support the Viet Minh continued to fight the Japanese until 1945 – at which point they marched into Hanoi and declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. However, no sooner was the Second World War over than the French attacked the Viet Minh, helped in the South by the British, who had been given temporary responsibility for the region and believed the former colonial authority should be restored. The French return forced the Viet Minh back into the hills and a long war ensued – the first Indochina War lasted nearly nine years. Ho Chi Minh’s guerillas were backed after 1949 by newly-Communist China, while the French war effort was paid for by a US now agonising about Communist expansion.

Frustrated that guerilla warfare never allowed them to use their superior firepower, the French decided in 1954 to lure the Viet Minh into a battle at Dien Bien Phu, a valley near the Laotian border. But the Viet Minh mobilised an army twice as big as expected, and hauled heavy artillery to the top of the steep hills surrounding the valley, something the French had considered impossible. After 55 days of intense bombardment, Viet Minh troops over-ran Dien Bien Phu and the French colonial period was over.

**Ho Chi Minh**

Ho Chi Minh is one of the key figures of the twentieth century. The first President of an independent Vietnam, he led the resistance to the French, Japanese and Americans, and is still considered the father of the nation, referred to affectionately, even by opponents of Communism, as Bac Ho (‘Uncle Ho’).

Born Nguyen Sinh Cung in 1890, in Nghe An, Vietnam’s poorest province, Ho left the country at the age of 21 as a galley boy on a French freighter. After three years at sea he worked as a cook in New York and London, beginning a lifetime habit of changing his name to mark each new phase. In London he was Nguyen Tat Thanh, but in Paris, where he spent six years, he marked a new political commitment by calling himself Nguyen Ai Quoc (‘Nguyen the Patriot’). He joined the Communist Party and travelled to Moscow in 1924, where he was known as Comrade Linh; and from this point onwards, Ho’s life was completely dedicated to freeing Vietnam from colonial rule.

In Canton, for the next three years he was Ly Thuy, a mobiliser of Vietnamese students, while in 1928 he was with Vietnamese dissidents in Thailand, shaven-headed and wearing the saffron robes of a Buddhist monk, and using the name Thau Chin. In 1930 he assembled rival factions in Hong Kong and launched the Vietnamese Communist Party. He was arrested and imprisoned, but escaped by persuading a guard to report him dead.

He spent the 1930s drifting between China and the Soviet Union, awaiting the right moment. It was a lonely life, dedicated to a dream distant in both geography and time. He was once found on a bridge over the Seine in Paris musing on what might have been: ‘I always thought I would become a scholar or a writer, but I’ve
become a professional revolutionary. I travel through many countries, but I see nothing.’

The Second World War brought him back to his homeland, to a base in the hills near the Chinese border, and it was from here that he marched south with the Viet Minh to take Hanoi and declare Vietnam an independent republic. His own Declaration of Independence deliberately echoed that of the United States: ‘We hold the truth that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’. Ho was hoping specifically for US support in his anti-colonial battle; but the choice of words is clear evidence that he was always first a nationalist and only second a communist. Ho’s own most famous quotation underlines this further: ‘There is nothing more precious than independence and freedom’.

Ho Chi Minh’s last two and a half decades were dedicated to leading his people to unified independence, through the struggles of the Viet Minh against the French, and the Viet Cong against first the southern regime of Diem and then Thieu and the Americans. He died in 1969, six years before his dream of a unified, independent Vietnam was to become reality.

Much of the enduring respect for Ho in Vietnam derives from his personal qualities rather than his policies, from the sense that he was utterly and incorruptibly dedicated to his nation and his people. Throughout his life he was unpretentious and ascetic, shunning personal comfort – when he became President he refused to use the palace offered him and lived instead in a modest house in the grounds. As a result, he is still revered even by trenchant critics of Communism and the current Government. He would have regarded that as an infinitely more meaningful tribute than the cold and echoing halls of the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum and museum in Hanoi.
The American War

The victory of the Chinese Communists in 1949 transformed the French-Indochina War from a colonial struggle into an anti-communist crusade. Over the subsequent quarter of a century, the United States committed itself militarily and politically to maintaining anti-communist regimes throughout the region. The fact that these regimes were neither representative nor elected, that they were generally corrupt and extremely repressive, made no difference. The US was committed to propping up any regime in Asia which purported to be anti-communist.

