Coming Home to Vietnam

by Eileen Conway

Dr. Vo-Tong Xuan is living proof that a single individual can have an enormous impact on a country's progress.

Born in 1940 to a poor family in An Giang in southern Vietnam, Xuan is now vice-rector at the University of Cantho and a member of the Vietnamese National Assembly. His proudest achievement is his leadership in helping transform war-ravaged Vietnam from a rice importer into the third largest rice exporter in the world, all within one decade.

Xuan is one of the foremost Vietnamese agricultural scientists, and was honoured in 1993 with the Ramon Magsaysay Award for government service. The award, begun in 1953, honours the late Philippine president and today it is considered by many as Asia's equivalent of the Nobel Prize.

In its citation to Xuan, the award committee praised his efforts toward rebuilding a war-devastated Vietnam: Xuan elected to forsake safer and more lucrative positions elsewhere and returned home to Vietnam to extend his activities beyond the university and into the fields. The committee further lauded his work in combining practical scientific research and effective advocacy to improve the lives of Vietnamese farmers.

Certainly, Xuan does not keep his admiration of the Vietnamese farmer a secret. My personal goal in life is to serve my country and to work on behalf of the Vietnamese farmer, he says.

To appreciate the magnitude of Xuan's achievement in greatly increasing rice production in Vietnam, consider the hurdles involved. For the plan to succeed, it required convincing the Marxist government to put aside the collectivized system of agriculture in favour of land tenure to individual farmers; it involved developing in the laboratories better technologies such as high-yield rice varieties; it required training and inspiring a large cadre of agricultural extension workers; and perhaps most challenging of all, it involved educating and motivating millions of peasant farmers in Vietnam to modify their traditional way of farming and accept new technologies and techniques generated by agricultural research.

Even when his ideas were unpopular with the government, he held his ground until the government began to see things his way. After conducting secret and highly illegal experiments on the relationship between crop yields and land tenure in the late 1970s, Xuan used his weekly educational television program on farming methods to broadcast a devastating indictment of the state farming system in September 1980. The experiments involved testing a new contract system whereby farmers undertake to produce an agreed-upon amount for the state; everything over and about that amount is for the farmers to keep and sell for their own profit.

After the September 1980 television shows, the immediate reaction from government officials was anger and defensiveness and Xuan was nearly prosecuted. Luckily, he had allies among provincial officials and
within four months, the government began abandoning state farms in favour of individual farmers leases which provided better incentives for farmers to produce more rice.

Yet why did this man son of a poor clerk and raised in the city chose a life in agricultural research and advocacy on behalf of the Vietnamese farmer? He himself is not even remotely from a farming background.

"I do not come from a farm, it's true, he admits. My family was poor, my father was a clerk and we moved several times when I was a child but always we lived in towns or cities. During high school exams, however, I used to escape the noise of the city and go for study breaks to my uncle's farm in the country. I remember being utterly amazed at how hard he worked, the long, long hours of work and toil, and yet how little financial gain he received. He and all his neighbors were the same: they all lived in extreme poverty."

When he finished high school, he wanted to pursue university studies in engineering; however, the university was offering scholarships only in agriculture and since he needed a scholarship, he applied and was accepted.

Hard work is a habit he learned early in life. "My father earned almost nothing in his job and so as a family we all had to work hard to survive. As a boy, I usually had one or two part-time jobs selling newspapers, guarding cars, whatever I could get, and of course also keeping up with my schoolwork. I feel lucky I did not come from a rich family, as I can appreciate the importance of work and I sympathize with other people who labour."

He studied agricultural chemistry at the University of the Philippines during 1969-71, specializing in sugar cane but he switched to rice when he realized that rice would be more important to the future of agriculture in Vietnam.

Twice in his life he has made a decision to stay and work in Vietnam.

The first time was in 1971 when he was working in the Philippines and was offered a job to come back to Vietnam to the University of Cantho. Returning was not an easy decision because he had a good job in Manila and was able to avoid the war; however, he felt a strong commitment to return because he was convinced his knowledge could help Vietnam rebuild its agriculture sector. His wife agreed, and they moved with their children back to Vietnam on 9 June 1971.

The second time was in 1975 in Japan where he was completing work on a PhD and, with the Vietnam war about to end, he wondered if it wouldn t be better not to return to Vietnam.

"Yet during my time in Japan I had met many successful farmers who had good science and technology to help them, and so I was inspired to try to achieve the same for the Vietnamese farmer." He returned on 2 April 1975 at a time when most of the traffic was going the opposite way, out of Vietnam.

Xuan credits his success to the support of his wife of 32 years, Ngoc Le, who has been a strong ally especially during difficult times. They have two children and enjoy a close family life.

Xuan is currently involved with an IDRC-funded project, Vietnam Farming Systems Network, begun in 1991 and aimed at training people in farming systems research and extension methods. It also will develop appropriate agricultural systems that are economically and environmentally suitable. Nearly 100 farming systems specialists have been trained so far and they, in turn, are training other agriculture extension workers, ministry employees and farmers. The project has developed various environmentally sound, economically sustainable farming systems such as: sloping land agroforestry systems in the hilly and mountainous regions, and rice fish or rice shrimp systems in the fresh water and saline water regions.

As to the future of Vietnam, Xuan foresees the need for changes in technology and policy. "On the technology side, we need to develop even better rice varieties that can produce yields of at least 30%
more, and at the same time these varieties must offer good eating qualities. We must develop more efficient ways of pest control and fertilization control so we can be sure of a clean environment. On the policy side, the politicians must design a better policy which offers greater incentives to the farmer. Since I am a member of the national assembly, I always try to push to create a political climate which is conducive to better agriculture. We need to address the serious growing gap between rich and poor farmers.

"Vietnam is on the path to prosperity, although the advance is still slow. We have overcome all kinds of political, economic and social difficulties. I am proud to have been part of that."

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