

An Outline of Czech-Vietnamese Relations

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Neben einer Darstellung der wichtigsten historischen Etappen tschechisch-vietnamesischer Beziehungen widmet sich der Aufsatz vor allem kulturellen Aspekten des Verhältnisses. War die Haltung der tschechischen Gesellschaft in den 1960er und 70er Jahren gegenüber der vietnamesischen Diaspora durch Gleichgültigkeit geprägt, erlangten viele Vietnamesen um 1982/83 Ansehen als erfolgreiche Geschäftsleute. Die Annäherungen beider Gesellschaften, die zum Beispiel in einer wachsenden Zahl gemischter Ehen ihren Ausdruck fand, blieb jedoch oberflächlich. Eine tiefgehende Auseinandersetzung und ein fundiertes Verständnis der jeweils anderen sozialen Werte und Normen blieben aus. Der Aufsatz schließt mit der Erkenntnis, daß eine Mehrzahl der Probleme im tschechisch-vietnamesischen Verhältnis der Gegenwart in einem engen Zusammenhang mit den drastischen politischen, ökonomischen und sozialen Transitionen der vergangenen Dekade in beiden Ländern steht.

Diplomatic contacts between the Czechoslovak Republic¹ and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam were established on 2 February 1950. Czechoslovakia was the fourth state in the world to give official recognition to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam - after China, the USSR and Mongolia. The Czechoslovak Republic and later the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic never established diplomatic and economic contacts with the Republic of Vietnam, i.e. South Vietnam. The first Treaty on Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation between the Czechoslovak Republic and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was signed in Hanoi on 10 August 1955. Simultaneously the General Specification and Payment Conditions in Business between the two countries was compiled.² Mr Vladimír Knap, the first Czechoslovak ambassador in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, representing the Czechoslovak government, signed the Agreement between the Czechoslovak Republic and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on Scientific and Technical Cooperation on 28 September 1956. Under this agreement, Vietnamese citizens were trained in Czechoslovakia in the following years, mainly in mechanical engineering and light industries (e.g. the textile, food-processing and shoe industries). At the same time the first Vietnamese university students and postgraduates were educated at our universities.³

1 In 1945, after the end of World War II, the Czechoslovak Republic was renewed. In 1948 the left-oriented revolution established the Communist regime in the country; in 1969 the country was renamed the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.

2 See Sita et al (1985), pp. 133-4.

3 During my last visit to Vietnam in July 1998 I met Mr Thai Ba Van who had studied art history at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, in 1955-1961.

Business cooperation between the countries was realized in the form of one-year contracts on exchanging goods and financing the build-up of certain enterprises. During the sixties and seventies, numerous factory works were built in Vietnam thanks to Czechoslovak help e.g. the wood concern in Chau Duong near Ha Noi, the lumber-mill and wood concern in Thanh Hoa, the tannery in Thuy Khe, a factory producing ball bearings for bikes, another factory producing locks in Dong Anh, more than 30 car servicing points and garages for general repairs of lorries, and a few small size hydro-power stations (located mainly in the mountainous region of North-West Vietnam). A large number of various machines and similar equipment were delivered to a number of textile factories and tanneries and breweries. Czechoslovakia also exported equipment for Vietnamese mines, and cigarette factories, as well as various machine tools, diesel aggregates, chemicals, tractors, outboard motors, pharmaceuticals, irrigation equipment, etc., and imported rubber, jute, wood and wooden articles, tropical crops, coffee, etc., from Vietnam. In the period mentioned, the same as in the seventies and eighties, the prevailing export to Vietnam was considered "friendship aid from a socialist country".

In 1955, the Hospital of Vietnamese-Czechoslovak Friendship was established in Hai Phong City. The Czechoslovak side not only financed the building of the hospital, but helped with the medical staff: Czechoslovak doctors and nurses worked in the hospital from the very beginning until the seventies. One of the famous doctors who served in this hospital in 1958-9 as a chief consultant is Prof. MUDr. Vladimír Sery, Dr Sc. Since the early sixties he has been publishing a number of scientific studies dealing with diseases⁴ in Vietnam, e.g. the Japanese encephalitis, problems of transmitted infections, etc.

