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Mum, Dad & International Relations:

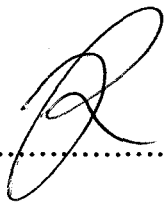
*A True Story about
Grand Theories &
Ordinary Vietnamese People*

KIM T. HUỠNH

March 2004

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of
the Australian National University

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made.

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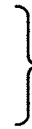
Jim George



My Panel

Katrina Lee Koo

Jeremy Moses



My Colleagues

Dad

Mum

Thạch



My Family

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the tyranny of grand theories and the efficacy of everyday resistance in international relations via alternating politico-biographical accounts of the author's father (Thiét) and mother (Vân). Three grand theories, defined as totalising ideas for emancipation based on a positivist approach to knowledge, are critiqued in the context of the First and Second Indochina Wars and their aftermath. These grand theories are the French civilising mission, American liberal-capitalism and Vietnamese Marxism-Leninism. Under a veil of idealised bipolarisations such as barbarism/civility, subjectivity/objectivity and Other/self, the proponents of these grand theories facilitated the destruction of non-conforming belief systems, greedily exploited natural and human resources, and facilitated horrendous conflict in Việt Nam despite and indeed because of their hubristic claims to universal liberation and optimal progress.

There are three inter-related ways to view the objectives and processes of this thesis. Firstly, as a deconstruction of the three grand theories stated above by way of destabilising, inverting and subverting the bipolarisations upon which they depend. What is revealed in this process is the less than objective metatheoretical underpinnings of these grand theories and their frequently brutal and marginalising consequences on ordinary lives. Secondly, in conjunction with and as a product of this deconstruction, a rich mosaic of little narratives and knowledges is illuminated and analysed. In this sense, this thesis also represents a genealogy, a systematic study of subjugated knowledges. It is emphasised, however, that these knowledges are not simply and wholly subjugated from the top-down. They are also concealed and wielded as a means of everyday resistance. Specifically, Vân and Thiét's stories demonstrate the ability and means by which ordinary people resist the tyrannical policy derivatives of twentieth century grand theories such as pacification, assimilation, containment

theory, land reform, strategic hamlets, winning hearts and minds and reeducation. And so thirdly, these biographical essays constitute a qualitative study of everyday resistance as influenced by the work Michel de Certeau and James C. Scott. The efficacy and dangers of everyday resistance are further explicated via an intertwining analysis of Thiết's obstinately subversive and decadent sister Hường.

By drawing upon Vietnamese literary works (including the folktales of Trạng Quỳnh, The Tale of Kiều, modern novels from the Self-Strength Literary Group and many popular proverbs and songs) Vân's story in particular offers an historical and empathetic means of understanding both self and Other in personal and global contexts which counters narrow positivist understandings. The courage and resilience that Vân and Thiết demonstrated while growing up, attaining an education, getting married and providing for their families encourage us to contemplate over how we might practise everyday life and/as international politics in more virtuous and effective ways.

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MAP of INDOCHINA 1954 – 1975¹

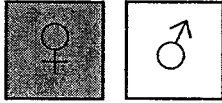


¹ Taken from A.J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War 1954-1975* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000) 22.

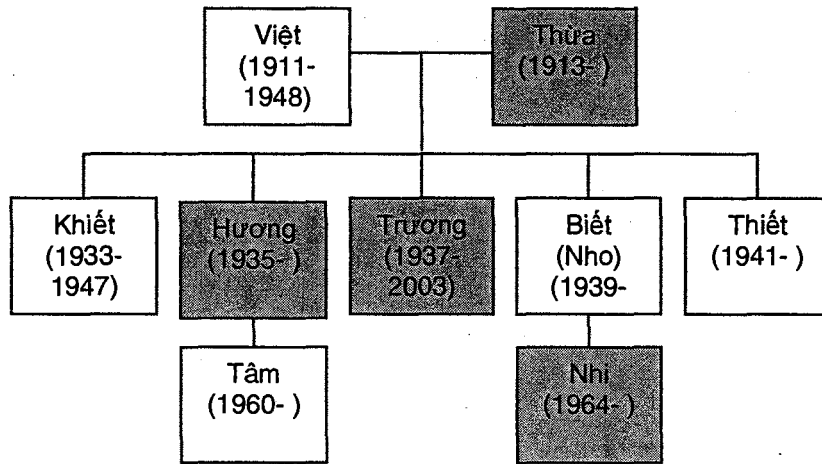
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Việt Nam (The South Vietnamese Army, for these purposes including the air force and navy)
COSVN	Central Office of South Vietnam (The political and military command centre of the NLF)
DRV	Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (The North Vietnamese Regime)
MACV	US Military Assistance Command Việt Nam (US command headquarters in South Việt Nam)
NLF	National Liberation Front (pejoratively referred to as Việt Cộng by Southern Republicans and US forces)
PAVN	The People's Army of Việt Nam (the North Vietnamese Armed Forces)
PLP	People's Liberation Party (the Communist Party in the South, an ideological arm of the NLF and PRG)
PRG	Provisional Revolutionary Government (The political arm of the NLF and the PLP)
RVN	Republic of Việt Nam (the South Vietnamese Regime)
SRV	Socialist Republic of Việt Nam (Unified Việt Nam after 1976)
VWP	Việt Nam Worker's Party (the Communist Party in the North during the Second Indochina War)

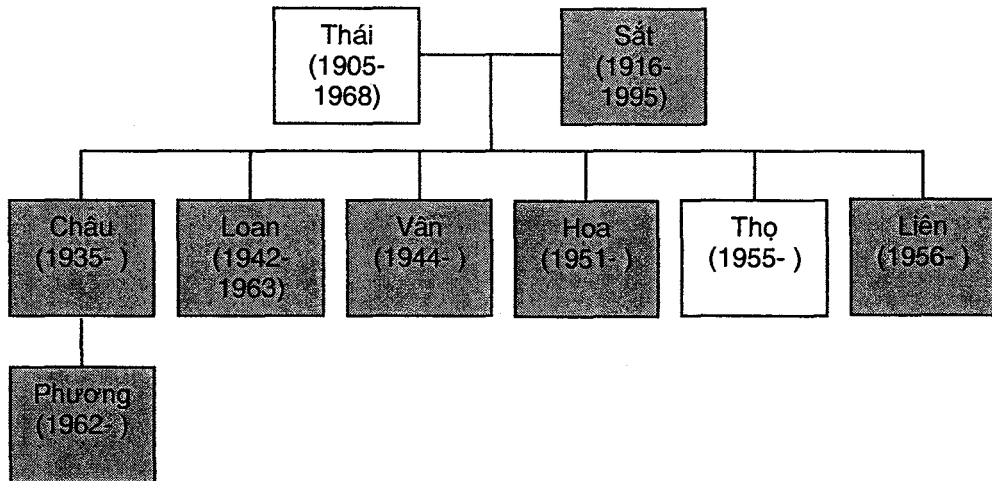
FAMILY TREES



Thiêt's Family Tree



Vân's Family Tree



INTRODUCTION:

Tells of the interrelationships between Mum, Dad & international relations.

A Bondi Backdrop

My family has a little old house near Bondi Beach where my older brother and his girlfriend live. Mum, Dad and I try to visit as often as possible. As we drive towards the house along Bondi Road, a wall of Pacific blue greets us and we are embraced by a sense of security and happiness. On the footpaths one can find a menagerie of characters: corporate flyers who live near the beach so that they can talk about living near the beach; backpackers who travel the world in search of other backpackers; bare skin sunbakers and surfers who seem to be allergic to almost all forms of clothing; and the established residents who long for the ol' Bondi, whilst relishing the fact that their much sought-after properties are making them wealthier by the minute. My family freely associates with all of these crowds and many others. In our own individual ways and for reasons of necessity and fancy, we have all become good at adapting. It's fair to say, then, that no-one feels more at home in this iconic Australian backdrop than us.

On sunny days logic necessitates that the beach is given absolute precedence. We bathe at North Bondi (rather than Bondi Central) so as to avoid the flocks of tourists. With sunscreen haphazardly applied to his ever-bronzed face, Dad wades out beyond the white-water and duck dives one curling wave after another. Occasionally he floats on his back with his feet poking out of the water. Often he outlasts even the most addicted surfer. Mum prefers the calm pools shaded by the urban rainforest where multi-storey monstrosities creep upwards in search of light, spectacle and resale value. At other times she can be seen

reclining on the beach reading a *Women's Weekly* and guarding the Barbecue Shapes. My brother and I dart out past the lycra-clad kids with their boogie boards in order to find a place where we can tread water and time, awaiting our wave. Sometimes, as twilight encroaches, the four of us sit on the sand and say very little. And it was during one of these sublime moments that I reflected upon what an Aussie picture we had painted: despite and perhaps even because of all the problems, prejudices and social pathologies that we have faced and continue to face in this liberal-democracy; despite and perhaps even because of the fact that we are Vietnamese boat people.

Where do I come from? What brought me here? Surely I should know? Why don't I know? Surely my children and their children should know? Why don't I find out so that someday I can tell them? These are the sorts of everyday questions and impulses that ignited this dissertation on my Mum, Dad and international relations. They were underpinned by a long-held sense that my family was driven to this alien land by hardship and injustice, and a desire to understand and somehow avoid or prevent similar hardships and injustices in future. Through both inductive and deductive processes, a well-rounded education, intertwining sources of inherited/self-constructed knowledge and a touch of luck, I have come to identify an underlying reason for our exile from Việt Nam—grand theories.

Argument 1: The Tyranny of Grand Theories

“Grand theories” in this context are totalising ideas of progress and emancipation that are based upon purportedly universal forms of knowledge. Since the Cartesian and Newtonian revolutions of the seventeenth century and the subsequent European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, grand theorists have commonly adopted a positivist approach to knowledge and the world; that is, a conviction in their ability to ascertain universal truth (wholly separate from values) via empirical science and in accordance with procedures of objective observation, analysis and proof. Positivists, it has been argued, recognise “as

valid only one form of knowledge (scientific rationalism), one methodology (deductivist empiricism), and one research orientation (problem-solving)".¹

As this positivist epistemology—seemingly universal in its application and meticulous in its calculations—spread from the natural sciences into the social sciences, Western political thinkers and actors moved away from the guidance of God and the service of royalty towards that of science and democracy. Human reason (*logos*) as exemplified in mathematics and physics was lauded over all forms of intuition, superstition and spirituality (*mythos*). In the highest echelons of political theory and practice, popular reason dictated that industrialisation and technology were worthy ends in themselves, optimal means for the accumulation of wealth, the enhancement of well-being, and control over recalcitrant elements of nature and society. Thus, an idealised image of the modern age was born, and it was fawned upon as the final (boundless) stage in a straight-line progression from savagery to civility. Glorious modernity, it was believed, was attainable by all those who demonstrated a devout adherence to positivist epistemology, advanced technology and a grand overarching theory of politics and the universe.²

It did not take long, however, for the grand theory of Western modernity to generate the sort of oppression and violence that its adherents had consigned to the age of barbarism. Via abstraction and simplification, Western colonists forged new bipolar distinctions between tradition and modernity, barbarism and civility, woman and man, and darkness and light that served to harbour primeval prejudices and despicable desires. In this way, generations of transcontinental pillage and domination were undertaken behind a mask of benevolent emancipation. The concomitant cries of suffering natives were dampened by

¹ Jim George and David Campbell, "Patterns of Dissent and the Celebration of Difference: Critical Social Theory and International Relations" in *International Studies Quarterly* 34:3 (September 1990): 269-293 at 282.

² James C. Scott critiques the totalitarian tendencies of what he refers to as "high modernism" in *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 89-90. While his arguments are similar to the author's his approach is a political anthropological one, while this thesis draws from political philosophy and biography.

shrill reassurances that the colonists knew them better than they knew themselves and that socio-economic development was always close at hand.

Via this necessarily potted path (in which grand theories have been somewhat grand theorised about), we come to the first of three grand theories which will be briefly introduced here and later critiqued in detail in the context of twentieth century Vietnamese history and Van and Thiét's lives.³ The French civilising mission (*mission civilisatrice*) sought to emancipate the colonial world via the promulgation of Western scientific education and the prospect of individual rights.⁴ Through proper education and an awareness of their individuality, asserted the French colonists, natives would eventually "dare to know" the world as it truly is and themselves as they truly are. Combined with the example of French industrial endeavour, the naturally lazy indigenes would be compelled along the developmental path in the footprints of their colonial masters.

The second grand theory that will be examined is US liberal capitalism which has been often and accurately criticised as neo-colonialist. In the context of the Cold War, US liberal capitalists undertook a revised civilising mission which—like the French before them but with more sophisticated machinery, an emphasis on consumerism, and additional funding—imposed upon less developed nations like Việt Nam a brand of emancipation that was also predicated upon socio-political obedience and epistemological emulation. Integrated with this US grand theory of liberal-capitalism (serving as a symbiotic partner by bolstering resolve and obfuscating contradictions) is the grand theory of US manifest destiny, the notion that it is both natural and righteous for the US to be the exemplar and

³ In focussing on the role of grand theories in instigating and perpetuating the Indochina Wars, I am not suggesting that they are the sole causes or that this is the only valid way to analyse these conflicts. For instance, the Indochina Wars have also been legitimately examined and promoted as wars of national liberation or as civil conflicts. This analysis serves as an alternative to these well-trodden paths towards understanding the Indochina War without aiming to wholly refute them.

⁴ The French civilising mission does not merely encompass colonial policies and strategies. It also incorporates an underlying and enduring conviction that it was the moral obligation of the French to spread their conceptions of civilisation to the rest of the world. Even when the emphasis of French colonial policies shifted, from promoting association with and not assimilation of the colonies for instance, this underpinning conviction of the civilising mission remained intact. Raymond F. Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory 1890-1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961) 122.

guarantor of global freedom, and that its pre-eminence must be maintained by any means and at all costs.⁵

Thirdly, adopting Lenin's 1916 conceptualisation of imperialism as the "highest stage of international capitalism",⁶ Vietnamese revolutionaries linked the Franco-American-imposed oppression of Indochina to infectious global capitalism and its communist cure. The resultant grand theory, Vietnamese Marxism-Leninism, advocated the overthrow of colonialism as a critical step towards socialist revolution and, eventually and invariably, a communist nirvana. As an ideological mirror of Western colonialism, Vietnamese Marxism-Leninism is often striking in its practical resemblance.

All of these three grand theories failed in Việt Nam. This is not to say that they were at all times implemented with insidious intentions or were wholly obstructive of freedom and progress. On the contrary, at the very least the *mission civilisatrice* provided many Vietnamese, particularly women, with a means to conceptualise a liberating alternative to existing Confucian obligations that subsumed them into the family unit and bonded them to their ancestors. There were, of course, also palpable technological benefits to French colonialism for Vietnamese including enhanced systems of sanitation and transportation (although it is difficult to separate these positive elements from negative technological forces of destruction and control). US liberal-capitalism at times offered similar benefits of individuality and technological advancement in addition to a greater emphasis on the creation and fulfilment of modern consumer desire (once again a double-edged sword). And while Vietnamese Marxism-Leninism was diametrically opposed to such capitalist exploits, in many ways it too offered emancipation from backward feudalism and brutal colonialism. Most importantly, officially and to a large extent legitimately, Vietnamese Marxism-Leninism won two wars of independence and reunified Việt Nam.

⁵ An official expression of American manifest destiny in the context of the Second Indochina War can be found in "McNaughton's memorandum" which is discussed in Chapter Five of this thesis at page 243. Original can be found in *The Pentagon Papers*, as published by the *New York Times* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1971) 255.

⁶ Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (New York: Pluto Press, 1996).

On what basis, then, is it argued that these grand theories failed? While they all constructed pockets of Vietnamese society that accorded to their lofty blueprints for development, the French civilising mission, US liberal-capitalism and Vietnamese Marxism-Leninism caused great destruction for all the good that they achieved because their abstract universalities, rigid certainties and stark bipolarisations could not adapt to complex and fluctuating social issues. What's more, when these grand theories invariably confronted real life obstructions from ordinary people,⁷ it was the theories that were given precedence as they were based on perceived immutable facts and conceived as having over-arching application. Thus, there was no room for negotiation and it was the people who were deemed inadequate and in need of reform while the theories and their policy derivatives remained indisputable. In fact, such was the valorisation of these theories and the dehumanisation of those who refused or were incapable of yielding to them, that the most heinous acts of violence were induced in an effort to actualise the idea and integrate the individual. In the name of greater science, wealth and civility, the Vietnamese experienced slavery in colonial plantations, pacification, agrovilles, strategic hamlets, Agent Orange, programs to win hearts and minds (WHAM), new economic zones and reeducation camps. Obsessed with being value-free (or promoting universal values), those who grand theorised over twentieth-century Việt Nam became virtue-less. Moreover, when these inflexible grand theories themselves clashed to help create and perpetuate the First and Second Indochinese Wars and the oppressive aftermath of 1975, such was the ideological devotion and hubris of their adherents that they were unable to appreciate, reflect upon and overcome both their common epistemological deficiencies and the destruction that was being wrought upon Việt Nam and elsewhere. These grand theories, it is argued, generated crises of modernity as for all their proclamations of progress, emancipation and enlightenment, they too often delivered for Văn and Thiết the exact opposite: barbarism; incarceration; and darkness.

⁷ "Ordinary" in this dissertation is used with a distinct and deliberate touch of irony, and is at times written more accurately as "(extra)Ordinary". A concrete definition of these terms is not possible, nor desirable in this context as what is sought is not a formula for the classification and emancipation of ordinary people but rather, an illumination of how ordinary people can at times show extraordinary characteristics and *visa versa*.

Argument 2: The Existence & Efficacy of Everyday Resistance

But if grand theories drove Vân and Thiết from Việt Nam, they do not sufficiently explain how they survived two long and brutal wars, abject poverty, and totalitarian oppression to eventually find comfort and security on sunny Bondi Beach. For a deeper understanding of Mum, Dad and international relations, then, it is necessary to explore the intriguing and illusive phenomenon of everyday resistance and how it has been wielded by people like Vân and Thiết.

The first of two academic theorists whose work has been relied upon most heavily in this respect is Michel de Certeau. His book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, provides a lively and compelling argument for how people naturally and regularly “make do” in the face of tyranny.⁸ Certeau is an incorrigible optimist who believes that there are always means of escape and that oppression will give birth to insurrection. He is critical of Foucault’s early work, *Discipline and Punish* in particular, for perpetuating the assumption that violent disciplinary procedures (whether they be in mental institutions, schools, offices or elsewhere) have the capacity to entirely shape and control docile beings.⁹ On the contrary, Certeau explicates and promotes a “science of the ordinary” which illuminates how “every man” uses tricks and/or games of language and culture to subvert dominant discourses. He refers to these surreptitious acts of the weak over the strong as “tactics” which possibly find their evolutionary roots in “the age-old ruses of fishes and insects that disguise or transform themselves in order to survive”.¹⁰ Importantly, tactical behaviour occurs within a setting which is not of the ordinary person’s making. As such, they can be characterised by their insecurity, short-term existence and mobility.¹¹ But they are also predicated upon great cunning, particularly when it comes to “poaching” prevailing cultural and

⁸ Michel de Certeau (Steven Rendall trans.), *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 48-9. Jeremy Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau: Interpretation and its Other* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 147. Michel Foucault (Alan Sheridan trans.) *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). It is the author’s impression and pointed out later in this introduction, that Foucault’s later work and in particular his notion of genealogy offers a means of resistance against modern day totalitarianism.

¹⁰ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xix.

practical weapons for re-employment against the system that forged them. For this reason, Certeau describes tactics as “manoeuvres within the enemy’s field of vision”.¹²

While Certeau points out that the tactical character of everyday practices like talking, reading, moving about, shopping and cooking are often overlooked, *The Practice of Everyday Life* does not readily offer the reader clear and detailed examples of how and when these mundane activities become subversive turns, detours, diversions, inversions, conversions, subversions, torsions, and tropes.¹³ Such examples, however, can be extracted by astute inquirers from almost any account of tyranny and survival. For instance, the Italian chemist, Primo Levi, while making his way home from a horrifying year in a Nazi work camp, wrote a letter to his family telling of not only his ordeal, but also his development of what Italians call *l’arte di arrangiarsi* “the art of getting by”.¹⁴

Maybe I’ll come home shoeless, but in compensation for my ragged state I’ve learned German and a bit of Russian and Polish, I also know how to get out of many situations without losing my nerve, and how to withstand moral and physical suffering. To economise on the barber I’m sporting a beard. I know how to make a cauliflower or turnip soup, cook potatoes in a hundred different ways (all without seasoning). I know, too, how to assemble, light and clean stoves. And I’ve been through an incredible variety of careers: assistant bricklayer, navvy, sweep, porter, grave-digger, interpreter, cyclist, tailor, thief, nurse, fencer, stone-breaker. I’ve even been a chemist!¹⁵

Another critical form of tactical behaviour provides for spiritual inlets of reprieve in times of desperation. In the most horrendous circumstances, everyday resistance involves secretly holding on to a fragment of one’s past and the memory of freedom in the face of despondency. For example, in the totalitarianism of 1984, Winston Smith finds reprieve in otherwise mundane practices such as a reflective diary entry, a walk in the countryside, an act of love, and the humming of a long-lost song. Imprisoned in a cell without light,

¹² “Strategy is the science of military movements outside of the enemy’s field of vision; tactics, within it.” Quote of von Bülow cited in *Ibid.*, 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi* (London: Hutchinson, 2002) 213.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 214-5.

sound or human contact, Henri Charriere (*Papillon*) makes do by asphyxiating himself with a blanket and returning to the ever-green fields of the French countryside.¹⁶ Once again, turning to a Jewish survivor of the Nazi work camps for guidance and inspiration, Viktor Frankl evokes the image of his wife and the heavenly sensation of love to overcome desolation and death.

Occasionally I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise....

Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved.

In front of me a man stumbled and those following him fell on top of him. The guard rushed over and used his whip on them all. Thus my thoughts were interrupted for a few minutes. But soon my soul found its way back from the prisoner's existence to another world, and I resumed talk with my loved one: I asked her questions, and she answered; she questioned me in return, and I answered....

I did not know whether my wife was alive...but at that moment it ceased to matter. There was no need for me to know; nothing could touch the strength of my love, my thoughts, and the image of my beloved. Had I known then that my wife was dead, I think that I would still have given myself, undisturbed by that knowledge, to the contemplation of her image, and that my mental conversation with her would have been just as vivid and just as satisfying. "Set me like a seal upon thy heart, love is as strong as death."¹⁷

James C. Scott's work on everyday resistance has also been of great importance in understanding my parents' lives and their interrelationship with international relations. In his 1985 book, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Scott set out the results of his qualitative study of everyday life in a

¹⁶ Henri Charriere (J.P. Wilson and W.B. Michaels trans.), *Papillon* (New York: W.Morrow, 1970).

¹⁷ Viktor E. Frankl (Ilse Lasch trans.), *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 48-50.

Malaysian village.¹⁸ His aim was to observe, in depth, how peasants get by between the momentous events of repression and revolt that are so often the preoccupation of scholars. His conclusion is that acts of everyday resistance are critical to the survival of peasants against landlords, overseers and oppressive regimes. These acts include foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson and sabotage.¹⁹ Importantly, such surreptitious undertakings maintain the impression of compliance without its substance.²⁰ Moreover, they require little or no coordination, often representing a form of individual self-help; and typically avoiding any direct symbolic confrontation with authority.²¹ Perhaps most controversial is Scott's assertion that everyday resistance is generally more effective than open and violent revolt when it comes to achieving practical socio-economic gains for less powerful classes.

This message is reaffirmed in Scott's 1990 book, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, in which he broadens his examination of everyday resistance to incorporate examples of subversive activities and literature from around the world.²² Scott argues that a profound investigation of politico-economic activity must pay attention not only to the public transcripts which tell the story of open and official political interaction, but also the hidden transcripts which are performed beyond the spotlight of public scrutiny and hegemonic control. Importantly, within the hidden transcript, the roles and fortunes of the powerful and powerless are far from clear-cut. While subordinate groups do not by any means have a monopoly over power relations within these hidden transcripts, they are often apt at conducting *infrapolitics* in such a manner as to maximise their practical benefits while minimising—if not eliminating—retribution from superordinate groups. Here too Scott addresses critics of everyday resistance who view it as a mode of false consciousness, providing a safety valve for the prevention of “real” explosive revolutionary resistance, or representing a hegemonic concession from the powerful elements of society who fundamentally remain in control. While it is

¹⁸ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

²² James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

not possible to approach any sort of resolution to this hefty debate here, it seems prudent and sufficient for the purposes of this dissertation to acknowledge that there are multiple forms of resistance and that everyday types, while internally directed at immediate and confined survival, can provide the foundation for more overt and extraordinary varieties of subversion. Scott vividly illustrates this point using the example of polyps in a coral reef.

Just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do thousands upon thousands of individual acts of insubordination and evasion create a political or economic barrier reef of their own. There is rarely any dramatic confrontation, any moment that is particularly newsworthy. And whenever, to pursue the simile, the ship of state runs aground on such a reef, attention is typically directed to the shipwreck itself and not to the vast aggregation of petty acts that made it possible.²³

Finally, a brief acknowledgement of postcolonialism and postcolonial literature in particular, provides the reader with a nuanced understanding of everyday resistance (and also serves as a convenient bridge between what this dissertation argues and how those arguments will be made). It is far from clear what constitutes postcolonialism and postcolonial literature in terms of geographical origins and even whether the term “postcolonial” is appropriate. But for the narrow purposes in which postcolonialism is being drawn upon here, it is enough to say that it does not assert that the colonial era has passed or seek any sort of closure to the philosophies, policies and practices of that/this era. Rather it seeks to reopen, reanalyse and re-Orient them from the perspective of the subjugated and the marginalised. If only temporarily, it re-centres Eurocentrism and suggests that there is no fixed or all-defining centre at all. Importantly, postcolonial literature does not only bear witness to the political oppression and attempted erasure of identity that has occurred under the aegis of modern civilising missions. It also illustrates the ability of the colonised to make do, to resist and subvert from within, and to incorporate colonial ideas and yet remain native. Some of the political and literary devices that are commonly used to this end include the poaching of the colonist’s language and the tactical use of irony.²⁴

²³ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 36.

²⁴ Linda Hutcheon is a notable expert in the areas of irony, postcolonialism and postmodernism. Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: the Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994).

These tools are all evident in Gabriel García Márquez's (Gabo's) Nobel Prize winning novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which is especially well-regarded for its masterful employment of magical realism.²⁵ Refuting the totalising rules of Western realist literature, Gabo magically realises and rationalises meticulous acts of intuition, alien visitation, the nerve-racking eating of soil, and foreboding flurries of yellow butterflies. Most importantly, he does not construct a world of pure fantasy, but rather a realistic town named Macondo in which such magically realistic phenomena take place every day in conjunction with war, terrorism and grinding matters of the heart. The book thereby projects a powerful postcolonial message that had hitherto been expressed only in whispers, "We are here! We exist in our own right! We have survived your best efforts to define and confine us! We have ways of living in and looking at the world that are neither subsumed within, inferior to, or wholly distinct from yours! We are here, for now and forever more!" The renowned scholar Tzvetan Todorov concludes his foray into colonialism with an apt demand for postcolonial times, "We want equality without its compelling to accept identity, but also difference without its degeneration into superiority/inferiority."²⁶

Argument 3: The Utility of Personal Narratives in International Relations

It is recognised that these arguments concerning the destructive nature of grand theories and the efficacy of everyday resistance are unoriginal. However, the innovation and value of this dissertation for academia and international politics is derived not wholly from the postulations that it presents, but also, how they are presented: as a political biographical essay about the author's mother and father.

What does an account of Vân and Thiét's lives have to do with and have to offer the study and practice of international relations? Answering this question requires further elaboration. Firstly, it is necessary to turn to critical social

²⁵ First published in 1967. Gabriel García Márquez (Gregory Rabassa trans.), *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (London: Picador, 1978).

²⁶ Tzvetan Todorov (Richard Howard trans.), *The Conquest of America: the Question of the Other* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984) 249.

theorists (including critical theorists, poststructuralists and postmodernists) who are renowned for their critiques of modern grand theories and, more importantly here, their conceptualisations of resistance. Lyotard proposes and celebrates clouds of “little narratives” which resist totalisation into any universal history and thereby undermine the ability of a general history to impose its credibility on ordinary people.²⁷ He refers to these little narratives as “micrologies” that defend reason by tracing “an immediate line of resistance to the current totalitarianism”.²⁸ Foucault offers the analytical process of “genealogy” which can be regarded as a systematic study of subjugated knowledges; that is, knowledges that are disqualified by a popular knowledge for being below an arbitrary and authoritarian threshold of “scienticity”.²⁹ Derrida asserts that social and political life can be seen as analogous to a text and should not be simply analysed to determine the author’s intent, but rather in a manner that acknowledges its multifaceted and rhetorical dimensions—its textuality. To this end, he puts forth the interpretive tool of deconstruction.³⁰ Deconstruction attempts to demonstrate how theories and discourses rely on artificial stabilities produced by the use of seemingly objective and natural oppositions in language.³¹ Moreover, to deconstruct seemingly self-evident stabilities—such as self/other, subject/object, rational/irrational and peace/war—is to show how they are artificially constructed and hierarchised to serve specific power interests. The related Derridean process of double reading involves firstly mimicking the dominant interpretation of a text, discourse or institution with all the accompanying assumptions and conventions and then, in a second reading, exposing the internal tensions within that dominant interpretation and how they

²⁷ Geoffrey Bennington, *Writing the Event* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) 113.

²⁸ Jean-François Lyotard (Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas trans.), *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence, 1982-1985* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 73.

²⁹ Michel Foucault (Colin Gordon ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) 82.

³⁰ For his seminal work on deconstruction see Jacques Derrida (Spivak, G.C. trans.), *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

³¹ Steve Smith, “New Approaches to International Theory” in John Baylis and Steve Smith (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 165-190 at 182. Many deconstructionists resist simplistic and confining explanations of what they do. See Chris Brown, “Turtles all the Way Down: Anti-Foundationalism, Critical Theory and International Relations” in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 23:2 (Summer 1994): 213-236 at 226 footnote 29.

have been concealed or expelled to achieve stability and consensus.³²

Importantly, the objective of both deconstruction and double reading is not to prove the innate falseness of prevailing power relations, but rather to expose how “any story depends on the repression of internal tensions in order to produce a stable effect of homogeneity and continuity”.³³ Another textual approach is offered by Said who promotes the “contrapuntal reading” of books, histories and ideas—particularly those that have been reified as classics—in order to uncover the litany of intertwined and interpenetrating perspectives that have been overshadowed and overlooked in the process of canonisation.³⁴

Secondly, it is necessary to point out that these critical social theories have had a revolutionary impact on international relations scholarship. From the early 1980s a small group of international relations theorists set out to smash the engrained positivist icons that underpinned incumbent international political thought and action. Using devices such as genealogy, discourse analysis, double reading and deconstruction they demonstrated that what were perceived to be neutral and universal categorisations, concepts and processes in the study/practice of international relations were in fact partial and local. They questioned the underlying rationale of existing doctrines, divisions and debates, asserting that many virulent and enduring battles over ideology and policy concealed a debilitating epistemological collusion. Walker, for instance, double read and deconstructed Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, while Ashley undertook a similar task with Waltz’s neorealist classic, *Man, the State and War*, to demonstrate how these seminal books could be contextualised and conceptualised in alternative ways to that of positivist monological realism and with radically different conclusions.³⁵ More specifically, Walker destabilised the idealist/realist opposition by suggesting that, read in light of his other works and in the broader

³² Richard Devetak, “Postmodernism” in Scott Burchill and Andrew Linklater (eds.), *Theories of International Relations* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996) 179-209 at 190.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993) 63.

³⁵ RBJ Walker, “*The Prince* and ‘The Pauper’: Tradition, Modernity, and Practice in the Theory of International Relations” in James Der Derian and Michael Shapiro (eds.), *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1989) 25-48. Richard K. Ashley, “Living on Border Lines: Man, Poststructuralism, and War” in Der Derian and Shapiro, *International/Intertextual Relations*, 259-322.

context of Italian Renaissance culture, Machiavelli can be seen to be making historically specific prescriptions that could just as easily be related to humanism and civic virtue as it has been more commonly related to realism and power politics.³⁶ Ashley demonstrated how realist portrayals of an anarchical and irrational world “out there” are complicit in strategic understandings of “man” as supremely sovereign and rational.³⁷ He pointed out that the state is conceived by analogy with sovereign man as a pre-given entity which is solely capable of creating order in the constructed context of international anarchy.³⁸ In effect, this serves to justify state violence and control. Bolstering this argument, Campbell and Dillon asserted that violence is simultaneously “the thing which the modern state is designed to protect citizens against, but also that which makes possible the modern state as a shelter from violence.”³⁹ Der Derian’s genealogy of diplomacy offered six different but related paradigms from which diverse but valid understandings of the doctrinal history of diplomacy can be derived.⁴⁰ Drawing from Nietzsche, he illuminated new possibilities for understanding and undertaking diplomacy without creating a rigid dogma. In this sense he achieved Nietzsche’s aim, “To replace the improbable with the more probable, possibly one error with another.”⁴¹ Finally, with critical feminist theory, we have seen the use of women’s personal narratives to forge cracks in the overarching, positivist and patriarchal façade of the international political theoretical orthodoxy. Enloe, for instance, has potently asserted that everyday goings-on involving women as secretaries, shoppers, prostitutes, factory workers and mothers are intrinsically tied to global political activities such as the provision of foreign loans, the maintenance of armies and the morale of nations.⁴² Her work unveils a landscape

³⁶ Walker, “*The Prince* and ‘*The Pauper*’”, 33.

³⁷ See Ashley, “Living on Border Lines”, 268.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Devetak, “Postmodernism”, 194 paraphrasing David Campbell and Michael Dillon, “Introduction” in David Campbell and Michael Dillon (eds.) *The Political Subject of Violence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993) 161.

