

Two Stories of Training in Vietnam

by Matt Desmond
and Chris Hosking

Matt is a training consultant based in Vietnam for the past six years, where much of his work was with a group of non-government-organisations, to build a pool of rural development trainers. In December 2001, his Vietnamese colleagues took over the consultancy and sent him back to New Zealand to de-worm and explore leisure opportunities.

Chris is a Psychodramatist working in private practice. Much of her professional life is associated with ANZPA training programs for those keen to learn to integrate the method of psychodrama within their work. Chris first led training in Vietnam in 1996, and has returned to the country each year since then. Currently living in Wellington, she is a staff member of the Wellington Psychodrama Training Institute.

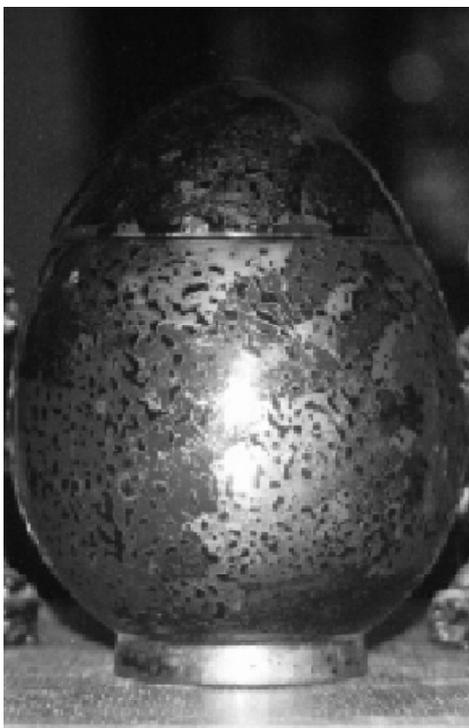


Figure 1: A Vietnamese lacquered egg

A LACQUERED EGG

by Matt

After more than six years of leading training workshops in the north of Vietnam it was somehow fitting that my swansong was a role-training workshop. Back in 1996, I had persuaded Chris Hosking and Bev Hosking to come and work with a group of the rural development workers I was training. I recall the questioning e-mails from New Zealand asking how exactly active group work and dramatic methods might be of relevance to people here. I recall the difficulties of sounding convincing based only on an intuition that there was a huge pool of spontaneity just waiting to be tapped. Five years and five workshops later, a group of rural development trainers came together in Phu Tho in November 2001 to work for a week with Chris and me.

In the last session of this last workshop we placed a low table on the stage. On its cover of white silk was a lacquered egg for each participant, and one for Chris and me. We introduced the eggs as 'Trainers' Treasure-boxes'. Each participant was invited to imagine one quality which was present in this group and would have real value for a trainer in village Vietnam 'when the chips were down' (which roughly translates as 'being at the bottom of the worst'). The participants then chose an image or symbol or colour for that quality. One by one they spoke of the quality they had imagined and placed its symbol in each egg. Here, I try to do justice in English to the qualities selected, and some of the people behind them.

Duong

Duong gave Resilience. She said that whatever happens during the training day we must be able to enjoy our dinner so we are recovered for what the next day might bring.

Earlier in the workshop, Ly (aged 25) had identified Duong (35) as possessing a quality of maturity and independence that she was seeking for herself. In the role of the *Elder Wise Consultant*, Duong had told Ly that when she was 22 her mother had given her a small rice-pot and a bicycle and told her that after being cared for for 22 years it was time for her to look after herself. She had found a teaching job in a remote village school for which there was initially no salary. For three months she had taught herself to be a teacher by day and found wild weeds for food in the forest by night. This experience, she explained to Ly, had given her the quality of independence.

Thao

Thao gave the quality of Creativity. She talked about the quality in a trainer that can create growth in situations where there seem to be very

few resources.

Thao had been protagonist in a long and difficult role-training session which contained scenes of her relationship with her father and her sons. She had searched for friendship in these relationships amongst the ancient backdrop of Confucian roles and norms. The 11-year-old Thao introduced us to the father who was already a leading funeral and 'people's opera' musician, but who could not permit his daughter to attend embroidery classes because study and housework should fill her life. Later in the session, she introduced us to her sons and explained why their longed-for 'games with mother on the mat' could only happen on the evenings when all homework had been completed. In giving Creativity, perhaps she was remembering her first role-training workshop when, exploring 'missed opportunities' with her recently deceased mother, the shame of small and silent tears had almost immobilised her in the drama. Almost.