The 1954 Geneva Conference divided Vietnam temporarily in two at the 17th parallel: a Communist North led by Ho Chi Minh and a South led by Ngo Dinh Diem. The Conference specified that free elections were to be held before 1956 and the country reunited. But the United States never ratified the agreement. President Eisenhower said in his memoirs: 'I have never talked... with a person knowledgeable in Indochinese affairs who did not agree that had the elections been held... 80 per cent of the population would have voted for Ho Chi Minh'.

Elections were ruled out, and the US began bolstering up the Diem regime in South Vietnam, which tortured and executed thousands of Viet Minh supporters. The Communists did not respond until 1960, when a new patriotic movement – the National Liberation Front – rallied all Diem’s opponents in South Vietnam. A new war had begun.

Under President Kennedy, US involvement mounted steadily. American military ‘advisers’ regularly went into combat and on bombing missions. But their disenchantment with the corruption and incompetence of the Diem regime increased. In 1963, Diem and his brother Nhu launched a vicious repression of Buddhists, and the world was shocked by the protest of a monk who set himself on fire. The US backed a coup by dissatisfied generals, who assassinated both Diem and Nhu.

Conflict escalated. The North despatched troops covertly into the South down the ‘Ho Chi Minh Trail’
through the mountains. In 1965, President Johnson began the sustained bombing of North Vietnam, and the first marines arrived in Danang. By the end of that year there were 200,000 US soldiers in Vietnam; by the end of 1966 there were 400,000.

But it was not a war to their taste. The guerillas would strike and then disappear into vast networks of underground tunnels, or blend into the local community, where they had a good deal of popular support. Instead of using their superior firepower, US soldiers were eternally on patrol wondering when the next mine or booby trap would strike. Too often, they responded by treating any Vietnamese villager as a threat to be ‘liquidated’. Civilian casualties were high; at least 25,000 civilians were killed and 50,000 more injured every year.

On the eve of Tet (the Lunar New Year) in 1968, the North launched a major attack intended to liberate South Vietnam before the ailing Ho Chi Minh died. In the short term it failed: nowhere did the local population rise up in support, and the northern troops suffered devastating losses. But the Tet Offensive was a long-term success; television coverage of it profoundly shocked a US public which had been told everything was under control. Instead, they saw the Communist flag raised over Huế and the US Embassy in Saigon attacked. The anti-war movement in America gathered momentum, and the will to fight began to evaporate.

The new US President, Richard Nixon, spread the war into Cambodia – the murderous Khmer Rouge ultimately came to power as a result – but also started disengaging from Vietnam. US forces were steadily reduced and a peace agreement was eventually signed on 27 January 1973, after the destructive Christmas bombing campaign. The Americans withdrew as planned within 60 days, but both Vietnamese armies carried on fighting.

The US withdrawal devastated South Vietnam’s economy. The North launched another major offensive on 10 March 1975 and routed their demoralised opponents; on 30 April Saigon fell and Vietnam was reunited.

<table>
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<th>Date</th>
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<td>17 April 1975</td>
<td>Khmer Rouge takes power in Cambodia</td>
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<td>30 April 1975</td>
<td>Saigon surrenders</td>
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<td>2 July 1976</td>
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<td>Chinese retaliatory invasion of northern provinces of Vietnam</td>
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<td>December 1986</td>
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<td>Resolution 10 on agricultural and other reforms adopted</td>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>Vietnam exports 1.5 million tons of rice</td>
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<td>September 1989</td>
<td>Remaining Vietnamese troops withdrawn from Cambodia</td>
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<td>June 1991</td>
<td>Seventh Party Congress confirms continued reforms</td>
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<td>October 1991</td>
<td>Cambodian peace accord signed. US announces it is ready to talk about resuming relations with Vietnam.</td>
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One country, two peoples

Two Vietnamese win $100 in a lottery: the northerner spends the money on a new roof; the southerner on a television. Stories illustrating the difference between people from two distinct regions in the same country are common throughout the world – as between the North and South of England. In Vietnam such stories are politically sensitive – the whole independence struggle was, after all, founded on the belief that Vietnam is one country, one people. But the differences remain.