Around the same period, a number of nature researchers conducted projects dealing with some specific features of Vietnamese fauna and flora. These specialists (as well as the above-mentioned doctors and physicians), on returning home, described Vietnamese cultural habits and customs, published their reports in series of articles in various periodicals or produced thematic travel books. One of the most popular and still highly valuable travel books dealing with Vietnam was written by Miro Rozehnal. One of the medical specialists, who visited Vietnam was Josef Nesvadba, who was so inspired by the country that he wrote a novel based on his experience - in 1964 he published a science-fiction novel titled *The Dialogue with Mr Dong*. The book was so successful that it was reprinted several times, and even translated and published abroad (in France, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Germany and Switzerland).

In the early sixties, the first course of the Vietnamese language was organized at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague. The course focused on basic practical knowledge of the language and, later, on political and war vocabulary. A second similar course was organized at the turn of the sixties⁵ and seventies. Before entering the course of Vietnamese, Czech or Slovak students⁵ were expected to have a deep knowledge of the French and Russian languages and a basic knowledge of German

⁴ Cf. *Vietnam-Bulletin*, 1998/4, pp.19-20.

⁵ We should bear in mind that in this period the Czechoslovak Republic still existed and that the Oriental languages were only taught at Charles University (in the state capital), where both Czech and Slovak students could study.

and English. This was a very important point: only through foreign languages could the students get some objective information on Vietnam. A certain drawback was a critical shortage of teaching materials, both in Czech (or Slovak) and Vietnamese. The sensitive weakness of both courses was that they were implemented by native speakers without any knowledge of teaching Vietnamese as a foreign language. Another weak point of the programme was that the students could not visit Vietnam before they finished their university studies. All the graduates of the Vietnamese courses had Vietnamese as a minor subject and another foreign language as their major subject. The third and fourth courses were held in the late seventies and early eighties. In this period, the curricula of language courses at the Faculty of Arts were changed: Oriental language courses were complemented by study visits in the relevant Oriental country; the length of the visit varied from three to nine months. Another important modification of the curriculum was that now the students could decide which subject (out of two) they would select as major after three years of study. A great advantage of these courses was the presence of a native speaker with a deep knowledge of the theory of the Vietnamese language. Unfortunately, the native speaker did not pay much attention to practical language skills. The graduates of the above mentioned languages courses worked in the Academy of Sciences, as interpreters and translators, and as teachers of Czech (or Slovak) for the Vietnamese.⁶

A common attitude of Czechoslovak society towards the Vietnamese in the sixties and seventies expressed the feeling that they were very modest and hardworking people, mostly isolated in small groups of compatriots. University professors were surprised at their excellent study results. The Czechoslovak citizens did not know much about Vietnamese culture, the different habits, history and tradition of this very distant country, but the average citizen was well aware of the long war in Indochina⁷ and the moral necessity of taking in a certain number of Vietnamese citizens and thus helping the deeply damaged country.

The Agreement between the Government of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on Professional Training of Vietnamese Citizens in Czechoslovak Companies was signed on 8 April 1974. The training involved various branches of engineering, metallurgy and consumer industries. In northern Bohemia, where the textile industry had traditionally been developed and in the mid-seventies suffered from a shortage in the labour force, a great number of Vietnamese were trained and later worked in textile factories in the given area. Up to the eighties the common view of Vietnamese citizens was very similar to that of the previous period: Vietnamese workers and apprentices were considered to be quiet, hardworking, provident people trying to save as much money as possible in order to provide financial security for their families at home in the future, humble beings with a smile on their faces. Czechoslovak society did not think much about the fact that the Vietnamese did not try to establish deeper contacts with the Czech community, that they did not go anywhere alone but only in smaller or larger groups, that their style of life was very similar to the life style of soldiers. Why did Czech society pay so little attention to this diaspora of hundreds

⁶ See Müllerová 1980.