Duong

The younger Duong gave the gift of trust in others. She said that the critical quality in all our training was to have trust in ourselves, to really believe that we are able to make relationships that can lead to growth and learning.

Over the past four years, Duong has wrestled with her age (now 26) and her 148 centimetres. Often being required to gain the trust of much older and far more experienced (and bigger) officials, she has led the group in a journey through the Vietnamese language and its maze of personal pronouns. Whether these young women should introduce themselves as 'em' with its connotations of youth and innocence and respect, or as 'chi' or 'co' with their messages

of teacherliness and ability to bring aspects of wisdom, or as 'toi' with it's implication of 'I am what you see, I am me'.

Tuyen

Tuyen followed immediately. 'My gift for the Treasure-box follows from Duong's. It is the quality of having trust in others. As a development trainer I need the genuine trust in others, in the people. I need to trust that all people can build their lives and livelihoods.'

Tuyen began her working life as a doctor, then became a dentist. Now, at 34, she is a mother of two, a team leader and a full-time trainer. I have seen Tuyen at work with her groups of young HIV-positive people. She is an excellent and truly respectful facilitator. And in our training groups we have also come to know the deep doubts she has about her work, especially now as the first of these young people are starting to die.

Tu

Tu had written a yellow card for each of the participants' Treasure-boxes. It read 'To respect and admire all the roles we have'. She said that the excellent trainer did not dismiss or cut off the roles they were uncomfortable or unhappy with. She said that for her these roles were 'part of Tu' and that she was learning more each year about valuing them.

Tu is an original member of the group. I say very publicly that, in all this country of 80 million, she is the most able, the most flexible, group-leader. She is pioneering an area of training which we might call 'self-knowing leadership' which focuses on our practice/praxis as the essence of who we really are. In this week's workshop she has displayed her relationship with her 80 year-old mother – coming home from work to

place her head in her mother's lap and to take an hour just feeling her mother's hands knead her hair. During this time her mother sings, first the sad songs of war separations and unrequited love, and later the songs of revolutionary heroes and their achievements.

Phong

Phong paced around the table of eggs and stuffed a wad of toilet paper in each calling out 'Crazy... Crazy... Trainees need to be crazy'.

Over the past two years Phong has been describing his learning edge as 'stepping out of the shadow'. We have gone with him inside this shadow and seen a type of tranquillity, and anonymity, and little responsibility. We have also often seen Phong and the shadow throwing each other off the group stage with true force and determination. And we have seen the shadow of his father, a much-decorated military doctor, who simply cannot comprehend that Phong is choosing rural work rather than the career in the Medical School which he has been offered.

Huong

Huong offers the quality of belief that change can really occur.

The whole group watches in silence as Huong places her card in each of their Treasure-boxes. We all reflect on her struggles over these past three years to create a place for herself, separate from her twin sister, separate from her co-trainers, separate from the poverty of her childhood. I reflect on the evening during this workshop when she had packed her bag and was ready to leave after what she felt as the shame of her few silent tears.

Ha

Ha stood, strode to the stage, and eyeballed each of us. 'The trainer is an adventurer', she said. 'Don't hang back. Get out there!'

Ha had expressed her workshop purpose as wanting to develop the role of rebel. In one evening session, she was invited to take as long as she needed to dress herself as a rebel and then to enter some enacted scenes from her daily work. The group had laughed themselves sick as she slowly and thoughtfully rolled up one trouser-leg, draped herself in orange and green silks, cocked her hips with a thumb in each pocket, ordered sex on a mobile phone, used some choice English from her Australian teacher's vocabulary, and swaggered around the stage with a cigarette. Later in the session she leapt onto the 'boardroom table' and berated her older 'managers' to get a life.

Hoa

Hoa had made a blue-green heart for each Treasure-box. The colour of young rice, she explained. Inside she had drawn the symbol for Sensitivity which she said the group had shown towards her in a new way. She said that this was the quality she aspired to, to have real empathy for the village mothers in her training groups.

Hoa was attending her first such workshop, having demonstrated a very high ability for group facilitation in her Training of Trainers' courses. She was the baby of the group at 24 and had, on the last morning of the workshop, announced her purpose of 'slowing down'. Her session earlier in the day had delighted all of us as she raced between roles (far ahead of the director's guidance – or perception?), and spoke psychodrama jargon like an old hand. 'Now I will say what I'm not saying'. 'Now I need

to reverse roles with that me over there'.

'Now I have already reversed roles with a me who isn't in the drama yet'. The session had ended with the group celebrating her acuity and liveliness. Even the 30 year-olds, with wistful admiration, had urged her not to slow down, but to learn to value and trust her natural, immediate responses to people and life.

