users have changed over to TTVN as it offers free access and is user friendly.

Who owns the Vietnamese cyber space? End of 1997, there was a bitter internal political struggle on the question of which of the above mentioned networks should receive state licences for Internet Access Providers. It wasn’t really surprising that only a single company, Vietnam Data Communications (VDC), a subsidiary company of the state-owned Vietnamese Post and Telecommunication Company, received this status.

A short time ago the Japanese helped the Vietnamese with considerable investments in a prestige object. Deep in the jungle, about 40 km west of Hanoi, they started building the Hoa Lac Hi-

Tech Park with a vision and deadline for the forthcoming 25 years. It's director, Professor Dang Ngoc Dinh comments: "The basis of Vietnamese industry and commerce is science and technology. We are striving long term, for own technological capacities. Our information scientists are already as good as those in Bangalore or California, but much cheaper however".

The Hoa Lac Hi-tech Park Project did a recent survey on how 100 early Internet users make use of the Internet. It is about the "early adopter" the innovators and the curious, the extra something. Most are male, over average school achievers, and are for Vietnamese circumstances, better earners. The first Vietnamese users were exactly in character with other "early adopter" colleagues world-wide, be it in Switzerland, USA or China. As the Web is not very well known in Vietnam, PC's are mostly used for sending emails. Nearly all users are of the opinion that the Internet fees are too high, and there is an insistent rumour that this "fee wall" is politically desired, however all persons questioned answered that the Internet in Vietnam needs to be extended urgently.

The questionnaire results are particularly fascinating in the areas in which they differ from European ones: Here, the normal culture critic sees the Internet as automatically being the end of traditional culture as we know it, the Vietnamese think differently about this. More than half of all questioned see no contrast between the modern Internet world and the old world of their ancestors. The expansion of the Net is as important to them as the sentence: "We should never forget the wisdom of our ancestors". It is not as it is here - old contra new - but a unity of contrasts, as Lao Tse already taught 2,600 years ago.



When it comes to ethics, the internet has so far had a shady reputation. The Jesuits might just change that. All but four of their 28 universities in the United States have clubbed together to offer cyberspace classes on ethics. Last summer each of them donated US\$ 35,000 to set up the Jesuit Distance Education Network ([www.ajcunet.edu/jnet/jnet.htm](http://www.ajcunet.edu/jnet/jnet.htm)). Source: The Tablet, 12.8.2000