⁴⁰ These paradigms are diplomacy, mytho-diplomacy, proto-diplomacy, anti-diplomacy, neo-diplomacy, and techno-diplomacy. James Der Derian, *On Diplomacy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

⁴¹ Friedrich Nietzsche (W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale trans.), *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage, 1969) 18. Cited in Der Derian, *On Diplomacy*, 3.

⁴² See particularly Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches & Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). *Does Khaki Become You: The Militarization of Women’s Lives* (London: Pandora, 1988). *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). “Women after Wars: Puzzles and Warnings” in Kathleen Barry (ed.) *Vietnam’s Women in Transition* (London: Macmillan, 1996) 299-316.

that is not exclusively male and inspires us to contemplate more deeply and expansively not only about how to think and do international relations, but also what constitutes it.

The preceding potted history—a brief contrivance of intellectual and epistemological influences—brings us to this dissertation which itself represents a form of everyday resistance. The following stories about Vân and Thiết are little annoying narratives, genealogies, deconstructions, double and contrapuntal readings of the Indochina Wars and their aftermath which interrogate purportedly over-arching grand theories and events so as to provide a stage for often unacknowledged instances of everyday resistance. The aim is not to homogenise these complex and often elusive critical social theories, but rather to draw upon their richness and hybridity to articulate silenced voices, highlight camouflaged courage and actualise repressed possibilities. As with Enloe's work, the intention is to both zoom into and broaden the scope of what is considered international relations, taking the spotlight away from grand theories and momentous figures and refocussing it upon the everyday characters who they so often purport to serve and too regularly betray.

Creative nonfiction and biography in particular can be a potent means of achieving these tasks for three reasons. Firstly, emotive personal narratives using localised forms of evidence serve as a counter-balance to literature that is preoccupied with omnipotent celebrities, overarching theories and impenetrable statistics. Such narratives provide an effective means of humanising politics by (re)introducing empathy into the hearts and minds of experts who do not venture far from prescribed forms of writing and knowing and thus, for all their calculating, never truly understand. Biography, it is argued, can critique and resist the scientification and rationalisation of people, and thereby serve on the front line in the war for the “correct naming of things” against those who have an interest in obfuscating stinking death, hapless misery, outrageous injustice, the richness of life, and the wonders of love. The personal narrative is thus not only a legitimate foundation for the contemporary study and practise of international relations; it is a particularly valuable one. To an extent this has even been

acknowledged by the arch positivist and father of Cold War containment theory, George Kennan:

There is only one history for us to learn from—I count literature as a way of meditating on history. The kind of history I favor is biographical because that alone is capable of reaffirming the value of the individual.⁴³

Secondly, by putting forth real life characters for comparison and contrast, biography serves as an accessible and empowering means of conveying and establishing a legitimate rival knowledge claim to a broad range of people. Some would argue that academia is about specialisation and that specialised writing and thinking requires a specialised language that is incomprehensible to all who do not speak it. One can respond by asking, “Why? Why does this *always* have to be the case? Why shouldn’t accessibility at times be a legitimate scholarly objective? Is it not the case that academic obscurity is too often mistaken for profundity?” Moreover, when constructing standards and boundaries of/to knowledge, surely it is prudent and “academic” to contemplate not only who are we keeping in and out, but also “What are we trying to protect? What do we have to hide?”⁴⁴ Furthermore, one of the central arguments of this dissertation is that grand figures are not the only individuals who matter in international relations. It would be both unconscionable and contradictory if it were written in such a way that only grand figures could read it.

Thirdly, personal narratives offer a way of conveying a prescriptive message through the presentation of exemplary characters. At the same time, however, the use of varied characters and interpretations allows for the acknowledgement of truth as fractured and multi-vocal. Importantly, provided that the characters are not (quint)essentialised or idolised, biographical accounts offer guidance without the pretence of universality or a foreboding aura of compulsion. By both evoking the familiar and taking the reader to another place, creative personal narratives

⁴³ Cited from a 1989 interview with Kennan in Fred Inglis, *The Cruel Peace: Everyday Life in the Cold War* (New York: Basic Books, 1991) 95.

⁴⁴ In this vein Bill Readings referred to the neurotic professionalised academic expert as possessing a “tendency to ignore that they have been ignored – to clap oneself in a nut shell of one’s theory, to line it with mirrors, and to count oneself king and infinite space....” Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) 72.

encourage the emergence of alternative voices rather than smothering or antagonising them. Essential to the achievement of these tasks is that the author adopts a degree of humility and candour. As the new journalist Dan Wakefield asserts:

I am writing now for those readers—including myself—who have grown increasingly mistrustful of and bored with anonymous reports about the world, whether signed or unsigned, for those who have begun to suspect what we reporters of current events and problems so often try to conceal: that we are really individuals after all, not all-knowing, all-seeing Eyes but separate, complex, limited, particular “I”s.

In the spirit of this humility and candour, we turn to issues of methodology and memory.

Methodologies, Memories and Modernities

If biography can do much to humanise international relations, it also has great potential for the dehumanisation of those who are being written about. The very act of writing itself, asserts Lévi-Strauss, is a means “to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings”.⁴⁵ Biographers in particular are regarded as a violent bunch, dedicated to a transgressive and parasitic process of metaphoric exploitation. They force their grimacing characters into iron suits of coherence, order and eloquence—suits that never quite fit. In this case, this point is illustrated by the fact that the underlying theoretical framework of this biographical essay is a construct of Western men (specifically Certeau, Scott and mostly male critical theorists including to some extent the author). Does this negate the possibility of ethical representation, unhampered by dictatorial imperatives? Is it still possible to write about Vân and Thiét “on their own terms?”

In responding to these questions it is necessary to accept a certain level of paradox and recognise that it is impossible and undesirable to paint pure images

⁴⁵ Claude Lévi Strauss (John Russell trans.), *Tristes Tropiques* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991) 192. Cited in Abbas Milani, “Narratives of Modernity: Perspective of an Oriental Despot” in Michael J. Shapiro and Hayward R. Alker (eds.), *Challenging Boundaries: Global Flows, Territorial Identities* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 219-232 at 219.

of the past and the Other. But this is not a woeful concession, as it is intricately tied to the celebration of a researcher's (and in this particular case, a multicultural migrant's and a son's) capacity to act as a bridge between often disparate times and places. The mortar holding this bridge together is a commitment to reflexion and a continual endeavour to secure one's footing on either side with an aim to perhaps someday transcending the division altogether. And so it is also acknowledged, subsequent to reflexion and endeavour, that at the metatheoretical, theoretical and *ex post facto* theoretical levels there are also "Eastern" influences that are not precisely quantifiable, but which are nonetheless distinctive and pervasive. The recording of ancestral history for instance is a typically Confucian undertaking, very much different to this biography in a procedural sense, but possessing similar underlying motives such as paying homage to those who have come before and providing a legacy for those to follow. The Confucian notion of *tu thân* (self-cultivation) which featured prominently in the upper echelons of imperial Vietnamese society is also noteworthy in its relevance to the central philosophy of this thesis. While the intricacies of *tu thân* cannot be explored here, it is enough to say that this notion asserts that personal cultivation and family interactions can/should provide a foundation and model for national and international relations.⁴⁶ While *tu thân's* personal-political prescriptions are far more rigid and expansive than the messages in this thesis, there is nevertheless an overlap in the sense that both seek to promote the enhancement and linking of self cultivation with the regulation of the family, the governing of the state, and world peace.⁴⁷ In short, to suggest that this biographical thesis is an attempt to recolonise Việt Nam using new concepts of Western enlightenment and benevolence, is to understate the hybridity encompassed within Việt Nam, the West and the author.

There are of course measures that biographers can take to loosen the grasp of their commanding minds and scribing hands. Firstly, it should be appreciated that (as in the "real worlds") in the worlds of literature tyranny is never complete. With respect to both non-fiction and fiction, every-page resistance is carried out

⁴⁶ A more detailed exposition of *tu thân* can be found in David G. Marr, "Concepts of the 'Individual' and 'Self' in Modern Vietnam" in *Modern Asian Studies* 34:4 (2000) 769-796 at 773.

⁴⁷ In Vietnamese, *tu thân, tề gia, trị quốc, bình thiên hạ*.

by characters against the indulgent whims of writers who in the end, “scheme in vain, for characters always manage to evade one’s all-seeing eye long enough to think thoughts and utter dialogue one could never have come up with if plot were all there were”.⁴⁸

It will perhaps provide further comfort to the reader who is concerned with the authorial dominance of this political biography to emphasise its intrinsically collaborative nature. Firstly, it is collaborative in the sense that the two main characters, Vân and Thiết, are also the most influential political and philosophical figures in the author’s life and work. Secondly, this dissertation is collaborative because it is the product of events lived by Vân and Thiết and filtered through their memories as they were recounted to the author in good faith. This was discussed with each of them before they were reminded that, “You need to recall and tell me what were you thinking back then?” or “How you felt at the time?” These were, of course, ambit appeals. Often there is irresolvable contestation over whether or not events took place and acts were committed. Especially difficult to pin down, however, are the motivations behind those events and acts. States of mind are labile, but even more labile is the memory of them.⁴⁹ As a result, totally faithful and reliable answers do not exist to the questions that were posed to Vân and Thiết concerning times “back then”. However, it is also the case—and a central argument of this thesis—that while a great deal of their pasts have been flavoured by subsequent experiences, there is also much continuity and repetition in their lives recollected. Memories sometimes change and sometimes stay the same. It is the forlorn task of the biographer to interpret and distinguish between the two.

After being sieved through Vân and Thiết’s memories and those of other informants, this narrative was manipulated and reconstructed by the author before being offered to the reader to complete the text. Perhaps the best way to describe this process is by comparing it to the act of dreaming:

⁴⁸ Thomas Pynchon, “Introduction” to George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin 2003) xxi.

⁴⁹ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage, 1988) 30.

In our dreams we are always conscious of our role as a shadowy watcher, through whom the 'story' is somehow flowing, while at the same time we are the protagonist—experiencing the same events we are watching. And then there is the third self: the recumbent figure sleeping, the dreamer.⁵⁰

To acknowledge that the author cannot exclude himself/herself and intervening history from biographical writing (or reading) is not to succumb to the allure of fiction. On the contrary, such recognition serves to enhance consciousness of those countless instances where imagination is a tempting substitute for rigorous research and/or a convenient way to promote a political cause. As a result, the author's imagination has been kept in check by the weight of evidence from detailed and exhaustive interviews, cross-referencing and, where possible, encouraging contributors to read the completed work.

In addition, the level of appropriation that accompanies the biographical process has been curtailed in this thesis by customising the methodological approaches and representational strategies to each character. Thiết's story is more structured, "male" and "modern" in the (stereotypical) sense that words (both his and the author's) provide a clear lens to an ostensibly comprehensible reality, and actions are a precise reflection of rationalised intentions. It is the straight-line story of individual endeavour from backwardness to progress and darkness to light. And as is the case with such bipolarities, Thiết can often be understood by what he is not, by what he has overcome. While at times intricate, his life is there to be discovered by a biographer who possesses the skill and will to find and excavate it.

Vân's life story on the other hand cannot simply be pin-pointed, unearthed and told even with the most precise directions and unyielding determination. It offers far more interpretative scope than Thiết's, such that the lens through which the reader gains an understanding of her history is necessarily opaque. Adopting a slightly more postmodern approach, the aim with respect to Vân's story is to explore the textuality (both in a literal and philosophical sense) of her life and

⁵⁰ Brian Matthews, *Louisa* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1987) 13.

times. Historical understanding is sought/mediated through her and others' reactions to and interpretations of cultural trends and in particular via the influential literary narratives of her life.

In this vein, it is also necessary to customise to each character some of the key terms of this thesis. With respect to (and after consultation with) Thiết, "tradition" and "modernity" are used in his chapters to refer to orthodox and largely bipolar sociological conceptualisations. The former is degraded, the latter valorised, and the coupling itself is closely related to Thiết's journeys from rural to urban, superstition to science, seasonal time to clock time, subsistence agriculture to industries of scale, and poverty to plenty.

After discussions with (and analysis of) Vân's character, it was determined that her notions of "tradition" and "modernity" are not as clear cut as Thiết's. "Tradition" in her story refers to the (far from isolated nor necessarily anachronistic) era directly prior to the French colonisation of Indochina. During this period, Việt Nam was ruled by the Nguyễn dynasty which Emperor Gia Long established in 1802. Gia Long's reign heralded the resurgence of a conservative Confucian ethic. Most notably, he introduced a twenty-two volume legal code that was closely modelled on the Chinese Ch'ing Dynasty's (1644-1911) legal code. This "new-as-old" legislation undermined the official status of women to such an extent that, following the black letter of the law, a husband was obliged to divorce his wife if she committed one of seven out: infertility; adultery; neglect of parents-in-law; talkativeness; theft; jealousy; and incurable diseases.⁵¹

Late nineteenth century French colonialism was the catalyst for the introduction of "modern" Western technologies and notions of individualism, liberalism and science which eroded elements of the Confucian conservatism advocated by the Nguyễn emperors. Importantly, it is not suggested by the author or Vân that French colonialism (which, among other things, facilitated totalitarian rubber

⁵¹ Phạm Văn Bích, *The Vietnamese Family in Change: The Case of the Red River Delta* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999) 111-8. Mai Thị Tú and Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết, *Women in Vietnam* (Hà Nội: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1978) 12-30.

plantations and the proliferation of opium dens and brothels) practically and wilfully promoted the emancipation of Vietnamese women or Vietnamese more generally. Rather, it allowed for the filtering and stimulation of revolutionary ideas that were debated, adopted and customised by the Vietnamese (including Vân) before being mobilised against both pre-existing and new forms of colonial and patriarchal oppression.

Roughly speaking, then, Vân's story articulates "tradition" and "modernity" as a complex interaction between nineteenth century Vietnamese-Confucianism and twentieth century Franco-Vietnamese enlightenment ideals. In adopting this nebular and still-open turning point, however, two preliminary defences must be made. The first responds to accusations of mistaking Chinese colonial oppression for some "true essence" of tradition and French colonial oppression for some "true essence" of modernity, and thereby promoting a demeaning image of Vietnamese provincialism. Such accusations rely upon simplistic and misleading distinctions between Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese and disregard the at times admirable and potent capacity of the Vietnamese for tactical cultural poaching. Take for example the beloved legend of *Âu Lạc* which tells of the birth of the Vietnamese people from the fairy queen *Âu Cơ* and the dragon lord *Lạc Long Quân*. There is evidence to suggest that when this legend was first coined, *Lạc Long Quân* was portrayed as an eel-like creature rather than a sea dragon. His reptilian evolution from eel to dragon occurred as a result of a developing Vietnamese admiration for Chinese dragons. Such is the real and enduring nature of this admiration that today it would be obsolete and inaccurate to regard an eel king as the traditional and one-true mythical progenitor of the Vietnamese race.⁵² Similar assessments can be made of the Vietnamese national alphabet (*quốc ngữ*), the epic poem *Kiêu* and the long tunic (*áo dài*) which were heavily influenced by external forces and yet are no less Vietnamese for that. As such, this thesis examines the Vietnamese and Vân's appropriation of foreign ideas and practices just as much as it does their acquisition and submission to them.

⁵² A. Terry Rambo, "Black Flight Suits and White *Aó Dài*: Borrowing and Adaptation of Symbols of Vietnamese Cultural Identity" in Trương Bửu Lâm (ed.), *Borrowings and Adaptations in Vietnamese Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1987) 115-123.

The second defence to the adoption of these conceptualisations of “tradition” and “modernity” with respect to Vân (and perhaps Thiết too) relates to accusations that they reify images of entrenched female subservience in Việt Nam. And so it must be pointed out that in Việt Nam’s long and rich history, Confucianism, patriarchy and matriarchy have had varying levels of influence. For instance, the Hồng Đức legal code which was introduced circa 1475 by Emperor Lê Thánh Tông was highly progressive and egalitarian in terms of the property ownership, inheritance and divorce rights that it provided to women. Moreover, in pre-Neolithic times (circa 8000BC) there is evidence to suggest that Vietnamese society was distinctively matriarchal.⁵³ It is not uncommon, then, in Việt Nam (and elsewhere) for the traditions of yesterday to become the modern practices of tomorrow.

A final caveat and reminder is necessary when adopting these conceptualisations for both Vân and Thiết. What are presented are conceptual tools, personalised and not universal definitions of modernity and tradition. Therefore they should not be applied uncritically to other contexts, but rather used with a dose of caution and irony so as to avoid hubristic monological interpretations. In this sense, the manner in which these concepts are presented (if not their substance) is consistent with the author’s interpretation of modernity and tradition. In both cases what the author does *not* envisage is a temporal or spatial sphere of uniform content demarcated by concrete boundaries. Nor is it contended that one epoch/idea is inherently good and the other irredeemably bad. More specifically, tradition is not always a shackle on individual freedom and progress or a fixed source of identity enrichment. In the same vein, modernity is not in the Weberian sense an “iron cage” that one either totally inhabits or constantly struggles to escape.⁵⁴ Rather, in both cases what is conceived is an historical set of attitudes concerning the construction of knowledge that emerges struggling against

⁵³ While it is not suggested that matriarchies or patriarchies are based on physical stature alone, archaeologists have found ancient remains of women in North Việt Nam who are nearly two metres tall with bronze bracelets around their wrists. It is arguable that the socio-psychological remnants of this matriarchal society have meant that, even after a millennium of Chinese rule over Việt Nam from 111 BC to 939 AD and periods of patriarchal Confucianism after that, Vietnamese women have enjoyed more private and public power than their Chinese counterparts (there was never any foot-binding in Việt Nam for instance). See Mai Thị Tú and Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết, *Women in Việt Nam*, 12-30.

⁵⁴ Ashley, “Living on Border Lines”, 260.

counter attitudes in what can be referred to as an “economy of power”.⁵⁵ With these issues of methodology, memory and modernities clarified, it is now possible to turn to the story itself.

A “Chose Your Own Adventure” Chapter Outline

The following chapter outline aims to provide the reader with an idea as to the structure and argument of this thesis without giving away the story. The reader can, however, without loss or liability postpone reading the next three paragraphs.

Chapter One explores Thiết’s childhood in a village in Central Việt Nam, illustrating how his family were driven into a wretched existence by the First Indochina War. In 1952, eleven year old Thiết visited the city of Đà Nẵng for the first time. There he was introduced to electric lights and touched ice for an earth-shattering instant. These experiences left the boy with a niggling desire to shed light upon darkness, to know and control the world out there. Chapter Three explains how the Việt Minh communists harnessed this desire such that at the age of thirteen he abandoned his family and migrated to a revolutionary village where he trained to become a ruthless revolutionary guerrilla. Following an examination of the US’ failed intervention in the First Indochina War and Cold War containment theory, the narrative turns to how Thiết found himself trapped under the 17th parallel after the 1954 Geneva Accords. Chapter Five depicts Thiết’s move to the city and how he gradually acquired a new faith in liberal-capitalism. However, even after he moved to Sài Gòn and became an icon of techno-rationality (an electrical technician), Thiết remained devoted to a narrow view of the world that was commensurate with the epistemological perspective of US technowar managers, his communist past, and which originated from that electrifying first contact with manufactured light and ice. Intertwined with Thiết’s story is an account of his sister, Hương, and how she used the tactics of everyday resistance to propel herself and her family out of indigence. Unfortunately, her doctrinaire adherence to the modes of (self)deception that

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 261.

were often necessary for survival and prosperity led to Hương's descent into decadence.

Vân's story offers a range of alternatives as to how one might understand both a vast historical epoch and one solitary life. Her journey of political identity formation through the twentieth century is more convoluted and liminal than Thiết's, and yet no less modern or Vietnamese.⁵⁶ It is a story full of contradictions, of radical liberation and renewing tradition. Chapter Two suggests that Vân's characteristic capacity for self-sacrifice was derived from a sense of inadequacy and responsibility that grew out of the fact that she was born a girl in a family starved of boys. It also explores the modern totalitarianism of the French civilising mission in the context of her grand uncle Tu's rubber plantation. Chapter Four follows Vân into high school where she learnt about and effectively integrated radical ideas from the West such as liberalism and individualism, while at the same time respecting and upholding Confucian submissions and virtues for women. In contrast, the Diệm regime is examined with particular emphasis on its unsuccessful and often brutal attempts to integrate old and new and East and West. Chapter Six illustrates how, after Vân and Thiết married, Vân was terrorised by a tyrannical mother-in-law who viewed her modern-day achievements as inconsequential or even impediments to a life of servitude. Their domestic battle was carried out in the realm of infrapolitics that was masked by more conventional political activity. Vân had a rare and profound ability to incisively reflect upon her own existence and that of others. This dissertation explores these self-examinations, often referring to the literary works that framed and influenced them (including the folktales of Trạng Quỳnh, The Tale of Kiều, modern novel from the Self-Strength Literary Group, and many popular proverbs and songs). The aim is to construct a rich account of one

⁵⁶ The term "liminal" in this context is related to "hybrid" in the sense that both draw from and reconcile multiple sources of influence. However, while hybridity refers to a continual process of combining influences; liminality invokes the contingent location on (and shifting from) one side or another of a porous border between cultures, identities, historical eras and roles. Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, "Engaging Subjective Knowledge: How Amar Singh's Diary Narratives of and by the Self Explain Identity Formation" in *Perspectives* 1:4 (December 2003) 681-694 at 683.

woman's struggle and a cogent refutation of the ultra-positivist/behaviouralist understandings of the Vietnamese that were so devastating during the Indochina Wars.

The two central messages of this dissertation relating to grand theories and everyday resistance are particularly relevant to post 1975 Sài Gòn which is the focus of Chapter Seven. During this time Vân and Thiêt were trapped in an Orwellian nightmare of constant surveillance and heinous conformity. However, even when this crisis of modernity was most oppressive, they and many other ordinary Vietnamese people found imaginative means to maintain their individual identities and acquire enough material goods to keep their loved ones alive. Eventually, when they could do this no longer, my family sought escape via a leaky and overcrowded boat.

*

Mum and Dad's stories are intriguing and memorable, but do not tell of unusual heroism or adversity. Undoubtedly there are alienated and oppressed persons worldwide, some of whom would view my family's ordeal as relatively trifling. Indeed, we have friends and relatives whose experiences during and after the war were far more harrowing than ours. Nevertheless, the fact that millions of others have overcome an (in)comparable degree of hardship and displacement in the context of twentieth century grand theories does not detract from the validity and value of my parents' particular stories, the grandeur of their courage, the totality of their sacrifice, or the boundless admiration and love that I have for them.

CHAPTER ONE:

Tells of how Thiết and his family subsisted in and resisted against the First Indochina War. Explores the barbarous ramifications of the French civilising mission and introduces the tactical poaching of Vietnamese anticolonialism.

Thiết: How's the study going son? The research I mean. Had any comments from your teachers or advisers lately? You're going well I assume? No problems?

Kim: I'm going OK Dad. Don't stress, I'll get my PhD and find a good job. I know how important that is, how important that is to you anyway.¹

Thiết: You know what? I think it'll be a great thesis. Of course, the critical part is the international politics. That's what'll make it you know? It's good that you're writing about politics. You could be a lecturer or a professor in future. You won't make as much money as your brother, but you could be famous. First, you have to realise that Việt Nam's got a long history. Do know about the French, and about the Americans and about Guam in 1969 and...?

Kim: For God's sake Dad! I've been doing this for almost four years now and I've been teaching politics for two! You don't have to worry so much. I've read about French colonialism and the Nixon Doctrine and heaps of other things too. I don't need to talk to you about that stuff. I need to talk to you about your

¹ Details of the author's data collection and interviewing methodology can be found in the bibliography at page 412.

childhood and our family. How many times do I have to tell you that my research is just as much about us as it is about anyone or anything else? When are you going to understand that? When are you going to accept it?

Thiệt: Alright, alright, I'll tell you what I can. Where do you want to start? It's really not that important or interesting though. Nobody wants to know about us. There's nothing to tell.

A Childhood almost Forgotten

All preceding moments in history led to the birth of my father in a small hut in Central Việt Nam. While the exact date of this event has been forgotten, what is remembered is that the midwife failed to arrive on time so that my grandmother was left to sever the umbilical cord and cast my father out onto the cold dirt floor. Thiết was born into the centre of the universe, into a point from which he could fashion time and space as he saw fit. Sadly, before he could become conscious of this empowering actuality, the universe collapsed around him.

“The French are coming! The French are coming!” spread through Thiết’s village of Bồ Bản as the sun set on another day in Quảng Nam province. Other villagers frantically beat saucepans, tins and pans to warn of the coming danger such that initially Thiết thought that an earthquake or mudslide had hit. It was December 1946 and Thiết was barely five years old, but he still remembers hearing those belated warnings and the clanging cacophony as Việt Minh revolutionaries and villagers retreated from advancing French forces and international politics exploded into his everyday life.

Wounded Việt Minh guerrillas suddenly hobbled and crawled into Thiết’s home past bowls of rice that had not yet cooled. One of them brusquely informed Thiết’s parents, “The Vietnamese people and the national liberation vanguard thank you for offering your house as a hospital in the struggle against French imperialism. You may now leave.” Thiết’s father and mother sidestepped blood-soaked and moaning revolutionaries as they hastened to gather their belongings

and small children into bundles and baskets that could be carried away on work-weary shoulders. It was not the first nor would it be the last time that patriotism, revolution and freedom were mercilessly imposed upon them.

“The French are coming! The French are coming!” screamed passers-by as Thiết, his parents, two older brothers and two older sisters shuffled towards the mountains, away from their ancestral home, from their crops and animals, and the explosive heat. Terrified and confused, Thiết clung to his eldest brother, Khiết, who seemed like the only solid thing left in his life as everything else dissolved into the fire and the night. Straining under the weight of his five-year-old brother, it was not long before Khiết had to put Thiết down. “Run, you’re too heavy! Run, just for a little while!” he urged. Thiết froze and watched with disbelief as his loved ones slipped away before screaming for them to return.

The entire family came to a halt thinking that something horrific had occurred to their youngest member. Thiết’s father, Việt, turned back and ran to his son whose arms were raised in expectation of a tender life-saving embrace. Instead, the young boy felt a thunderous slap across his face that dissipated his tears and nearly knocked him to the ground. “Are you stupid boy?!” Việt’s scolding rang in Thiết’s ears. “Stop your crying and hurry up!” Thiết regained his senses just in time to see his oldest brother receive a forceful blow for being complicit in the delay. There was no time for a child’s frailty or a father’s compassion as French planes roared through the night sky and the fire fell down around them.

Thiết’s family dived into gullies on the side of the road and lay with their eyes and mouths clenched shut, as if trying to shut out an unimaginable reality. When the earth stopped shaking they scampered onwards, soaked in sweat under blankets, cushions and pieces of cloth that Việt had strapped to their torsos to protect them in and from the battle. In all the commotion and terror, Việt had reverted to that natural and ordinary belief that we have some influence over whether our loved ones live or die; that layers of cloth provide some protection against bullets, bombs and shells.

The First Indochina War had begun. And for the French colonialists, it was a war of redemption. France had administered Việt Nam (or Annam as it was called at the time) since the 1880s with relative impunity, easily quashing any and all overt resistance movements with their superior military technology. “Trying to fight the French,” said the nineteenth century Vietnamese emperor Tự Đức, “is no different to grasshoppers kicking wagon wheels.” However, the onset of World War II brought French colonialism in Việt Nam to its knees. The invading Japanese usurped the Westerners and took military control in 1940, all the while proclaiming that Asia was for Asians. Tragically, the Vietnamese would suffer even greater hardship under Japanese occupation as their fellow Asians compelled them to produce food and materials for the war in the Pacific. Such was the brutality of this plunder that over a million Vietnamese in the Northern provinces perished during the ensuing famine.

Following their victory over the Axis forces in 1945, the Allied powers met at Potsdam to determine, among other things, the immediate fate of Việt Nam. Chiang Kai-shek’s Chinese nationalist forces were entrusted with the task of disarming the Japanese in Northern Việt Nam, while the South was to be administered by the British under the command of General Douglas Gracey. Characteristically, in the months that followed, the Vietnamese were betrayed and exploited by the great powers. Over a hundred thousand dishevelled and war-starved Chinese troops pillaged Northern Việt Nam. General Gracey released French POWs and allowed the French General Leclerc and his expeditionary corps to return to Sài Gòn from where they sought to retake all of Indochina. Hungry for the resources and pride that they had lost during World War II, of all the colonial nations France was particularly averse to relinquishing the prizes of its once grand empire. Charles de Gaulle made clear in August 1946 that, “United with the overseas territories which she opened to civilization, France is a great power. Without these territories she would be in danger of no longer being one.”²

² Cited in Michael Maclear, *Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War* (London: Thames Methuen, 1981) 30.

But the Vietnamese had tasted independence and were determined to hold on to it. Taking advantage of the opportunity that arose between the defeat of the Japanese and the resurgence of the French, Hồ Chí Minh, the leader of the League for the Independence of Việt Nam (the Việt Minh), declared Vietnamese independence on 2 September 1945 in Hà Nội.³ Not long afterwards, a relatively pluralistic national parliament was elected and the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRV) was born under Hồ Chí Minh's presidency. In the following year the French regained control of the South and negotiations took place between the reinvigorated colonists and the defiant Vietnamese regime. At the same time the Việt Minh brutally purged the DRV national assembly of non-aligned factions. The negotiations faltered and, by the end of 1946, Việt Nam was on the brink of war.

During the first days of December around ten thousand French soldiers landed at Đà Nẵng, the capital of Thiết's province of Quảng Nam. The invading forces pillaged the city, tearing down the red flags with a single yellow star in the middle that symbolised the fledgling nation. On the evening of 19 December 1946, the DRV leadership announced that, "The French have sent us a letter requesting our surrender and we have refused." Shortly afterwards, war was declared on all fronts. In the North, Centre and South of Việt Nam, Hồ Chí Minh informed anti-colonial soldiers and militia that:

The Fatherland is in danger!
 The time has come to attack!
 We must rush to the front, kill the enemy and save the nation!
 Fight and sacrifice to the last drop of blood.
 Destroy the French imperialists.⁴

³ Hồ Chí Minh was born Nguyễn Tất Thanh and used a number of synonyms throughout his life, the most popular being Nguyễn Ai Quốc (Nguyễn the Patriot), Bác Hồ (Uncle Hồ) and Hồ Chí Minh (He who is enlightened).

⁴ Nhà Xuất Bản Quân Đội Nhân Dân, *Quảng Nam – Đà Nẵng: 30 Năm Chiến Đấu và Chiến Thắng (1945 – 1954), Tập I [Quảng Nam – Đà Nẵng: 30 Years of Struggle and Victory (1945 – 1954), Volume I]* (Đà Nẵng: Nhà Xuất Bản Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 1988) 67. See also Hồ Chí Minh, *Toàn Tập: Tập 4 [Collected Works: Volume 4]* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Sự Thật, 1984) 202-3. All translations are by the author unless indicated otherwise.

During the first weeks of the war in Thiêt's province and over much of Việt Nam, French forces drove the Việt Minh into the countryside and mountainous jungles, arguably coming close to complete military victory in a matter of months.⁵ The Việt Minh, however, was both strategically and psychologically well-equipped to deal with this daunting turn of events. Decades of analysing uprisings in Việt Nam and other parts of the world had endowed Việt Minh leaders with an understanding of the patience, organisation and commitment required to overcome their foe. Many of them had served sentences in colonial jails which they had transformed into revolutionary education institutions.⁶ On 22 December 1946, three days after the opening of hostilities, Hồ Chí Minh's government issued a declaration drawing from the Maoist model of a protracted people's war.⁷ It was envisaged that the conflict would be fought in three phases: an initial phase of defence and withdrawal; followed by a protracted phase of guerrilla warfare (the holding phase); and then the final counter-offensive.⁸ According to Mao, during the first stage revolutionaries "must be prepared for long retreats, during which they may temporarily grow even weaker. The enemy, however, will also be growing weaker because of the lengthening logistic lines, harassment by the Red guerrillas, weakening morale, and increasing

⁵ Greg Lockhart, *Nation in Arms: The Origins of the People's Army of Vietnam* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989) 69.

⁶ David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) 313-5. See also David G. Marr (ed.), *Reflections from Captivity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1978).

⁷ William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996) 135.

⁸ Defence (*phòng ngự*); holding (*cầm cự*); and the general counter offensive (*tổng phản công*). When Mao's protracted war model was first espoused by the Vietnamese communists in 1941, Hồ Chí Minh simplified it to a three stage progression from political struggle, to joint political and military struggle, culminating in a mass uprising. At the outset of military conflict in late 1946, the Việt Minh turned to a more direct expression of Mao's strategy which was aptly reflected in the Party's prominent ideologist (and Sinophile) Trường Chinh's treatise, *The Resistance Will Win*. William Duiker, "Vietnamese Revolutionary Doctrine in Comparative Perspective" in William S. Turley (ed.), *Vietnamese Communism in Comparative Perspective* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980) 45-74 at 53-54.

It should be noted that the Việt Minh did not slavishly adopt Mao's military strategy. Indeed, Lockhart suggests that it is possible that by the late 1930s Indochinese Communist Party members derived such a theory in parallel to Mao. Moreover, there was no shortage of practical adaptations and variations on Mao's model and the head of the Việt Minh armed forces, Võ Nguyên Giáp, expressed uncertainty as to the prospect of drawing clear divisions between the several stages. Lockhart, *Nation in Arms*, 71. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 136. George K. Tanham, *Communist Revolutionary Warfare: The Vietminh in Indochina* (New York: Praeger, 1961) 15.

unfriendliness of the population.”⁹ In the second stage the revolutionaries would steadily wear down and isolate the enemy in preparation for the final victorious general offensive.¹⁰

With his penchant for analogy, Hồ Chí Minh aptly foreshadowed how the war would be fought in an interview three months before its commencement. “The spirit of man is more powerful than machines, which cannot operate effectively in swamps and thick jungles,” he asserted before likening the imminent conflict to a contest between an elephant and a tiger.¹¹

If the tiger ever stands still the elephant will crush him with his mighty tusks. But the tiger does not stand still. He lurks in the jungle by day and emerges by night. He will leap upon the back of the elephant, tearing huge chunks from his hide, and then he will leap back into the dark jungle. And slowly the elephant will bleed to death. That will be the war in Indochina.¹²

At that stage, Thiết’s parents strongly supported Hồ Chí Minh and the anti-colonial movement. They had made substantial contributions when revolutionaries came to the village earlier that year during the “week of gold” and asked for donations to buy supplies, guns and bullets for the Việt Minh. As Thiết’s parents fled towards his mother’s home village of Hương Lam, however, there was no time to consider political allegiances, pontificate over ideological platforms or wonder how this offensive might impact upon the strategic balance of power in the war for national liberation. Trapped in the crossfire, they were not about to encounter any friendly bullets.