There is a difference in climate, for a start – the South is warm and humid all the year round whereas the North has distinct seasons. But there is an even more vital difference in cultural heritage: the North was ruled directly by China for over a thousand years and imbibed its strict, disciplined Confucian traditions; while the South was long part of the Champa kingdom which had Malay origins and a looser, Hindu philosophy. The Kinh people moved south as pioneers, expanding their frontier and gradually taking control of the land.

But the most important difference is a much more recent one, stemming from the fact that the country was split in two between 1954 and 1975. The North observed a strict communist system which was all the more austere because of its total dedication to winning the war. Private commerce was forbidden and all economic activity was subject to central planning, with Five Year Plans on the Stalinist model.

The South, meanwhile, was flooded with American money. At first, this money was simply pumped into the economy to bolster up the anti-communist regime and its military effort. But as American soldiers started to arrive en masse, so the South Vietnamese economy had to evolve to service them. People flocked to the cities, partly because the countryside had become a war zone, but also to take advantage of entirely new financial opportunities, whether as street traders, or as prostitutes. Between 1960 and 1974, the proportion of the workforce employed in agriculture dropped from 88 per cent to 55 per cent and the population of Danang grew from 50,000 to 500,000.

Not all southerners welcomed the American invasion, of course; besides those who joined the Viet Cong and fought actively against them, there were plenty of tacit Viet Cong sympathisers, passive resisters, and people who simply resented their country being taken over by a foreign power.

All the same, when North Vietnamese soldiers first marched into Saigon in 1975, they could hardly believe the luxuries that its citizens had enjoyed as part of their everyday
life – wide avenues filled with Japanese cars, modern apartment buildings and expensive hotels, bars and restaurants blaring pop music, blue jeans and floppy hats, and expensive cosmetics. Northerners, motivated by slogans of independence and socialism, had sacrificed even the most basic amenities in order to help the war effort.

After the war was over, fashions and goods and even a whole lifestyle began to filter slowly from the South to the North. From the early 1980s, people wearing baseball caps, bell-bottomed trousers and colourful clothes were seen on the streets of Hanoi. Then came the private coffee bars, with Western music, videos and imported beers. Gradually, the socialism of the North came to be seen by many as a lost cause, full of empty promises, leading nowhere. The free-market economics and consumerism of the war-time South became symbols of the hope for a better future. Although the South lost the war, it appears to have won the cultural peace.

When the Communist Hanoi Government took control of the whole country, there was bound to be a certain amount of discrimination against people who had been on the opposite side in the civil war. But the Communist Government also made the mistake of trying to squeeze this sprawling, artificially wealthy southern economy into the same mould as the North. This caused great resentment and, as a consequence, you can wander around the streets of Saigon (the imposition of the name Ho Chi Minh City is still resisted and resented) and have trouble finding a single person who does not look back on the Americans’ time there as a Golden Age. ‘When the Americans were here,’ says one old man who lives in the shanty shacks built on stilts above the Saigon River, ‘one person in work could feed a family of eight or nine; now he struggles to feed himself.’ It is a common complaint on the streets, and it signals that the rosy memory of the American years has perhaps as much to do with money as with ideology or ‘freedom’.

The Americans pumped so much money into South Vietnam that almost everyone benefited. Many people were directly employed as drivers or office workers, and others found work in the entertainment and service industries. Money spent by US soldiers on bar girls would be passed on to the families of those bar girls, and those families bought goods from traders and farmers – everyone finished up better off.

