SABBATICAL REPORT FOR ACADEMIC YEAR 2008-2009

Submitted by Pat Kennedy
Professor, History, CC
Leeward Community College

This report is based on my travel, study, and academic experiences in SE Asia. The purpose of my Sabbatical Leave as stated in my application was two-fold: (1) to study the unique evolution of the relationship that has developed between the Republic of Vietnam and the United States as the two nations moved from being bitter enemies during the years of the Vietnam War (or as the Vietnamese call it, the American War) to being trading partners in the 21st century and (2) to better understand the amazingly friendly attitude that the Vietnamese people show to the returning American G.I.'s, and American tourists in general. Overall the Vietnamese have a very positive attitude towards the world and their future. These original themes of mine would expand to include more specific topics, including goals and accomplishments that the Vietnamese have made in education. To help gather this information I was able to make arrangements to conduct a workshop on ‘Globalization’ at Hong Bang University, a private college in Ho Chi Minh City.

An additional benefit of my trip included experiences elsewhere in SE Asia. Since my travel itinerary included Thailand and Laos, as well as Vietnam, my travel stories which I share with my students have expanded to include cultural experiences and observance of the current economic and political changes in each of those three countries in SE Asia. As is true in all journeys, my experiences and memories include everything from amusing incidents to the types of food and diet found in SE Asia. For example, when I arrived in Bangkok where I met my son, my time schedule was turned upside down. On the first evening, we went for a midnight stroll. I was amazed to see a baby white elephant plodding down the sidewalk. He seemed to be unaware of the stares of strangers, and nobody appeared to be with him although he seemed to be purposefully moving along the way. I still chuckle at the memory.

On a more serious note while in Bangkok, we found ourselves suddenly in the midst of dramatic changes in government and the social classes. There were actual civil disorders verging on sometimes violent protests which were taking place around government buildings. A very serious situation was unfolding that still has not been completely resolved. A group of Thai citizens had taken control of the area around their parliament and government buildings. The so-called ‘yellow’ shirts as these citizens were called were demanding, among other items, an end to corruption in government. One person was killed in street demonstrations while I was there. At this point our hotel went on a heightened security alert with guards who were checking ID’s and bags at each entrance. After I left Bangkok, I continued to follow events through the media and found the rebellion changing courses when a new group, the ‘red’ shirts were making their voices and demands felt. These were people from the countryside who believed that their needs and political rights were being ignored by the government. Eventually, these groups took over the airports for several days which brought tourist and business travel to a halt, but I was out of Thailand by that time. In addition to witnessing these current events, as a historian, I enjoyed more peaceful aspects, such as viewing the rich cultural beauty of ancient Buddhist temples and exquisite carvings and paintings. Although there are shared elements in the three cultures, one may discover distinctive differences. For example, it was fun to taste the
differences in the curries between Laos and Thailand. Vietnamese food also has distinctive flavor differences within the confines of its boundaries. There is a distinct difference in geography, tribal peoples, and food from north to south in Vietnam. It was all a great learning experience in exotic foods and tastes.

Before I begin the actual report, I want to explain why I embarked on this journey and chose the theme of SE Asia. As a historian I have been very interested for the past several years at the changing economic and political patterns from eastern Europe and Russia to the economic changes in China and elsewhere. The term 'red' capitalism has been used in countries such as China to describe these economic changes. One of my sons lives in Ho Chi Minh City and works at the U.S. consulate. He had been urging me to visit. Since I had been studying these changes around the world, I decided to take him up on his invitation. Also the topic of Vietnam is one of the important discussions in my History 152 classes.

As I prepared for my trip, I began to share even more with my students about the story of Vietnam. Our student body is a cosmopolitan mix of many cultures. There are a large number of students who have come from Vietnam to Hawaii. Since I teach World Civilizations, it is important for students to recognize how historical events shape politics, the economy, and cultural attitudes.