By the time Thiết’s family arrived in Hương Lam later that evening, the battle was a relatively safe distance behind them and the exhausted refugees rested at a house belonging to one of Thiết’s aunts. A few days later, Việt undertook a scouting expedition back to his home village at which time he discovered that Bồ

⁹ Paraphrasing of Mao’s *On Protracted War*. Cited in Tanham, *Communist Revolutionary Warfare*, 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ David Schoenbrun, *As France Goes* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957) 234-6. Cited in William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Hyperion, 2000) 379.

¹² *Ibid.*

Bản had become a combat zone and that his house had been permanently appropriated as a medical outpost. With little chance in the near future of returning to their everyday lives, throughout the winter of 1946/1947 Việt and his family existed without vision or design, anxiously awaiting a push or pull that would redirect their dismal inertia. They did not resist or expect but simply endured. As is told in the great poem *Kiều*:

Just run the risk, close your eyes and take a step
See how the earth spins and where it takes you.¹³

During those long and frightful months in Hương Lam, the only thing that seemed certain was that the war would eventually come for them. And with this fact at the forefront of his mind, Việt buried some money, rice, saucepans and vital documents including two or three precious photographs. In so doing he made a pledge, to persevere in the hope of someday exhuming his life and valuables from the earth. Even if he did not make it back, thought Việt, that bundle might be recovered in the near or distant future and serve as the only material evidence of his family presence on the earth. By that time the currency might be worthless, the grains of rice would surely be inedible, and the identification papers faded beyond recognition; but there was also some small chance of Việt passing on an invaluable and indelible message, “We were here. We existed. We loved, fought and sacrificed for one another until the last day, and deserve our place in history.” “We were here,” was the message entombed in the soil on that day, “and we will not be forgotten like ripples on a pond or so many leaves after autumn.”

There was no warning on the day French forces came to pacify Hương Lam, so it was both terrifying and perplexing when huts and the people inside them seemed to spontaneously catch alight. The bombs came from all directions as villagers hastened to find refuge from the deluge of metal and fire. Thiết and his siblings rushed home from their chores or games and congregated around their father who

¹³ *Cũng liều nhắm mắt đưa chân, Thử xem con tạo xoay vần đến đâu.*

Recounted by Thiết. For a bilingual (Vietnamese-English) edition of this epic poem see Nguyễn Du (Huỳnh Sanh Thông trans.), *The Tale of Kiều* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

calmly but firmly directed them to gather what they could, stay close together, and run. Again, Việt relied on instinct to guide his family through the anarchy and destruction. A few smaller groups of villagers dashed into the jungle, but Thiết's family found themselves with the majority of escapees travelling in a south-westerly direction towards the Trường Sơn mountain range.

Frantically, they shuffled through the countryside, this time under the blazing midday sun. It was not until late in the afternoon that the family arrived at the township of Đại Lộc where, without relatives or friends, they were forced to camp in the street under a shelter made of branches and refuse. With the rice and money that they had brought, Thiết's parents were able to buy supplies from locals who were surviving on corn after consecutive rice harvests had been interrupted by drought and war. It was not long before bitterness developed between the refugees and the residents, and bickering and theft became commonplace. Then the shells started falling and the bullets started flying, and visitors and locals alike were unified in their homelessness and despair.

The family's flight from Đại Lộc was by far the most arduous of their evacuations to date, as the war pursued them throughout the entire day and then into the night. The flurry of explosions sent jolts through their bare feet, even as the howling of planes rattled their eardrums. Fatigue rose to the top of the family's list of enemies, so that time and place blurred and all they could feel was the weariness that had seeped into their bones. Upon arriving in alien and sometimes abandoned villages, the children asked to stop and rest but, ever aware of his responsibilities, Việt pushed his family onwards. It was not until they reached the village of Ngọc Kinh, and Việt sensed that they had momentarily escaped the battle, that he allowed his family to collapse in the street.

Only a few days passed before the insatiable war came for the family and Ngọc Kinh. This time Việt reasoned that to continue their retreat on the roads was to die of exhaustion and/or gunfire. The only option left, then, was to lead his wife and children into the precarious sanctuary of the jungle. Together, with as many worldly possessions as they could carry, the family stumbled along an overgrown

track deeper into the sub-tropical rainforest as the clamorous sounds of conflict faded behind them. Now they were terrorised by squadrons of mosquitoes, ant regiments, armoured scorpions and battalions of ticks. And ever-present was the onslaught of hunger and fatigue, exacerbated by a growing sense of resignation, a sense that it was futile for ordinary people to seek security in a time of war.

After almost a full day of strenuous hiking, Thiết's family reached a rocky outcrop at the base of a mountain where small groups of escapees had already taken refuge in the crevices and caves. They hastily set up camp in an empty cavern before Việt climbed a short distance up the mountain and looked over the countryside. The green expanse between him and the Eastern Ocean was potted with smouldering patches that had once been lively villages. Việt could only hope that Bồ Bản was not one of them. Since the beginning of the war, now almost half a year ago, Việt wondered, "How many dreams have been laid to waste? How many children would never grow up? How much wisdom had been incinerated with their elderly?" Never had Việt yearned so desperately for his homeland, and never did it seem so far away.

Living Down to the Expectations of Sarraut's Civilising

Mission

Thiết's family was inexperienced and largely inept when it came to jungle survival. Fortunately, the streams that flowed around Ngọc Kinh Mountain provided them with an abundance of clean water. There was also bamboo that could be used for the construction of makeshift shelters and to replace old shoulder poles. Otherwise, their environment was at best barren and at worst hostile. Incapable of harvesting food from the wilderness, the family's food supplies soon dwindled to life-threatening levels. Each night Thiết's mother, Thừa, had to determine how much rice they could afford to eat and how much fish paste or salt could be added for flavour. The solitary evening meal invariably became more watery and bland as each day passed. With the fighting all around them and growing in intensity, Việt and Thừa's belief in themselves—in their ability to sustain their family—also diminished. "We were trapped and thought

that we were going to die right there,” Thừa would remark many years later before using a popular proverb to express the fact that she had resigned her own fate and that of her loved ones to forces above and beyond her mortal existence. “We will make it,” she thought and hoped, if only because:

The heavens conceive elephants,
And bestow the grass for them to eat.¹⁴

And then one day, an escapee from the war staggered into the jungle in search of food and shelter. Việt was the first to spot the straggling cow and could not believe his good fortune. He gathered some other men and with hawkish speed pounced upon the emaciated beast. They flailed and blooded it with their rudimentary tools before haphazardly segregating the enormous parcels of flesh, more meat than they could possibly consume or preserve—a bovine bonanza! That night, Thiết’s family sat around the fire in remnants of clothes, ripping off and gnawing on chunks of charred beef with their never-brushed teeth, filling stomachs that had almost forgotten what it was like to be content.

Unfortunately, this banquet of beef was a fleeting luxury that was quickly overridden by the oncoming of disease. During his time on Ngọc Kinh Mountain, Thiết often caught glimpses of wraith-like creatures with swollen hands and feet that were shaking incessantly. Starved of rice and vegetables, these people had fallen victim to beri-beri and would surely soon pass on to the next life. More prominent was the rustling sound and off-putting sight of habitual scratching. Scabies were ubiquitous; that is, mites were feasting upon almost every square inch of their skin and flesh, inviting bacteria and infection. Many of them looked like lepers with their skin broken and their clothes sticking to their festering wounds. Against his mother’s commands, Thiết peeled off the irritating scabs that covered his arms to reveal pockets of pale yellow pus mixed with blood into which flies adored landing and feasting. The resultant scars would remind him of this terrifying time for decades to come. And in the night as he tried to sleep, Thiết heard groans echo through the caves from those who lay shaking in

¹⁴ *Trời sinh voi, Trời sinh cỏ*. Recounted by Thiết.

malaria-induced delirium, groans that were accompanied by the terrifying buzz of circling mosquitoes.

Perhaps if the various groups had cooperated and shared information and resources, those weeks in the jungle would have been less arduous. For the most part, however, Thiét's family stayed away from the other refugees who were lurking in the crevices and shadows. When two unknown parties crossed paths, they would at most exchange a nod or a grunt. Never did they stop to inquire about the war, convey their stories of hardship, or share and perhaps dilute feelings of displacement and anguish. This cautiousness grew not out of ignorance or indifference towards the other but rather, a deep understanding of their common predicament. Việt and Thừa knew all too well that when a certain point of desperation is reached, even the most meagre crumbs in the hands of another can seem justifiably yours, and that it was at this point that Machiavellian acts of violence and deceit became both rational and likely.

Importantly, this is not to assert that the primitiveness of Thiét's family's predicament and behaviour was a consequence of innate cultural and evolutionary deficiencies. Indeed, it is more accurate to say that their barbarism was directly related to Western progress; that they had been driven into a prehistoric existence by the intricate ideologies, narrow epistemologies and dazzling machines of the French civilising mission. Thus, to envisage Thiét living in this wretched state is to understand one of the many ways in which the Vietnamese were forced to live down to the expectations of their colonial masters. And with this image in mind, it is possible to discover deeper truths in the degrading/benevolent statements made by Indochina experts at the time.

Annamites at best are never clean, but sickness shows up this trait in its most revolting form. To have his pulse taken, the patient clothed in be-
vermined rags extends a grimy fist covered with layers of dust.¹⁵

¹⁵ Virginia Thompson, *French Indo-China* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1937) 283. This is the first major work published in English on Indochina. It is however, based wholly on French sources and Thompson's outlook concurs with that of French colonialists at the time. Westerners referred to Vietnamese as "Annamese" or "Annamites" until at least 1945. The term "Annam" was also used during the French colonial era in a narrower sense to distinguish Central Vietnam from the North (Tonkin) and the South (Cochinchina). Partly because the term meant "Pacified South" as coined originally by the Chinese, most patriotic Vietnamese avoided using

Succinctly depicted here are the quintessential images of the backward and dirty native-patient in need of a good dose of civilization; and the doctor-colonialist who desperately wants to turn away in disgust but somehow finds the courage and good grace to continue practicing her/his science. Whether the doctor specialised in the natural or social sciences, the diagnosis rarely deviated from two inter-related axioms: firstly, that Vietnamese were lesser forms of human beings and; secondly, that Westerners held a privileged culturo-technological position from which they could diagnose and make prescriptions for natives better than the natives could themselves.¹⁶ Some specialists placed great emphasis on the fact that the Vietnamese had demonstrably lighter brains and verifiably faster heartbeats than Westerners.¹⁷ Here, they asserted, was scientifically verifiable evidence of their innate physical inferiority! Others derived Vietnamese cultural and intellectual inadequacy from the absence of libraries, thereby disregarding the refined ability of Vietnamese to allegorise their knowledge and experiences by orally reciting and recreating an infinite array of poems and proverbs.¹⁸

The grand figure who epitomised the French civilising mission and most fervently sought to guide/compel the Vietnamese down narrow predetermined paths of modernisation, was the French Governor General of Indochina from 1911-1913 and 1917-1919, Albert Sarraut.

“Annam” after about 1930. Trần Tư Bình (John Spragens, Jr. trans.), *The Red Earth: A Vietnamese Memoir of Life on a Colonial Rubber Plantation* (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1985) 87, note 2.

¹⁶ For the seminal text on this colonialist mindset see Edward D. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1995).

¹⁷ The average Annamese brain mass was measured to be 1,233 grams compared to 1,375 grams for the French brain. Heartbeat rates per minute were measured as follows: 82 beats for the Annamese man; 96 for a Annamese woman; 80 for an Englishman; and 72 for a Frenchman. The question of why these “facts” were evidence of Vietnamese inferiority was not addressed. A. Bouinai and A. Paulus, *L'Indo-Chine Francaise Contemporaine* (Paris: Challamel, 1885) 227-8. Cited in Nola Jean Cooke (unpublished), *Colonial Political Myth and the Problem of the Other: French and Vietnamese in the Protectorate of Annam* (Canberra: Australian National University Thesis, 1991) 32.

¹⁸ For more on the elevation of written expression over oral expression as a distinctive element of Western colonialism and modernity see Michel de Certeau (Tom Conley trans.), *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 210-1.

I want to give you the instrument of liberation which will gradually lead you toward those superior spheres to which you aspire.¹⁹

Sarraut saw the Vietnamese not so much as dirt-ridden patients but rather, dirt itself; and his faith in the divine power of French colonialism illustrates the pathologically patronising and horrendously hubristic nature of the mission.

[T]he patient and maternal hand of France has drawn upon the immense clay of the native community to make models and create their “individualities”... From the previous human dust, the action of France has made men!²⁰

Importantly, to acknowledge the crushing grip of Sarraut’s godly hand is not to claim that he was malicious or that he did not possess any sincere compassion for the Vietnamese (indeed he was relatively popular among them). The horrors of French colonialism grew not so much out of destructive sentiments but rather, a certainty in French altruism that precluded reflexion and served to mask arrogance and greed. Sarraut was convinced that because the ultimate and unchallengeable goal of colonialism was the “biological unity of mankind”, France had a “natural right” to open “underdeveloped” areas for the good of all humanity.²¹ By definition, acts of colonial possession were unsullied by the “character of plunder” and justified by universal “human law”.²² Indeed, in Sarraut’s mind, the contract of exchange between the core and periphery was more than mutually beneficial. It actually favoured the natives who received the rule of law, deliverance from disease, scientific education, and protection from third parties (other colonisers).²³ Colonists would also facilitate mass production and infuse the natives with a modern work ethic.

¹⁹ Georges Gorrose, *Forceries Humaines* (Paris: André Delpeuch, 1926) 51. Cited in William J. Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995) 11.

²⁰ Jean Ajalbert, *L’Indochine par les Français* (Paris: Gallimard, 1931) 225-6. Cited in Cooke, *Colonial Political Myth and the Problem of the Other*, 424.

²¹ Albert Sarraut, *Grandeur et Servitude Coloniales* (Paris: Editions du Sagittaire, 1931) 113. Cited in Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993) 222. See also David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) 250-1.

²² Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 21.

²³ Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*, 250-1.

In return, the Vietnamese needed only to acquiesce to colonial rule and the entrepreneurial endeavours of French companies which were granted expansive tracts of land and monopoly rights to exploit them. Moreover, according to French rhetoric, as young Việt Nam “matured” (*slowly*), it would be allowed increased participation in its own rule.²⁴ Invariably there were recalcitrants and ingrates who failed to recognise the generosity of their colonisers. One of the most prominent was Hồ Chí Minh who in 1922 wrote a letter to Sarraut (then Minister of Colonies) expressing with supreme sarcasm his appreciation of the French civilising mission.

Your Excellency,

We know very well that your affection for the natives; of the colonies in general, and the Annamese in particular is great.

Under your proconsulate the Annamese people have known true prosperity and real happiness, the happiness of seeing their country dotted all over with an increasing number of spirit and opium shops which, together with firing squads, prisons, ‘democracy’ and all the improved apparatus of modern civilization, are combining to make the Annamese the most advanced of the Asians and the happiest of mortals.

These acts of benevolence save us the trouble of recalling all the others, such as enforced recruitment and loans, bloody repressions, the dethronement and exile of kings, profanation of sacred places, etc.²⁵

By the summer of 1947, as the Indochina War raged on, Thiêt’s family had become all too familiar with the devastating consequences of French benevolence and the Việt Minh’s militant lack of gratitude.

In 1947 the War was Lost

Thiet’s family were frighteningly malnourished and diseased by the time a unit of French soldiers arrived with an interpreter who informed them that the

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Hồ Chí Minh, “An Open Letter To M. Albert Sarraut, Minister of Colonies” first published in *La Paria*, 1 August 1922. Cited in Hồ Chí Minh (Benard B. Fall ed.), *On Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-66* (New York: Praeger, 1967) 15.

countryside had been pacified and that it was now safe for them to return home. A month had passed since Thiết's family arrived at Ngọc Kinh Mountain and it had been more six months since they had left Bồ Bản. With the fighting in a lull, a handful of refugees had already deserted their rocky hideouts. While the family's time in the caves had been nothing short of horrific, Việt and Thừa's hearts were heavy with anticipation as they packed their belongings for the long trek eastwards back to Hương Lam and Bồ Bản. Constantly they wondered whether the (re)categorisation of the region as "pacified" would provide them with any enduring sense of safety. They were just as anxious over what, if anything, remained of their abandoned homes and lives.

When the seven of them returned to Hương Lam, they were greatly relieved to find that Thiết's aunt's house was still intact. A quick trip back to Bồ Bản confirmed that their own home had also somehow remained unscathed except for a requisite number of bullets in the bricks and an unsightly trench that now surrounded it. A relative in Bồ Bản informed them, however, that the Việt Minh still considered their house to be the property of the masses and a vital instrument in the fight for national salvation. Concomitantly, the French still saw it as a prime target in the war against the recalcitrant natives. With their home held hostage by both the warring camps, Thiết's family resigned themselves to staying in Hương Lam.

Their spirits suffered another substantial blow when Việt discovered that the bundle of family treasures which he had buried before evacuating Hương Lam had been devoured by termites. The rusty saucepans remained intact, but the only evidence of the rice, money, their family papers and those precious few photographs was a discolouration in the dirt. To be sure, Việt's family still existed, but a significant fragment of their past had been erased. Without those documents and pictures, thought Việt and his wife Thừa, it would be that much harder in future to recall where they had been, and for their descendants to determine where they had come from. More immediately concerning to them was the fact that Việt and Thừa had anticipated using the buried money and rice to sustain the family upon their return. They were no longer refugees, but with no land to till or capital to invest, any notion of security remained illusive.

In the following months, other scattered villagers trickled back into Hương Lam including Thiết's aunt who joined Việt and Thừa in earning a scant living by selling pickled vegetables and dried areca nuts.²⁶ Like everyone else in the village their meals were irregular, unappetizing and of little nutritional value. Thiết's mother and sisters had become apt at compensating for the lack of rice by mashing various beans into a paste which all too often constituted the family's solitary daily meal. Another option was to mix rice with cassava, the tough and tasteless leaves of which could be consumed but certainly not enjoyed.²⁷ Substitutes had become the norm, and while he had never experienced comfort or plenty, Thiết knew that this was not how life was meant to be.

By September 1947, the Việt Minh had also started to return from the mountains where they had consolidated their forces, reaffirmed their protracted people's war strategy and honed their guerrilla tactics. Việt Minh propaganda campaigns recommenced in Hương Lam, and were followed by the resumption of armed conflict. With the memory of their horrifying flight to Ngọc Kinh still fresh in his mind, Việt was convinced that they could not escape the war. Rather, his family would have to incorporate it into their everyday lives as one would an ailment such as asthma or diabetes. They would have to live in a state of constant anxiety and preparedness, so that no matter when the war came they could swiftly evacuate into the nearby jungle. This is not to say that Thiết's family became adept at surviving in the wilderness. On the contrary, they slept uneasily, enveloped in fear and the pungent stench of decaying leaves for two or three days at a time before creeping back to the village to see if the fighting had subsided. Each time they prayed that their house had not been ransacked or destroyed. Each time they tentatively rebuilt their lives and wondered how much longer they could live with such terror and uncertainty. Throughout this period, which they would all later recall as the most dismal and anarchical of their lives, Thiết's

²⁶ The chewing of the areca nut serves as a mild narcotic for many older Vietnamese. The nut is sliced and mixed with white lime paste and wrapped it in a pungent betel leaf and chewed. A red paste is formed which is spat out.

²⁷ *Khoai mì*, a potato-like tuber. The Central Vietnamese cassava is far more tough and bitter than the Southern Vietnamese variety. It has to be soaked for days to get the bitterness out and is often cut into strips and dried.

family did not make concrete plans for the future but rather alluded to some distant and hazy time, "When the war is finally over..."

The jungle surrounding Hương Lam was more treacherous than at Ngọc Kinh due to the absence of clean water. And it was this fact that caused the entire family to fall ill after returning from one of their intermittent flights of escape. Thiêt's father was struck by all manner of diseases, the most crippling of which was malaria. Việt was gripped by a searing fever, his skin turned a putrid yellow and he drifted between states of semi and total unconsciousness. Even so, he realised that the family's survival lay in the balance; that if he did not make it through this assault, his wife and children would likely follow him to the grave. It is difficult to fathom, then, the level of despondency that Việt must have felt when he sensed that his struggle was almost over and turned to his wife in a rare moment of shared lucidity and said, "Take good care of the children who make it, won't you?"

It is perhaps fortunate that the two oldest children, fourteen year old Khiết and his twelve year old sister Hương, did not overhear these piteous words from their once invincible father. Being the only two members of the family not wholly incapacitated by illness, Khiết and Hương worked tirelessly nursing their quivering family and scrounging for scraps of food. There were nights however, after their loved ones had fallen asleep, when the two youths allowed self-pity and fatigue to overwhelm them. Together, they quietly sobbed and wondered, "What have we done that is so odious? Why do we deserve such hardship and suffering?" Haplessly, they tried to avoid speculating over which one of their loved ones might pass away in the night. Fervently, they resisted dwelling over the countless ways in which the next day might be darker and more difficult than the one just passed. Then a scream, cry or murmur of discomfort, and the call of duty overpowered the allure of despair.

It was in fulfilment of one of these duties that Khiết found himself kneeling beside a cauldron of boiling water which he intended to use to bathe his father. And it was perhaps for no reason other than to illustrate the at times tragically incomprehensible nature of fate that, in that instant, the fibres within the wooden

stand supporting the cauldron strained and then suddenly buckled. Milliseconds later, Khiết was confronted with a wave of scolding water. Initially the teenager thought that he had managed to leap out of the way, but then he noticed a small burn on his knee no larger than the size of a plum. Khiết assessed that the injury was of no consequence; it was a stinging nuisance, unworthy of treatment and overshadowed by the life-threatening ailments of his family and even the inconvenience of boiling another cauldron of water. Tragically, however, without the protection of bandages and antiseptic, bacteria entered the wound and for some unknown reason took hold of the young man with uncommon alacrity and devastation. A day later, Khiết's knee festered profusely. Unable to walk, he had no choice but to abrogate his duties and, only a matter of hours later, joined his family in their deathly delirium. As if sensing that his defences were down, unidentified diseases mercilessly invaded his over-worked and under-nourished body. Khiết's arms and legs began shaking violently and, only three days after his seemingly innocuous accident, the young man was summonsed to the next life.

“Wake up! Wake up older brother!” pleaded Khiết's sister Hương. It was no use. Khiết's chest was motionless and he was staring at her with the eyes of the dead. Painfully aware that her parents and three younger siblings were on the verge of joining him, Hương was engulfed by unprecedented feelings of angst, responsibility and loneliness. Her mind was racing, it was all too much, she was powerless and everything was lost. But while the young girl could not think with full clarity, she had not lost her senses. Indeed, in the heat and humidity, her brother's corpse immediately began to emit a foul stench which indicated to Hương that her first priority was to bury Khiết. What was also clear, however, was that this undertaking was physically and spiritually beyond her. Thus, the next morning Hương reluctantly left her still unawares family and returned to her home village of Bò Bản in search of a relative or anyone who could help. It was the height of the wet season and Hương had to wade through flooded rice fields before she arrived at Bò Bản and found her paternal grandfather. Using the last of his savings, Hương's grandfather hired a neighbour who travelled to Hương Lam the next day. With Hương's assistance, the neighbour dug a grave and wrapped Khiết's body in a bamboo mat before perfunctorily performing a funeral

ritual and burying the young man. The joss sticks had long since disintegrated before Thiết's family started coming out of their respective states of unconsciousness and inquired as to Khiết's whereabouts. Utterly distraught and exhausted, Hương could only callously reply that, "He is dead and already buried."

Except for Thiết's other older sister, Trương, who would suffer from recurring bouts of malaria for years to come, the family gradually recovered and at the end of 1947, almost a year since first leaving Bò Bản, they returned to their home village. By moving back to Bò Bản it was hoped that they could start anew, somehow distance themselves from the tragic events of their immediate past. Thiết's mother Thừa, however, was left with a terminal sense of resignation. Through the depths of hunger, sickness and deprivation, she and her husband had managed to keep their family intact; that is, until Khiết's passing. This single fatality of the First Indochina War, a casualty of star-crossed fate and scalding water, changed everything for Thừa. Thereafter, and for the decades to come, the war offered no prospect of victory for her. It was already lost, and could never be re-won. This is not to say that the middle-aged mother had resigned herself and what remained of her family to annihilation. On the contrary, Thừa was never more determined to struggle and survive.

A Land without Allies

After they returned to Bò Bản in 1948, Thiết's family's survival took on a different dimension as they were now living directly under French control. During the day, their status as an occupied people was painfully evident. On top of the most conspicuous hill, a small fort had been constructed upon which the French Tricolour flew. At twilight six-year-old Thiết often heard the haunting calls of lonely bullfrogs followed by a number of long desolate bugle bursts that heralded the withdrawal of the colonial troops to their fort and the descending of the Tricolour for the evening. These sounds would evoke a sense of sorrowful reminiscence in him for the rest of his days.

The Việt Minh had abandoned the family's home by the river, but Việt did not dare reoccupy it as the French still viewed the building as an enemy outpost. Without a house for his wife and four children to live in, Việt turned to his father for assistance and was offered a tiny corridor that connected his father's house with their ancestral shrine. The ancestral shrine was one of the most ornate and spectacular structures that Thiét had ever laid his eyes upon. Children were usually forbidden from entering, which served to accentuate its majesty and sanctity. In accordance with the Confucian rituals of ancestor worship, on the anniversary of deaths and New Years relatives and friends came to the shrine to pay their respects, make small offerings and ask for good fortune from those in the afterlife. It was also necessary to report to the ancestors important family events such as weddings, births, deaths and success in exams. On such occasions, Thiét peered inside the entranceway to see an immense hall held up by shiny wooden pillars as thick as a man's torso. The centrepiece of the room was the ancestral altar, laden with offerings of fruit, tea and rice. Also on the table were some photographs and drawings, ornate candlestick holders and a brass burner from which smouldering joss sticks and sandalwood emitted copious amounts of sweet smoke. On either side of the altar there were two imposing wooden tablets onto which the names of their forebears had been inscribed in the Chinese characters of days past. It was the responsibility of a senior male (*đích tôn*) like Thiét's grandfather to maintain the shrine, replace offerings, lead rituals and pay homage to their ancestors every morning and evening. In this and other ways, the elderly in the village remained occupied and engaged after their bodies had deteriorated. Ancestral worship allowed them to continue looking forward even as they reflected upon a life past.

And so, Thiét never questioned why such spacious luxury was cordoned off for the dead. From a young age, Thiét accepted that he was the product of the sacrifice and toil of those who came before him. Perhaps more importantly, he was convinced that ancestral spirits continued to influence his family's everyday existence. Keeping one's forebears content in the afterlife was surely a prerequisite for prosperity in this one. It was pragmatic, then, to afford one's ancestors the utmost respect, adulation and a most splendid shrine, even if this

meant sleeping in a cramped corridor. And in any case, thought Thiết, “Who would want to sleep with spirits of the dead?”

There were other reasons for why sharing a bed with his parents and three older siblings in that confined corridor did not bother Thiết in the slightest. The family bed was an adventure land where he could explore a maze of bodies, arms and legs before discovering a spot in the middle that was just right for him. Guarded by five snuggling sentinels, it was a sanctuary from the perils of both the natural and supernatural worlds. There was, to be sure, occasional snoring and Thiết was frequently a victim of accidental kicks. But this was a small price to pay for the rich and trouble-free slumber that grew out of having everyone in the world that he loved in one place.

One night, not long after his family’s return to Bồ Bản, Thiết’s sleepy sanctuary was shattered by the explosion of shells and the scattering of his sentinels.²⁸ One of his family members picked him up and ran outside. Before he was conscious of what was going on, the bleary-eyed boy was flung into a recently constructed dug-out situated a few metres from his grandfather’s house. In a matter of seconds, mutual security had transformed into collective fear, cosiness had turned to claustrophobia, and cushions were replaced by cold jagged rocks. Thiết’s family, including extended members, huddled like rabbits in a burrow as the roar from the battle above reverberated down through the dirt and into their petrified bodies. With every explosion the dug-out rattled, candles flickered, dirt fell from the low-cut ceiling, and Thiết’s family wondered whether survival was in fact a blessing if their home and ancestral shrine had been obliterated and in the context of a war that seemed never-ending.

The next morning, after the gunfire had subsided, Thiết and his family crawled out of the underground shelter to see what was left of their village and their lives. The air was clouded with smoke and the landscape littered with a new array of

²⁸ In the Central Vietnamese countryside neither French pacification nor Việt Minh liberation was ever complete or enduring. In January 1948, Việt Minh leaders announced the conclusion of the first defence phase (strategic withdrawal) in their People’s War and the imminent progression to the second phase (holding stage) of protracted war. Put simply, the Việt Minh was taking the initiative and it was for this reason that Thiết’s slumber was so violently interrupted.

potholes and gullies. Miraculously, Thiết's grandfather's house and their ancestral shrine were undamaged. One of his aunts had not been so fortunate, her thatch hut going up in flames during the night and the ashes blown away by the wind. Even more upsetting for Thiết's parents was the discovery that the makeshift Việt Minh hospital which they had built to last lifetimes and which they still referred to as their home, now lay in smouldering ruins. This momentous loss, on top of Khiết's passing, served to confirm in Việt and Thừa's minds the rectitude of their non-alignment. The war was their foe, and they despised it with every sinew and each breath. Sadly, however, Thiết and his family were soon to discover that there was no place in the First Indochina War for conscientious objection.

A Personal/Political Assassination

The young man pursued Việt in a most obsequious manner. "The village was never more prosperous than when you were in charge," he said, recounting good ol' days that he did not know anything about. "Someone who is as talented as you has a responsibility to stand at the head of the community, to be the administrative village chief." Việt had held the position six years ago when he was appointed by a cousin who was canton chief at the time. There were significant benefits associated with being village chief, most notably reduced taxes. However, much had changed since then. The rise of the Việt Minh meant that to take an appointment in the French-backed administration, was to invite harassment or even death. "Your words are very flattering, but I'm far too old to shoulder such hefty responsibilities," Việt judiciously responded. "Your character and intelligence are well-known, have you considered stepping forward?" That evening, Việt spoke to his wife about his exchange with the young man. Thừa agreed that this was no subtle ruse. The sycophant was not old enough to recall what sort of chief Việt had been. More significant was the fact that the youth's father was a man named Kiền.

Kiền was the patriarch of one of the most prominent families in Bò Bản. He despised Việt, in part because he had coveted the position of administrative

village chief and resented the nepotistic manner in which Việt had attained it. More important perhaps was the lingering enmity between the two families, the origin of which (like so many petty feuds) was both fiercely debated and utterly indeterminable. This latent hostility between the two kinfolk had erupted in 1944 when Việt approached Kiễn, who operated a pressing machine, with some peanuts that he wanted to press for oil. Kiễn brusquely turned Việt away, demanding that he first pay the fees and levies required by the colonial administration. Việt knew that Kiễn had not made such demands from others. There was a heated debate, leading to an exchange of blows in which Kiễn came off second best. The embittered Kiễn cursed Việt, “You and I will not live under the same sky!”

Not long afterwards, Kiễn became an active member of the Việt Minh. His knowledge and level of commitment to Vietnamese independence and the global socialist revolution at that time is unclear. What is certain, however, is that Kiễn detested Việt and did not hesitate to take advantage of the resources made available to him as a member of the anti-colonial movement to seek his revenge. Drawing upon the revolutionary fervour at a Việt Minh gathering, Kiễn made his case against the traitor Việt.²⁹

“Comrades, what more do we need to know than that Việt was village chief, a lackey for the dreaded French imperialists? Among all the puppets, he was the most corrupt, profiting greatly from the sweat and blood of his compatriots. He was then, and is now, an enemy of the revolution! I ask you, are we going to let him continue in his wicked feudal ways?”

The murmurs from the mob suggested that the village militia were reluctant to condemn Việt as many knew and respected him. Sensing their indecision, comrade Kiễn’s son stepped forward to make an address. He reinforced his father’s accusations with a petition which supposedly showed that a majority of

²⁹ The following evocation is based on interviews with Thừa and Hương who had spoken to a Việt Minh guerrilla and village acquaintance who was present at the meeting.

villagers had testified against Việt as being a servant of the French and an insidious enemy of the people. In fact, Kiến's son had cajoled many villagers into signing the petition and had resorted to forgery to supplement his case.

“Democracy has spoken!” cried Kiến's son. “Are we going to let the people down? Before you answer, you should know that the traitor Việt is not only unrepentant when it comes to his past crimes; he is still committing them today. Only a few days ago the scoundrel confided in me his intention to reclaim the position of village chief that he held before the glorious August Revolution. Truly, there are no limits to his greed. I have seen it with my own eyes and heard it with my own ears. We have all witnessed the traitor Việt making trips to Đà Nẵng where he is no doubt collaborating with the colonists and other lackeys. Are we going to let him continue as an accomplice in the crimes of French imperialism? Do we not have a responsibility to the people and the Revolution to stop feudalistic fiends like Việt once and for all?”

Kiến's son made no mention of the fact that his father had also once desperately wanted to be village chief, or that Việt had many relatives in Đà Nẵng who he visited on a regular basis. Members of the mob who harboured even a modicum of doubt, were likely reassured by the oratory performances from Kiến and his son, and by a brutal Việt Minh dictum which exhorted that it is “Better to kill mistakenly, than let one slip by.”³⁰ That evening, a perfunctory vote was held among the few dozen revolutionaries. It concluded with a roar of approval that sealed Việt's fate. The crowd's blind enthusiasm for Kiến's deception was a perfect example of how the most sinister personal ambitions can dovetail seamlessly with the grandest revolutionary ideals.

