

Abstract/Technical:

What Are You Driving At? Vietnam's Roads as a Microcosm of Cross-Cultural Understanding

For two months this summer, I lived and rode a motorbike in Vietnam, a country whose roads are characterized by Westerners as “chaotic” and “lawless”. Though the roads seem chaotic at first, this characterization is largely inaccurate, a result of Westerners interpreting Vietnamese driving conditions through the lens of Western norms and shared agreements.

Lack of awareness of one’s own assumptions, and lack of familiarity with another culture’s norms will prevent us from seeing the patterns governing other people’s behavior. If we fail to discern a pattern, we may wrongly assume there is none; hence the perception of “chaos”. We also subconsciously evaluate other cultures based on our own norms, seeing “violations” of our own rules rather than recognizing a different set of rules. This phenomenon leads many Western visitors to underestimate the efficacy of Vietnamese norms, and judge drivers as uniformly reckless, incompetent, or worse: “uncivilized”. While there are aspects of Vietnamese driving that can and should be improved upon (lack of helmet safety standards comes to mind), doing so is impossible without an understanding of the system’s guiding principles. To put it another way, judging Vietnamese driving with only an understanding of Western norms would be akin to judging basketball players using the rules of soccer.

Analyzing the patterns of Vietnamese drivers reveals there is a comprehensive and largely effective set of shared agreements in place, ostensibly a result of the difference in the context in which they developed: namely, a context where 90% of the vehicles are motorbikes and 10% are cars, opposite the proportions in the West. The fundamental difference between Vietnamese driving and Western driving

is this: Western driving is based on *Rules*, while Vietnamese driving is based on *Attention*. Western *Rules* seek to create a safe environment by limiting variability and creating predictability. Vietnamese *Attention* seeks to create a safe environment by maximizing drivers' flexibility and responsiveness to changes in the environment. This is the best option in a place where law enforcement is spread too thin to effectively enforce the panoply of rules that make up the Western driving system.

The difference between Western and Vietnamese driving systems is a microcosm of all cross-cultural understanding. Understanding another culture requires that we recognize our own tendency to evaluate others based on our own metrics, and assume that the behavior of each culture has its own "internal logic"- animated by a set of assumptions and agreements that are opaque to outsiders. While we may want to address shortcomings of another culture's system, that can only be done once one understands the system, its unique variables and constraints. Adding a list of Western style driving rules will not provide funding to the Vietnamese police force, and it won't change motorbikes into cars. We need to understand the inputs of this system in order to change the outputs.

The same goes for any cross cultural endeavor. In this age of hyper partisanship, polarization, and alienation, the ability to suspend one's own paradigm to understand someone else's is increasingly important, as we communicate not only across ethnic and national divides, but also across social and political divides within our own neighborhoods and families.