⁷ Czechoslovak society was shocked, e.g. by photos from the Vietnamese village My Lai and by the war horrors.

of Vietnamese citizens formed in the second half of the seventies? The answer is quite simple: with these foreigners, there were almost no problems of a racial, political or social character. Nevertheless, if any problems (regarding language or study aspects) did arise, they were quickly solved by the Vietnamese side.

Typical features of the Vietnamese economy of the late seventies were the lack of work opportunities, the enormous number of citizens and the very poor situation of both the agricultural and industrial sectors. The long war in Vietnam was over,⁸ the country was successfully reunified,⁹ but the situation of the national economy was almost catastrophic. In 1978 Vietnam became a member of The Council for Mutual Economic Aid and was supported by all the socialist countries. Not inconsiderable was also the aid of capitalist countries from all over the world, the reason being quite clear: to help recover the national economy destroyed by the long war. In 1979, the Vietnamese government started to negotiate with the governments of the socialist countries for a temporary feather bed abroad. In the early eighties agreements between the government of Vietnam and governments of all socialist countries on the temporary employment of Vietnamese guest workers were signed. In connection with this development the "Agreement on Friendship and Cooperation between the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam" was signed on 2 February 1980 (during the official state visit of the Czechoslovak president Gustav Husak to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia). In the context of the agreement mentioned a protocol on professional preparation and further improvement of the professional qualifications of Vietnamese citizens in Czechoslovak companies was signed. The protocol was signed between the ministries of labour and social affairs of both countries; another protocol was signed between the ministries of education. Thanks to this protocol, thousands of Vietnamese citizens came to Czechoslovakia either to be trained, or to be trained and work, or to study.

Between 1980 and 1990, the Czechoslovak side accepted approximately 50 Vietnamese students and 20 postgraduates each year: two thirds of them studied in the Czech Republic and one third in the Slovak Republic. In this period Vietnamese students and postgraduates studied at all types of Czechoslovak universities, e.g. at the Faculties of Arts, Law, etc., not only at the universities and faculties of economic and technical orientation. Both students and postgraduates had to pass a one-year intensive language course of Czech or Slovak before they entered the university. The first year of the university study mainly involved a further intensive language course, oriented towards special terminology relating to the students' particular branch of study.¹⁰ I have not come across any serious problems with Vietnamese students or postgraduates at the Czechoslovak universities, or any conflicts of the Vietnamese students with Czech citizens. In my personal opinion, this was due to the relatively high level of previous training of both students and postgraduates and,

8 The Paris Accords in 1973 finished the long war in Indochina and on 30 April 1975, "Operation Ho Chi Min" finished the war in Vietnam.

9 The Socialist Republic of Vietnam was officially established on the 2nd July 1976.

10 Because of some weak points in organizing intensive language courses for the Vietnamese before their departure from Vietnam and after their arrival in Czechoslovakia, a certain number of Vietnamese students and postgraduates had to pass the same language courses in both places.

first and foremost, to a reliable set of information on the different type of life in Czechoslovakia.

Vietnamese apprentices and workers had passed through a three-month intensive language course of Czech or Slovak at home, but all these courses were taught by native Vietnamese only, so that the graduates were not used to authentic pronunciation. (Vietnamese students and postgraduates had very close study contacts with Czech or Slovak teachers and were used to original genuine Czech pronunciation and, of course, they had many more language units weekly than apprentices and workers.) That was the main reason for initial misunderstandings of this social group in Czechoslovakia: though they knew quite a large number of words, they could understand them only in written form. We should also bear in mind the great difference between the Vietnamese and Slavonic languages (complicated grammar, specific articulation of certain sounds, etc.). The mentioned group of Vietnamese had other sources of information on their future life in Europe: they concentrated more on salary, possibilities of buying certain goods, etc. They undervalued the important role of very distant culture and social habits.