The memory of this comparative affluence means that the Vietnamese Government is judged against impossibly high standards – whatever policy it adopted could not, in the circumstances, have delivered to its people American levels of wealth. But the Party would have had much more chance of pulling people behind a common national purpose if it had not first alienated them by post-Liberation purges that sent thousands to re-education camps and prompted thousands of others to take their chances in boats on the South China Sea.
A half-chance of paradise

One of the things that has harmed Vietnam’s image most over the years since reunification has been the exodus of refugees known as ‘boat people’. People do not risk their lives in flimsy boats on the typhoon-tossed open seas for nothing; and the assumption has therefore been that they must be running away from something really terrible, from a climate of fear and repression within Vietnam.

For the first wave of ‘boat people’ which followed the fall of Saigon in 1975 there was some truth in this. People were leaving because they were terrified of what would happen once the Communists were in control; the majority of this first wave were either middle-class people who feared the loss of their businesses, or people with ties to the old regime or service in their army who feared persecution. And those who stayed did indeed see private enterprise frowned upon and thousands of people sent to re-education camps, where they studied Marxism-Leninism and had to express contrition for their past sins before being able to return to normal life. (There is a story in circulation in Vietnam that, after Liberation, the first day people in the South feared for their lives; the second day they feared for their property; the third day they started complaining that there weren’t any good programmes on the TV any more!)

But the ‘boat people’ (many asylum seekers actually travel overland) have continued to leave Vietnam throughout the 1980s, although economic policies have been relaxed and most people have been released from the camps. Why?

Speak to asylum seekers who have recently returned to Hanoi after an unsuccessful attempt to escape through Hong Kong, or to ordinary people in Saigon who are still interested in leaving, and you become convinced that the problem is usually not politics or repression but simply money; they hope for a better life in a rich country. Vietnam has been so impoverished by its decades of war and its ensuing decade and a half of misguided economic policy and isolation from the rest of the global economy that its people are more susceptible to images of wealth elsewhere in the world.

People in Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City and its environs saw rich-world living at first hand when the Americans were in residence, and see no reason why they should now have to live in poverty while others enjoy such plenty. The sense of deprivation is further enhanced by the packages of money and goods which arrive from relatives who have succeeded in settling overseas. In addition, southerners are still treated as ‘losers’, and many people feel frustrated by subtle but inescapable discrimination which blocks their progress in work and other fields.

Perhaps intentionally, Western policy towards Vietnam has encouraged emigration. This policy is two-fold: there is a ‘push’ factor, from the impoverishment of the country by the aid and trade embargo imposed by the US after Vietnam invaded Cambodia (President Reagan spoke of ‘bleeding Vietnam white’ as a punishment); the other factor is the ‘pull’ of the image of life in

In limbo. Up to 1,600 Vietnamese refugees live in each shed of the Shan Shui Po closed camp in Hong Kong. Some of them have been here awaiting resettlement for five years.
the West and the preferential
treatment that Vietnamese ‘refugees’
received. Until 1982, anyone who
was able to reach a neighbouring
country was almost guaranteed
resettlement in a rich Western
country, in particular America,
Canada, Australia or France. The
decades of isolation and poverty
have led to a sense of hopelessness
amongst most Vietnamese people
that things will ever improve.

Over a million Vietnamese are
now living as expatriates in Western
countries. They form flourishing
communities in many cities. Because
of the powerful ties of kinship in
Vietnamese society, the links remain
strong between these overseas
Vietnamese, and their families who
stayed behind. The money and gifts
they send home are a useful
contribution to the economy – but
also a powerful magnet.

All over the South, there are
people who dream of emigrating to
the US and solving all their
problems at a stroke. For example,
amongst a group of poor families
living in stilt-houses built out over the Saigon River, all but the two
oldest people among them said they would go to the US tomorrow
if they had the chance – and they said many of their neighbours in
this stilt suburb had left in previous waves of boat people.

Nuong is a 39-year-old woman with two children who tries to
keep her family going by temporary work for local farmers out
among the paddy fields of the Mekong Delta. The worry of her
breadline existence has etched deep lines on her forehead, yet what
keeps her going is not the hope of change in her locality or in
Vietnam as a whole, but the impossible dream that one day a magic
plane ticket to the US (where she has cousins) will rescue her from
poverty, undernutrition and insecurity.