Luong

Luong placed two smiling faces in each Treasure-box. She said that as trainers we need to be content within ourselves and to bring warmth and humour to the poverty of the villages.

That same morning Luong had shown us a 12-year old girl leaving the jungle after 10 years in hiding from the French military as the daughter of a revolutionary leader. The girl had shown her sadness at leaving the streams and trees, her young friends and the animals and noises of the jungle. The girl had sworn she would write about these things so that everyone could know what a wonderful time and place this had been. Then Luong showed us the 57-year-old woman who has taught, travelled, inspired and led, and is very much a respected aunty to this group. She is now nearing retirement and that morning she talked with her 12-year-old self and remembered with excitement and determination her promise to write of the time in the jungle.

Paul

Paul placed a frangipani flower in each egg. He said that as he had collected the flowers, he had imagined many qualities of a transformational trainer. But these were...just frangipani flowers.

Paul is an Alaskan salmon fisherman who spends up to nine months a year in Vietnam

teaching interactive communication to people in the camps – drug-users and sex workers who have been rounded up from the cities. During the week of the workshop he had been working to shrink the circles he tended to make around the present moment. The group of young Vietnamese trainers were great auxiliaries for Paul as they learned to challenge his loquacity, and demand that he summarise his thinking and join them...Now!

Ly

And Ly had written the simple word 'Wish' on violet card for each of the Treasure-boxes. She could find no words in the moment. Silently and delicately she placed her cards in the eggs.

For me, Ly is the spirit of this work and these people. At times outrageous, at others feeling a crippling shyness. So clever and quick, and often bewailing what she cannot yet do or understand. So determined to be a 'new Vietnamese woman', and so caught up in the needs and memories of her elders. During the week, Ly had presented a role-training session which involved her ageing parents, her young husband and the baby of her wishes. Finally from a tabletop high above the family she screamed at her father that she was his daughter not his wife and that the woman sitting next to him was his wife. She castigated his vigour, ordered him to leave behind the bitterness of war, and demanded that he re-romance the woman he had fallen in love with in the perilous swamps of Thai Binh.



Figure 2: Participants, 2001

NEW ROLE CREATION

by Chris

The workshop took place in the richly historic and symbolic area of Phu Tho. This is the home of the Hung kings, the first of whom was the eldest son of Lac Long Quan (the Dragon King). Quan's lover, Au Co (the Fairy Queen) delivered one hundred eggs which hatched into the one hundred Vietnamese forefathers. The Vietnamese people still call themselves 'the Children of the Dragon and the Fairy'. Phu Tho is also the home of the finest sumac trees in Vietnam, from whose sap the premium lacquer is made.

On arrival in Hanoi, the first words of beaming greeting are yet again 'you've got fat!' – a compliment, Matt reminds me. Then the nightmare bus ride into the countryside. And, in utter contrast to the traffic mayhem on the road, the bus is full of the hilarity and anticipation of the group members, some of whom have not met up since the last workshop a year ago. Lychee trees heavy with fruit line the roadside. I'm back!

We arrive at the Bai Bang Camp, our venue for the week. This is a compound with a touch of Ikea, built by the Swedes as a home for their workers at the adjacent paper mill. The Bai Bang mill was the first Western aid project to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and was begun while the American War was still raging. In fact it was begun because the American war was still raging. Construction of the mill was bitterly debated in Stockholm, and its opponents implanted the term 'Bai Bang' into the Swedish vocabulary as a derogatory term for a communist sympathiser. While Swedish experts were trying to survey the neighbouring forests, American B52s

were flying overhead, discharging their devastating cargo.

But for our group members, Bai Bang is a paper mill, and a symbol of international friendship. For most of them, their growing-up was dominated by the American War, and the Cambodian War, and the Chinese one. Luong, the eldest, has also lived through two French wars and a Japanese one. But, she proudly notes, without mentioning 11 September, that Vietnam is now ranked the safest country in Asia and one of the safest in the world.

We walk into the musty dark of our group room. A red and yellow Party banner covers the length of one wall. A prominent bust of Ho Chi Minh (Uncle Ho) overlooks the room. A rather forbidding lectern stands at one end, offset by many garish plastic flowers. Like the streets and houses outside, a film of dust covers everything. Then memories of earlier workshops flood back and everything else becomes incidental.

Over the past five years, the trainers in these workshops have ranged in age from 23 to 57. Many speak Russian as their second language, some German, Bulgarian or Czech, a few French and English. For many of the first-timers it has been a unique experience. 'It is the first time to stay in a place like this, so much luxury. I learn living with strange people from different backgrounds and experiences and living styles.'