Around 1982 - 1983, Czech society started to change its opinion on the Vietnamese presence in Czechoslovakia. In this period, mainly the Vietnamese apprentices and workers who had come to Czechoslovakia in 1980 had saved a certain sum of money and tried to buy as many interesting commodities as possible and send them to Vietnam. Under the international conventions in force at the time the Czech Crown was not freely convertible into foreign currencies, i.e. including the Vietnamese Dong. Nor had an agreement been signed between Czechoslovakia and Vietnam under which Vietnamese citizens (or Czechoslovak citizens working over long periods in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam) could take the finances they had saved up into their own country. Therefore the Vietnamese working in Czechoslovakia were forced to spend the money they had accumulated on attractive goods. For the Vietnamese the most attractive articles were bicycles, motorbikes, sewing machines, fabrics (especially sateen and satinette), pharmaceuticals and cosmetics. The Vietnamese very frequently bought enormous quantities of the goods, and if they did not have the chance to buy all the sorts of goods they wanted, they bought more goods of one sort, for example three bikes, and later exchanged the goods for another commodity (for example one bike was exchanged for a sewing machine).¹¹ Within a short time, the Vietnamese had earned the reputation of people buying certain sorts of goods for whatever prices, as well as the reputation of being efficient businessmen.

Another feature of the mid-eighties were the very frequent travel activities of the Vietnamese about Czechoslovakia. The general public could not understand why the Vietnamese liked to travel so much. We should remember that up to the nineties it was very complicated for the Vietnamese to travel freely in their homeland, either for financial or objective (very poor infrastructure, etc.) reasons. Until the nineties legislation was in place over the whole of Vietnam that had been prepared by the government of President Ho Chi Min at the close of the nineteen-forties and that

¹¹ Because of the shortage of electrical power in Vietnam, the Vietnamese demanded non-electrical sewing machines and were prepared to pay enormous sums of money for them.

more or less assumed the existence of a military regime in the country. It is for this reason that the law placed restrictions on relations between Vietnamese and foreigners and on the population's freedom of movement within the country. If, for instance, a Vietnamese citizen wanted to visit his relatives in a neighbouring district (or province), he had to have a visiting permit from the police. If a Vietnamese citizen wanted to invite a foreigner to his flat or house, he needed a permit from higher police departments.¹² When the Vietnamese found that they could travel freely through Czechoslovakia, they did. Another aspect of this activity is that in accordance with their home habits they visited their relatives working and living in Czechoslovakia. It should be pointed out that the concept of the classical Vietnamese family is very different from the concept of the Czech family.

Czech society in general considers the Vietnamese family to consist of mother, father and children, in exceptional cases grandmother and grandfather. This is a basic misunderstanding of interpersonal relations. The Vietnamese consider a parent's sisters and brothers, grandmother's sisters and brothers, their children and a parent's nephews as members of close family. It is also very common for three generations to live together in one house or flat. This fact is absolutely unacceptable for an average Czech family, especially one living in a town.

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namese side arranged the processing and transferred a substantial part of the products to the Czechoslovak side. This form of cooperation was especially developed in the production of selected types of footwear (at factories at Hai Phong and Ho Chi Min City), in the production of men's shirts (factories in Ho Chi Min City), and in the production of knitted underwear (factories in Hanoi).

After the Velvet Revolution in 1989 the new government of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic took over itself the foreign commitments of the proceeding socialist government. On 20 February 1992 the "Protocol between the government of the Vietnamese Socialist Republic and the Government of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic on the Composition of Accounts Receivable and Accounts Payable in Payment Relations between the Vietnamese Socialist Republic and the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic" was signed in Hanoi. At the same time the "Agreement between the Government of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic and the Government of the Vietnamese Socialist Republic on Mutual Trade and Payments" was also signed. The Czechoslovaks made a financial settlement with the Vietnamese side in the issue of the temporary employment of Vietnamese citizens in CSFR. Unfortunately it was only ascertained with great difficulty whether Vietnamese citizens who were meant to turn to their homeland actually left the CSFR. It should be taken into account that fundamental economic changes were going on within CSFR and that the disintegrating state enterprises could hardly (and from a legal point of view were not even allowed to) check whether their former Vietnamese employees had truly left Czechoslovakia. Another thing to be aware of is just how quickly Czechoslovak legislation was undergoing changes and the considerable extent to which it was promoting the development of private enterprise. Lack of experience in the creation of apt legislation for the new economic and political conditions in Czechoslovakia led *inter alia* to some laws being extremely vague. It seems that the legislation as it stood allowed foreigners with long-term residence in the CSFR to do business.