The following are the main points in a narrative outline which I use when teaching about Vietnam. Please note that for the purposes of this paper it is in the briefest form possible. The area of Vietnam was a tributary state of China for almost 1000 years. This was in the era prior to the tenth century. For a period of time the Vietnamese established a kingdom. Then France took control of Vietnam in the 19th century and established a colonial government from 1859 to 1954. They renamed it French-Indo China. WW II began and the fact that France would fall to Nazi Germany would have an impact on Vietnam. During this period Ho Chi Minh began to form his opposition to the French. It was in this period the birth of the Viet Cong and their movement began. When WW II ended, a weakened France faced growing opposition from those in Vietnam who wanted to end colonization. French control ostensibly ended with the fall of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Due to the Geneva accords, Viet Nam was divided North and South with the North being led by the communists and Ho Chi Minh and the South by a pro-western government. The period from 1954 to 1975 saw the new government that emerged in South Vietnam was still in one way or another under pro-western influence. Some of our students, either through personal experience or from family stories, begin to have direct recollection of Vietnamese history in this 1954 – 1975 era. To return to the outline by 1955 there was the beginning of turbulence through the government of the Diem family in the South and from the Viet Cong in the North. As the problems grew, the U.S. became involved beginning to send its first military advisors about 1963. From 1963 to 1975 there was an increasing escalation of U.S. involvement and Viet Cong attacks on the south. By 1975 the Vietnam War was over and the U.S. was out of there. For the next year, the Viet Cong increased its presence in the south. By 1976, the communist Republic of Vietnam had been established. Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City. This tragic war between North and South tore families and friends apart. Obviously, trust in foreign relations between the United States and the Republic of Vietnam would take time to develop. I kept these experiences of their history in mind as I traveled. The fun of being a historian is to be able to travel to a country and actually see its historical record.

One of the early acts of the new communist government was to nationalize land. Private ownership of property was ended. The government tried to implement programs that
would encourage the communist system. Recovery from the war did not come, and attempts at economic improvements proved to leave Vietnam stagnant. Initially the U.S. did not invite trade. By 1986, the Republic of Vietnam recognized that conditions must change. The policy of *Dai Moi*, meaning renovation was introduced. The economy was still dominated by the state in that it was being carefully planned, but the concept of a free market society was being introduced. Some of the Vietnamese that I would later meet called it a ‘socialist’ oriented market economy. The government introduced a type of private ownership of farms, in order to increase productivity of crops. In factories there was an emphasis on increased productions and profits. There was a push to obtain foreign trade treaties. There was certainly more of a willingness to develop international trade and to develop jobs and training for the people. Gradually, during this period, the U.S. began to lower its trade restrictions against Vietnam. A new spirit of cooperation began to develop. By the accounts of some people in Viet Nam, *Dai Moi* brought a rejuvenation of the spirit of the people.

All of these actions spurred new jobs and professions; and, as a result, the need for the improvement of schools and job training. Old cultural trends began to emerge from out of the shadows. Cultural changes began to occur. For example, religion began to be allowed on a limited basis. I say ‘limited’ because there are still restrictions on public statements of free speech and those who proselytize must be careful in how they go about it. On Saturdays, however, the Catholic Church in downtown HCMC has come to be the day for weddings, and if you sit at the park across the street, you will see one wedding party after another leave the church and pose for pictures.

Today the streets of HCMC are filled with the incessant hum of young people on motor bikes (rather dangerously) going to school, work and/or making deliveries. HCMC is under construction from its sidewalks to massive rebuilding of shops and large office and apartment buildings. At the park across from the Catholic Church, one can see many coffee shops and cafes serving crepes, the thin pancake brought by the French in their period of colonization. Young students with computers and books are enjoying their refreshments. One sees the influences of the past mixed with the new lifestyles. Certainly many new ideas are also being introduced from foreign tourists and businesses. The people of Vietnam are looking forward to a better quality of life. They want to forget the divisions of the past. They are looking forward to building a solid future. In talking with my Vietnamese friends, I believe that the strongest reaction to the changing economy has occurred with improvements in education.