I recall Matt telling me: 'These trainers work with participants who, just like them, have no history of participating in their own learning. The first time they come on our training, they are unbelieving that they bring critical expertise to the problem at hand. And after the training they invariably go back to groups which expect them to lecture,

pontificate and provide expert solutions to every imaginable problem.'

Matt and his growing team of Vietnamese colleagues have been concentrating on building up a core group of trainers. There is a massive amount of 'training' going on in the country, but very little has developed yet in the way of a base of learning concepts or training practice. Everywhere are the legacies of Confucius; a long and vicious history of colonisation and invasion; and the central planning system required by the wars and the Party. And at the same time, the people are absolutely stunning – enormously intelligent, keen to learn, very committed to the future of their country, and possessing a deep gentleness that is full of laughter, song, and tears.

How terribly the rice suffers under the pestle!
But it emerges polished, as white as cotton.

The same process tempers the human spirit:
Hard trials shape us into polished diamonds.

from A Prison Diary, Ho Chi Minh 1890–1969

Back in '96, the first of the first moments. We look around and everyone has a pad and pen poised. It is mesmerising. Where is the warm-up? To stand out as an individual here is obviously not quite the norm – and I feel somewhat unusual. Very tall, as if my bones have suddenly expanded to an unusual size, decidedly plump, clumsy and horribly white. Matt certainly looks unusual and even Bev looks huge! The trust given when directing one of these folk though, no matter how new they were to this situation, was an astounding 130 per cent.

At the end of her second workshop, Yen wrote: 'Last training we practised a lot but for me it was a rain that has penetrated in me. With this training I learned much more by doing and feeling... I learned to say 'yes' to myself and that I will not be tiny in other peoples eyes...' What is impressive here is not just that Yen appreciated this new learning experience, but that she could recognise and value how the learning had affected her.¹ So although the training we did was effective, already inherent within these people was an outstanding responsiveness and sense of responsibility about learning: 'I want to become more confident in a big group. I don't want to wake up just my sleeping part – I want to wake up my sleeping volcano!'

One year Matt observed: 'The French invested virtually nothing in the education system here. They were interested in a passive, illiterate workforce and a small local educated 'mandarinate' whose loyalty to the French would be guaranteed by their small numbers and their privilege. Uncle Ho (Ho Chi Minh) and his comrades started with nothing except a highly committed and intelligent people, and achieved a unique 'educational revolution'. In the space of 25 years or so, the Viets achieved near universal literacy. This was (and is) unheard of and was achieved by probably the only way possible: a centrally driven and planned curriculum and teaching system, and revolutionary vigour. We have forgotten that to learn to read is revolutionary.'

Our group members often train groups of more than 50 participants, and initially their goal was to have '100 per cent participation'. Once they had been taught 'participatory methods', only complete participation was satisfactory in their eyes. Complete participation was the measure of success of the trainer, anything less was failure.

The interest in the benefits of role training was gripping, as were the daunting lists of objectives drawn up by the group members. 'This week, I want to find all my missing roles' became a little intimidating... I recall Mr Hai, head of an agriculture college with 3000 students. The first time he was a protagonist, he expected himself to not only be the protagonist, but to produce the drama, to organise the mirroring, coach the auxiliaries and lead the sharing! The subject of his drama was how to get his sister to stop crying after she had failed an exam. In his final re-enactment he gave her a microphone and coached her to weep to the whole world.

Halfway through the third workshop, that was for the first time daringly called 'Role-Training', a hot debate was going on amongst the participants, but in Vietnamese of course. Some time later a summary of this debate was reported to us. 'New Role Creation is a much more relevant name for this than Role Training', they asserted. Something of the spirit of Moreno had been realised – 'We are role creators', he asserted. From then on, the exuberant atmosphere of the workshop was congruent with its title, New Role Creation.

And Hong... Her letter to herself reflects many of the areas we worked together on, the rigidities and the tremendous flexibility. It reflects the work of the total Training Project: the philosophy, inspired and actualised by Matt, with the inherent values of self as a creator, of learning with mutuality and equality. The letter, written by Hong to herself in the future, was posted on to her six months after a workshop.

Dear Hong,

It is very nice that you join course. In the past you could not clearly recognise the importance of being yourself as a trainer that you should be

responsible for what you are and will be training, that you should care for people more, pay more attention to them, inflating the influence to the people participating the training you might lead.

