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My Vietnam: On the Mekong River's Banks

Recently I had a chance to spend about a month in Vietnam on business. It was such a short stay, with most of my time spent in Ho Chi Minh City, that I do not presume to discuss the whole country. This said, let me talk a little here about my impressions of what I saw during my stay. The first thing which surprised me in Ho Chi Minh City was the overwhelming number of motorbikes! You rarely see people walking in the street. They mostly move around by motorbike or bicycle (and, needless to say, the richer folk by car). If you stroll in the street, motorbike taxis will swiftly approach you with the drivers crying out: "Get on, sir!" Brand-new motorbikes cost as much as 200,000 yen, and I wondered how it was that so many people could afford them when their monthly salaries must be somewhere in the region between 2,000 - 20,000 yen (salaries vary significantly depending on the employees ability and kind of occupation)... Anyway, it is true that everybody is now working very hard to get a well-paid job, and very many people attend language schools or computer training courses after (or even during!) working hours.

Watching the swarming motorbike crowds, I keenly felt the energy and vitality of Vietnam. But, I could not help but question: where are they heading? What is their destination? In Vietnam, to my eyes, people appeared extremely energetic - all trying their best to forward themselves. This energy might be something the Japanese people have forgotten long ago. But what will the Vietnamese achieve as a result of such efforts? As discussed at the conferences on global climate change, we (i.e. Japan and other developed countries) have advanced far along our development paths. This does not justify our preaching to developing countries and telling them to stop their economic development because it is harmful to the global environment. We come up with such arrogant statements because we have already achieved a certain level of development ourselves. For those who have not, more economic development seems to offer things still to be discovered and is something to be adored and longed for.

In Vietnam a book titled "Lessons from Japan's past pollution experiences" was on sale in the Vietnamese language. In developing countries there is one school of thought that aims to harmoniously attain both economic development and environmental conservation. This approach is based on learning lessons from the experiences of already developed countries. In this respect, Japan, as a country which has achieved what is perceived as economic development, can and should offer a model for other countries. Japan should offer a practical alternative development paradigm that is more concerned about the global environment, reflecting Japan own past experiences and mistakes. In its process of development Japan has devastatingly sliced up its natural environment and has neglected its agricultural activities, while concentrating on industrial and economic development. This was wrong, and one of the most important keywords for development in today's society should be "agricultural life", not only for farmers but also for many others not engaged in farming. The concept aims to draw the importance of nature and agriculture back close to the lives of ordinary people.

However, are the Japanese people able to change their lifestyle at this stage? It is necessary to promote systems to encourage non-wasteful lifestyles=(systems which do not just rely on people moral or ethical commitment). One example of such a system would be the installation of in-room light and air-conditioning devices which cannot be left on when nobody is in the room, as is sometimes seen in hotels where room lights can be turned on only when one enters the room and inserts the room key into a certain place, and which are automatically turned off when the key is removed.

(Reported by KOTO)



Bikes, bikes and bikes...



Main method of transport in the Mekong Delta is by boat