A few days later, not long after the 1948 New Year's celebrations, Việt was ambushed and blindfolded on his way to Hương Lam. The gang of Việt Minh revolutionaries led him at gunpoint through the jungle to Đông Nghệ Mountain which was less than an hour's walk away. There they accused, charged and

³⁰ *Giết lầm hơn là sống sót.* Recounted by Thiết.

convicted him of betraying the Vietnamese people and the global peasant-proletariat movement. As the beating began Việt called out, urging his assailants to confer with his brother-in-law who was a prominent Việt Minh member and could attest to his innocence. The beating continued until Việt stopped pleading. Then, at around four in the afternoon, the revolutionaries shot Việt dead and buried him in a shallow grave.

The Việt Minh were quick to spread news of the execution as an example to other counter-revolutionaries and so Thừa learnt of her husband's death that same afternoon. The devastation that Thừa and her children felt in that instant is beyond the author's capacity for comprehension and expression. What can be conveyed is that the grieving Thừa could not help but wonder why she had been dealt these injustices. "What did I do that was so wrong in a past life to make Heaven punish me like this?" she asked. To be sure, Thừa also felt a searing hatred for Kiến and, in that instant, wanted nothing more than revenge. However, such acts were beyond her capabilities and contrary to her character. Kiến had an army on his side and, as a revolutionary soldier, roamed the mountains beyond her reach. Moreover, Thừa convinced herself that revenge would only make things worse. Not long afterwards, she reminded her children, "We must let karma deal out its justice. In this life or the next, evil will be met with evil." In years to come, Kiến would lose a leg in battle and die after a period of drawn-out anguish. So in a sense, Thừa was vindicated. But for the rest of her life, she would remain inconsolable.

The Globalisation of Games

Seven year old Thiét was overwhelmed with grief after his father's murder. In the years to come, at various times and for various reasons, he would try to come to grips with or even forget that momentous and horrendous event. But Thiét would never be completely successful in his amnesic endeavours. Even when many of the mental images of his father's life had faded, the emotions and visions of his death (particularly the sight of his skeleton which was discovered and exhumed three years after his murder with its wrists still bound by wire and

long wispy strands of hair on its skull) remained clear, ever-present and often agonising.

It must be noted however that while death, destruction and destitution were all too prominent in Thiết's early life, they did not by any means monopolise it or extinguish his youthful imagination. Many years later, even Thiết's wife of thirty years would labour under the misconception that war and hardship had tyrannically terminated Thiết's childhood. One day, after coming across a skipping rope in their yard, she demonstrated her enduring ability to skip. Thiết was unable to repeat her feat/feet as he had never skipped rope before. That same day, Thiết proclaimed to his son (the author), "Your mother's skipping abilities are astonishing! She can skip forwards, backwards and run and skip at the same time!" Shortly afterwards, his wife shook her head with great compassion for her husband and confided to the same son, "We really should feel so sorry for your father, he had such a horrible childhood. He doesn't even know how to skip." And while this is no doubt a significant deficiency, deeper investigation reveals that Thiết's childhood ability to make do and make play in the most oppressive circumstances is both (politically) instructive and uncanny.

It was common, for instance, during the wet season for cyclonic winds to blow huts away while families still huddled inside them. The raindrops would pelt down like rocks, stinging the skin of those unfortunate enough to be caught in the open. The river would disdain its banks inundating homes in Bò Bản, and for weeks or even months on end, villagers forgot what it was like to be dry. Even during the worst floods, however, Thiết was capable of discovering joyous and imaginative inlets of reprieve. He and his older brother, Biết, saw opportunities for excitement and adventure where adults saw only a catastrophe deserving of woe. Directly disobeying their mother's orders, the two boys strung together large pieces of bark that had fallen from banana palms to make small semi-waterproof canoes. And for whole days they explored vast oceans, founded mysterious lands and slew fierce dragons in the submerged rice paddies around their village.

Thiét grouped together irksome issues of money, war and school (which he attended intermittently) under the common rubric of “interruptions to the crucial task of playing games”. One of his favourite pastimes was the skilful but splendidly simple game of tip-cat (*đánh trống*) which, in the first instance, required the flipping of a small stick into the air. While in mid-flight, the small stick was then whacked with a larger stick, the winner being the player who could launch the projectile the furthest. Tip-cat could include a points system, bases and fielders; but for Thiét it was best played with minimal complication.³¹ The young boy and his friends also filled their days, playing cards using scraps of paper as money. Often they erupted with disagreements and incriminations no less heated than those that broke out among the adults. Other universally popular games that fulfilled Thiét’s innate need to play included bones, hopscotch and hide-and-seek.

In addition, Thiét found great pleasure in the mesmerising practice of pushing a bamboo hoop through the dusty streets of Bò Bản with a stick. It is both appropriate and gratifying that forty years later, a Korean boy opened the games of the twenty-fourth Olympiad with this very activity. No doubt, billions of attentive global citizens from Africa, South America, Asia and beyond felt a wave of cheerful nostalgia as they watched this single-yet-universal boy push a hoop across the Olympic stadium in Seoul. With this in mind, it is worth remembering that adults have a lot to learn from the mysterious ways in which children’s games, with only a few minor cultural variations, are promulgated around the world. As Primo Levi points out, “The fact remains that political frontiers are impervious to our verbal cultures, while the substantially nonverbal

³¹ One can only baulk at how the game might have acquired the name “tip-cat”. It is most likely, however, that the name is derived from the occasional practice of tapering the ends of the smaller stick so that it looks like a cat’s tail. Tip-cat has been identified as a common ancestor of both baseball and cricket. Its English origins can be traced back to *The Little Pretty Pocket Book*, a book of games for boys published in England in 1744. Seven hundred years earlier, it was played in Central Asia around Kazakhstan under the name of *Chelik-Chomak* (rod-bat). Martin Hoerchner, “Dispersing the Mists of Time” in *Society for American Baseball Research (UK Chapter)* <<http://www.sabruk.org/examiner/08/mists.html>> accessed 28 May 2001. H.B. Paksoy, “Two Altaic Games: ‘Chelik-Chomak’ and ‘Jirid Oyunu’” <<http://webpages.acs.ttu.edu/hpaksoy/cae09.html>> accessed 28 May 2001. Dan Beard, “What to Do and How to Do It: Tip-Cat” in *inquiry.net* <<http://www.inquiry.net/outdoor/games/summer/games/tipcat.htm>> accessed 28 May 2001.

civilization of play crosses them with the happy freedom of the wind and the clouds.”³²

And so, it was not so much the First Indochina War that deprived Thiét of his childhood. Rather, it took a far more expansive coercive-and-yet-co-opting force to supplant young Thiét’s magical thinking; a force that might be referred to as modernity, and which he would come to equate with untrammelled approval as progress and civilisation.

That Electrifying First Touch

It was a sweet twist of fate, or perhaps a benevolent passing spirit, that diverted Thiét from that well-trodden peasant path that started in, finished at, and never left the rice fields. Instead the young boy’s destiny unravelled and he was suddenly propelled onto strange new trajectories that were far more indeterminable and exciting than those confined to Bò Bàn. It began on an otherwise nondescript day in 1952 when Thiét’s paternal grandfather, possibly noticing a wistful gaze on his face or pitying a rip in his shirt, asked the young boy to accompany him on a trip to Đà Nẵng. Never before had Thiét been the envy of others—this was nothing short of winning the lottery.

The old man and the small boy set out early in the morning on their fifteen kilometre journey to a relative’s house in central Đà Nẵng. As they left Bò Bàn, Thiét thoughts were captured by his grandfather’s ancient stories of valiant sword-wielding heroes and magical monsters. With both parties fantastically preoccupied, time and the weariness in their legs seemed to evaporate with the morning dew. Suddenly, as they approached the city, Thiét’s attention was torn away from his grandfather’s folk tales as he gawked at the alien world before him.

It was a scene more dazzling and bizarre than any that his grandfather, even with all his story-telling skill, could ever fashion. Houses stood side-by-side one

³² Primo Levi (Raymond Rosenthal trans.), *Other People's Trades* (New York: Summit Books, 1989) 181.

another, flowing over the landscape into the horizon. Hordes of multi-coloured people scurried out of the cinemas and buildings, flowing down the sidewalks into the brilliant glow of the miraculous street lights. "I must tell my brother about this incredible place," thought Thiết to himself. "I must tell everyone." He wanted to know each person who passed him. "Have you heard of my village Bò Bân? Where are you going this afternoon in such a hurry? Where did you get that hat and what about those shoes? How do any of you manage to move about without constantly bumping into one another?" Every time Thiết opened his mouth intending to ask one of these questions, he received a hip-and-shoulder and heard a gruff voice tell him to watch where he was going.

Upon arriving at his relative's house early in the evening, the young boy was immediately drawn to the incandescent light bulb. Thiết was astounded by the seemingly instantaneous illumination. Over and over again he switched the lights on and off until he was sure that he could perceive the delay as the mystical electric current raced from the switch to the bulb. Nevertheless, Thiết concluded that electricity was very fast indeed. Another new experience came in the form of interaction with cousins who seemed wholly comfortable with, if not blasé about the wondrous inventions around them. And while this was off-putting at first, the fact that they played the same games as Thiết made it easy for him to assimilate. Perhaps it was presumptuous of him, but that evening as he went to sleep, Thiết thought that he could get used to this city living.

The next morning when an ice merchant came to the house, one of Thiết's cousins, Khôi, introduced him to the long cold slabs of ice in the back of the cart. Khôi nonchalantly touched a shimmering block and encouraged Thiết, who had no conception of ice whatsoever, to do likewise. Thiết was not one to back away from a challenge and so, trying his best to mask his trepidation, the boy moved his hand towards the colossal gem. His finger made contact, melting a miniscule amount of the crystal block as the heat rushed away from his tingling skin. He retracted violently from the unimaginably stinging cold. And yet, despite this immediate repulsion, there remained a stubborn curiosity, a desire to touch, to experience and to know more soon. Thiết would never forget the day when he first touched ice. It was if the young boy was left with an epistemological birth-

mark—a branding that would intensify over the years as Thiêt dared to know and control, not only his own life, but also the world out there.

In times not long past, it was common for Vietnamese like Thiêt to be overwhelmed by Western technology and the modernising forces that the colonists seemed to yield with frightening ease and absolute authority. At the turn of the twentieth century the first governor general of Indochina, Paul Doumer, instituted a frenzied modernisation and industrialisation campaign building highways, bridges, and railroads with what Vietnamese viewed as unimaginable speed and efficacy.³³ In a society that did not have an extensive stagecoach service, French officials sped about their business in powerful automobiles, appearing as “disguised genies . . . half-gods in their flying chariots.”³⁴

The mighty Red River itself was conquered by French technology. Even their most faithful supporters had advised the French not to attempt to build a bridge across the Red River. Others merely smiled. The dragon who lived in the river would never permit such a thing to happen. In response the French built the greatest bridge in Asia. Its pilings extended over a hundred feet beneath the surface, plunging into the heart of the dragon! Over a mile long, it was named for Doumer. Many Vietnamese were impressed, and also resentful.³⁵

In the face of such lightning-fast change, there were Vietnamese who desperately sought a return to an imperial past. Most notably, the *Cần Vương* (Loyalty to the King) resistance movement (circa 1885 to 1895) appealed to scholars and one-time aristocrats to rally around and reinstall the deposed emperor Hàm Nghi. Its most enduring leader, Phan Đình Phùng, was wholly ignorant of modern military techniques and was thus destined to defeat against the state-of-the-art French forces.³⁶ In 1901 Governor General Doumer reported that not a single one of the

³³ Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 56.

³⁴ Paul Mus, *Viet Nam, Sociologie d'une Guerre* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952) 126-7. Cited in Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 56.

³⁵ Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 56.

³⁶ Hoàng Văn Chí, *From Colonialism to Communism: A Case History of North Vietnam* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964) 15.

colonial troops in Indochina had been killed since 1897, while most of the resistance leaders were either dead or imprisoned.³⁷

All too aware of the frightful lessons of the failed *Cần Vương* movement, the anti-colonialists of the early twentieth century focussed not so much on reviving some idealised notion of a traditional Việt Nam, but rather, building a new nation in its place. Critical to their strategy was the importation and adaptation of modern ideas, practices and technologies from France and beyond.

After visiting Japan in 1905, the scholar-patriot Phan Bội Châu had an epiphany of Thiế́t-like proportions, thereafter discarding the neo-Confucian wisdom that he had adhered to during his young adulthood.³⁸ He came to view Việt Nam as “backward” (*lạc hậu*) in a linear narrative of world time.³⁹ Gradually he became convinced that Vietnamese civilisation and independence could only be achieved via a study of how other Asiatic societies had triumphed over Western aggressors (the quintessential example being the Meiji Restoration in which Japan had repelled the invading Russians in the “Miracle of the Rising Sun”).⁴⁰ Such tactics, he believed, had to be customised and applied in the name of Vietnamese progress and liberation. To this end, Phan Bội Châu established the *Đông Du* (Go East) movement, headed the *Việt Nam Duy Tân Hội* (Association for the Modernisation of Việt Nam) and set up the *Đông Á Đồng Minh* (Union of East-Asians). “If other people have taken one month to reach their goal, we should try to attain it in one or two weeks” he wrote in 1907. “If other people have the talent to make steps a thousand miles long, we should try to make steps of ten thousand miles. At first we learn from them. After that they will learn from us.”⁴¹

³⁷ Vũ Đức Bằng, “The Tonkin Free School Movement: 1907-1908” in Walter F. Vella (ed.), *Aspects of Vietnamese History* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1973) 152.

³⁸ Neil Jamieson, “Relata, Relationships, and Context: A Perspective on Borrowed Elements in Vietnamese Culture” in Trương Bửu Lâm (ed.), *Borrowings and Adaptations in Vietnamese Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii at Manoa: 1987) 124-40 at 127.

³⁹ Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam’s South* (Honolulu: Allen & Unwin and University of Hawai’i Press, 2001) 12-3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Phan Bội Châu, “The New Việt Nam” (*Tân Việt Nam*) first published in 1907. In Trương Bửu Lâm (ed.), *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism 1900-1931* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000) 105-124 at 121.

Phan Bội Châu's associate, Phan Châu Trinh, was also convinced that Vietnamese imperial traditions were deadweights to progress.⁴² An admirer of the French Revolution, he too placed Việt Nam in a temporal, social and technological deficit to countries like Japan and France. "Alas, the Vietnamese people are in full decay, their intelligence totally blackened. Compared to other countries of Europe and Asia, the distance is great."⁴³ Vietnamese emancipation, contended Phan Châu Trinh, depended upon the proliferation of a modern education in which rational science, Western philosophy and notions of democracy would replace the Vietnamese predilection for superstition and frivolity.⁴⁴ With this in mind, he supported and lectured at the *Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thực* public schools which trained and educated nationalist political activists during the early 1900s before being closed down by the French.

While Phan Bội Châu and Phan Châu Trinh had their distinctive differences,⁴⁵ both sought to harness and fine tune the programs for progress and emancipation that the French (and other foreigners) had introduced to Việt Nam, at the same time that they criticised the lies and double standards inherent in the French civilising mission. For them, Western modernisation and civilisation could be achieved on Vietnamese terms and in their own interests. In this and many other ways, Vietnamese anticolonialists of the twentieth century sought to "subvert from within"; that is, even when they were subjugated and appeared to have accepted their subjugation, these courageous and ingenious figures adopted the "laws, practices, and representations that were imposed on them by force or by fascination to ends other than those of their conquerors".⁴⁶ They were exemplars of what Certeau celebrates as the highly subversive everyday practice of

⁴² Phan Châu Trinh was a native of Thiết's home province of Quảng Nam.

⁴³ Phan Châu Trinh, "Letter to Governor-General Paul Beau" in 1907 in Trương Bửu Lâm, *Colonialism Experienced*, 131.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Vietnamese communists generally view Phan Châu Trinh as being too passive or reformist in his approach, particularly compared to Phan Bội Châu who stridently advocated armed resistance. In a letter to Nguyễn Ái Quốc (Hồ Chí Minh) written from Marseilles on 18 February 1922, Phan Châu Trinh warned that armed resistance against the colonists would only lead to disaster, emphasising that "stable waters are better than shallow treacherous rapids". Instead, Trinh believed that the Vietnamese should hold the French to their civilizing mission, taking advantage of the modern infrastructure, technology and ideas before pressing the Westerners to withdraw. Nguyễn Q. Thắng, *Quảng Nam: Đất Nước & Nhân Vật [Quảng Nam: The Land and its Characters]* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa, 1996) 459-67. Duiker, *Sacred War*, 21.

⁴⁶ Michel de Certeau (Steven Rendall trans.). *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 31-2.

“poaching”, of defeating one’s enemies with the weapon of their own choosing and often within their own field of vision.⁴⁷

While neither of the Phans were communists or lived to see their dreams of Vietnamese modernisation and independence actualised, they were both critical in laying down the political and epistemological foundation for Hồ Chí Minh.⁴⁸ In his autobiography, Hồ Chí Minh describes his own (Quốc’s) collision with modernity and propensity for poaching from the perspective of a fictitious character (Lê).

I met a young man from central Vietnam. I had met him at a friend’s house. Being of the same age, we soon became buddies. I took him in front of the cafes frequented by the French, where we watched the electric lights. We went to the movies. I showed him the public fountains. So many things that young Quốc (Nguyễn Tất Thanh) had never seen. One day, I bought him some ice cream. He was astonished because it was the first time he had ever eaten it.

A few days later, he suddenly asked me a question:

“Hey, Lê, do you love your country?”

Astonished, I replied, “Well, of course!”

“Can you keep a secret?”

“Yes.”

“I want to go abroad, to visit France and other countries. When I have seen what they have done, I will return to help my compatriots...”⁴⁹

Like Thiết, the father of modern Việt Nam had also “touched ice”. He too had not turned away in fear and suspicion, but was inspired and intrigued by the possibilities for progress and emancipation. Both of them had seen the way forward towards the city, the light and the wondrous world beyond their circumscribed horizons. Both of them had resolved to never look back again.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 37. See also John DeFrancis, “Vietnamese Writing Reform in Asian Perspective” in Trương Bửu Lâm, *Borrowings and Adaptations in Vietnamese Culture*, 50.

⁴⁸ There is some evidence to suggest that Hồ Chí Minh betrayed Phan Bội Châu in 1925 by secretly turning the old patriot into the French authorities, convinced that i) Phan Bội Châu was no longer of any use to the communist anti-colonial movement, ii) that the subsequent trial would inspire a surge of patriotism among Vietnamese that could be harnessed by the communists, and iii) that the 100,000 piastre (a buffalo cost 5 piastres at the time) would pay for new recruits. Hoàng Văn Chí, *From Colonialism to Communism*, 18.

⁴⁹ *Avec l’Oncle Ho* (Hà Nội: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1972) 15-6. Cited in Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 43-4.

CHAPTER TWO:

Explores the mosaic of Chinese imperialist, French colonialist and Vietnamese nationalist discourses in Vên's childhood.

Vên: Now son, when you're writing this for other people to read, I want you to make it clear that I'm just an ordinary and simple woman. I never had it very hard and never did anything special. There are plenty of women in Việt Nam—your paternal grandmother or your Auntie Bảy for instance—whose lives were far more challenging and interesting than mine. I'm just normal and simple, I'm nothing special.

Kim: OK Mum. But it's my work and in the end I have to decide and take responsibility for what's in it. I have to write things as I see them.

Vên: No, no, no. You don't understand! This is very important to me. I don't know how to explain it to you... You don't have enough Vietnamese. And I don't have enough English... It's just not right for a woman like me to be placed above others, to be made the centre of attention and looked at as if she's different and special. I don't want that at all.

Kim: Alright Mum. I'll do what I can. I'll try my best.

Kim to the Reader: For a long time I had no idea how to write Mum's story without placing her in the spotlight. And so, I focussed on the equally important task of elucidating why she was so averse to spectacle. Then one day, she gave me a clue to solving both of these puzzles.

Kim: We haven't really talked about your role models. Who did you look up to? Who did you admire when you were growing up?

Vân: I never had any real-life role models. Characters in stories probably had more influence on me.

Kim to the Reader: I had gained this impression before, but its significance and utility was not appreciated until that moment. Stories, books, proverbs, folksongs and poetry had served as my mother's guide in life and were at times her saviour. I knew that this was not unusual and remembered an esteemed expert suggesting that when it came to both spoken and written forms of literature, "Vietnam is and always has been one of the most intensely literary civilisations on the face of the planet."¹ And so I too turned to the pages of books, the stanzas of poems and the verses of songs to subtly illuminate my (extra)ordinary Mum.

The Unchosen One

Vân's father was sick on 25 July 1944, the day that she was born. In fact, he was so sick that he could not walk without the assistance of a cane which he waved in the air as a horse-drawn cart carried his wife to the hospital. Between contractions, Vân's mother could hear her husband's final words of encouragement, "Bring home a boy, won't you!"

From the very beginning, then, it was clear that Vân was not the "Chosen One" whose story is so often celebrated and immortalised. Indeed, she was not even the preferred one. This is not to say that Vân's parents were uncaring or indifferent to her existence; only that they had received and transmitted a message that was seemingly pervasive in their society at the time, "If only she were a he."

¹ Alexander B. Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976) ix.

One hundred women are not worth one testicle.²

One boy is everything,
Ten girls are nothing.³

In accordance with these proverbs and in the hope of having better luck next time, Thái (Vân's father) and Sắt (Vân's mother) dressed her up as a boy and cut her hair short until she was six years old. This was a common practice for parents who had not been blessed with male descendants. And while Vân testifies that she never felt resentful or inadequate as a consequence, it is also true that for much of her life she conjectured, "If only I *was* a he, then surely my family would have been better off."

Sắt first fell pregnant in 1934 and gave birth to a boy who did not survive past his first week. When Thái and Sắt's next three babies (the third being Vân) were born healthy girls they were haunted by questions such as, "Who will look after us when we are old?" and "What will happen to the family line?" Having only girls was a constant burden. Husbands had to be found for all of them. And if their spouses wanted to live somewhere else then Vân and her older sisters, Châu and Loan, would have little choice but to follow. Vân's parents were convinced that women could not control their own lives let alone bring prosperity or kudos to their families. Ostensibly, it was a world in which men acted and women endured. So went the woman's lament:

My body is like a drop from a downpour.
It may fall into a well or into a flower garden.
My body is like a drop of falling rain.

² *Một trăm con gái không bằng dái con trai*. A popular proverb in Việt Nam and China often attributed to Confucius. Recounted by Vân. All translation are by the author unless indicated otherwise.

³ *Nhất nam viết hữu,
Thập nữ viết vô*.

It must be emphasised that Việt Nam is not "naturally" or "inherently" patriarchal. Patrilineal succession and primogeniture were introduced to Việt Nam during the 1400s under the Lê dynasty. Emperor Lê Thánh Tông (ruled 1460 to 1497) was particularly active in importing these and other customs of Chinese Ming Neo-Confucianism. John K. Whitmore, "Foreign Influences and the Vietnamese Cultural Core: A Discussion of the Premodern Period" in Truong Bửu Lâm (ed.), *Borrowings and Adaptations in Vietnamese Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1987) 1-21 at 11. Chapter Four of this thesis further examines patriarchy and feminine resistance in Việt Nam.

It may land inside a mansion or end out in a slushy field.⁴

At the end of 1946, two-and-a-half years after Vân's birth, her parents' suspicions were verified when another boy was born only to die shortly afterwards of presumably the same mysterious ailment. Something was definitely wrong. The services of a local astrologer were solicited who informed the couple that the alignment of their stars did not bode well for the birth of boys. Ominously, the astrologer added that the birth of a strong son would come at the cost of one of his parents. Unable to accept such a horrific zero-sum prospect, Vân's parents sought another diagnosis. They turned to a local witch doctor who established that evil spirits had infiltrated the male lineage of Vân's family and were causing the same bedevilled boy to be born over. The witch doctor prescribed that a charm be hung from their front door which would help dispel the wicked spirits. Thái and Sắt gratefully paid the doctor's fee, purchased the enchanted trinket, and went to sleep that night confident that they had done everything possible to preserve the family line.

A year or so later, when Sắt gave birth to another boy, her joy was laced with trepidation. Sắt watched over the infant constantly. He appeared to be healthy but so too had his older brothers. This fact convinced Vân's mother that no measure was too extravagant to ensure the survival of her precious son. The infant was immediately given a girl's name, Hồng, in an attempt to avert the mysteriously murderous forces. Then, a few days after his birth, Sắt turned to a travelling Kampuchean medic who had recently arrived in town, elephant on standby. There was a brief examination before the treatment was decided upon. Moments later, with the same anxious resoluteness of parents who have their sons circumcised, Sắt and Thái watched as the bush medic lifted the baby's soft head past the gigantic lips and teeth into the pachyderm's mouth—a bulk of strength, inhaling up and forever banishing the evil spirits.

⁴ *Hạt rơi xuống giếng hạt vào vườn hoa.*

Thân em như hạt mưa sa.

Hạt vào đài-các hạt ra ruộng lúa.

Nguyễn Du (Huỳnh Sanh Thông trans.), *The Tale of Kiều* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) line 619, page 180.

Unfortunately, this colossal undertaking turned out to be little more than a delaying tactic. When Hồng contracted fever some months later, Thái purchased all manner of concoctions which Sắt poured into Hồng's throat or rubbed into his tiny chest and stomach. To no avail, one night the malevolent forces grasped his soul and carried it away. Vân's mother was beyond consolation. "What horrible evil have I committed in a past life to deserve such a cruel and terminal affliction?" Together with Thái she returned to the witch doctor who was confounded by the tragic news and could only advise that they wrap the tiny corpse in a fishing net so as to trap the evil in the grave.

It is not a clear vision or momentous event that Vân recounts as her first memory, but rather the deep melancholy that took hold of her family after Hồng's passing. Even then she wanted to sooth her family's pain, to lessen their suffering. From the earliest age she possessed a sense of responsibility and indeed guilt over the fact that she was irredeemably a girl and therefore, part of the problem.

Where the Earth Bleeds

Vân's house was situated in the precinct of Phú Cường in Bình Dương province thirty kilometres north of Sài Gòn, and had a somewhat opulent feel about it. Two ornate gilded arches welcomed visitors into the front courtyard which featured a series of water-apple trees bearing tantalising fruits of ruby and jade. The house was adorned with French shutters and the walls, along with four immense pillars that stood on the front veranda, were rendered a gentle yellow. Atop the roof elegantly rounded red tiles overlapped all the way down past the guttering. And on the inside there were large terra cotta floor tiles that had a knack for staying cool, so that children and animals alike could be found sprawled across them on long summer afternoons. Vân lived in this villa for the first seven years of her life and remembers it fondly, as never again would her family know such spacious and sound living.

Much of their prosperity at that time was directly attributable to the scholastic and entrepreneurial achievements of Vân's Grand Uncle Tư. Tư was born in 1884 and was the first member of his family to receive his *diploma* (secondary school certificate). His mother was a powerful rice merchant; his father ran a successful business in herbal medicines; and he had an uncle who held a prominent position at the Indochinese Bank. While still in his twenties, Tư possessed connections of the highest calibre, fluency in French and the commanding air of a person who knows no barriers. Armed with these attributes, it was no surprise that after graduating with his *diploma* Tư had an exotic French wife by his side and a well-paid position in the French rubber company, *Le Terre Rouge*. Here he steadily gained a reputation for being an industrious and competent employee such that in 1931 he was issued with a license to clear and develop a tract of land as a rubber plantation in the district of Phú Hưng.

Spurred on by the automotive boom of the 1920s, around five hundred rubber plantations were established in Indochina by French companies.⁵ Of these, Phú Hưng was relatively small, covering an area of twenty-by-twenty kilometres and employing less than five hundred workers. One of the largest plantations, Dầu Tiếng, was situated in the same province as Tư's (then Thủ Dầu Một and now Bình Dương province) and was operated by the Michelin rubber company. Official figures (under)estimate the number of Vietnamese deaths at Dầu Tiếng between 1917 and 1951 from disease and maltreatment at 11,000 out of the 45,000 workers.⁶ Perhaps a more accurate account of the conditions at the plantations is offered by the writings of those who were trapped inside. While the French viewed the latex oozing from the trees as "white gold", Vietnamese labourers described it as "white blood" seeping out from "slaughterhouses" and "hell on earth".⁷ Their songs convey the deepest sorrow and most horrific forms of exploitation.

⁵ David G. Marr, "Introduction" in Trần Tư Bình (John Spragens Jr. trans. David G. Marr ed.), *The Red Earth: A Vietnamese Memoir of Life on a Colonial Rubber Plantation* (Athens, Ohio: Center for International Studies, 1985) v.

⁶ These official figures do not take into account uncontracted workers. Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, 210. Ngô Vĩnh Long, *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants Under the French* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 113.

⁷ *Máu Trắng*. Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, 210. *Địa ngục trần gian* and *lò sát sinh* respectively. Ngô Vĩnh Long, *Before the Revolution*, 113-5.

The workers have shed much of their blood,
 Blood floods the ground and oozes out like latex from the trees
 Here is hell on earth,
 The plantations of the red-earth districts are where the French murder
 people.⁸

A particularly detailed depiction of suffering and resistance in a *Le Terre Rouge* rubber plantation can be found in the memoirs of Trần Tư Bình.⁹ Trần Tư Bình was a young Leninist revolutionary who came to the Phú Riềng rubber plantation (also situated in Thủ Dầu Một province) in the 1920s in order to immerse himself in a gruelling working-class environment.¹⁰ He was convinced that it was only via such a process of “proletarianisation” that he could gain true empathy for the masses and participate in the overthrow of both French colonialism and global capitalism. The majority of his fellow workers were peasants from the impoverished regions of Northern Việt Nam, as Southerners were generally aware of the slavish working conditions and could more easily escape and return home. Before the Northerners had left for their new lives, recruitment agents and native administrators showed them idyllic pictures of what life would supposedly be like in the plantations. They made detailed assurances of three square meals a day, rent-free housing, free education for their children, safe and modern working conditions, extensive medical benefits, and regular holidays. Many were deceived into fingerprinting work contracts in the belief that the forms provided government protection from exploitation, before they were shoved and thrashed into cramped railway carriages and cargo ships heading for the South.

Upon arriving at the Phú Riềng plantation, Trần Tư Bình and his co-workers discovered that the accommodation was squalid, the wages measly and the

⁸ *Kiếp phù đồ làm máu đào*
Máu loang mặt đất máu trào mù cây
Trần gian địa ngục là đây
Đồn điền đất đỏ nơi Tây giết người.
 Ngô Vĩnh Long, *Before the Revolution*, 46.

⁹ Trần Tư Bình (John Spragens Jr. trans. David G. Marr ed.), *The Red Earth: A Vietnamese Memoir of Life on a Colonial Rubber Plantation* (Athens, Ohio: Center for International Studies, 1985).

¹⁰ Company records show that 22,000 of the 198,000 contracted workers for *Le Terre Rouge* died from 1917 to 1945. Once again there are no figures for uncontracted workers. Ngô Vĩnh Long, *Before the Revolution*, 113. Marr, “Introduction to *The Red Earth*”, vii.

working conditions intolerable. One of the first tasks was to clear the land. The workers started before sunrise and did not finish until sunset, and such was the deadliness of fatigue that the terrifying sound of tree trunks and branches lashing through the air was often followed by piercing screams and then deathly silence. The bodies were left, says Trần Tư Bình, to “fertilize the capitalists’ rubber trees”.¹¹

So as to facilitate greater order and production, an overseer/worker division was constructed whereby the former was elevated to a position of omnipotence; while the latter was dehumanised to the status of chattel. All possible means were harnessed in this radical bipolarisation process so that in accordance with traditional social categories, overseers had to be referred to as “master” (*thầy*), while the workers were scorned from above as if they were children or animals (*mày*). Perhaps more brutally efficient however, were the modern methods adopted to circumscribe and demoralise the work force. Rubber tappers at Phú Riêng were stripped of their names and replaced with a number that hung around their neck on a piece of wood. As mere numbers, the workers had no inherent worth, individuality, identity or function outside of the system that had created them. Such was the identity amnesia at the plantations that it was not uncommon for children to know their parents only as numerical figures. At Trần Tư Bình’s rubber plantation the dehumanisation measures were ostensibly so completely effective that overseers no longer heard the screams or could discern the agony of those who they trampled with nail-studded boots, tortured for attempting escape, or raped again and again. With this in mind, one well-known commentator asserted that it was not the communists, but rather, the French colonists in their rubber plantations who first experimented with modern totalitarianism in Việt Nam.¹²

However, even in this heinous milieu, Trần Tư Bình observed and experienced the capacity of many workers to retain a sense of internal poise, improvise tactics to dispel despair, and secretly lay the foundations for liberation. This he attributes to the organisational and motivational role of Marxism-Leninism:

¹¹ Trần Tư Bình, *The Red Earth*, 25-30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 209.

Phu-rieng had...all the characteristics of a self-conscious working class...The more we struggled, the more we won. And the more we won, the more we struggled. The more we won, the more the masses believed in and gathered around the party branch. Gradually we learned to marshall our forces, to protect ourselves when we were on the defensive, and to strike boldly when we were on the attack.¹³

With the Party's steady ideological helmsmanship, argues Trần Tu Bình, the workers were able fully to realise that they had been lied to and exploited, that the rubber plantation world was up-side-down, that it was in fact the colonists and their lackeys who were the savages. Moreover, through Marxism-Leninism the plantation workers were endowed with a belief in change, a faith in their collective ability to overcome their oppressors and to build a prosperous and just future for themselves and their children. In the early 1930s, this newfound spirit emboldened the workers to rise up and capture Phú Riềng plantation. The uprising took place against the advice of Trần Tu Bình who stridently believed that they should wait for a nationwide Party-coordinated offensive. He was right, and the workers were quickly suppressed by intervening French troops.