As stated earlier, I had already made arrangements to give a workshop at one of the colleges in HCMC. As a result, one of the first items on my agenda when I arrived in Vietnam was to contact the school administrators at Hong Bang University and find out exactly what they wanted from me. They welcomed me warmly, and one of the administrators offered to take me on tours of HCMC. Not only was I given tours over several days, but I had the opportunity to ask many questions. There is no doubt that economic growth and the rebuilding of HCMC is evident everywhere. There are new stores, office and apartment buildings, new sidewalks and sewer systems going in. It is difficult to walk down some streets due to all of the construction. As I met the very friendly people, I found that sometimes they speak with impatience, but usually it is with great pride at the changes that are occurring. Many of them see that the changes that have come with education as being among the most important for the Vietnamese. They have a very high literacy rate—some put it as high as 90 per cent. Obviously, they restructured their school system when *Moi Dai* was introduced in 1986. I strongly believe that it is this emphasis on education which has brought such a positive attitude to the Vietnamese people whether it is in dealing with their past or planning their future. The education system is still being developed. My friends tell me that the schools in Hanoi or HCMC (that includes buildings; as well as studies) are much better than village schools and often parents try to send their children to the cities. Primary education is
a requirement for all students and is free. Intermediate schools and high schools are not compulsory and also not free. There are fees parents must pay. Also students must pass exams to enter those schools. University education is very competitive and an important goal for many. Students must have high grades in secondary schools and pass college entrance exams. It is in the university system where it is believed there is much room for improved teaching and educational studies. There are both four year universities and two-year community colleges. Those parents who can afford it send their children to private universities. It is in the private schools that students receive the best language and job training, according to my sources. However my sources were professors and officials who taught at a private college. Hong Bang University where I presented a workshop on ‘Globalization’ is owned by Japanese investors.

This workshop with the Vietnamese students was a great experience. The administration and professors had asked me to submit a copy of my talk, and I did so. There was a two-fold purpose in this. First of all, there is censorship. My talk discussion topics needed to be approved by the university. I had been warned of this practice by the U.S. Consulate. Second, there was a very good reason to provide a written example because the professors wanted to give copies of my speech to each student. Of course, I complied. Among the most popular courses at Hong Bang are the English language courses. They teach different types of English courses; for example, a student may want business English, teaching English, or sports English for those young men and women engaged in international sports activities.

There were about 75 students and five professors plus the school administrators at the “Globalization” workshop. They were seated at two long tables that ran the length of the room. Each student had a copy of my talk and discussion topics, and each, had a microphone so that he/she could ask questions. During the workshop, tea was served to each of us and large plates of sweets were available. The workshop was most enjoyable and held in an atmosphere of respect, enthusiasm, and friendliness. It lasted a bit over two hours. I have a great enthusiasm for history and I tried to relay to these students my interest in Vietnam, and of course, the relations between the two countries. I was amazed at the curiosity of the students about the U.S. They were selective, perhaps careful in the questions that they asked. After the discussion was over and we went down to the courtyard, several students followed me with questions about the United States. Later I found out why they had so many questions about the U.S. I was told that they do not really have any courses about the U.S. or World history. They teach a cultural history of Vietnam, but as far as modern history it was described as a ‘political’ history. Later in looking through text books, I did find a very brief English language version of U.S. history.

In discussions with representatives of the college following the presentation, the subject of history became the topic of conversation. I was asked if I would be willing to write an essay for a teacher’s magazine about the importance of teaching history, and all societies need to teach the subject. I agreed to the proposition, and actually spent part of my vacation period doing research for this article. I chose the title ‘HISTORY, THE PATH TO THE FUTURE’. I actually had great fun writing it, but was concerned that it might not pass the censors. It was accepted with only a minor example being removed. It was published in a journal, Tai Hoa Tre for the Teacher’s Day issue. I received several copies a few months ago, but, of course, I cannot be sure what is really there since it was translated into the Vietnamese language for the teachers of Vietnam.

So to sum up my sabbatical, the adventure of studying history through travel and the pleasure of making new friends, for me was a wonderful learning experience. I found it particularly interesting that in a country where little or no world history is taught, the students WANT to learn about the world events. So many of our students ask, “Why do we have to study
history?" We often do not realize how valuable education and the freedom to learn really is. In addition to the travel experience the workshop in at Hong Bang University was one of the best experiences in my years of teaching. It was also a very rewarding experience to have the opportunity to write an article for their teachers' magazine encouraging the importance of teaching history. I learned a great deal from this sabbatical experience which I hope to share with others.