Another document worthy of note because of its influence on contemporary Czechoslovak-Vietnamese relations was signature of the "Agreement between the Government of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic and the Government of the Vietnamese Socialist Republic on the Abrogation of Visa Requirements for State Citizens of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic and the Vietnamese Socialist Republic who are Holders of Diplomatic and Official Passports" on 10 July 1992. This agreement made it possible for Vietnamese nationals then (and now, after the formation of Czech Republic) to have relatively easy access into this country. Another piece of this legislation too general in its formulation enables them to start businesses. It seems that even now, several years after the creation of the Czech Republic, there is insufficient coordination in the activities between the Alien Police Department, the Trade-Licensing Authorities, the Revenue Offices, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, etc. There is great difficulty in distinguishing those Vietnamese nationals who are here legally and those who are not. Vietnamese traders have gained control over almost all the market places in the country, hence the association formed in the minds of most Czech citizens in the recent years of 'Vietnamese equals market traders'.

At the same time the Czechoslovak government compensated financially the disfunctions of the agreements between the former Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and returned a great number of Vietnamese citizens to their homeland, the German government implemented the same policy towards Vietnamese workers in the former German Democratic Republic, but a great number of Vietnamese leaving the GDR did not return home and entered Czechoslovakia illegally.

Since the beginning of the nineties the Czech economy has been undergoing fundamental changes that have been manifested in part in the waning interest of enterprises in the Asian market and in the rising interest in the European market. It was not until the mid-nineties that Czech interest in the 'old markets' in Asia (i.e. including Vietnam) increased. Yet Czech businessmen, unfortunately, frequently underestimate the specifics of the Asian market - a knowledge of local cultural customs, personal business contacts, the stress on business negotiations in person, which very often cannot be made up for the correspondence or activity by an authorized agent, etc., and therefore the business success they expect falls at the first hurdle. Medium-sized Czech businesses that have employed Vietnamese citizens with a good knowledge of the Czech language and environment have registered success in Vietnam.

In 1995 the Czechs and Vietnamese entered into the "General Agreement on the Implementation of Bilateral Development Aid Provided by the Czech Republic to the Vietnamese Socialist Republic to Assist in the Construction and Running of an Orthopaedic and Rehabilitation Centre in the Province of Bac Thai at a Total Cost of forty-five Million Czech Crowns". By the end of 1998 the building of the rehabilitation centre in Thai Nguyen should have been completed and halfway through 1999 the centre should start operating, after being fully fitted with equipment and after the specialist staff has been trained.

It is now a tradition that the Czech side awards ten university grants a year to Vietnamese students (both for postgraduates studies and complete university courses).

In the whole of the Czech Republic, Vietnamese citizens are very active businessmen. They try to make the best use of the support of the new Czech state for commercial undertakings. A lot of Vietnamese have a business licence and have quite good business results. A serious problem of dealing with the Vietnamese living temporarily in the Czech Republic is the fact that the persons who come here on the basis of a bilateral government agreement between the Czech and Vietnamese Republics signed in 1994 very soon leave their official jobs at state companies, arrange for a business licence and start doing private business.

The Vietnamese community living in the Czech Republic is extremely successful in making use of the many weak points of Czech legislation. An important role in the context of the clashes of two national cultures is played by a quite different understanding of the notion of a gift.

In my personal opinion a great number of problems connected with the Vietnamese diaspora in the Czech Republic and with Czech activities in Vietnam are closely related to political, economic and social transition both in the Czech Republic and in

Vietnam. Both societies should always bear in mind that their national cultures and traditions are, logically, immensely different.

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