Trần Tu Bình most likely overstates Marxism-Leninism's capacity for inspiring resilience and subversion at Phú Riềng. His book and others suggest that many of the tactical manoeuvres undertaken by rubber plantation workers were not wholly attributable to ideology. For instance, even when their names and lives were ostensibly taken over by numbers, the workers found ways to reclaim their distinctive identities without immediately bringing derision and beatings down upon them. Secretly, they recolonised the numerical systems of control in order to sustain their notions of self. Many plantation workers added simple adjectives to their numbers in order to identify one another more easily and humanely, so that "11" became "11-plump" (a particularly distinctive characteristic) and "31" might be known as "31 thin".¹⁴

¹³ *Ibid.*, 62-3.

¹⁴ Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, 211-2.

Trần Tư Bình illustrates another instance of surreptitious subversion when, in response to labour unrest, the French director at Phú Riềng organised sporting teams and arts groups in the hope of placating the natives. Taking advantage of this opportunity for reprieve and revolt, the workers set about rehearsing a New Year's (*Tết*) dragon dance. In so doing, under the noses of their oppressors, they were able to hone their martial-arts and sword skills so that when *Tết* finally arrived, the parade of workers marched to the director's villa on (and in) a cloud of festive joy. During this vibrant episode of justice and revolt, the workers ridiculed the director while performing all manner of dances and gesticulations (the meaning of which he was only vaguely aware). The director was left red-faced, bewildered and temporarily powerless; as the cackling workers envisaged and made inevitable a time when they would be their own masters.

There are no published works on Vân's grand uncle Tư or his Phú Hưng rubber plantation, and memories of this period and place are scattered and faded. Was life and death for workers at Phú Hưng anything like that at Phú Riềng (which was in the same province and run by the same company)? What is discernable is that any differences were not of a fundamental nature, but rather a matter of degrees. The workers at Tư's plantation were also from the North and their abject poverty was evidenced by the fact that their clothes consisted wholly and inadequately of tattered loin cloths. Sadly, here too it was possible to find frightening forms of objectification, where workers were known and knew themselves only as numbers. Moreover, during roll calls and pay days, it was not unusual to see Tư standing ominously over the pitiful procession of workers which he inspected as if they were cattle. Even more frightening for weary rubber tappers in the fields was the sight of director Tư on his menacing horse as he rode through the plantation with a long whip in hand. Vân's grand uncle was also infamous for his many sordid relationships with young women, thereby affirming the common wisdom that,

It is easy to enter a rubber plantation but hard to get out of it,
A man who goes there loses his wife, and a woman comes home with
children.¹⁵

¹⁵ *Cao su đi dễ khó về*
Trai đi mất vợ, gái về có con.

Plantation workers at Phú Hưng were not as quick to revolt as their comrades at Phú Riêng and more successful as a consequence. It was not until the late 1930s that strikes broke out, followed by the sabotaging of saplings, and several attempts to take Tư's life. With French colonial troops committed to World War II in Europe, the Việt Minh and plantation workers took control of Phú Hưng and set it alight, forcing Tư and his overseers to flee to the township of Bình Dương. He would return in the 1940s and attempt to restart the plantation on a smaller scale, but by then the red earth had dried up and was no longer profitable to him.

In Bình Dương Tư took over the management of several well-situated properties and it was not long before he was one of the most influential people in town. Now in his reflective fifties, Tư perhaps recognised that he would someday have to answer for his earthly deeds. In all likelihood, this motivated him to take on the custodianship of a local temple. The temple was dedicated to the Chinese general Quan Công whose valour and virtue is immortalised in *The Three Kingdoms*.¹⁶ Decades later, a statue of Quan Công was erected at the front gate. Astride a valiant steed of unrivalled pace and endurance, the General's righteousness and ferocity is symbolised by his fiery-red face and the implements of his rule: a scimitar, pike, staff, and pen.¹⁷ To be sure, the statue is a befitting tribute to both the spiritual and secular patrons of the temple. It has even been suggested that, in his retirement, Tư had a political epiphany of sorts and subsequently joined a newly established branch of the Cao Đài sect known as the Minh Chon (Bright Truth) Way which actively fought against French colonialism.

Rubber plantation folksong. Ngô Vĩnh Long, *Before the Revolution*, 115.

¹⁶ His full name in Vietnamese is Quan Thánh Đế Quân.

¹⁷ Inside the temple there is an altar dedicated to Tư upon which there is an imposing picture of him wearing a pristine white suit. His hair is dark and slick as he reclines in an elegant lacquered chair. Today the temple is more popular than ever. Each New Year and during the festival of the first full moon, it attracts hordes of visitors who pray and make offerings for prosperity. It and a nearby temple in Bình Dương are mentioned in Philip Taylor, "The Ethnicity of Efficacy: Vietnamese Goddess Worship and the Encoding of Popular Histories" in *Asian Ethnicity* 3:1 (March 2002) 85-102 at 99.

Years later, Vân visited Tur when he was well into his seventies. At that time, he was still receiving a pension from the French government which helped him employ numerous servants who reverently stood by the elderly man's chair awaiting his every command. When Tur passed away, an enormous funeral was held and a torrent of tears was shed. Relatives and friends lined up to recount stories of his generosity and virtue. He had chauffeured gleeful nieces and grand-nieces through the dusty tracks of Phú Hưng plantation in a dashing Roland automobile which sent peacocks scattering at the sight and sound of their extravagance. He had also funded the education of many of his nephews and offered them work regardless of whether they finished or failed. Tur's resplendent home was always open to indigent friends and relatives in the countryside who needed an overnight stop on their way to or from Sài Gòn. There were those who proclaimed that such was Tur's saintliness, that his coffin could be elevated with only one finger. Others, who had held on to fragments of his questionable past, whispered that he had so many wives that each of them needed only one finger to lower him into the grave.

Perhaps most notably, Vân's father (Tur's nephew), was a primary beneficiary of his generosity. Thái relied on Tur's sponsorship to undertake his studies and then worked for him as a plantation overseer until the day that Phú Hưng burnt down. And so it could be said that the financial comfort that Vân experienced in her early years and the villa in which she slept so soundly, were constructed with the white gold of French colonialism. The extent to which Thái's hands were stained with the red earth and blood is unclear. Undoubtedly, he was responsible as an overseer for controlling and disciplining his workers. However the manner in which he undertook this task was not readily recounted at the time or subsequently by Thái (and other overseers), not even to his wife. Vân thus places great faith in her father's reputation as a gentle and virtuous man. With unshakeable conviction she maintains that he preserved and exercised his virtue, even while working in a slaughterhouse.

Everyday Readings of Vietnamese Conflict and Revolt

When the ground and all that was on it shook ferociously and people ran past Vân's house with the aimless desperation of ants after the first drops of rain, she knew that the war had come. The Việt Minh planted bombs at bicycle races, the town hall, and even circuses, but usually the explosions came from the market where the revolutionaries also poisoned food. While the central objective of this havoc was the destabilisation and overthrow of French colonialism, the Việt Minh guerrillas clearly accepted that ordinary people had to make sacrifices or even be sacrificed in order to achieve these goals.

The greatest risks were taken by those revolutionaries who planted the bombs or threw the grenades at government officials and French troops. It was common for such tasks to be undertaken by children not much older than Vân whose innocent appearance made them effective assassins. Songs were used to both encourage and recruit young operatives on their perilous missions.

...The throngs of cheerful young women and men
Who are deeply involved in the struggle for the future!
Ten thousand steps forward: what a powerful rhythm
Ten thousand chants together: what unyielding melody...¹⁸

Before the dust from the explosions had settled, colonial troops were raiding houses and occasionally Vân would see young men being led to the French barracks with their hands tied behind their backs and resignation on their faces. Days, weeks, perhaps months passed before there was another explosion, screams, sirens and arrests. Like many other children living in war-torn countries, Vân was warned to stay away from crowds. And while she always tried to obey her parents, the young girl remained puzzled as, "How can people avoid crowds?"

¹⁸ ...Là đoàn người tuổi trẻ gái cùng trai
Đang say sưa tranh đấu cho ngày mai!
Muôn bước tiến: nhịp hùng cương,
Muôn tiếng hét: điệu quật cường.

Ngô Vĩnh Long, *Vietnamese Women in Society and Revolution: 1. The French Colonial Period*. (Cambridge: Vietnam Resource Center, 1974) 184.

There were times when planes flew overhead and thousands of pieces of paper fluttered to the ground like giant multicoloured snowflakes. The pamphlets praised the French for building roads, hospitals and schools, and condemned the Việt Minh as godless terrorists. With neither planes nor coloured paper available to them, the Việt Minh revolutionaries hand-dropped leaflets in the street stating that the French had pillaged the country's natural resources, built more jails than schools and that a glorious people's revolution was inevitable and imminent. Importantly, this was no cheap and impotent imitation on the Việt Minh's part. Rather, it evidenced the revolutionaries' refined ability to make do with minimal resources and, whenever possible, turn the weapons of their enemies in their favour. Indeed, the modern Vietnamese alphabet (*quốc ngữ*) in which these propagandistic pamphlets were written was itself a prime example of Vietnamese and Việt Minh tactical poaching at its most effective.

Prior to the arrival of the French, only a handful of the Vietnamese officialdom and scholars could read and write. Without a distinctive Vietnamese alphabet, they used either Chinese or, from the around twelfth century onwards, many scholars wrote in a Vietnamese script known as *nôm* that adopted Chinese characters (officials continued to use Chinese). Recognising how difficult and time consuming it was for both natives and foreigners to learn to read and write Vietnamese using Chinese characters, seventeenth century European Catholic missionaries in Việt Nam started devising a Latin-based alphabet with which they hoped to spread the word of God. Particularly noteworthy was the Jesuit Priest, Father Alexander de Rhodes, who in 1651 compiled a ground-breaking Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin dictionary. From the turn of the century until the end of World War I, the French colonial administration promoted the Latin-based script (*quốc ngữ*)¹⁹ as a reasonably effective means of communicating with, administering and controlling the Vietnamese population through the training of native functionaries (the complete assimilation of the Vietnamese to French had been considered but was deemed impractical). Reacting against these colonialist

¹⁹ Translates as the "national language". In the late 1800s Vietnamese collaborators with the French were celebrating and associating *quốc ngữ* with *quốc văn* (national literature) and *quốc âm* (national sound/tongue), all of which had been previously associated with *nôm*. David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) 145.

programs, some Vietnamese rejected anything carrying even the slightest scent of the West. The blind poet-patriot of the mid-to-late 1800s, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, argued that *quốc ngữ* was a crude club with which the French aimed to beat the Sinicised elegance out of elite Vietnamese literature and thereby force them into culturo-linguistic barbarism and enslavement.²⁰

Facilitated by the introduction of printing presses, by the 1930s *quốc ngữ* had generated a momentum of its own that neither the French or dogmatically anti-French campaigners could quell. Between 1920 and 1940 around one hundred different *quốc ngữ* manuals were printed with a total production of at least 3.7 million copies.²¹ Books were hurriedly translated from French and Chinese into this new form of writing, facilitating an unprecedented level of social and scientific learning. Critical in *quốc ngữ*'s explosive popularity amongst the intelligentsia were influential journalists and pro-French collaborators like Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh and Phạm Quỳnh who, in their publications and proclamations, sought to reform and modernise Vietnamese society by way of the positive adoption of Western ideas and texts. In 1938 the French Popular Front leaders in Paris allowed for the establishment of an Association for the Dissemination of *Quốc Ngữ* Study which aimed to promote the script to people via the distribution of free primers and a dedicated army of volunteer teachers.²² There were also anti-French scholar-activists in the North who recognised that *quốc ngữ* could be taught and used not only to promote Catholicism and the glory of France, but also to liberate their people from ignorance and foreign rule. Led by the *Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục* school movement and scholar-activists like Phan Châu Trinh, *quốc ngữ* also became regarded as a quick and easy means of teaching people how to read and write for nationalist emancipatory purposes.

Most notably, in the 1930s the Việt Minh (many of whom had learnt the new script in jail or in the jungles using flat rocks and limestone) had recognised *quốc*

²⁰ John DeFrancis, "Vietnamese Writing Reform in Asian Perspective" in Trương Bửu Lâm (ed.) *Borrowings and Adaptations in Vietnamese Culture* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii at Manoa: 1987) 41-51 at 49.

²¹ Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 176.

²² *Hội Truyền Bá Học Quốc Ngữ. Ibid.*, 179.

ngữ as a powerful propagandistic tool.²³ After coming to power in 1945, Hồ Chí Minh announced that combating illiteracy was one of the government's top three revolutionary objectives (the other two being resisting the French and overcoming famine).²⁴ A massive teacher training program was implemented and in many Northern villages it was common for markets to be closed off to all those who had not attended their *quốc ngữ* classes. "Studying is Patriotic" went the popular slogan which later developed into, "We must be literate to emerge victorious in the Resistance."²⁵ Via these fervent pedagogical measures, both literacy rates and support for the independence movement soared. Between September 1945 and December 1946 the Department of Mass Education reported that 95,665 voluntary instructors had taught 2,520,678 people how to read and write.²⁶ The Việt Minh came to be seen by many ordinary people as both great nationalists and civilisers. And suddenly they could promote their messages of resistance and liberation with unheralded speed and fidelity. Clearly, literacy and education in Việt Nam was never an end in itself, but rather a political battleground that had to be won.

...men who have just been taught to read, to write and to count are only likely to be better slaves, and it is harder to defend people against semi-culture than against ignorance. For there is 'reading' and reading. Reading is nothing if one cannot distinguish between the truth and the lies printed on a piece of paper, and if one cannot recognize the secret combinations which they may form at times.²⁷

When Vân was six years old and had started to read, she innocently picked up a Việt Minh pamphlet and brought it home, hoping that her father would help her to decipher it. Her mother, Sắt (who was illiterate), immediately identified the pamphlet and scolded Vân severely. She tore the paper from her daughter's hand and gingerly disposed of it as if it was toxic, "Do you know what would happen

²³ *Ibid.*, 183.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁵ *Đi học là yêu nước.*

Có biết chữ kháng chiến mới thắng lợi.

Cited in Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 186.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 184.

²⁷ Jean Guehenno, *Education Populaire et Crise de Civilisation* (Paris: UNESCO, 1950). Cited in Benard B. Fall, *The Viet-Minh Regime: Government and Administration in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, rev. ed. 1956) 112.

if the French caught you with that? We would all be in trouble!” This left Vân with the impression that reading could be extremely dangerous.

During her childhood, Vân was often confronted with semi-comprehensible occurrences of seemingly conflicting political and moral orientation. There was a sense that everything French or Western (*Tây*) was bigger, stronger and more beautiful.²⁸ When first introduced, the tremendous turkey was viewed as an upgrade of the humble chicken, and therefore became known as a “French chicken”. The slender and feeble Vietnamese onion (scallion) was no match for the bigger, rounder and juicier Western variety. Vietnamese with white skin and high noses were praised for their “French-like beauty” and merchandise imported from the West was automatically embossed with the mark of quality. At times, the French appeared to be generous and fun-loving especially on 14 July when, to celebrate Bastille Day, a dazzling parade of natives draped in the French tricolours surged down the main street to the town hall where there were all manner of market stalls and sideshow alleys. A grandstand and stage were also erected upon which children sang the French anthem, *La Marseillaise*, and the band played throughout the day.

While at that time, Vân could not really understand why anyone would object to such frivolity, these affairs were a prime target for the Việt Minh. Consequently, French-sanctioned fun was always seasoned with fear and the prominent presence of grisly colonial soldiers on the look out for saboteurs. This was the image of France—ominous and overbearing as their destructive protectors—that young Vân also struggled to come to grips with. The French lived in houses that were luxurious beyond imagination and guarded by soldiers and fearsome German Shepherds. In the street, French people were not to be gawked at; rather one should stare at the ground as they walked by, or take a detour so as to avoid them all together. And so, even as the colonists imposed their ideas and interests upon her, Vân felt distant from them. At times she was convinced that the white person’s culture was wholly detached from the coloured person’s, that white

²⁸ Discussed in Truong Bửu Lâm, *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism 1900-1931* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000) 52-3.

people were bent on subjugating others, that they were disdainful of proud natives, and that they could not be trusted.

More often it seemed to Vân that everyone involved with the war should be avoided. This was the perspective that her parents, Thái and Sắt, tried to foster in all their daughters as they knew that brash children were threats not only to themselves, but also to everyone around them. Of the ubiquitous conflict and terror, Thái and Sắt explained nothing to their children. Nevertheless, a perceptive child could learn much by scrounging around for morsels of information, colluding with older children, and mulling over the ever-inconsistent moods and behaviour of adults. It was via these hazy means that Vân, even before she was ten years old, developed a political consciousness. Her first impression was that the Việt Minh was more deserving of her support than the French. She started to view the revolutionaries as heroic underdogs, the modern-day equivalents of a long list of national heroes who had driven away the Chinese invaders in times past. Việt Nam, the young girl rationalised, was surely for the Vietnamese. Vân thereby moved from merely recognising the existence of war, to formulating her own opinion as to why they were fighting. This enlightenment, however, came at a great cost. For in the process of rationalising bloodshed, Vân lost her innocence; that imaginative, blissful and unrecoverable quality that only flourishes when such things remain unknown. Then, in 1950, a momentous event occurred that would turn Vân against the Việt Minh forever, leaving her without a major ideological line to adhere to, or even a house to live in.

In Times of Terror

This event had its immediate origins in Thái's decision after returning from the Phú Hưng plantation in the early 1940s to purchase a small fleet of cars that he hired out to transport people mostly to and from Sài Gòn. Thái's fleet consisted of two black *Vedettes* (sleek sedans with an extra bench seat installed in the middle so as to boost their capacity to around nine) and a mini-bus that was made for twenty but often held twice that. At first, Thái drove the vehicles himself.

However, as business improved he employed drivers to make the trip to and from the capital once or twice a day. Vân's mother supplemented the family income by transporting wood, charcoal and fruits such as mangosteen, durian and rambutans to the city for sale. The family thereby (re)integrated themselves into the colonial economy and, for much of the 1940s, this served them handsomely.

Thái and his drivers made it a point to always return before nightfall so as to avoid the nocturnally active revolutionaries. By 1950, with the First Indochina War well underway, car bombings and other acts of sabotage started to take place during the day. At first, only large commercial and luxury vehicles were targeted, but it was not long before the Việt Minh was setting all manner of automobiles alight. Fewer and fewer people dared travel to Sài Gòn, and Thái's trade dwindled along with his savings. Then one day the Việt Minh put him out of business for good when they ambushed the two *Vedettes* at gunpoint and directed the drivers and passengers to the side of the road. Cloth fuses were fed into the petrol tanks and a fateful match was lit. In an instant, the two stylish sedans were transformed into smouldering banners for the promotion of the national liberation movement and, perhaps more importantly, to illustrate the dangers of dissent.

Those who were allied with the French would have most likely shown sincere compassion for Thái and his family. They would have re-iterated that the French were the true champions of Vietnamese prosperity and security. How could it be otherwise? How could true justice and liberation be promoted by those who target non-combatants at markets, festivals and on motorways? No doubt Việt Minh proponents would have replied with considerable vitriol. They would have pointed out that the French—who had raided the Vietnamese countryside and blanket bombed the nation in the name of “pacification”—were in no position to make righteous statements about terror and civilian casualties. Moreover, it might be argued that the Việt Minh's use of such unconventional tactics was based on well-reasoned grounds. The pre-eminent Việt Minh strategist at the time, Võ Nguyên Giáp, asserted that conventional war was “extremely dangerous” for poorly equipped armies which had to turn to protracted people's war tactics for their comparative advantage. And if some civilians were lost in the process, then this was a tragedy that was nevertheless justifiable by the

Maoist axiom, “a revolution is no tea party”. The staunch Việt Minh devotee might even argue that Thái was not innocent and unaffiliated with the crimes of colonial capitalism. He had exploited his drivers for profit and facilitated colonial trade. Indeed, following this line of reasoning, it could be said that the Việt Minh were actually liberating Vân’s family from the tentacles of Western imperialism and socio-economically repositioning them in preparation for the glorious national, socialist and communist revolutions. The rationale behind such acts of “armed propaganda” was to “legitimise armed violence with the promise of rice and a better life.”²⁹

Not surprisingly, it was difficult for Vân’s father, Thái, to accept that the French or the Việt Minh had his family’s best interests in mind. It was only a matter of months before he was forced to sell the remaining mini-bus and then their much loved villa, the only home that Vân had ever known. To make matters worse, the instability in the economy had dragged down automobile and property prices so that the liquidation of their assets only slightly cushioned their fall. For the next year, Vân and her family moved from one friend’s or relative’s house to another. With almost everyone struggling to survive, any hospitality afforded to them never lasted very long. Vân’s meals were made bitter by the taste of charity. She slept uncomfortably, niggled by the fact that she was not in her own home. Constantly, she felt as if her presence was resented, as if she did not belong in the very space that she occupied. When it came time to leave, young Vân could sense the hostile tones and half-masked lies in the statements of their friends and relatives, “The house has to be renovated. There are some other people coming who are more in need than you. It’s just better for everyone if you find another place.” Vân would never forget the feelings of shame, insecurity and displacement that came with not having her own home, and devoted the remainder of her life to ensuring that she and her loved ones would never feel that way again.

It was not long before the drivers who had once worked for Thái were bringing him offerings of rice and food. One day, one of the drivers dropped off some

²⁹ Greg Lockhart, *Nation in Arms: The Origins of the People’s Army of Vietnam* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989) 113, note 32.

dried fish and went to particular trouble to emphasise that he was working at a dried fish factory and was so sick of the smell that Thái was doing him a favour by taking it off his hands. The worker realised the sensitivity of the situation and did not want his old boss to lose face. Thái graciously accepted the fish and gave it to his wife, Sắt, who left it on a window sill to air out the pungent aroma. She had hardly turned her back, before a street cat pounced on it and ran away. Reacting to Sắt's scream, the entire family pursued the scraggly feline. Frantically, they chased the cat even after they knew the fish was no longer edible. The pursuit was driven by vengeance and because the family could not bear another demoralising defeat. After the best part of an hour, they congregated back at the house and collectively accepted that all was lost. Hungry and exhausted, Vân's family slumped in silence before spontaneously erupting with laughter. That shrewd alley cat had reminded them that even when they were bereft of their house and last morsel of food, Vân's family still had hope, they still had each other. In better times, Thái commissioned an oil painting of that scrawny cat and the measly piece of fish to remind them of how they had been dragged through the streets and come out clean.

Modern City Living I

In the middle of 1952, Thái got a job at the Planning Department and found an affordable place for the family to live in Sài Gòn. Eight year old Vân had already been to the city a number of times. But as she sat on the back of the rickety truck with her family and belongings, the thought of living in Sài Gòn sent surges of excitement through her veins. Their home was situated on an anonymous and dusty street of Cây Mai district (named after the trees that heralded the New Year with cheerful yellow flowers). Much to the children's delight, their house was very close to a biscuit factory where the owners fed coconut shells and wood chips into an oven that emitted an enticing aroma throughout the day. Often Vân could not help but stop by on the way home from school and inquire as to the availability of broken bits that were sometimes sold at a discount to polite young children. Another advantage of living in Cây Mai was the abundance of small orchards where blooms of every possible shape and colour were nurtured and

sold. Vân soon discovered that to find a hidden niche in one of these splendid places and to take deep breaths, was to lose herself in the pages of a finely illustrated fairy tale.

Notwithstanding the enchanting smells of flowers and biscuits, Cây Mai was no paradise. This was particularly evident throughout July and August when raging raindrops fell upon the city, causing the sewers to overflow into homes. During these times, Vân and her family crowded on to an elevated hardwood bed where they waited like Noah in his arc for the putrid waters to subside and for the immense clean up to begin.

Like all other houses in the area, Vân's was made of thatch. A low wall separated the front living area from the kitchen, while the bathroom could be found inside a dilapidated backyard shed. In a mutually detrimental exchange of filth, the family's bath water ran off onto other properties at the same time foreign suds and grime ran onto their's. Bowel movements, which also took place within the shed, necessitated the lining of a bowl with paper that was subsequently wrapped up and deposited into an adjacent bin. Much to their dread, Vân and her older sisters had to carry this bin to the communal cesspit each night. As they conducted their night soil sorties, the girls were often berated and told to hurry on by neighbours whose waste, Vân concluded, must have smelt that much more agreeable than their's.

Even more burdensome than the floods and the lack of sanitation, was illness which hampered Vân's family's wellbeing throughout their time at Cây Mai. Vân's younger sister, Hoa, was born in Bình Dương in July 1951. Her arduous infancy would come to reflect the family's struggles and small victories during that period. She was a premature baby and was held hostage at the maternity clinic because Vân's father could not pay the bill. "If it weren't for that lucky lottery ticket," he would recount years later, "I would have had to break into the ward and rescue her!" Not long after the family moved to Sài Gòn, Hoa fell ill and was near death for over a month. She was unconscious with fever and festering sores covered her tiny body. Hoa's mother, Sắt, did not have faith in or money for the services of a Western-trained doctor, and so she placed a catfish in

a basin under her daughter's bed in the belief that it would draw out Hoa's deadly ailments. Fortunately, both fish and child survived, and the grateful family released the Piscean wonder into a river after making an incision on its tail so that kind-hearted anglers would know of both the infection and good deed that it bore.

Vân's older sister and confidant, Loan, was a pretty and sweet-mannered girl who Vân often admired and occasionally resented for the attention and compliments that she received. While in Bình Dương, Loan was diagnosed with polio which developed rapidly after they moved to Sài Gòn. Her limbs became increasingly fragile and bowed, and the muscles around her feet shrivelled so as to have a mummified appearance that robbed Loan of the ability to walk. Once again, Vân's parents could not afford to take Loan to a hospital. And in any case, they were convinced that such heinous afflictions were largely caused by supernatural forces and had to be rectified accordingly. Clearly, Vân's parents did not possess a Cartesian view of the world whereby the mind is distinct from the body and the spirit is often banished altogether. On the contrary, for them, mind, body and spirit were intrinsically related. And so, Thái came home one day with a monkey that Vân and her sisters immediately fell in love with. A name had already been chosen for the little beast when they discovered that he was to be slaughtered and its kidneys removed for Loan to eat. After that measure proved unsuccessful, Thái, Sắt and Loan travelled to the other side of Sài Gòn to see a man who sold holy water that could purportedly cure any ailment. Such was the reputation of this elixir, however, that by the time they arrived, the man's well had dried up. Along with many other disappointed hopefuls, Thái returned with containers of water that he held over his head while the miracle worker blessed them from his veranda with a leafy branch. Particularly traumatic were the visits to a Buddhist temple in Chợ Lớn where a powder was sprinkled upon Loan's aching knees and then set alight. With each treatment the family waited in anticipation and hope, only to grow increasingly despondent and indebted.

Despite the family's best efforts and constant prayers, the life force in Loan became dimmer as her aspirations of marriage, education and longevity slipped away. The polio weakened her immune system and she encountered problems

with her stomach, lungs and heart. Too weak to study, Loan gave up school before she could read and kept herself occupied by doing menial jobs around the house and watching people go by in the street outside. Her father always reserved the best clothes and food for her, and occasionally scraped together enough money for Loan and her sisters to see German ice skaters, foreign movies such as *Aladdin and the Forty Thieves*, and all manner of exotic exhibitions. Nevertheless, Loan faded into a facsimile of a person. This can be seen in the photographs of that time which show an emaciated young teenager sitting awkwardly in the shadows, heavily adorned with bracelets and necklaces that had been purchased to remind her of her beauty.

The Legendary Subversive Adventures of Trạng Quỳnh and the Literary Socialisation of Vietnamese Everyday Resistance

Like the war, Loan's illness served to abbreviate Vân's childhood, burdening her with responsibilities and demanding a solemn fortitude that was beyond her years. Vân spent many days reading to her older sister Vietnamese fairy tales such as *Tám Cám* and *Trái Thị* along with (more wholesome) Western equivalents like Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty. Together they dreamt that someday soon, divine magic would restore Loan's legs so that she could go to the movies and the zoo without her younger sister having to carry her shrunken form from place to place.

Occasionally, their father Thái provided a more lively source of fantastical fiction through his story telling. For this he was well-known, so that at family gatherings children would come from afar and loll around his feet, too respectful to ask him outright to begin, but also anxious to get a prime position as soon as he hollered, "Who wants to hear a story?"³⁰

"Yes, yes, father!"

³⁰ The following evocation is based on Vân and her sisters' recollections and the following texts. *Vietnamese Folk-Tales Satire and Humour* (Hà Nội: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1990). Nguyễn Đức Hiền (ed.), *40 Truyện Trạng Quỳnh [40 Tales about Trạng Quỳnh]* (Hà Nội: Culture Information Publishing House, 1998).

“Me, me! Wait for me before you start Uncle Thái!”

The children came streaming in from their games of bones in the backyard or skipping in the street and sat cross-legged and attentive at Thái’s feet. On perfect occasions, Vân’s mother passed out cups of sugar cane juice or *sâm bô lượng* sweet soup for every member of the audience. The smaller ones would drink from spoons, so as to savour the experience. On such occasions, Vân looked up to her father as if he were an oracle of wisdom, an eternal fountain of fabulous tales.

“Now, what story would you like to hear?” asked Thái.

“Please, tell us the story of My Châu, Trọng Thủy and the Golden Tortoise.”

“No, we heard that one last time. I want to hear about the brave Thạch Sanh!”

“How about the story of the stupid husband and the clever wife? That story always makes me giggle.”

“No, not a funny story, I want to hear an action story.”

“Quiet everyone!” said Thái in a commanding voice. “I will tell you a story that is both funny and exciting. How would you like to hear about the adventures of Trạng Quỳnh?”

“Yes, yes, tell us a story about Trạng Quỳnh and how he lived by his wits and saved Việt Nam from the Chinese and...”

“Who’s Trạng Quỳnh?” asked one of the smaller children.

“Don’t you know anything, stupid!?” castigated the small boy’s cousin,
“Everyone knows who Trạng Quỳnh is.”

“Actually, that was an excellent question,” said Thái cutting-in and coming to the rescue of the small boy who was on the verge of tears. “For a long time no one knew exactly who Trạng Quỳnh was, and whether he was real or made up. We now think that he did exist. He lived during the Lê and Trịnh dynasties in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that’s two hundred and fifty years ago. I’m almost fifty years old so that means that if he was still alive today then he would be far far older than me.”

“Ooooh, that’s very old indeed,” remarked a little girl.

“Trạng Quỳnh’s real name was ‘Nguyễn Quỳnh’ and he was born in the district of Hoàng Hóa in Thanh Hóa province in the North. We’ll never know exactly which Trạng Quỳnh stories actually took place, which ones he wrote himself, or which ones changed as they were told and retold over the generations, but it seems that Trạng Quỳnh was known to be a genius from a very young age. He received the highest marks in his examinations for his first degree but failed to receive his second degree because his free thinking offended the inflexible imperial examiners. Nevertheless, despite the fact that he didn’t even get to the highest examinations, we honour him as ‘*trạng*’. This is the title that we give to whoever received the highest score in the highest degree, the smartest person in the land.

Now, there are lots of stories about Trạng Quỳnh and how he teased and tricked everyone: the common people; the mean and greedy Trịnh lords; and even the gods. But he is best known for tricking the Chinese. You’ll remember that the Chinese ruled Việt Nam for a thousand years and called it ‘Annam’ which means the pacified land to the south. Even now we sometimes still call China, ‘*Trung Quốc*’ which means ‘middle kingdom’. In any case, following the thousand years of Chinese rule, for almost another thousand years the Vietnamese were never really free. We were always afraid that China would invade us again and knew that, because their country was many times bigger than ours, we could not hold them out forever. We knew that if we wanted to maintain our independence and dignity we could not rely on strength alone, that we would have to use our wits.

In this regard the humble Vietnamese were as powerful as anyone because no-one, even in China, was more cunning than Trạng Quỳnh.

Before a Chinese emperor decided to conquer a neighbouring country, he would first try to determine whether the people of that country were talented and intelligent. The emperor would send envoys that proposed quizzes, tests and puzzles to the chosen champions of the land. If they failed, then invasion would surely follow. You can imagine the pressure upon these Vietnamese champions, the fate of a whole country was in their hands. But Trạng Quỳnh always met the challenge with cool humour and an indomitable spirit. Now, which Trạng Quỳnh story shall I tell you? How about the story of Trạng Quỳnh the ingenious painter?"

"Yes, yes, yes, tell us that story."

"Well, there was one Chinese emperor in the time of Trạng Quỳnh who was convinced that the talent of his chief imperial artist exceeded anything that he had ever seen. One day, the emperor got an idea. He would send the artist to Việt Nam and challenge the best Vietnamese artist in a competition. When the Vietnamese artist was soundly defeated, word would quickly spread through the Southern land of the superiority of Chinese civilisation. The Vietnamese would be demoralised and prime targets for invasion.

The Chinese envoy was sent at haste along with advance word of the test that had been set for the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese emperor and his lords were terrified and panicked like fish stranded on the shore. In desperation they turned to Trạng Quỳnh, asking him for advice and whether he knew of a painter who might be up to the task. Trạng Quỳnh was unruffled and replied, 'I do not know any painters, but will happily take up the challenge myself.' The Vietnamese lords were confounded. However, knowing Trạng Quỳnh's reputation and with no other alternative, they accepted his offer.

When the Chinese envoy arrived in all its pomp and finery, the Vietnamese emperor and lords were forced to greet and treat them as honoured guests despite

the fact that they had come to conquer our land. When the time came for the all-important test, the leader of the envoy declared the dastardly terms on which he expected Trạng Quỳnh to compete. 'To demonstrate the infinite talent and culture of the Middle Kingdom, I come with the royal painter who will draw in three beats of a drum a magnificent beast. If the unknown artist from this pacified land can match or better his feat, the emperor will consider your land worthy and leave you in peace.'

'Hah!' cried Trạng Quỳnh, 'I can draw ten animals in that time!' The assembly was shocked and knew of no magic that could accomplish such an implausible deed. They watched and waited, frozen with fear as the drummer began his count."