But people in the North are also not immune to the idea that
outside Vietnam the streets are paved with gold. Do Chi Ngoc left
Hanoi in July 1988 and bought a passage in a tiny boat at Quang
Ninh for about £300 – the whole of his life savings together with
part of his mother’s. He had, he says, only one reason for leaving.

‘Some of my friends had said there was a country that was very
rich and like paradise – naturally I wanted to go there. I didn’t have
any special country in mind... Yes, I felt terrified [of the boat
journey] but I was so keen to get to this paradise that I felt it was
worth the risk.’

Despite being hit by typhoons on the way, Ngoc eventually
reached Hong Kong – but was immediately arrested and housed in
a detention centre, where he stayed for almost two years. 'In the end I got the news that none of us would be accepted by a rich country: we'd have to stay in the camps. And I heard the Government in Vietnam would take back anyone who returned voluntarily. But it was the letters from my mother that really made up my mind - she said returned refugees weren't in any trouble.

'Now I work with my little sister on her tea stall. But I'm really just filling in time while I wait for the authorities to allocate me some work - they've promised to let me train in television repair but say I'll have to wait...'

Finding employment is the major problem for people who have returned from Hong Kong. Nguyen Thanh Van, who is a pharmacist by trade, has not applied for her old job in a Hanoi hospital because she is sure that with current unemployment levels she would not be re-employed. Pham Thi Bach Tuyet, on the other hand, will be returning to her former sewing co-operative as soon as she has saved up and bought a sewing machine.

Most of the repatriated asylum seekers have found work in the country's expanding private sector, often selling imported goods in the numerous street markets. Nguyen Thi Than, who was an engineer before he fled, now sells Chinese apples and beer in the streets of Hanoi. 'This is a very different Vietnam from the one I left,' he says. 'Now there are good opportunities for those who want to work hard and have initiative.'

But however much the country has changed, the movement of migrants from poverty will only diminish when the quality of life improves in Vietnam. The international community can help in this by accepting Vietnam back into the fold and removing the trade and aid restrictions which hamper its economic development.

A people on the move

The Vietnamese traditionally have very close ties to the familiar surroundings of their village and to the land that they inherit from their ancestors. These ties have been strained and broken by the physical destruction caused by warfare, and by the huge movements of population that have taken place over the last forty years.

In 1954, when the country was divided by the Geneva Agreements, more than one million people, most of them Catholic, moved from the North to the South. During the war with the US, eight million people were moved into 'strategic hamlets' by the southern Government, and people migrated from rural areas to the comparative safety of the towns. Large numbers of people in the North were moved from towns and cities which were targets of US bombing. Many spent years living in underground shelters.

Since 1975 about four million people have left the densely populated Delta provinces and central coastal areas, to be resettled in the New Economic Zones in the highlands.

At the end of the war, many of those most closely associated with the previous Thieu regime left South Vietnam, with American assistance. Between 1975 and 1978, about 130,000 arrived in countries of first asylum in SE Asia. Many thousands more lost
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their lives at sea, as a result of shipwreck, piracy or exposure. By July 1978 about a quarter of a million Vietnamese of Chinese origin had crossed the border into China.

In 1979 the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) convened a conference in Geneva at which some 65 countries pledged resettlement aid and places for 260,000 refugees. Virtually anyone who could reach foreign soil was eligible for resettlement and, in addition, the UNHCR Orderly Departure Programme (ODP), which allowed for emigration to reunite families, was established. Many tens of thousands of people have left Vietnam officially, for Western destinations, under the ODP. During the same period, many more people arrived unofficially in SE Asian countries, by boat, seeking asylum.