Now, you can name your actions, you can name your behaviours, you can name your feelings, you can be confident with 'yourself' which you practised in the drama, you can identify or predict problems relating to training and that you can have strategy or solutions to solve one by one, you can and you have to be sure that what you want to bring to them is right and needed so that you don't waste time, energy and money to unwanted training.

You learnt to listen to people, to try to read their minds, their feelings, to have sympathy, empathy for them, to touch them, to learn their concerns and to create common concerns or interest in the group that you are working with. (It's a hard task for you, I know). Now on, please open your hearts, your eyes, your ears and practise what you think is right and needed for your target groups. Look around and you will find many supports from resources yourself. Your training target groups, your boss, your co-trainers, your colleagues, even your mother, brothers and your friends. Maybe they are waiting to help you, share and lead you in doing useful things for training or whatever you want to do.

Remember to pay attention to pick the wild weeds around the small tree to become a bigger tree, as big as you want.

Challenge yourself.

Strong too is the Vietnamese sense of responsibility to one another. Conducting any sharing at the close of a drama was at first impossible. No-one was allowed to speak for more than a few seconds before it had to be made clear to them that 'the solution of the drama would not work

in every situation'. Thank goodness for Japanese Psychodramatists – we knew that it was sometimes an advantage to have three chairs on the stage! One for the protagonist, one for the director, and one for the person sharing, no interrupting allowed! Easy. They knew, all too well perhaps, how to obey a rule.

A day and a half into one of our earlier workshops some group members demanded to hold an evaluation of the workshop. Several anxious hours later this was presented to Bev and me. 'Not enough singing!' Many of the projects these people work for are funded by various Aid agencies (Red Cross, Care, Oxfam etc.) and there is a very strong emphasis on these trainers evaluating the effectiveness of their work. The results of these evaluations usually determine whether their projects, and their years of commitment to date, can continue.

As well as the ability to learn, the ability to play is an astonishing aspect in working with these folk – one which we were quickly alerted to. Evening concerts, learning the Cha Cha and sharing one can of Coke and one apple for a group supper. Re-enacting the dramas of the day (especially the roles of the group leaders) brought the greatest mirth. In the first workshops, we had to have a song (usually Russian) to begin each session.

Mid-September 1998, the darkest night of the year and the brightest moon. Hundreds of children out in the lanes and alleys, calling to the 'Lady of the Moon' to come down and play with them. She came, laden with mooncakes, candy, toys...all the mothers and fathers disguised as the 'Lady of the Moon' came to play.

Combined with the playfulness is an imaginativeness. I recall Mrs Minh, when presenting a difficulty as a trainer, saying that she is 'so busy in her mind that her heart turns upside down and her blood changes from red to purple!' Or Mrs Thuy somehow feigning a leg amputation during a war scene. Or Huyen refusing to accept the burden of wisdom ascribed her by the group and instead, as a fortune-teller, reading wisdom from the palms of group members' hands.

Matt says: 'we talk about act hunger...well these people have got feedback hunger. It staggered me to realise how little feedback happens in this society. When they got the idea, either through genuine verbal feedback or mirroring by group members, we soared...' Dung writes 'If I am feeling brave I will want the group to reflect back what they see in my inner world, my relationships and my psychology'.

And of all the valued (treasured) memories from these workshops, these folk's receptiveness to, and use of, mirroring has been remarkable. It has opened up so many new possibilities. On the final morning of this last workshop (prior to the lacquered eggs!), Tu presented a moment in the sharing phase of a session where she was disturbed by the warm-up of one older man who was dealing out very strong advice to the younger protagonist. Tu had the idea to intervene using mirroring during the sharing, something I thought was definitely not recommended. She was unequivocal that this would work. She set out the scene and acted each role of the director, protagonist and group members, expanding on the unexpressed aspects. At the crucial moment, with some prompting, she organised mirroring and with the extended use of metacommunication, she



Figure 3: A sociodramatic moment for Matt and Chris (photo with Uncle Ho)

left us with no doubt that this man would accept the mirroring and that he would develop another warm-up. The freedom that Tu has experienced in being mirrored herself, created another new summit of confidence and sensitivity in the group's development over the past five years.

Endnote

1 The stories of group members' names has been a rich theme of all our workshops in Vietnam, (and a guaranteed starting place for the group leader who is very uncertain where the group's warm-up is). In the parts of North Vietnam that were bombed by the Americans between 1968-73, series of individual bomb-shelters were built by upturning concrete waterpipes into holes in the ground. Yen is named after these shelters, because her mother gave birth to her in one during a bombing-raid.