"Does anyone know how long three drum beats is?" asked Thái. "It's about five seconds. Count with me. One...two...three...four...five. Then multiply that by three. Not very long is it? So the task before Trạng Quỳnh was formidable to say the least.

Bohhmm!!! Went the drum for the first time.

And the Chinese painter picked up his brush, dipping it in the ink as a bird draws nectar from a flower, and deftly illustrating the undulating outline of a mighty beast. In the background he elegantly but with frightening speed dabbed and dragged his brush to create soft plump clouds that would frame and accentuate the fierceness of his dragon. As for our hero Trạng Quỳnh, both his form and paper remained inanimate.

Boohhmm!! Went the second beat of the drum.

And the Chinese painter revealed his secret ability. He picked up a second brush which he used with equal skill and speed. The master painter added the dragon wings, one hand sketching the bony outline while the other elegantly filled-in the delicate membrane. Clearly, he had practiced this picture thousands of times before. Then he started on the fearsome razor-sharp claws, simultaneously

drawing the left claws with his right hand and the right claws with his left, so that even the sharpest eye could not have identified the slightest variation. After that, but still in that instant, the painter used the very point of his brushes to meticulously depict every scale on the beast's body and every strand of hair on its flowing mane. Can you imagine how many scales there are on a dragon's body? Can you guess how many hairs are on its neck?

And still our champion *Trạng Quỳnh* was motionless and so relaxed that he yawned as if he were about to go to bed. Ahhhwhh!!! The leader of the Chinese envoy was sure that a mad man stood before him and was ready to slaughter every Vietnamese in retribution for *Trạng Quỳnh*'s insolence. The Vietnamese dignitaries had already packed their trunks with treasure, and fresh horses were standing by ready to flee. They all awaited the final drum beat.

Booohhmmm!!!

The Chinese painter drove his brushes into the paper and drilled deeper and deeper, spinning the tips around to make two shining vicious eyes. His arms then swirled in a mesmerising flurry as he added great swathes of fire from the dragon's snarling mouth. But by that stage, would you believe, no-one was watching him. Instead, their attention was fixed upon *Trạng Quỳnh* who had dipped his hands in a pot of ink and run his fingers down the page.

Time was up. In the seconds of silence that followed no-one could make any sense of what had just transpired, no-one that is except for *Trạng Quỳnh*.

'Fool!' cried the envoy head. 'We give you this marvellous work of art and all you can offer is a few scraggly lines. Every man, woman, child and animal in this pathetic land will pay for your impertinence.'

'With the greatest respect Your Excellency,' said the ever calm *Trạng Quỳnh*. 'Have you not seen ten glorious worms before?'"

The children burst into pure and joyous fits of laughter upon hearing the punch-line. One or two of them boasted that they had guessed it was coming all along.

Thái summed up, “The Vietnamese members of the court and even some of the Chinese cackled so hard that the story of how Trạng Quỳnh had once again outsmarted the Chinese echoed through the land, fortifying the people’s spirit and keeping them safe from invasion.”

“Tell us another one. Tell us more about the wonderful Trạng Quỳnh!” pleaded the children who were addicted to the suspense, humour and nationalistic valour embodied in Thái’s stories.

“I do know one more story about him. But it’s a little lewd. Usually I only share it with adults and I’m not sure that...”

“Please, please, we are all old enough. We won’t pass on the story to anyone who is too young! Please...”

“OK, but you have to promise. And promise that you won’t tell anyone that I told you.”

“Yes, yes, our lips are sealed.”

“Alright then, this story starts like the last one. But this time, the Chinese emperor had been given an enormous water buffalo from one of his Central provinces. The beast was as tall as three men and as long as six. Its horns were thicker than a tree trunk and sharper than a spear. ‘Surely, the Vietnamese will not be able to better this fearsome and gigantic creature,’ thought the emperor to himself. ‘I will send my water buffalo south and challenge the Vietnamese to present two of their measly water buffalos to match this one in combat.’

A cage several times bigger than this house was built with the strongest steel and bamboo to transport the champion water buffalo. Twenty other buffalos were

needed to pull the cage and great sections of forest and farmland were stripped just to feed the beast on its journey.

Once again the Vietnamese emperor turned to Trạng Quỳnh for assistance who brusquely replied. ‘Two buffalo! That’s an insult. Tell the Chinese that I will raise one water buffalo in the time that it takes their beast to arrive. One Vietnamese can always match one Chinese or one of anyone else.’

When the monster arrived its cage door was thrown open to the great terror and awe of all those who were present. Its fiery wrath had been stoked by the long period of confinement. Truly this beast was Chinese. Our hero Trạng Quỳnh arrived at the challenge a little late with a small covered wagon. Casually, he opened its doors and released his secret weapon...a tiny calf. Scrawny and staggering as if it was still finding its feet, the calf gingerly approached the snorting water buffalo as the dignitaries watched on in disbelief. What they didn’t know was that Trạng Quỳnh had starved the calf for two days and that it was craving to be teathed. So naïve as to believe that the bull was its mother, the calf found its way in between the monster’s hind legs and started to do what calves do naturally. The little water buffalo was licking the bull’s prodigious member, he was licking his willy! Unable to withstand the disagreeable sensation of those greedy lips and that sandpaper tongue, the mighty Chinese water buffalo fled as if it had been struck by a thousand bolts of lightning. Overwhelmed by the indignity of defeat, the imperial envoy was not far behind.”

The children rolled on the ground in merry fits of laughter. But there was also an important moral contained in the hilarity, a message that was imbued in countless other folk tales and absorbed into the psyche of almost every Vietnamese child. It concerned the precious and enduring nature of Vietnamese independence and the fact that the weak can always defeat the strong, provided that they did not confront them head-on; but rather, attacked from an angle and somehow found a way to redefine the field of play in their favour.

Modern City Living II

Like Trạng Quỳnh, Ngô Đình Diệm was also a strong advocate of Vietnamese nationalism, but that is where the similarities ended. Born in 1901 into a Catholic mandarin family, Diệm was a highly driven, stern and studious young man.³¹ He was first noticed as a public figure at the age of twenty-eight when he became the governor of Phan Thiết province. This brought him to the attention of emperor Bảo Đại who enticed Diệm to Huế in 1933 and elevated him to the position of Minister for the Interior. Diệm resigned that same year due to what he viewed as suffocating French restrictions on his plans for national reform. After Hồ Chí Minh's August Revolution of 1945 one of his brothers, Ngô Đình Khôi, was killed during a Việt Minh purge. By his own account, Diệm was subsequently kidnapped by the Việt Minh and taken to a mountain hide-out where Hồ Chí Minh offered him a position in the fledgling Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRV).³² Diệm flatly refused and was released pursuant to an agreement for political prisoners between the French and the Việt Minh in March 1946. During these and other occasions, Diệm established a reputation for having a rigid and indeed puritanical sense of integrity and patriotism.

In 1950 Diệm exiled himself from Việt Nam and spent much of the next four years on the East Coast of the US promoting an anti-Franco-Bảo Đại and anti-Việt Minh message. During this time he petitioned support from what became known as the Việt Nam Lobby which consisted of journalists, members of the Catholic hierarchy, and prominent politicians like John F. Kennedy and Michael Mansfield all of whom saw Diệm as offering a "Third Way" between colonialism and communism. In June of 1954, following the Việt Minh's victory over the French at the battle of Điện Biên Phủ, Ngô Đình Diệm returned to Việt Nam at the bequest of the head of state (ex-emperor) Bảo Đại in order to take up the prime ministership of the Associated State of Việt Nam (on the proviso that

³¹ Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002) 5-6.

³² The authenticity of this meeting between Diệm and Hồ has been questioned by at least one commentator. Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled, Vol. I: From Colonialism to the Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1967) 647. Cited in *Ibid.*, 214.

France grant Việt Nam dominion status).³³ A month after Diệm's homecoming, the Geneva Accords were adopted and Việt Nam was split at the 17th parallel with elections scheduled for 1956 aimed at establishing a unified national government that would almost certainly be led by Hồ Chí Minh.³⁴

Diệm was largely unknown to Vân's family when he returned to Việt Nam, however, it soon became apparent that he would be an influential figure in all of their lives. With Bảo Đại spending most of his time in France, Diệm had *de facto* total control over the South Vietnamese regime. This, however, was not enough for him. By the end of 1955, Diệm had generated sufficient support for a republican movement that would allow him to usurp Bảo Đại and become the pre-eminent political figure in South Việt Nam. A referendum was organised by Diệm's brother, Ngô Đình Nhu, in which the people had to choose either Bảo Đại or Diệm for the position of head of state. In the weeks leading up to the referendum, Diệm and Nhu took control of the public service so that Thái and his colleagues in the Planning Department were enlisted to deliver pamphlets and how-to-vote cards for the Prime Minister. Public moneys were dedicated to trucks plastered with pro-Diệm posters, streamers and balloons that rolled up and down the streets blasting out republican propaganda songs from loud-speakers.

The 23rd of October is the day of the popular referendum,
The 23rd of October is the day to smash the throne.³⁵

When that day finally arrived, Diệm supporters reminded citizens that they were making a choice between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, the ragged and the lively, the monarchy and the republic. Voters arrived at polls to find that Diệm's cards were an auspicious red while the Emperor's were a dull green. Like many others, Vân's parents knew that the result was preordained,

³³ Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina 1940-1955: Viet Nam and the French Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968) 203-245. Cited in *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁴ A US National Security Council study completed in May 1955 stated that the communists would hold the upper hand in any elections held due to "Communist popular appeal derived from long identification with the struggle for independence." D.J. Sagar, *Major Political Events in Indo-China 1945-1990* (New York: Facts on File, 1991) 35.

³⁵ *Ngày 23 tháng mười là ngày trung cầu dân ý, Ngày 23 tháng mười là ngày phá tan ngai vàng.*
Recounted by Vân.

that the election would be rigged; but they also suspected that even if this were not the case, Diệm would probably win. They also resented the ex-emperor Bảo Đại for seemingly doing nothing more than capitulate to French demands and his own lavish desires. Thus, because the ends were generally desirable and perhaps unavoidable, it mattered little to Thái and Sắt that the demolition of the last vestiges of Vietnamese monarchical rule and the creation of the new Republic of Việt Nam (RVN), was no victory for democracy. Official figures (manipulated by Nhu) indicated that Diệm won by an overwhelming margin of 5,721,735 votes to 63,017, with some electorates polling more votes than the number of people registered.³⁶

Knowing that Hồ Chí Minh's presidency would win a general election if held, Diệm refused to conduct the pre-arranged consultations leading up to the ballot of 1956. With US support, he argued that Hồ Chí Minh's Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRV) had violated the 1954 Geneva Accords by allowing Chinese troops into the country, that his own government had not signed the agreements, and that the Northerners were so indoctrinated with communist propaganda that their votes would have no meaning. At the same time, despite concerns of an invasion from the North, Diệm compelled France to withdraw from South Việt Nam. By mid-1956 there were no French colonial troops left in Indochina and the French High Command had been abandoned. This created the political, economic and ideological space for a new benefactor in Sài Gòn, the United States.

For Vân and her family, the most noticeable consequence of this support came in the form of financial aid. President Eisenhower had written to Diệm in 1954 stating that the US government was "exploring ways and means to permit our aid to Vietnam to be more effective."³⁷ The result was a U.S. taxpayer-funded commodities import program in which US aid money was made available to the Diệm administration for the purpose of nurturing an anti-communist Vietnamese middle class. Sustained development assistance to the agrarian majority in South

³⁶ John Clark Pratt, *Vietnam Voices: Perspectives on the War Years 1941-1982* (New York: Viking, 1984) 69.

³⁷ Sagar, *Major Political Events in Indo-China 1945-1990*, 31.

Việt Nam was neglected by the Americans in the belief that modernisation and liberty had to be rapidly manufactured in the image of the West and from the top down.³⁸ The communists thus did everything they could to portray Diệm and his followers as traitors who had sold out to foreign invaders, referring to them as lackeys (*tai say*) and the regime as American Diệm (*Mỹ Diệm*).³⁹ In reality, Diệm and his family's intense patriotism made them wary and at times antagonistic towards the US even if they viewed the superpower's patronage as indispensable. Diệm was sceptical of the US' commitment to the RVN such that two of his close associates concluded that, "Deep down, he seems always to have harbored a stereotype of Americans as politically naïve and incurably softhearted."⁴⁰ Often Diệm and Nhu were critical of what they viewed as insufficient aid provided by the US.⁴¹ At other times they expressed concern about its potentially debilitating impact upon the Vietnamese cultural heritage. As Nhu pointed out in 1957, "American aid could become a sort of opium paralysing the country."⁴²

There were few such concerns or objections to the commodities import program during its early days in Sài Gòn where long-deprived consumers were suddenly presented with all manner of exotic US-subsidised goods, from toothpaste to tank-tops. There was an abundance of army rations, giant tins of orange-coloured cheese, peanut butter and jam. Catholic Americans donated mountains of second-hand and new clothes so that young women and men could be seen wearing provocatively tight pants known as "jeans" which, for Vân, could have just as easily been designed on another planet. An influx of modern technology led to the proliferation of radios and the opportunity for Vân and her sisters to listen to

³⁸ Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1964) 137-8.

³⁹ Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 28.

⁴⁰ William Henderson and Wesley R. Fishel, "The Foreign Policy of Ngo Dinh Diem" in *Vietnam Perspectives* (August 1966) 3-30 at 26. Cited in Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 30.

⁴¹ Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 30.

⁴² Nhu would later describe the US-Vietnamese relationship as a "clash of civilisations". *Ibid.*, 25, 31. The widely published communist historian Nguyễn Khắc Viện later linked US aid to religion and superstition; what Marx referred to as the "opiate of the masses". "There was also the fact that the whole existence of this neo-colonialist society (the RVN) hinged on a very unstable factor, on continued US aid. No one could be sure of what was in store; no one, even the richest, could count on anything certain or stable on which to plan the future. Even the most scientific minds could not help thinking in terms of fate and destiny when they contemplated the morrow. Hence the development of religions with a strong element of superstition—soothsaying and horoscoping. Moreover there was the deliberate attempt on the part of Washington to assist the development of these religions by all means, in particular by financial aid." Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Southern Vietnam: 1975-1985* (Hà Nội: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1985) 36.

cải lương operas and Vietnamese folktales for the first time in the comfort of their own dilapidated home. Even more momentous was the family's acquisition of an Italian-made sewing machine which Thái purchased with the assistance of an interest-free loan. Thái was certain that the sewing machine would be both emancipating and profitable for his wife and daughters. "Now you can make clothes much faster and with stronger seams," Vân's father told his somewhat underwhelmed wife Sắt. "When you're really good at it, we can open up a business!" To everyone's disappointment, Vân's mother was intimidated by the frightening clamour and odious gyrations of the new technology. Unable to depress the foot-pedal with requisite confidence and finesse, Sắt broke one sewing machine needle after another. Thereafter, it was left up to the twelve year old Vân to take responsibility for the sewing machine and the family's clothing needs which became yet another hefty burden upon her slender shoulders.

Vân's family's ascendancy into Diệm's new middle class was epitomised by their moving out of Cây Mai to Phú Thọ in 1954. By that time, Thái had been promoted at the Planning Department and was in charge of organising semi-permanent accommodation for politicians, high military officers and visiting bureaucrats from around the country and all over the world. At Phú Thọ vast housing complexes were being constructed to accommodate the burgeoning urban masses of Sài Gòn. Vân's new home was not as luxurious as the villa in Bình Dương, but was brand new and carried with it the hope of better things to come. Importantly, while they remained unconnected to the sewerage pipes, the cesspit was not far away. And so, if only for the residential security, material comfort and palpable excitement that he brought to their lives, Vân and her family saw Diệm as a modern day hero and visionary, the man who had liberated them from need.

A New Age Confucian Comparison

Incorporated into Thái and President Diệm's aspirations for Vietnamese modernisation was a flavouring of old-time Confucianism. With respect to his parenting skills, for instance, Thái constructed a deferential distance between

himself and his daughters. He stood above and before Châu, Loan, Vân and Hoa and felt neither the desire or need to ever make physical contact with them. According to Thái, there was a natural and harmonious order of things in which the father rules over his family as the king rules over his subjects. Affection was perceived as weakness or inconsistency, which encouraged confusion and unruliness. Of course, this is not to say that Vân's father did not cherish or occasionally show great care for his children. Only that this compassion was predicated upon respect, propriety, and keeping one's place. For instance, there were many delightful mornings when Vân sat beside her father in cafés as he chatted to friends and intermittently poured sweet hot coffee into a dish so it would be cool enough for her to drink.

It was also indicative of Thái's Confucian persuasion that he placed a great emphasis on education which he understood as being the primary means by which cultural heritage and social harmony were transmitted and preserved. And while it was not commonly Confucian for women to be publicly educated, Thái's lack of sons opened his mind (at least in this respect) to modern notions of gender equality. He thus considered it prudent if not necessary for his daughters to know as much as possible about the world beyond their household. In this spirit of harnessing and customising age-old values in order to keep up with contemporary times, Thái collected syndicated novels from newspapers and magazines and carefully pasted them into scrap books that he stored on a bookshelf along with an extensive collection of Vietnamese classics and, most precious of all, bound copies of the Chinese Four Books and Five Classics.⁴³ Thái was determined to establish his own modest temple of literature, a legacy of wisdom to his daughters and generations to come. And so, while they would meet multiple hardships and sell many precious belongings over the years, Vân's family maintained Thái's bookshelf in the belief that it contained a wealth too precious to squander.

To enrich your family, there is no need to buy good land:
Books hold a thousand measures of grain.

⁴³ The Four Books are the *Book of Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Analects*, and *Mencius*. The Five Canons are the *Book of Changes*, *Book of History*, *Book of Poetry/Songs*, *Book of Rites*, and *The Spring and Autumn Annals*.

For an easy life, there is no need to build a mansion:
In books are found houses of gold.⁴⁴

President Diệm was (in)famously described in the West as “The Last Confucian”.⁴⁵ And while the extent of his commitment to Confucianism is debateable,⁴⁶ what is clear is that Diệm envisaged himself as a grandiose lord whose words and laws needed no justification in terms of their truth and justice beyond the fact that they were his. Diệm was convinced that Việt Nam needed his messianic and enlightened rule, such that with the utmost sincerity the President asserted that, “I know what is best for my people.”⁴⁷ In his official biography Diệm was quoted as saying, “The fundamental fact about Vietnam...is that historically our political system has been based not on the concept of the management of the public affairs by the people or their representatives, but rather by an enlightened sovereign and an enlightened government.”⁴⁸ From this exalted position, compromise with his opponents was not a rational or viable option. Like a stern father, Diệm had little desire for popularity or affection. He required only their utmost respect and complete obedience.

Paradoxically, during the initial years of his reign, Vân’s family did not respect the president out of old-fashioned piety, but rather his achievements with respect to modern nation building and mass education. President Diệm extended Sài Gòn university and built the University of Huế. Most notably, he made education available to people of all social backgrounds and ages. During the mid-1950s the RVN undertook a massive teacher training program and established night schools all over the country where anyone could learn a trade or acquire the basic education that had been denied to them during the long years of war. Vân had been attending school since the age of six, but in Bình Dương and Cây Mai her

⁴⁴ “The Emperor Renzong Song” in *Confucianism and the Chinese Scholastic System* <<http://www.csupomona.edu/~plin/lis201/confucian2.html>> accessed 11 July 2001.

⁴⁵ Warner, *The Last Confucian*.

⁴⁶ For an analysis of Diệm as a “conservative modernizer” see Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 35. This notion is further developed in Chapter Four of this thesis in the sections “The Progressive Perils of Personalism” and “A Modern Mandate from Heaven marks the Demise of Diệm’s Dictatorial Reign”.

⁴⁷ Cited in Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 234.

⁴⁸ Warner, *The Last Confucian*, 91.

education had been informal and intermittent. School was usually held in the teacher's living room without anywhere near sufficient resources or qualifications. This changed markedly when Diệm came to power and made primary school education compulsory. At Phú Thọ Vân enrolled in the local government school along with more than a thousand other children. Their abilities varied widely, but almost all of them were eager to make the most of this newfound opportunity.

And so, through its education initiatives Diệm's Third Way represented a composite and a compromise between old and new that held out the prospect of a developed and prosperous RVN that could stand on its own feet. His attitude to those who did not accept this vision in its entirety however, was utterly uncompromising. The brutality that went hand-in-hand with Diệm's compassion was evident in his bloodthirsty campaign to pacify dissident religious sects with sizeable private armies such as the Cao Đài and Hoa Hào, and his violent purging in the countryside of Việt Minh guerrillas. In early 1955 conflict took hold of Sài Gòn as the Army of the Republic of Việt Nam (ARVN) clashed with defiant Bình Xuyên gangsters not far from Vân's home. Scores of civilians were killed and the city, including all the schools, was shut down for days. Even this, however, Vân's family could tolerate as they had no affiliation to those groups and were soon thankful for the purges which allowed them to once again travel to Bình Dương without fear and even return at night.

For Vân's family during those early years of Diệm's leadership, the dark and duplicitous nature of his administration was evident only in the influx of Catholic Northerners who had migrated to the South after the 1954 Geneva Accord partition.⁴⁹ This exodus was sponsored by Diệm and the CIA under the counsel of Colonel Edward Lansdale, a one time advertising executive who had previously been successful in planning and implementing anti-communist disinformation campaigns in the Philippines.⁵⁰ As a psychological warfare expert

⁴⁹ Catholics constituted between five and ten percent of Vietnamese at the time. Diệm's brother, Ngô Đình Thục, was the archbishop of Huế.

⁵⁰ In the novel *The Quiet American* Graham Greene caricatures Lansdale through the character Alden Pyle. Lansdale was also the inspiration for the character of Edwin Barnum Hillandale in the 1958 bestseller by William Lederer *The Ugly American*.

and Diệm's chief American adviser, Lansdale ordered the mass-production of books and pamphlets suggesting that the communist ascendancy would lead to political and economic catastrophe. He also strategically planted rumours among Catholic Northerners that they would be viciously persecuted after the godless communists had taken full control.⁵¹ In their sermons, political priests propagandised the imminent apocalypse and leaflets were dropped from planes proclaiming that "God has Gone South!"⁵² As a result, almost a million Catholic Northerners abandoned their ancestral homes, "voting with their feet" to provide a reliable support base for Diệm and compelling evidence of communist tyranny for international observers.⁵³

In the winter of 1954, Sài Gòn was hit by a cold spell and the temperature plummeted to an unbearable 17°C. Vân recalls that the air was stinging with cold and the ground was too icy to walk on with barefeet. Some Southerners grumbled that it was the avalanche of Northerners who had brought the harsh and undesirable conditions. In Sài Gòn and Chợ Lớn they set up unsightly shelters in the streets that often became permanent homes. A handful of schools, including Vân's, were temporarily closed to provide accommodation for those who viewed themselves as "Diệm's chosen people". Vân's family were quick to turn against the refugees who they perceived as haughty, often denigrating them as "*Bắc ky*".⁵⁴ The Northerners spoke the same language, but their accents were harsh and not always easily understood. They were also considered industrious, aggressive and energetic, which only served to fuel the prejudice with jealousy. Ten year old Vân was not contemptuous but confused as, "If the Vietnamese had won the war against the French, why are so many people without homes and their loved ones?"

⁵¹ Pratt, *Vietnam Voices*, 38-41.

⁵² Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) 45.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Dương Văn Mai Elliot offers the recollections of a similarly aged Northern emigrant at the time. Dương Văn Mai Elliot, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) Chapter 11.

A New Age Mandarin

Despite her family responsibilities and all the frightening and exhilarating distractions going on around her, Vân excelled at primary school. This came as a welcome surprise as the family was not known for its academic prowess and there was no early indication from Vân that she would be any different. Indeed, one time when Thái was helping his daughter with her homework, he remarked with both gentle encouragement and ridicule, “Some people study one time to learn ten things, you my dear study ten times to learn one thing. The point is, however, that if you try hard you’ll get there in the end.”

True to his word, if not his sentiment, Vân tried hard and graduated at the top of her primary school class. In the summer of 1957 she applied for one of the most prestigious education institutions in Sài Gòn, Gia Long High School for Girls. The gruelling entrance exams stretched over two days during which time candidates had to recount tracts of poetry, unravel mathematic equations and analyse a litany of historical events in Việt Nam and beyond. Afterwards, Vân returned home sombre. It was sheer folly to be confident as almost ten thousand girls had sat the entrance exams and only four hundred and fifty would be successful.

Two weeks later, Vân’s father rode his scooter to work and stopped by the school to check the results on a large blackboard. Vân had got in—number 402. In a rare public showing of compassion and pride, Thái disregarded work for the day and rode home to pick up his victorious daughter. Together they returned to Gia Long where the young girl stared in disbelief at her name on the blackboard as if it were written in the stars.

In times past when a scholar was successful in the public service examinations and became a mandarin, he would return to his home village leading a procession of soldiers and bearing gifts from the emperor.⁵⁵ Villagers shared in his success and lined the torch-lit streets, cheering and beating drums as he rode by on a

⁵⁵ With the country under French occupation, the mandarin civil examinations ceased in the South in the 1860s and the last one in Vietnam was held in the Central Vietnamese city of Huế in 1919.

gallant horse. In the crowd no-one was more proud and excited than the mandarin's charming fiancé who admired her future husband in his splendid brocaded gown. Similarly, Vân sat proud on her father's Lambretta scooter as she was paraded through the streets of Sài Gòn. And for an instant, the young girl was sure that the whole city was singing and dancing for her. Everything was starting to look up. With an education at a top school, Vân would surely get a prestigious well-paid job. She would be in control of her life, able to avoid or overcome the sort of cruel vagaries that had dogged her family for almost a decade. When it was time to marry, she would be financially independent and not have to continually answer to her husband. Vân would *not*, as the adage went, be a piece of silk floating in the midst of the market, knowing not into whose hands it will fall.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ *Thân em như tấm lụa đào
Phất phơ giữa chợ biết vào tay ai?*
I am like a piece of silk
Floating in the midst of the market,
Knowing not into whose hands it will fall.
Vietnamese folksong cited in Trịnh T. Minh-hà, *Framer Framed* (New York: Routledge, 1992)
50.

CHAPTER THREE:

Tells of how Thiết pursued enlightenment in the Việt Minh Revolution and Hương sought enrichment in the black markets of the First Indochina War.

Kim: Tell me about your time when you went to the Việt Minh school.

Thiết: We learnt about communism.

Kim: What did you learn exactly?

Thiết: You know, capitalism is bad. Marx is good. Lenin is better. Hồ Chí Minh is supreme. That sort of thing.

Kim: Can you give me with any details.

Thiết: No, not really. It was fifty years ago you know. I don't remember much.

Kim: Well, what did you do there? Did you study about communism all day?

Thiết: No. We sang songs and danced sometimes. There were maths and history classes too. Sometimes we split up into groups of three and did military training. We made punji sticks.

Kim: What's a punji stick?

Thiết: It's a sharpened piece of bamboo that you put in the ground to kill French soldiers.

The Business of Survival

“A child without a father is like a house without a roof” was a proverb that haunted Thiết’s mother Thừa.¹ Not in the sense that she was anxious to find a replacement for her late husband, Việt, in fact she believed that a woman’s

¹ *Con không cha như nhà không nóc.* Recounted by Thừa. All translations by the author unless indicated otherwise.

fidelity should extend beyond the grave. Rather Thừa was acutely aware of how difficult it would be on her own to provide Hương, Trương, Biết and Thiết with day-to-day security from the bombs, disease and starvation of the First Indochina War. Nevertheless, this wiry woman in her mid-thirties was determined, and arguably well-equipped for such a task. For while Việt had been the undeniable head of the family, the demanding nature of everyday peasant life ensured that his wife was by no means meek, ignorant or unaccustomed to the toil and tactical manoeuvring necessary to survive in such a hostile environment.

Immediately after Việt's murder, Thừa borrowed some money from relatives with which she bought food and time to determine how her family would make a living. Farming was the most obvious option and was supported by the fact that there was no shortage of hired help at the market where scores of landless peasants offered their labour for little more than the food required to keep them working. These were the indigent and nomadic masses, unable to pay their taxes and forced to sell their land and then themselves at horrendously low prices. Thừa quickly decided against the agricultural option however, as she only had a small plot of land and did not want to become dependent upon strangers.

The other option was to buy and sell goods, which Thừa settled upon as it was a pursuit that her two daughters, Hương and Trương, could easily and effectively contribute. But what to sell? And where would they find the money to get started? Her eldest daughter Hương came up with a solution, thereby verifying the not so well-known proverb (which tended to have more applicability in the countryside than in the towns):

Having an eldest daughter is better than having deep paddy fields and female buffaloes.²

Hương calculated that their best hope lay in the large flimsy leaves of banana palms which were used to wrap traditional rice cakes. In the aftermath of a storm, banana palm leaves littered the countryside such that the owners of the plants were often happy for Thừa and Hương to collect them. The mother and daughter

² Phạm Văn Bích, *The Vietnamese Family in Change: The Case of the Red River Delta* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999) 188.

team would clean the leaves and remove the stems before rolling them up to soften the fibres and then take them to the market to be sold for a profitable pittance.

After a few months and storms had passed, Thừa and Hương saved enough money to branch out into areas that brought higher returns such as salted fish, areca nuts, rice, peanuts and textiles. To acquire these goods at wholesale prices, Hương had to commute to the city of Đà Nẵng every week and in the process exposed herself to violence and exploitation from both the French colonists and the Việt Minh revolutionaries. The French had banned all intervillage commerce that was not under their control, rightly suspecting that villagers like Hương were selling goods to the Việt Minh, but also disregarding the fact that most of her wares were bought by non-combatants. As the crackdown intensified and French soldiers started blockading the roads, Hương had to get off the bus early, tie up her goods and balance them on her head as she crossed the river, and then walk the remaining distance home. Even then she was not safe. Several times Hương was stopped by pairs of Việt Minh guerrillas and asked what a young girl was doing with so much merchandise. If she responded truthfully that she was going to sell it at the market, then she was guilty of supporting the colonial economy. Alternatively, she could try to appease the revolutionaries by saying that the merchandise was intended for the Việt Minh. Either way, her wares were taken from her and that week the family suffered a great loss.

Particularly frightening were the Moroccan and Algerian French expeditionary troops who raided towns looking for black market goods to confiscate or destroy, women to molest, and men to forcibly recruit for war and labour. Displaying remnants of gashes on their cheeks from tribal rituals, the French expeditionary troops attracted the pseudonym, “scar faced ghouls” (*ma rạch mặt*). When they charged into the village grunting and howling many women fled, while others like Thừa and Hương hastened to conceal their merchandise and rub dirt into their faces in the hope of appearing so brutish and filthy that even the most malevolent legionnaire would be repulsed. Such was the widespread necessity and admirable cunning of this and other ruses that women boasted about having their “hair full of small stone flints” (highly prized by the Việt Minh guerrillas

for lighting fires) and being “pregnant with bundles of khaki material” stuffed under their shirts.³

A Global Cold War Village

With the money that she and her daughters generated from their market endeavours, Thừa built her family a new hut made of thatch, mud and buffalo dung. It did not compare to the treasured brick house that had been seized by the Việt Minh at the outset of the war and then bombed by the French, but nevertheless it belonged to them and was considerably more comfortable than the corridor in Thiết’s grandfather’s house in which they had been living. Without any hired help, they managed to produce enough food on their small plot of land to fulfil their basic needs in addition to a small amount for sale. Depending on the seasons and demand they grew cassava, sesame and rice and at times were even able to raise a pig or a few chickens. Thiết and his older brother Biết spent their days looking after the crops while his mother and sisters traded at the market. Working with the dirt between their toes, sleeping under that primitive grass roof and inhaling the smells of the earth, Thiết’s family were not unlike many other Vietnamese peasants in terms of what they had lost and reconstructed:

The enemy razes our tile roof house,
And we erect a thatch hut.
The enemy sets our boats ablaze,
And yet we still go fishing.⁴

This is not to say that the First Indochina War had abated or that life for Thiết and his family, by any measure, had become comfortable or even secure. Only that by the middle of 1949, two years after Việt’s murder, they were finding

³ *Đầu phòng đá lửa, Có chừa Ka Ki.*

⁴ *Giặc đốt nhà ngói, ta dựng lều tranh,
Giặc đốt ghe mảng, sắm thùng đi câu.*

Cited in Nhà Xuất Bản Quân Đội Nhân Dân, *Quảng Nam – Đà Nẵng 30 Năm Chiến Đấu và Chiến Thắng (1945—1954), Tập I [Quảng Nam Đà Nẵng 30 Years of Struggle and Victory (1945—1954), Volume I]* (Hà Nội: NXB Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 1988) 122. Also recounted by Thừa.

ways to make do. For instance, every afternoon after returning home and eating the evening meal, Thừa made an (extra)ordinary life-and-death determination as to where her family would spend the night. If she sensed a sufficient element of security in the air then they slept in their thatch hut; but when village warnings or her sharpened instincts alerted her to an imminent battle then they marched hurriedly back to Thiết's paternal grandfather's house where the family either bedded in that small corridor between the main house and the filial shrine or were shoved into the adjacent dug-out as flames lit up the night sky.

There are several reasons for why such everyday tactical behaviour had become commonplace for Thiết's family. At a local level it is necessary to recognize that Thiết's village of Bò Bản had been transformed, metaphorically speaking, into a village of sticky rice and hard beans (*làng xôi đậu*); the contrasting texture of these two basic foods symbolising the intractable differences between villagers who supported Hồ Chí Minh's Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRV) and those who were affiliated with Bảo Đại's French-backed Republic of Việt Nam (RVN). Bò Bản's bipolarisation can also be viewed as reflection of heightened hostilities at a provincial and national level. After being driven into the hills and the jungle at the outset of the war, during the late 1940s and the early 1950s there was a resurgence of Việt Minh activity. Still meagre in number and ill-equipped in terms of military hardware, the Việt Minh in Thiết's province of Quảng Nam mobilised to enlist troops, consolidate their liberated zones and harass areas like Bò Bản that had been pacified by the French. In addition, the ideological and real-life division of Bò Bản can be viewed at the international political level; that is, in terms of the oncoming of the Cold War.