In June 1988, with vast numbers of Vietnamese asylum seekers in refugee camps in Hong Kong, a large increase in arrivals, and inadequate resettlement provisions, the Territory’s Government introduced screening of people to decide whether they were political refugees, or ‘economic migrants’ not entitled to resettlement in a host country. Similar screening procedures are now used in other SE Asian countries, and people are increasingly volunteering to be repatriated to Vietnam. The US opposed forced repatriation, and Vietnam was unwilling to give them additional reasons for maintaining the trade embargo; but with a softening of the US attitude on the issue, in October 1991 Vietnam finally acceded to British pressure and agreed to take back even those refugees from the Hong Kong camps who have expressed an unwillingness to go home.
Vietnam’s Perestroika: Doi Moi

‘Things have been much better in the last five years.’ You hear this refrain wherever you go in Vietnam – from the bicycle mechanics to be found on every street corner in Hanoi, offering a speedy puncture repair or service to the streams of people pedalling by; from the young people who have set up stalls selling cigarettes in the streets of provincial towns and villages; from ordinary people who feel much freer to venture their own opinion about things, even to a Westerner.

The five-year time-frame is because momentous changes were set in train at the Sixth Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1986. The first concessions to market economics had come as long ago as 1979 but it was at the Sixth Congress that doimoi or ‘new thinking’ was approved, and the pragmatic Nguyen Van Linh emerged as General Secretary.

Since then the changes in the everyday life of most Vietnamese have been profound, particularly in the North. Until 1986, private enterprise was frowned upon in Vietnam. In the North, which had been under communist rule since 1954, people were used to a centrally planned economy in which goods were produced and distributed by the State. Western visitors to Hanoi in those years were struck by the strange quietness of its streets – this was largely because the only shops belonged to the State and were usually poorly stocked.

Until 1975, it is fair to say that both the government and the people of North Vietnam were utterly dedicated to winning the war and reuniting the country. People had developed habits of austerity and self-sacrifice from necessity. But once the country was reunified, they had to start thinking about regeneration and development. Vietnam’s then leader, Pham Van Dong, admitted frankly: ‘Waging a war is simple but running a country is very difficult’. Loss of Chinese support was an important factor in delaying recovery.

By the mid-1980s it had become clear that there was no option but to change direction from the policy of rapid industrialisation. The attempt to collectivise the South had failed miserably, there were food shortages of near-famine proportions, and the economy as a whole was grinding to a halt. As a result the Government launched its ambitious programme of reforms, liberalising the economy to allow private businesses to operate, and actively seeking foreign investment and trade.

In part, doimoi echoed the Soviet Union’s perestroika – but it was launched much more effectively and single-mindedly than Gorbachev’s economic reforms of the same period. The Vietnamese rediscovered their own taste and flair for trading and commerce, and thousands of shops, market stalls and small industries sprang up all over the country.

Doimoi has had profound effects in every area of life. In the countryside, land has been leased back to peasant families who now have complete freedom to cultivate their plots and sell their
produce. Harvests have markedly increased and, although there are still shortages in certain areas, Vietnam has been transformed from a country chronically short of food to a large-scale exporter of rice. The economy has started to adapt to world market conditions and government economists talk hopefully of Vietnam emulating its thriving capitalist neighbours in East Asia. The climate of repression which operated before 1986, in which people were afraid to speak freely against the government, has now eased.

But there are negative effects, too. Vietnam needed to change, but it was a society which genuinely tried to live up to the ideal of equality. Central planning may have failed to supply people’s material needs, but it did mean that people had equal access to a comprehensive system of health care and education. Now the gap between rich and poor is widening and there are few state funds to pay for the public services of which the Vietnamese were once justly proud. The feeling of general equality and collective purpose that once infused the North in particular, is now being fast eroded.

Yet there is no doubt that the doi moi reforms are popular – if ordinary people are dissatisfied with them it tends to be because they are impatient with the pace of change rather than because they wish to turn back the clock.

The village tailors in Ron sum things up as well as anybody. Ron lies on the main road just north of the Seventeenth Parallel which once divided the country. Cam and Nhu live in quite a substantial house built with its frontage on the roadside and its back on stilts over the sea. They talk articulately about their lives: Cam travelled as far as Thailand before returning home in 1960 ‘because my country needed me’; while his wife Nhu has always dreamed of travelling to Europe, ‘though I would always want to come home to where my roots are’.

‘We feel a lot better off as a result of doi moi,’ says Cam. ‘If you looked at this village and actually weighed up how much more or less people earned you might say the changes had been small – and that some people have actually ended up poorer. But we just feel it’s a better, more sensible way of operating.’