In the early 1950s it became evident that the war in Indochina was not solely or even primarily about French colonialism and Vietnamese independence. It had been subsumed into a Cold War context with all the accompanying international attention, ideological baggage and acute social divisions. Most notably, the French effort to maintain their empire was bolstered by support from the United States. In the spring of 1950 President Truman approved a grant of US\$15

million for economic and military assistance to Indochina.⁵ Months later, the Korean War broke out and in the eyes of US leaders the spread of communism in Asia seemed far more real and contagious. By the end of the year, US\$150 million had been funnelled into Indochina and the flow of American dollars continued to grow such that throughout the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, French conduct of the Indochina War was closely monitored and their colonialist needs generously met.⁶

To even begin to understand the causes and consequences of US involvement in Việt Nam a number of questions must be asked. Firstly, how could a nation that had stridently opposed European colonialism (and indeed had fought its own bloody war of independence) come to be the principal investor in a campaign to preserve just that? Secondly, what had changed since 2 September 1945 when officers from the American Office of the Secret Services (OSS) were present in the crowd supporting Hồ Chí Minh in his declaration of Vietnamese independence? His opening lines were extracted from the American Declaration: “All men are created equal; they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Thirdly, why was it that only a few years later Americans were derided by the Việt Minh as “interventionists” (*bọn can thiệp*)? Fourthly, how could an impoverished country like Việt Nam, Thiét’s province of Quảng Nam and even his small village of Bồ Bản become a decisive battle ground for world order, security and freedom? And finally, after enduring so much hardship and deprivation why was it that Thiét’s family, among many other Vietnamese families, was not permitted even the slightest relief from the terror of war?

One way of shedding light upon these questions is to examine the genesis and development of a strategic concept that—more than any other—guided US foreign policy during the early years of the Cold War. Containment theory was devised by George Kennan, a Russia expert who witnessed the terrors of Soviet

⁵ William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Hyperion, 2000) 425.

⁶ John Lewis Gaddis, “Drawing Lines: The Defensive Perimeter Strategy in East Asia, 1947-1953” in John Lewis Gaddis (ed.), *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 72-103. Cited in Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) 29.

collectivisation as a Moscow-based diplomat. In February 1946, he dispatched a piercing rebuke of Russian communism to the US State Department. What became known as “the long telegram” contained ideas of such force and persuasion that they immediately and profoundly changed the direction of US foreign policy.⁷ And while interpretations of the telegram remain highly contested, it is clear that Kennan took a decidedly more pessimistic view of Soviet-US relations than his predecessors. Kennan criticised as idealistic the prevailing “universalist” mode of thought which held that Soviet behaviour could be externally reformed and harmonious relations created between the two nations. The Soviets, he asserted, had to be reviewed with the same “courage, detachment and objectivity” as would a doctor examining an “unruly and unreasonable individual”.⁸ His diagnosis was that for historic and socio-psychological reasons (relating to the nation’s exposure on a vast plain surrounded by fierce nomads and its more contemporary inadequacies *vis a vis* more powerful and competent regimes in the West) the Russian leadership was inherently neurotic, insecure, belligerent and totally immune to modern logic.

Importantly, there was no short term cure for this affliction. “They” could not possibly be like “US”, and so the only option left open to US leaders in securing their domination in world affairs was to curtail the Soviet contagion while simultaneously affirming the good health of their own socio-political body. “World communism is like [a] malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue,” Kennan asserted in the long telegram. Consequently, “every courageous and incisive measure to solve internal problems of our own society, to improve self-confidence, discipline, morale and community spirit of our own people is a diplomatic victory over Moscow worth a thousand diplomatic notes and joint communiqué.” With striking potency, Kennan projected through that one telegram a dichotomised world order in which each person, community and

⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) 19. The original text can be found in Thomas H. Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis (eds.), *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy, 1945-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978) 50-63.

⁸ For an interesting and incisive explanation of how Kennan’s prolific use of medical metaphors reflected his personal illnesses and fixation with scientific causality and order see Robert L. Ivie, “Realism Masking Fear: George F. Kennan’s Political Rhetoric” in Francis A. Beer and Robert Hariman (eds.), *Post-Realism: The Rhetorical Turn in International Relations* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996) 55-74 at 70.

nation—without overlap, complexity or exception—was capitalist or communist, diverse or uniform, free or totalitarian, and rational or irrational. Each side viewed itself as the embodiment of a unique and supreme paradigm for freedom and prosperity that could not be combined with the other such that, as Kennan argued, “there can be no middle ground or compromise between the two”.⁹

A year after sending the long telegram Kennan affirmed his dark assessment of Soviet intentions and clarified his counter-strategy in an article published in 1947 under the pseudonym of “X”.¹⁰ He argued that world communism under the control of the Kremlin should be viewed as a “fluid stream which moves constantly, wherever it is permitted to move” until it fills “every nook and cranny available to it in the basin of world power”. Such a threat could not be dissipated by “sporadic acts” but rather, like a deformed tree, the Soviet Union’s expansive tendencies could only be righted with “long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment”.¹¹

In April 1950 the National Security Council’s document number 68 (NSC-68) was adopted by President Truman as a blueprint for US foreign policy in a bipolar world. Officially, NSC-68 was a systemised application of Kennan’s ideas and as such he was consulted throughout the drafting process. The officials who eventually wrote NSC-68, however, viewed the global balance of power as

⁹ Cited in David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992) 25.

¹⁰ All quotations in this section are from George F. Kennan (X.), “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” in *Foreign Affairs* 25 (1947) 566-582.

¹¹ In Kennan’s later publications and pronouncements there is a sense of prescriptive prudence that does not accord with the descriptive forcefulness and urgency evident in the long telegram and the X article. Lecturing at the National War College in 1947, Kennan asserted that because complete security could not be achieved, containment had to be prioritised and focused. Specifically, the primary concern of US foreign policy makers should be to ensure that of the five industrial-military centres of power in the world (the United States, Great Britain, Germany and Central Europe, the Soviet Union and Japan) none should be allowed to challenge the global supremacy of the United States. In other writings and lectures Kennan cautioned that the danger of war was remote, that a secure balance of power was not dependent upon US forces matching every capability of the Soviet military, and that negotiations could be productive and diplomacy should be flexible. Moreover, Kennan was aware that every strategy had financial limitations and should not be seen as an end in itself. It soon became apparent, however, that not even Kennan could contain containment. Decades later when he reread his long telegram Kennan commented, “I read it over today with horrified amusement. Much of it reads exactly like one of those primers put out by alarmed congressional committees or by the Daughters of the American Revolution, designed to arouse the citizenry to the dangers of the communist conspiracy.” Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 28-33, 83. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs 1925-1950, Vol. 1* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967) 291-2.

being far more precariously balanced than Kennan ever had. It could be tipped, not only by actual shifts in power, but also by psychological or perceived shifts. This necessitated a broadening of the US's primary spheres of interest from the five military-industrial centres of world power that Kennan had focussed upon (the United States, Great Britain, Germany and Central Europe, the Soviet Union and Japan) to their periphery and beyond. More specifically, NSC-68 rejected Kennan's assessment that the Soviet Union was already suffering from over-expansion. On the contrary, it was growing stronger with every conquest and was "animated by a new fanatic faith, antithetical to our own, and seeks to impose absolute authority over the rest of the world."¹² The Russians therefore did not calculate the costs of war in the same way as those in the rational West; they were likely to strike as soon as they were convinced they could win. It was critical, then, for the US never to fall behind the Soviet Union in terms of its military capability. In accordance with NSC-68, it became popularly perceived in US defence and foreign policy making circles that to place any sort of limit on the size of the Soviet threat or their own defence budget was to accommodate the possibility of national extinction.

After Eisenhower's election to the presidency in 1952, a "New Look" foreign policy was devised in part to reduce ballooning military costs. There was, however, no such contraction in America's threat perception. Eisenhower was convinced that the Soviets were "chipping away" territory from the free world and thus felt a need to assure all Americans that, "there is no weapon too small, no arena too remote, to be ignored, there is no free nation too humble to be forgotten."¹³ He would later confirm this promise by (in)famously describing South East Asian nations as being set up like a row of dominoes whereby the toppling of first domino, would invariably be followed by the collapse of the others.

¹² NSC-68, "United States Objectives and Programs for National Security, April 14, 1950" in Etzold, *Containment*, 385. See also Campbell, *Writing Security*, 25.

¹³ Eisenhower's inaugural address, 20 January 1953, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower*, 1953, 6. Cited in John Lewis Gaddis, "Drawing Lines: The Defensive Perimeter Strategy in East Asia, 1947-1953" in Gaddis, *The Long Peace*, 72-103 at 130.

Within such a belligerent international political environment, Hồ Chí Minh had no hope of receiving support from the West for his nascent government, let alone his war of resistance. President Hồ's nationalist pursuits were deemed "illusions" by US Secretary of State Acheson who suggested that "Hồ in his true colors" was "the mortal enemy of native independence in Indochina."¹⁴ This is not to say that Hồ Chí Minh and the Việt Minh were victims of the Cold War. In fact, they were often fervent participants in the ideological bifurcation that characterised it. This was particularly evident after Chairman Mao's coming to power in 1949 which President Hồ viewed as "a change in the center of gravity in Asia."¹⁵ Subsequently, President Hồ retracted his policy of inclusiveness with respect to the Việt Minh and the national parliament. All over the country the Việt Minh front (which had been founded on the popular support of peasant, women's and students' associations) was expunged of its liberal-bourgeois elements and reformed with a strong leftist bias.¹⁶ At around the same time, non-communist representatives of the DRV's general assembly were removed and in some cases assassinated.¹⁷ In 1950 President Hồ goaded the US, aggrandising the formation of a communist bloc in which Việt Nam was a proud member:

Since the beginning of the war the Americans have tried to help the French bandits. But now they have advanced one more step to direct intervention in Viet Nam. Thus we have now one principal opponent—the French bandits—and one more opponent—the American interventionists...

On our side, a few years of resistance have brought our country the greatest success in the history of Viet Nam—recognition of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam as an equal in the world democratic family by the two biggest countries in the world—the Soviet Union and democratic China—and by the new democratic countries. That means that

¹⁴ *Department of State Bulletin*, 13 February 1950, 244. Cited in Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina 1940-1955: Viet Nam and the French Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968) 250-1.

¹⁵ *Le Monde*, 24 August 1949. Cited in Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina*, 249.

¹⁶ Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina*, 249-250; Kim N. B. Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002) 27, 42. Ninh also makes an interesting point about the linguistic shifts that reflected this ideological turning at the Conference of Debate in Việt Bắc in September 1949. The conference saw the appearance of the term *nhân dân* to refer to the "people". From the 1920s, intellectuals had used the term *dân tộc*, which connotes both "people" and "nation" and serves to unify those elements in a geographic, linguistic and cultural context. *Nhân dân* was unburdened by such emotional overtones and was enlisted to channel the discourse along class lines via processes of classification, segregation and exclusion. Ninh, *A World Transformed*, 88-90.

¹⁷ Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina*, 249-50.

we are definitely on the democratic side and belong to the anti-imperialist bloc of 800 million people.¹⁸

A year later, the Việt Minh was dissolved and replaced with the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP) which held a monopoly over social and political power in the DRV. The proletarianised name was chosen carefully to reflect the organisation's distinctive ideological stance. Renowned journalist and historian of that period, Ellen Hammer, asserts that the Maoist and communist hardline forces in Việt Nam were making "a prescription for dividing the country, not for uniting it," and that by blindly following the communist line the Việt Minh lost the support of leading elements of the population.¹⁹

This became frightfully evident in January 1953 when the Party's Central Committee announced a comprehensive land reform program based heavily on Chinese precedents and guided by Chinese advisors. Radical elements of the Party, particularly Secretary-General Trường Chinh, were convinced that to achieve justice and productivity in the DRV the leadership had to be purged of its bourgeois-nationalist elements, the feudal and landlord classes totally eradicated, and the land given back to the tillers in preparation for collectivisation. DRV leaders officially described the two phases in which land reform was to be implemented—a landlord classification/targetting phase during 1953 and 1954, and land reform proper from 1954 to 1956—as "sky-splitting" and "earth-shattering".²⁰ The at times feverish speed with which social destruction and reconstruction took place provided for brutal excesses, McCarthyist hysteria and Orwellian oppression of the most frightening order.

The scholar Hoàng Văn Chí points out that violent excesses were calculated by Hồ Chí Minh to "kill the spirit of ownership" in the broader population.²¹ "To straighten a curved piece of bamboo," Hồ said, "one must bend it in the opposite direction, holding it in that position for a while. Then, when the hand is removed

¹⁸ *Voice of South Viet Nam*, 16 August 1950. Cited in Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina*, 251.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁰ Hoàng Văn Chí, *From Colonialism to Communism: A Case History of North Vietnam* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964) 166. See 164-5 for a detailed account of how Vietnamese were classified and persecuted.

²¹ Hoàng Văn Chí, *From Colonialism to Communism*, 212.

it will slowly straighten itself'.²² Accordingly, in North and North-Central Việt Nam people were arbitrarily categorised and divided with definitive brutality. Each individual was deemed either a poor peasant who was automatically a virtuous champion of the revolution, or a corrupt landlord who was inherently despicable and obsequious to the West. Landlords who did not contribute sufficiently to the war effort were stripped of their property and ferociously denigrated by peasants in public "speak bitterness" sessions. Hoàng Văn Chí points out that in the second phase of the reforms beginning in 1954, the leadership deemed that too many landlords had slipped through the initial classification process and thus set a quota of five people per village who had to be identified as the highest level of landlord and sentenced to death.²³ During this reign of terror it was said that, "It is better to kill ten of the innocent than to let one of the enemy escape."²⁴ The world was turned upside-down in a horrifying manner as beggars became powerful leaders and children were encouraged to denounce their older relatives. Torture was not uncommon, and an estimated three to fifteen thousand people were murdered in the frenzy.²⁵

By the early 1950s, then, both the Americans and the Vietnamese communists had adopted a divisive and dogmatic perspective with respect to the war and the world, leaving themselves and ordinary people like Thiết's family little room to manoeuvre. For Thiết's family the Cold War remapping of the world and their lives was neither neat nor painless. The descending of an iron curtain upon Bồ

²² *Ibid.*, 211.

²³ *Ibid.*, 166.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

²⁵ Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 488. Edwin E. Moise, "'Class-ism' in North Vietnam, 1953-1956" in William S. Turley (ed.), *Vietnamese Communism in Comparative Perspective* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980) 91-106. For a vivid account of the land reform process see Dương Văn Mai Elliot, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 348. See also Dương Thu Hương (Phan Huy Dương and Nina McPherson trans.) *Paradise of the Blind* (New York: Morrow, 1993).

Despite Hồ's and the Party's efforts to avoid a backlash to land reform, intellectuals revolted in 1956 in what is known as the *Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm* period. There was also a series of peasant uprisings. Subsequently, from late 1956 to early 1958 the Party undertook a rectification of errors campaign whereby thousands of landlords were reclassified as peasants. Trường Chinh who had provided much of the impetus for the reforms was relieved of his position as Party Secretary General and replaced by Hồ Chí Minh. Hoàng Văn Chí suggests that the rectification campaign was carried out reluctantly and ineffectually as it was driven from the USSR by Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation program and not an honest desire from Vietnamese communist leaders to make up for their excesses. Hoàng Văn Chí, *From Colonialism to Communism*, 213-4.

Bản did not provide security from a partitioned enemy; rather, it collapsed upon all parties—interested or otherwise—instigating mass hysteria, fear and suspicion. The Cold War meant that during the day when the village was officially “pacified” Moroccan and Algerian expeditionary troops stood over, assaulted or arrested villagers who to them appeared indistinguishable from Việt Minh guerrillas. And at night the real revolutionaries came into the towns in order to attack French outposts or those who had been identified as *collaborateurs*. More than ever, Thừa had to scan for potential foes, choose her words with the skill and sensitivity of a diplomat, and never come to rest on a particular affiliation or plan of attack for more than an instant as if she were an insect in a field of Venus fly traps. With both sides she often resorted to feigning complete ignorance. “Knowing nothing, hearing nothing and seeing nothing” was the only way to survive she would recall much later. In their people’s war, the revolutionaries proclaimed that, “Every civilian is a soldier.”²⁶ What they neglected to add was that every civilian is also a target.

A Pre-Enlightenment Inventory

As has been outlined earlier in the context of the Ngọc Kinh caves, when the rain and bombs fell incessantly, the fields lay dismal and fallow, the children were alarmingly stunted and ancestors wept with disappointment and rage at what had become of their legacy, it was not uncommon for the old-fashioned villagers like Thừa to place their faith in the justice and alms of the heavens above:

The heavens conceive elephants,
And bestow the grass for them to eat.²⁷

These few humble words known throughout Việt Nam allude to a conception of ordinary people as “reeds in the wind” and a prescription to trust in the order of things and the invariable flow of events. Traditionally, then, in times of upheaval and hardship, submission and endurance were often seen as necessary attributes for everyday subsistence.

²⁶ *Mỗi người dân là một người lính*. Cited in *Quảng Nam Đà Nẵng 30 Năm Chiến Đấu và Chiến Thắng*, 149. Recounted by Thiết.

²⁷ *Trời sinh voi, Trời sinh cỏ*. Recounted by Thiết.

No longer able to accept such woolly explanations for the origins and sustenance of elephants, twelve year old Thiét formulated a radical new interpretation of this ancient proverb. Thiét had watched his mother and sisters struggle through war, poverty, floods and the passing of loved ones. He knew all too well that when there was not enough rice for the daily meal they would mix in beans; when the rice ran out and the bean supply was low they added cassava; after the beans had expired they survived on bitter cassava alone; and when this was no longer an option they found something else. Young Thiét was convinced that this food had not been placed on the table by the Will of Heaven, but rather, the assiduous efforts of those around him, the determination and agency of peasants in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Given time, Thiét's personal-world view would develop into a conviction that one should never simply accept fate, endure suffering or enjoy quietude. It was not enough for him simply to make do; he had to make better. At the same time, Thiét came to accept other proverbs as being more appropriate and empowering in his life. One of the most notable was, "If the road is difficult, it is not because it is obstructed by mountains or rivers; but rather, because one's heart is daunted by those mountains and fearful of those rivers."²⁸ Like many Vietnamese modernists before him, Thiét would come to see life as a fierce war in which trying to escape was the same as a soldier deserting the battlefield.

In light of this momentous development and the fact that, by the end of 1953, Thiét had passed the age of reasoning and was approaching adolescence, it is useful (if only to understand the evolution of an everyday revolutionary) to make an inventory of his outlook on life just before the Việt Minh—by force, chance, invitation and otherwise—came to dominate his consciousness.

1. *Life Can Be Good*

Thiét had never been so well-off. His oldest sister Hương was making a substantial income from trading contraband to the Việt Minh while his mother and other sister, Trương, were having considerable success at the

²⁸ *Đường đi khó, không khó vì ngăn sông khách núi, Mà khó vì lòng người ngại núi e sông.*
Attributed to Nguyễn Bá Học. Recounted by Thiét.

market selling savoury donuts made from potato flour (*bánh trôi*). For the first time in his memory, Thiết was not crippled by hunger or overburdened by chores. He haphazardly attended reading and mathematics lessons at a neighbour's house and, more than ever, was able to play and explore the world with friends.

2. *Life Can Be Bad*

While the details were sometimes sketchy, Thiết had not forgotten what it was like to be a refugee: the sense of homelessness; wrenching starvation; and unrelenting trepidation. He knew something of the horrors and injustices of war—surely someone was to blame?—and could not ever forget the miserable time when his entire family had cowered in the caves and come close to death's door, and when his eldest brother Khiết was dragged inside.

3. *Life Can Be Better*

The boy was certain, however, that things could be otherwise. Indeed, that they were meant to be otherwise. Thiết often thought about the tantalising shock he had received upon making contact with that shimmering block of ice. Candles, fires and the stars in the night-sky had all been dimmed by the magnificent lights of the city. He wanted to see and experience these things again, perhaps even possess them for himself. This thought niggled him constantly, like a pebble stuck between his toes.

And so, Thiết possessed some financial security, a bitter understanding of past and present injustices, and a belief that ordinary Vietnamese deserved and could do better for themselves. It was the Việt Minh who most effectively fused these fundamental elements together to form a coherent and forceful ideology that was propounded and promoted at night-time rallies. At these supremely uplifting events, Thiết came as close as he ever would in his life to finding God.

*The Enlightenment*²⁹

“Honoured grandfathers and grandmothers, uncles and aunties, brothers and sisters, precious young ones, welcome!”

The crowd burst into applause, coordinated by the leader of the mobile propaganda unit who emitted great surges of electricity through the night air.

“With the determination and commitment that you’re showing here tonight we will surely be victorious!”

Roars from the compact mob animated the reliefs of flying dragons on the roof of the Túy Loan communal house (*đình*).

“We could not have chosen a better place to hold this meeting,” said the soldier standing on a small wooden box at the front of the hall. “In the *đình* where the villagers of Túy Loan have gathered on momentous occasions for almost two hundred years. From here our village guardian spirit draws its strength to protect us from those foreigners who want our fertile land to feed their insatiable appetites, those who shoot our buffalo for the pleasure of watching us suffer, those who enslave our women and children, those who want to take our country and make it their own. The guardian spirit will not let them succeed! Will you let them succeed?!”

“No! Never!” bellowed the lively congregation.

“It is here that we met before the August Revolution of 1945 when, under the leadership of President Hồ, we overthrew the Japanese and French imperialist who were allied in their oppression of the Vietnamese. We have done it before and shall do it again!”

²⁹ The following evocation is based on interviews with Thiết and official records of local military history during that period in *Quảng Nam – Đà Nẵng 30 Năm Chiến Đấu và Chiến Thắng*.

“Yes, yes! With all our spirit, energy, life and wealth!” the villagers hollered despite the fact that most of them had known very little about the Việt Minh until after the August Revolution when blood red flags and catchy songs flooded the countryside. Since the late 1940s, the guerrillas had successfully recruited troops and won over hearts and minds in and around Thiết’s officially French-controlled village. Việt Minh propaganda officers were well-known for their politeness, oratory skill and knowledge of local history. With such friendly and persuasive comrades all around him, Thiết somehow overlooked the fact that his own father had been killed by Việt Minh decree. He was entranced at these semi-secret night-time meetings by evocative plays that the revolutionaries adopted to educate and win over the people to their cause. They did not dwell on obscure and foreign ideological concepts; but rather, portrayed the War of Resistance as a bridge between a proud Vietnamese past and a prosperous and free future.

“The people of Quảng Nam are no strangers to struggle. It was five hundred years ago that our ancestors came down from the North in the Great March South (*Nam Tiến*). Conscripted by the mighty emperor Lê Thánh Tông because they were poor and landless, our forefathers, as you know, were forsaken from the beginning. But they fought valiantly against the Chăm and ferocious hill tribes to build and protect their homes on the frontier of a new and great land of the Viêts. It is from them that we inherit our indomitable spirit and it is in their honour that we will fight until the French colonists, who have built many more jails than schools, are driven from our land. The prodigious people of this region are well versed at overcoming hardship and woe; they know how to make something out of nothing. No doubt, you know the proverb, “It has not rained and yet Quảng Nam’s soil is soaked. We have not sipped the Hồng Đào wine and yet we are drunk.”³⁰

The revolutionary addressed a frail looking man at the front and asked, “Mr Tám, how old are you? Sixty you say?! You don’t look a day over forty. You must remember well then the revolutionary hero from this very village, Mr Ích Đường,

³⁰ *Đất Quảng Nam chưa mưa đã thấm. Rượu Hồng Đào chưa nhấp đã say.*
Cited in *Quảng Nam – Đà Nẵng 30 Năm Chiến Đấu và Chiến Thắng*, 9. Translated by author with Thiết’s assistance.

who was executed by the French colonialists at the market? Correct me if I'm wrong Mr Tám, but Mr Ích Đường had a rich revolutionary heritage and was also well-educated in France?"

"Yes, yes," said Mr Tám, relishing the unexpected attention. "He was a man of great talent and virtue who stridently opposed the body tax, the tax the Westerners forced upon us for merely existing."

"I had to pay the tax for my father even after he died," interjected a woman from the crowd.

"Right you are, madam," continued the Việt Minh revolutionary. "And for resisting this blatant exploitation, Mr Ích Đường earned a death sentence. Many of you know that his final wish was to ride a horse around the village to see for one last time the streets, stalls and people that he loved and fought for. Suddenly the great man broke free from his captors. But instead of escaping into the jungle, he rode his valiant steed through the streets screaming for justice, independence and a popular uprising. Even after they captured him and placed his head on the block, Mr Ích Đường defiantly yelled, 'The People of Vietnam are like grass; if you pluck one blade a thousand more will sprout!'³¹ Are we going to let Mr Ích Đường die in vain? What do you say Mr Tám?"

"No! We will fight in his honour!"

The crowd once again broke out into cheers and applause before the revolutionary soldier was allowed to continue.

"Every one of us knows people who are not as strong and wise as Mr Tám. These people think to themselves, 'I've struggled for so long, I've sacrificed so much, I've lost so much more. When will this all end?'"

³¹ *Ibid.*, 18-9.

Such individuals are not unpatriotic. They are misinformed and lack spirit. Tell them not to despair, lead them to the light. Reason with them that the war is almost over and that now more than ever they must make a choice between the side of justice and victory or the side of tyranny and defeat. Urge them to remember that every person—whether young or old, male or female, whether he has a gun, a knife or even a pot of boiling water—is critical to the war movement. Urge them to remember that this area is strategically positioned on highway 14 between the two enemy-held cities of Đà Nẵng to our east and Ái Nghĩa to our west. Remind them that Túy Loan is also of great importance to the people’s revolutionaries as a supply link between the war-zone of Phú Túc to the south and the liberated zones at Hòa Vang to the north. You must remind them that every person is a soldier. Will you remind them?”

“Yes, yes! We will remind them!” screamed the audience.

“Tell them of the Great Autumn Victory of 1952 when together we defeated the enemy outpost not far from here and sent all those Moroccan and Algerian legionnaires running. Thanks to intelligence collected by the people, the organisational skills of the Party and the courage of the soldiers, the people’s army struck like lightning and the battle was won in half an hour. Afterwards, thousands of our compatriots, ordinary peasants and villagers just like you, marched into the outpost to pillage it of much needed arms and supplies. They used buffalo, bicycles and their own backs, working day and night to transport the materials before the French retaliation forces arrived to find that nothing was left.³² Sons and daughters of Lạc Long what do you say?!”³³

“Long live Việt Nam! Long live the people of Quảng Nam province! Long live the Party!”

“Once the Resistance is victorious all doubts will be washed away by a mighty wave of peace and prosperity. We will be the instigators of universal harmony

³² For a full account of this battle see *Quảng Nam – Đà Nẵng 30 Năm Chiến Đấu và Chiến Thắng*, 191-6.

³³ An ancient dragon king. Legend has it that, along with the fairy Âu Cơ, Lạc Long Quân conceived the Vietnamese people.

(*đại đồng*). Surely, we deserve nothing less after living under the yoke of feudalism and imperialism for so many years, decades, and indeed centuries? Imagine what our rich nation and industrious people can achieve once freed of these shackles. Everyone will have enough land. Our children's stomachs will be full three times a day with meat and fish. Just like Western children they will go to school and grow up strong and smart. Việt Nam will be a country to be reckoned with, the country that turned the colonial tide. Can you imagine it my compatriots! Can you see it now!?"

"We can, we can!" yelled everyone in the communal house including Thiết. Indeed he screamed as loud as anyone despite the fact that he was not tall enough to see the revolutionary soldier making the speech. The boy's head was steaming and soaring, transcending his meagre body. He was surrounded by people, his brother Biết was somewhere to his side but he did not know exactly where. The crowd had become one amorphous mass of energy, their chanting and singing seemed internally conducted but perfectly synchronised, their fists like so many pistons exploding up and down, driving forward the unstoppable machine of Vietnamese independence. Afterwards, Thiết felt as if he had been cleansed in a font. And with the holy water still dripping from his brow, the world had never seemed so clear. He had "seen the light" and attained what the communists referred to as *giác ngộ* (enlightenment).³⁴ And while he was not yet aware of the actual term, its intricacies and consequences, at that point it was as if Thiết could leap over the moon and the stars were singing out to him:

Brothers and sisters!
 Together we rush into danger,
 To find the source of light.
 We vow our hearts as one,
 Amid the mountains and rivers of our homeland.
 From here and now we exert all our power.
 We the Vietnamese
 Look towards a resplendent future...³⁵

³⁴ *Giác Ngộ* was originally a Buddhist term that referred to a flash of insight-producing enlightenment and an awakening to deeper understandings and higher wisdom. The term was appropriated by the Vietnamese communists to refer to those who had "seen the light".

³⁵ *Này anh em ta,
 Cùng nhau xông pha lên đường,
 Kiếm nguồn tươi sáng.
 Ta nguyện đồng lòng.*

A Post-Enlightenment Inventory

At the night-time Việt Minh rallies Thiết, his brother and friends gained a new and exhilarating perspective on the world and their role in it. This perspective was based on three precepts which, in one form or another, he would hold on to for the rest of his life.

1. Don't Let the Spittle Dry on Your Face

The young Thiết took an interest in martial arts. He practised his kicks and punches against a wall, a helpless tree and the shadows. He had no interest in the codes of honour that were once thought to go hand-in-hand with the archaic fighting arts. This was power for power's sake, and suddenly Thiết did not need the guidance or lectures of others to feel that surge of electricity.

One day on a dusty and ill-shaped football field, Thiết witnessed an older and larger opponent push over his brother Biêt. The heat was in Thiết's veins and his mind was raging with spite and a resolve for justice. Suddenly he was outside of himself, possessing an new objectivity/omnipotency that allowed him to perceive not just his opponent's face and will, but also his own. As if from above he also clearly saw the brute standing over his shell-shocked older brother, and he could see himself, fists clenched and about to explode. Thiết hurtled his compact frame at his Goliath-like opponent, bringing him down and ruthlessly poking him in the eye. While the final score that day has long been forgotten, what is certain is that Thiết came home a champion. The sport-as-life philosophy of Albert Camus could not be more aptly applied, "All that I know most surely about morals and the duty of man I owe to football."³⁶

Điêm tô non song.

Từ nay ra sức anh tài.

Ta người Việt Nam

Nhìn tương lai huy hoàng...

Recounted by Thiết's sister Hương and Tôn Thất Quỳnh Du.

³⁶ Cited in Herbert R. Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979).

2. *The Enemy is Nothing More than That*

Despite such courageous achievements, Thiét remained discontent as he was aware that the other village boys were not the real enemy. Like countless other young men in occupied lands who throw rocks and scream obscenities at heavily armed troops, Thiét was anxious to strain the chains of his nation's oppression, to voice that secret subversive script that his people had for so long repressed and rehearsed in their individual and collective imaginations.

One day, with his friends not far behind him, Thiét approached one of the Moroccan expeditionary troops who invoked such fear and mystery among the peasants. Brushing aside the irrational fears of yesteryear, Thiét put out his gnarled little hand and stunned the Moroccan soldier—that scar-faced ghoul—with the candour of a mad man by saying:

Bonjour!

That one word and every day gesture, dripping with sarcasm and the obnoxiousness of youth, symbolised a tactical manoeuvre made both openly and seditiously in the enemy's line of sight. It represented a shift of the greatest magnitude in terms of how the Vietnamese viewed the French, the war and themselves. In that triumphant instant, Thiét poached the language and customs of his oppressors and twisted them around as one would a knife in a tussle to the death, showing the French and their lackeys how ridiculous and futile the Indochinese *mission civilisatrice* had been. The subtext of that one word cried out, "French language, culture and technology are no longer intimidating or unknowable to the Vietnamese. We will master your ways even as we mock them and harness what you have imported and imposed to send you packing!" The boy fell to the ground giggling even as he wheezed and coughed from the impact of the rifle butt rammed into his gut.

3. *The Righteousness of Action over Inaction*

Thiét watched and felt every drop of blood fall from his finger. The rusty knife with which he had cut himself had fallen to the ground. His brother Biét pick it up and at the same time gave Thiét a shove.

“Hurry up or we’ll get caught.” Biết cut another finger and cursed the first one for drying up. Their friend had already set about smearing on to the wall of their ancestral shrine the slogan that they had pontificated about all morning. Thiết followed, running his sliced and stinging index finger over the rough concrete. Never has children’s finger painting been more gruesome.

The three boys knew that if they were caught, the consequences would be severe as for their elders there was no place more sacred than the ancestral shrine. But for too long they had tolerated the offensive cleanliness of that white rendered wall; such a prominent space could not be left bare while a revolution was underway. Thiết thought of his mother and how furious she would be if she knew that they had defaced the building where his father’s spirit resided. She had never supported the revolution, she had tried to keep him away from the night-time meetings, she was misguided and backward, she did not see clearly, she was clouded by the past, she did not understand.

Before the blood had dried, the three young revolutionaries decided that they could not possibly stay in Bò Bản where they would surely be recruited or killed by colonial forces. They were anxious to leave the village of their ancestors, and were content with the mark they had left behind:

We Will Fight to the Last Drop of Blood!³⁷

Oil for Light and Guns

Thiết’s sister Hương also went to those night-time Việt Minh rallies but, unlike her younger brothers, was not persuaded by all the slogans and promises. To outsiders she appeared as dedicated to the Việt Minh and the national independence movement as anyone; however, her ranting and chanting was for the most part ruse and simulation. Hương attended not out of commitment or

³⁷ This message was most probably derived from Hồ Chí Minh’s call to the people on 19 December 1946 to “Fight and sacrifice to the last drop of blood.” See Chapter One of this thesis on page 32.

even curiosity, but rather, because it was silently but firmly expected that each household have at least one grown-up representative at the meetings. Indeed, this sense of pernicious coercion (from all sides) fuelled Hương's scepticism, her suspicion that neither the Việt Minh nor the French had her best interests in mind. In the twilight of her teenage years, the young woman became increasingly convinced that she had to look out for herself.

Hương stayed longer than anyone else at the market, haggling with more eloquence, tenacity and success than her competitors. She took greater risks, making more and more trips to Đà Nẵng and buying entire rolls of material that brought higher profits but were also more difficult to transport and conceal. It soon became clear to the young entrepreneur, however, that there was too much competition at the market near her home and insufficient potential for profit. Of course, Hương kept none of the money herself, giving it all to her mother. But at that stage, the young woman did not crave material wealth. Money was a means to an end; with money she gained power. Every time she pulled off a deal, convinced a customer that she/he was profiting greatly from the exchange or was perhaps even taking advantage of the sweet-mannered young woman, Hương's heart soared with victory. She had bettered another being, and for the first time in her life Hương felt like she was worth something. Hương could not get her fill of this sensation, but in order to maintain the high she could not afford to become stagnant or complacent. She knew that to keep moving forward, she would have to move on.

Hương travelled to isolated and sometimes besieged liberated zones where vendors were scarce and prices high. The peasant girl ventured ever deeper into the jungle on secluded mountain paths in order to avoid French troops. For days at a time, she scurried with two large baskets hanging from a pole over her shoulders, between her suppliers in Đà Nẵng and the Việt Minh controlled areas around Tam Kỳ, Việt An, Yên Nê and Phước Thờng mountain. The liberated markets were held under the cover of night so as to avoid colonial pacification campaigns. Hương was quick to discover, however, that the blanket of darkness did not provide a guarantee against bombing from French planes. On the contrary, if fighter pilots were careless in distinguishing between civilians and

combatants during the day, they were utterly reckless at night. When Hương heard the howl of approaching aircraft, she dived into the holes and gullies on the side of the road, trembling as she waited for the roar and fire to subside.

Afterwards, she promptly regained her composure, checked the produce in her baskets, re-lit the kerosene lamp that hung from her shoulder pole, and proceeded onwards. During these black market missions, the gritty young woman slept infrequently and only occasionally sat down to rest, leaning protectively against her precious baskets with the moon as a golden amulet in the sky, the whole universe above her tattered conical hat, and areca leaves tied to her feet as shoes.

While her profits steadily increased, Hương remained unsatisfied. She was convinced that there was much more to life, much more money, power and pride. She yearned for a grand event or life-altering endeavour that would affirm, once and for all, her economic prowess and ascendance from humble peasant beginnings. From this bed of frustration grew a get-rich-quick plan that she sold to her mother with the great alacrity.

“Everybody knows mother that what the Việt Minh need most right now, and are willing to pay the most for, is oil to clean and maintain their guns.”

“Yes, my dear,” said Thừa. “That’s why the colonial authorities monitor the supply of machine oil so closely. No one could possibly sell it without their permission.”

“What would you say then mother, if I told you that I know someone in Đà Nẵng who has a large supply of this oil and who is anxious to get rid of it?”

“And how do you plan to get the oil back here with all the blockades?” asked the older woman, playing into the hands of the younger one.

“Ahh, good question mother. In fact I have already spoken to a reliable man who will make for us large urns with false bottoms. On top of each one we can pour fish sauce to hide the precious oil underneath. Even the fish sauce we can sell for a good profit! I promise mother, just lend me our savings and I will multiply

them at least tenfold, probably twenty. Trust me, I have worked as hard as you for what we have, I'm not going to squander it."

After a number of verbal duels, the cautious Thừa relented. The night before the secret shipment, Hương lay wide awake on the floor of their thatch hut. Her mind furiously calculated the infinite number of combinations and permutations that might be produced by such a complex and perilous equation. She rationalised that it was better for her to get some rest but could not turn off those exasperating mental processes that buzzed in her head like the wings of mosquitos. She thought about what it would be like to come home with such a tremendous bounty. Surely no-one in the village had ever pulled off a heist like this one? But what if she failed? What if she lost everything? What if she were caught? A little more than a year ago Hương had been captured by colonial troops at the market with a bundle of anaesthetics, prime produce for the guerrillas. Subsequently, Hương was held for a terrifying week at the police station in a cell with six Việt Minh women. Every day the other women were interrogated, their stomachs filled with soapy water and beaten.³⁸ Fortunately, most likely because she was so young, Hương was released after surrendering to the authorities the name and address of her supplier. The security police threw the seventeen-year-old out into the street starving, dehydrated and with a chilling warning, "If we ever see you again baby-san, you will not be so lucky".

It was around two in the morning when the pickup truck that Hương had hired approached the highway turn off to Bò Bán and was stopped at gunpoint by two government troops. One of them asked what they were carrying and proceeded to examine the urns. Hương's head started churning again. The sickening smile on the soldier's face and the fact that she had never seen a blockade at this stretch of the highway before, made her strongly suspect that she had been set up. Hương held her breath when the soldier raised his rifle and drove the bayonet into the urn so as to illustrate the futility of her deception. Simultaneously, the false

³⁸ The historian Nguyễn Khắc Viên recalls the story of a girl of similar age to Hương who in 1956 was arrested in Đà Nẵng for submitting a petition demanding the implementation of the 1954 Geneva Agreements. Among other ordeals the Republic made her take what they referred to as a "trip by boat" by pouring soapy water mixed with shit into her mouth until her stomach was swollen and then treading on her with hobnailed boots. Nguyễn Khắc Viên, *Southern Vietnam: 1975-1985* (Hà Nội: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1985) 80.

bottom of the urn and Hương's hopes of a windfall were smashed to pieces. The teenager and her driver were arrested and taken to a nearby truck depot where they were told to squat on the ground with some other prisoners and wait.

An hour and then two hours passed as Hương squatted on the gravel, constantly scanning for an opportunity to escape. The young woman cursed her imprudence. She had got greedy, and used all the family savings to buy oil without leaving any cash with which she might bribe a soldier. She could taste the soapy water and feel the rib-shattering blows, but told herself that this was not the time to get hysterical. With superb sangfroid Hương determined that she would have to make a break for it before sunrise as every leering soldier who passed, every military vehicle that stopped, could potentially drag her to her death.

Another hour or so passed and the other weary prisoners fell to the ground where they drifted in and out of sleep. When a truck full of government soldiers screeched to a stop, Hương's survival antennae pricked-up and suddenly she was wide awake and full of adrenalin. Assuming that the prisoners were all asleep, the guard walked away to greet a friend who had just arrived. Hương seized the opportunity, leapt up and fled into the greyness of the night-time jungle.

The sun had risen by the time she managed to stumble back to the Bò Bản turn off with her hands still bound. The village was not far away, but Hương stayed concealed in the dense foliage, enduring a day of hunger and intense thirst as she waited for the traffic of soldiers to die down. At dusk the teenager stepped out in front of a truck heading westward and, in what seemed like a rare instance of good fortune, the driver took pity on the young woman and gave her some water before taking her home. More disgraced and destitute than ever, Hương staggered back to that hut of mud and grass and her anxious mother who wept profusely upon seeing her daughter.

All day Thùra had fretted over what was left of her family, what the war had taken from her, and how she had almost lost her eldest daughter for a few urns of oil. Already the conflict had claimed her husband and eldest son so that in her darkness of her despair, Thùra was sure that she herself was already dead—

vicariously killed—and with her last breath prayed for the longevity and happiness of the orphans who she would leave behind. To make matters worse, despite all her protestations, her two youngest boys had left to pursue an ideology that she viewed as pernicious and soul destroying.

The Tyranny of Enlightenment

Teaching Marxism-Leninism to any layman is extremely difficult and cannot be explained in one lesson, or even in one year. Like Euclidean geometry, Marxism starts from one preconceived postulate—that of internal conflict—from which derive a sequence of theorems and corollaries which progressively lead to acceptance of the communist pattern of life as the most rational one.³⁹

The wind and rain rushed into Thiết's open air classroom but the lesson continued even as drops of water fell through the roof and bugs crawled on to the dirt floor where the children sat. The teacher and thirty or so students of Cây Sanh Primary School situated at the northern end of Interzone V did not have any desks to get wet or notepads susceptible to the tempestuous winds.⁴⁰ Hence, in the midst of a storm, the students needed only to ensure that the images of Prime Minister Malenkov, Chairman Mao and Hồ Chí Minh remained fastened to a beam overlooking them, and concentrate on memorising the communist truisms dictated to them by their teacher.

“Communism is a system in which everything is owned by the people,” Thiết's teacher was repeating the basics for the class of eleven to fourteen year olds.

“And the Party represents and serves the people in a benevolent, constant and absolute manner, taking from each person according to ability and giving to each person according to need.”

³⁹ Hoàng Văn Chí, *From Colonialism to Communism*, 113-4.

⁴⁰ Interzone V was a Vietminh controlled area that ran along the coast of Central Việt Nam. The colonists considered the area to be of great strategic importance because it was a major source of supplies and troops for the revolutionary forces. A history of the area can be found in Nguyễn Khắc Viên, *Southern Vietnam: 1975-1985* (Hà Nội: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1985) 73-134.

The boy's concentration waned; he had not been at the school long but had heard this all before. Thiết's mind drifted back to his home village and the comforting memory of his mother and sisters. Silently, he scolded himself for his sentimentalism. "Bồ Bản is in the past. Why are you dwelling over it? Is it not wonderful to be surrounded by a spirit of revolutionary equality and unity, where everyone is a likeminded comrade (*đồng chí*)? Is it not wonderful to be away from mother who kept you from attending speeches and learning about the horrors of colonialism, capitalist exploitation, the efficacy of communism, and the world as it truly is and surely will be? Here at Cây Sành you can attend uplifting and informative speeches everyday. Indeed attendance is compulsory for young revolutionaries. Moreover, the teachers here are more passionate and informed than those who you used to listen to in the village communal house six months ago. They are far more ideologically sound and scientific." Thiết straightened his back and paid full attention.

"Under the control of the Party, workers will be given jobs that they enjoy and are good at. The land will belong to the peasants who will dutifully cultivate it for themselves, their families and the nation. No longer will they have to endure oppressive and demeaning work just to survive."

These teachings outlining the wonders of the coming communism were invariably linked to scathing criticisms of capitalism, thereby dividing the world as seen by young revolutionaries like Thiết into two distinctive and uncompromising camps.

"Under capitalism everything is owned by landlords who must increasingly exploit the workers to generate profit and remain in business. Capitalism is a system that encourages the rich to exploit the poor, and in which freedom is equated with anarchic competition."

They did not have to look far to find evidence of such a reckless and depraved system. According to Thiết's teacher, "The feudalistic Bảo Đại and his capitalist lackeys have accumulated immense wealth through the toil of the masses. Propped up by their colonial masters and corrupt to the bone, this false and

volatile regime oozes a contaminated culture (*văn hóa đồi trụy*) that must be opposed with all our might.”

Frequently, the will of the students, and their faith in the Việt Minh cause was augmented by appeals to Việt Nam’s heroes. Like President Hồ, whom he quoted whenever possible, Thiết’s teacher saw the children before him as both inheritors of a glorious Vietnamese past and the key to a proud Vietnamese future. “All of you are the representatives of the many thousand-year-old spirit of self-respect and self reliance in our people, the indomitable spirit that has passed down through the two Trưng sisters, Lý Thường Kiệt, Trần Hưng Đạo, Lê Lợi, Quang Trung, Phan Đình Phùng, and Hoàng Hoa Thám to you.”

Even before he had come to the Việt Minh school, Thiết knew from those night-time gatherings that the world was divided to the core and that he was on the side of righteousness and ultimate victory. What became apparent to him in the jungle was the Party’s central role in leading Việt Nam through the nationalist and socialist revolutions and the unique ability of communism to provide personal and universal salvation from the oppression and alienation of the capitalist colonial world.

From the songs, poems and speeches that he heard and repeated over and over again, Thiết became convinced that there was only one path to national independence and individual progress. This path was straight, well-trodden and so precariously narrow that the slightest detour could prove fatal. At the national level, it was determined that after the yoke of imperialism had been shaken off, Việt Nam would rise up to match the economic and social success of China. And as their collective socio-industrial potential was further realized, Vietnamese society would look and feel increasingly Czechoslovakian or Polish. Finally, at the end of this runway, lay the nirvana that was Russia. When he thought of Russia, Thiết sighed as if she were the ultimate pin-up girl, the saviour of humankind from fascism, a paragon of social justice and industrial progress, and founder of the eternal USSR. Such was Thiết’s and the other students’ idolisation of China and Russia that in their spare time they danced in joyous circles with their hands clenched together and voices united in celebration of these mighty lands:

Do you know about the powerful and free nation of China?
Of course, that's not difficult!
Can I tell you right now?!
The heroic Chinese flag has five yellow stars on a bright red
background!

Do you know about the powerful and free nation of Poland?
....⁴¹

On a personal level, it was also clear that the fastest and only way to victory and progress was to imitate and synchronise oneself with others. Thiết was constantly reminded of the importance of religiously maintaining his working class outlook (*giữ vững lập trường*) and complying without question to Party authority:⁴²

People, people emulate and compete,
Faster, faster emulate and compete,
We will definitely be victorious,
The enemy will definitely be defeated.⁴³

To emulate and compete is to love one's country.
To love one's country is to emulate and compete.⁴⁴

"From the darkness of colonialism and tyranny Việt Nam will rise up and thrive under the collective endeavours of the people and the economic leadership of the Party," proclaimed Thiết's teacher.

⁴¹ *Đó ai biết được nước Trung Hoa hùng cường tự do?
Nào có khó chi mà!
Nay em xin nói liền?!
Cờ Trung Hoa hùng anh năm sao vàng trên nền đỏ tươi.*

Đó ai biết được nước Ba Lan hùng cường tự do?

...
Recounted by Thiết.

⁴² For a more detailed discussion of how the communists harnessed the concept of *lập trường* at that time see Ninh, *A World Transformed*, 122-3.

⁴³ *Người người thi đua
Ngành ngành thi đua
Ta nhất định thắng
Địch nhất định thua.*

Cited in *Quảng Nam Đà Nẵng 30 Năm Chiến Đấu và Chiến Thắng*, 123.

⁴⁴ *Thi đua là yêu nước,
Yêu nước phải thi đua.*

Cited in *Quảng Nam Đà Nẵng 30 Năm Chiến Đấu và Chiến Thắng*, 124.

“With everyone working towards a common goal instead of against each other imagine how progressive we can be! The economy is like a stubborn buffalo that you have to get to the rice field. Right now some Vietnamese are pulling it by the neck while others are pulling its tail. We are going nowhere, just getting tired. Communism is a way of harnessing our collective talents and power so that we won’t be fighting against one another. And soon, we won’t be just growing rice. With technological assistance from brother China and mother Russia we will have factories many times bigger than a whole village, and machines that are larger than a house. Everyone producing for their families, communities, glorious Việt Nam and workers all over the earth.”

This industrial vision was particularly appealing to young Thiết who had come to view the iron-red world of men and machines as infinitely more progressive and liberating than the dull browns that had dominated his childhood. He had not forgotten the severity of the seasons, the terrorism of torrential rain and heatwaves so intense that they stripped the trees of their leaves and forced villagers to wipe themselves with dirt after going to the toilet (*ia trin*). Nature, like the French, was something to overcome. It was the reason, so went the old saying, that babies were born crying.

Of course, political victories and economic benefits did not come without great personal resoluteness, discipline and sacrifice. This became particularly apparent during self-criticism, which Thiết participated in a number of times while at Cây Sanh. Self-criticism involved separating into groups of ten or twelve and examining each other’s deepest thoughts and actions. Students had first to report on their own personal development and how they thought they could be more devout and effective revolutionaries. The floor was then opened up for criticism from others. Thiết did not mind reprimanding his comrades but was left feeling bitter after the examination turned on him. One time, for instance, he admitted that he was afraid of ghosts. He was not as frightened of them as when he had first come to Cây Sanh, but was still uncomfortable sleeping on his own.

“This is a grave error, comrade Thiét,” said an older boy who had never liked Thiét anyway. “How will you ever be a revolutionary soldier if you can’t even spend a night in the jungle by yourself? You must try harder to purge yourself of these barbaric superstitions.”

Thiét knew that his accuser, like everyone else in the class, was also still afraid of ghosts and secretly he was fuming from the hypocrisy. Nevertheless, despite its at times practical imperfections, Thiét was convinced that self-criticism served an important purpose; that is, it clarified the magnitude of the commitment and sacrifice that students were expected to make. The Trinity that was the Party, the anti-French movement and the nation was now not only the most important thing in their lives, it was the only thing. Everything was framed accordingly so that if someone was not working enthusiastically, they were not seen to be tired or grumpy, but rather displayed a dangerously low level of revolutionary fervour which was tantamount to the behaviour of a reactionary.⁴⁵

The students had even to be careful that they did not show undue affection to their families for fear of being labelled backward and unpatriotic. The family, it was thought, had to be reformed from a primitive inward-looking institution to a public-spirited communist one. “Though I have no family of my own, I have a very big family: the working class throughout the world,” said Uncle Hồ who upheld his bachelorhood as an exemplification of his devotion.⁴⁶ To be sure, a more iconoclastic system of loyalty could not be conceived in traditional Việt Nam where every child, including Thiét, was taught that:

⁴⁵ In his exposition of “control-discussion” (the successor of self-criticism) as a form of communist “thought reform” Hoàng Văn Chí refers to the technique of chain deductions which “is used to describe a series of seemingly obvious deductions which, starting from an insignificant revelation, lead inexorably to the conclusion that the accused person is a dangerous reactionary”. Ninh points out that in other educational programs aimed at determining and critiquing class background, a student was beaten as a traitor when he was little more than a petty thief. Another was bashed for having past contact with reactionary elements after which time he hanged himself. Hoàng Văn Chí, *From Colonialism to Communism*, 119.

Ninh, *A World Transformed*, 106-7.

⁴⁶ Cited in Bùi Tín (Judy Stowe and Do Van trans.), *Following Ho Chi Minh: The Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonial* (London: Hurst & Company, 1995) 59. There is evidence to suggest that Hồ was briefly married to a Chinese woman in Canton in 1927 and then later to the revolutionary heroine Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai. There is also much contestation over whether or not he had children. More details on this highly controversial topic can be found in Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 143. See also Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years* (London: C.Hurst, 2002).

The toil of a father stands as tall as Thái Sơn Mountain,
The love of a mother flows like a river source—endlessly.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, the rationality and worth of the revolutionary cause started to overshadow Thiết's nostalgic thoughts of his mother and sisters who had worked tirelessly to raise him and who he had left behind in Bò Bản. Perhaps most astonishingly, the teenager now preferred not to think about his father, Việt, and the fact that only six years earlier he had been falsely accused of spying for the French and assassinated by a gang of Việt Minh guerrillas. The airing of such memories would only introduce murkiness and messiness into his otherwise clear-cut life, and would no doubt generate suspicion and condemnation from his comrades.

In any case, Thiết told himself that he was too busy to dig up the past. At Cây Sanh there were also classes in maths, science and literature that Thiết undertook with great enthusiasm and some success. But this was by no means learning for learning's sake. Convinced that education could not be neutral and should therefore be at all times progressive, the instructors at Cây Sanh tried to direct every minute of class and extracurricular time towards the task of manufacturing ideological warriors who were ruthlessly dedicated to the Party and its revolutionary agenda. This is not to say that Thiết had been programmed like a machine. Nor was he ever asked to swallow those bitter forms of realist thought which dictate that the ends justify the means. On the contrary, the young man never stopped believing that virtuous conduct would be rewarded and evil conduct punished in this life or the next. However, because he was bombarded with notions of the communist paradise that awaited him, and convinced that his sacrifices would bring that paradise that much closer and make it more glorious, Thiết came to equate goodness with all that was communist and evil with all that was not. In the Việt Minh teachings, he saw the perfect integration of ethics and ideology, the continuation of a heroic tradition bolstered by the promise of

⁴⁷ *Công cha như núi Thái Sơn,
Nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra.*
Recounted by Thiết.

unprecedented progress. So potent was this concoction that the holiness of Thiét's leaders was seared into his heart and mind, while the humanity of his enemies was forced almost irretrievably into the nether regions.

As he sharpened bamboo stakes for his punji pit and soaked them in infectious urine and buffalo dung, Thiét gleefully envisaged French troops falling into his trap. Coldly, he rationalised that it is better to maim than kill the enemy as in addition to disabling his victim, two other sentimental French imperialists would have to carry their whimpering companion from the battlefield. Vividly he imagined the sharpened bamboo stakes driving through the feet and limbs of his targets, the white savages screaming and writhing in pain. In silent and solitary moments, this vision always brought a chilling grin to the young man's face that revealed traces of Pavlovian persuasion and concomitant drops of saliva.

After 1954 Things would Never be the Same Again...or Would They? Lessons Left Unlearnt for Thiét and US Foreign Policy

The villagers of Cây Sanh were on a heightened level of alert after scouting planes had been seen in the sky. Intelligence reports later confirmed what many of the revolutionaries had feared. The French imperialists had discovered them and were coming to pacify the area. Soon Cây Sanh would be battered by bombs and overrun with North African expeditionary troops. The only uncertainty was time. The Việt Minh guerrillas and villagers had perhaps a week, maybe a few days, or possibly only a matter of hours to pack all that was necessary and prudent before making a dash for the mountains.

In the first months of 1954, Thiét was living with his uncle Chín. Chín was the director of the Cây Sanh medical centre and among the first evacuees. Thiét desperately wanted to flee with his uncle but was ordered to stay behind and wait for his brother Biét to return from a training excursion the next day. The thirteen year old watched on anxiously as the people of Cây Sanh hurriedly packed their lives into small bundles and left. Suddenly, Thiét was alone and as darkness descended he felt trapped and terribly frightened. The murky silence was like a

fog that had to be waded through. He was a boy and country-bumpkin again, fearful not only of the impending imperialist attack but also of his radical isolation from the human world and susceptibility to assault from supernatural dimensions. It was too early for sleep but Thiét lay paralysed on his bamboo bed mat, rationalising that this was the best and only way to pass time, to evade the encroaching darkness.

“There is nothing to be afraid of,” Thiét told himself with his eyes jammed shut.

“Just relax and go to sleep, when you wake up it’ll be morning and Biêt will be back. There are no monsters or ghosts. They are not real. All those old stories are just made up by adults to scare children. Remember teacher’s instructions. Remember what your comrades told you in self-criticism. If Vietnamese are to be progressive socialists we must reform our primitive ways. Superstition is false, totally uncivilised. Belief in such things cripples rational thought and disguises the truth. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

These furious rationalisations temporarily succeeded in quelling Thiét’s fear but also inhibited his slumber. Invariably, when his appeals to logic became monotonous and were diluted of their potency, the teenager was left stranded with fearful images of floating ephemeral beings. Particularly horrifying were the gut-wrenching ghosts (*ma lai rút ruột*) which appeared as ghastly heads hovering over the ground, with their guts trailing behind them. Knowing that the gut wrenchers desired nothing more than to devour the faecal and intestinal matter of children, Thiét tried harder to harness the power of reason and self-criticism against the gruesome products of his imagination.

“Mother was superstitious, terribly backward,” Thiét reprimanded himself. “Do you want to be like her? Or perhaps you want your mother to be here now? Is that it? Are you but a helpless child? Of course not! Never again! You’re a revolutionary soldier and revolutionary soldiers thrive in the darkness. They’re not afraid of anything. There is nothing to be afraid of.”

Eventually, Thiết's self-directed scolding was drowned out by the frightening moans, shrieks and howls that emanated from the graves behind his hut. After a few minutes that seemed like hours, Thiết jumped up from his bed mat and fled from the eerie abode. Unsure as to whether he was facing his fears or evading them or even if he was awake or asleep, the youth paced up and down the streets of the ghost town. He strode, walked and then staggered but somehow kept moving into the early hours of the morning, fuelled by fright and only barely conscious under the twinkling starlight.

When Biêt arrived in the morning, he was surprised to see Cây Sanh deserted and his younger brother sitting ragged in the street. Thiết explained the situation (omitting his night-time ordeal) and they immediately left the doomed village which had been their home for the last nine months. Their destination was the secluded mountain village of Tuyên Phước which was only about twenty kilometres away. There were, however, a number of factors that stretched out the path before them and made the small packs on their backs seem heavy enough to weigh down a water buffalo. The dirt roads sloped mercilessly upwards and, due to caution and misdirection, the two teenagers often took detours onto winding tracks into the suffocating jungle. Several times Biêt was forced to ask directions from the indigenous highlanders who occasionally crossed their path. During these bizarre and guarded encounters Thiết stayed well behind his gesticulating brother, peering at the strange creatures whose loincloths provided them with but a modicum of modesty and a skerrick of civility. In every other respect they were, in Thiết's eyes, little more than beasts.

The midday sun drained Biêt and Thiết of energy and water. The elder had been on his feet since before dawn; the younger had been pursued by spirits since the night before. To make matters worse they were once again engulfed by that profound sense of uncertainty and alienation that comes with being a refugee. What were they going to do at Tuyên Phước? Would they ever return to Cây Sanh? What about school? Would they ever see Bò Bản and their family again? When would they be victorious? When was the war going to end? Such fearful and intractable questions had haunted them since they were young children and would stay with them for years to come.

With characteristic Việt Minh adaptability, Chín had already established a temporary medical centre by the time his nephews found him at Tuyên Phước. A French search and destroy program was underway and the wounded or near-dead were streaming into the mountain village. Scores of injured Việt Minh fighters and villagers lay on mats in the open air, everywhere blood was seeping through grimy bandages and operations were being carried out without anaesthetics in makeshift tents. So much flesh lay bare, on display as if in the goriest of butcher shops. Clumps of charred meat screamed out incomprehensibly to Thiét or begged him to end their agony. In the face of such human destruction, Thiét was both disturbed and puzzled. He felt an intense hatred for the enemy, but also for the war itself. In that instant the young teenager yearned desperately for an end to the fighting and wondered whether it was all worth it, whether wars are actually winnable.

In fact, by that stage early in 1954, the Việt Minh was in a commanding position and were only months away from victory. Their extraordinary military success was intertwined with French political defeat on the domestic front. During the early 1950s the war had become decidedly unpopular in France where it was increasingly referred to as “the dirty war” (*la sale guerre*). Colonial casualties were accumulating rapidly and would reach over ninety thousand.⁴⁸ Veterans returned home not to heroic fanfares, but rather averted eyes as French citizens called for a withdrawal from Indochina with ever more frequency and virulence.

It was under these trying circumstances that in May 1953 General Henri Navarre took command of the French forces. He had little knowledge of Asia but maintained a sense that his very ignorance and disassociation provided him with

⁴⁸ The breakdown of colonial troops killed in action during the First Indochina War has been estimated as follows:

French: 20,685
 Foreign Legion: 11,620
 Africans: 15,229
 Indochinese: 26,686
 Allied Indochinese states: 18,714
 Total Colonial Force Casualties: 92,934

Michael Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochinese Wars, 1772-1991* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 1995) 33.

“a new objectivity”.⁴⁹ There were some, particularly in the US, who were encouraged by Navarre’s commanding presence.⁵⁰ On 28 September 1953, *Time* magazine devoted a cover story to the General which they concluded with, “A year ago none of us could see victory. There wasn’t a prayer. Now we can see it clearly—like light at the end of a tunnel.”⁵¹ Their faith, however, would soon prove to be misplaced. Upon gaining the assignment, Navarre understood that he would not be given any more troops and that his primary task was to create a military situation favourable to a negotiated end to the war.⁵²

With this in mind, the General set out to reconstruct the war in order to take advantage of the higher technology and superior firepower of the colonial forces. He discarded the notion of engaging in a popular broad-based people’s war and proceeded to concentrate thousands of small forts into a few large ones known as “hedgehogs” in the hope of luring the Việt Minh into large set-piece battles.⁵³ At the same time, a conglomeration of mechanised battalions and regiments formed the *Groupes Mobile* which undertook massive search and destroy programs like the one that drove Thiết from Cây Sanh. Typically, however, the great size of the French forces and the thunderous sound of their monstrous machines allowed the Việt Minh to escape and regroup:

Like clockwork, each such mop-up operation begins by an aerial reconnaissance, which only puts the commies on notice that something is afoot; then this is followed up by long columns of trucks carrying the troops necessary for the operation. And, as if this weren’t sufficient to wake up the whole neighbourhood, there generally came along a few tanks to provide for artillery support, I suppose, whose clanking can be heard five miles away.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Michael Maclear, *Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War* (London: Thames Methuen, 1981) 41. Bernard B. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1967) 29.

⁵⁰ In October 1953 Senator Mike Mansfield led a US Senate study mission to Việt Nam. He found that “The military prospects of the non-Communist forces in Indo-China are improving” and based this conclusion in large part on increased American aid and General Navarre’s “psychology of the offensive”. Cited in Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1964) 126.

⁵¹ Cited in Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 28.

⁵² Robert Shaplan, *The Lost Revolution: The Story of Twenty Years of Neglected Opportunities in Vietnam and of America’s Failure to Foster Democracy There* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) 93. Maclear, *Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War*, 45.

⁵³ James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000) 62.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

The French mobile forces were constantly harassed and often ambushed by the elusive Việt Minh guerrillas who, one by one, steadily destroyed tanks with mines. As Hồ Chí Minh had forecast, the tiger was mauling the elephant.

Navarre pushed on, convinced that defeat was a consequence of insufficient scale and that the enemy would soon be broken. A commission investigating this period in French military history later concluded that Navarre was “under the influence of preconceived ideas which his staff had proclaimed as eternal truths; i.e., that the enemy had reached his apex of strength and that he was unable to launch large-scale operations in the view of his logistical limitations.”⁵⁵ With such eternal truths at the forefront of the French commander’s mind, in November 1953 he ordered expeditionary troops to parachute into the Điện Biên Phủ valley in North-West Việt Nam. Here they proceeded to construct the mother of all hedgehogs. The camp was made up of several fortified positions equipped with artillery, mortars, machine guns and around fifteen thousand troops.⁵⁶ Each position could provide artillery protection for the others and could also be resupplied by air. General Navarre was convinced that the occupation of Điện Biên Phủ would block the Việt Minh supply routes to Laos and force them to stand and fight. Serving as both bait and trap, it would turn the war in France’s favour.⁵⁷

There were those in his ranks who suspected that Navarre’s vision was theoretically over-ambitious and misguided in practice. Despite protests from his commander of ground troops in North Việt Nam, General René Cogny, Navarre launched his long-planned Operation Atlante in December of 1953 which diverted a great deal of military and human resources away from Điện Biên Phủ. The target of the operation was the Việt Minh Interzone V in which Tuyên Phước, Cây Sanh and Thiết were strategically positioned.

The essential objective which I expect to reach [in 1953-1954] is the disappearance of the Viet-Minh zone which spreads from south of

⁵⁵ Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 50.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 63-4.

⁵⁷ Gibson, *The Perfect War*, 64.

Tourane [Đà Nẵng] to the north of Nha Trang and east-ward to the Southern Mountain Plateau; that is, the destruction of the military forces of Liên-Khu [Interzone] V.

In view of the considerable strategic and political results which one is entitled to expect from the complete execution of that operation, I have decided to *subordinate* to it the conduct of the whole Indochina campaign during the first semester of 1954.⁵⁸

The operation was complete failure. Many of the Vietnamese troops involved in Operation Atlante were preoccupied with looting and neglected their military objectives. Moreover, the veracity of the subsequent Việt Minh counterattack on the French-controlled southern mountain plateau, forced Navarre to draw even more resources away from Điện Biên Phủ. A leading French historian on Indochina of that period later questioned Navarre's judgment with respect to launching Operation Atlante given that Interzone V was "a sector whose conquest at that time by the French (or whose continued control by the Communists) was in no way vital to the outcome of the war."⁵⁹

In stark contrast to Navarre thinking, the Việt Minh strategy was in tune with the social and physical environment in which they were fighting. In September 1953 when the Party's Central Committee met to devise the Winter-Spring campaign of 1953-1954 aimed at countering Navarre's advance, they emphasised the importance of bolstering the morale of the military and the people in the face of such a sizeable and imposing foe. Their leading strategist, General Võ Nguyên Giáp, was a one time history teacher whose knowledge of military science was largely self-taught. To be sure, General Giáp recognised that attacking Điện Biên Phủ was a great risk. And so he set about not only ensuring that the plan was technically sound, but also well-serviced in terms of morale. The message rang out among Việt Minh to, "Be positive, take the initiative, be mobile and lively. To fight is definitely to win."⁶⁰ General Giáp would later explain:

In the Dien Bien Phu campaign, the adoption of these tactics demanded of us firmness and a spirit of resolution...As a result not everybody was

⁵⁸ Cited in Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 45-6. Italics in the original.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶⁰ *Tích cực, chủ động, cơ động, linh hoạt. Đánh chắc thắng*. Trần Bá Đệ, *Lịch Sử Việt Nam: Từ 1858 Đến Nay [The History of Việt Nam: From 1858 to Present]* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Đại Học Quốc Gia Hà Nội, 2001) 289.

immediately convinced of the correctness of these tactics. We patiently educated our men, pointed out that there were real difficulties, but that our task was to overcome them to create good conditions for the great victory we sought.⁶¹

Notwithstanding the *prima facie* technological might of the colonial forces, the Việt Minh determined that Điện Biên Phủ was vulnerable. It was three hundred kilometres from the support of French forces in the Red River Delta and open to attack from the mountains on all sides. Victory, however, would require meticulous and arduous preparation. General Giáp ordered the mobilisation of two armies from as far away as Thanh Hóa province, two hundred kilometres from the battle-ground. Firstly, there were the regular forces, many of whom were forced to march twenty miles a day to converge at Điện Biên Phủ. Secondly, and just as importantly, a peasant force of tens of thousands of men, women and youths was enlisted. This “brigade of iron horses” or “human serpent” hacked and slithered its way through the jungle creating an intricate system of supply routes. For the peasant force, high-technology took the form of bamboo sticks which were attached to bicycle bars to enhance steering, balance and braking power; and shreds of material that reinforced inner tubes against ubiquitous thorns and shrapnel. The worker bicycles (*xe thợ*) were loaded with up to three hundreds kilograms of supplies and even dismantled heavy artillery from China, their engines fuelled with a cogent mixture of determination and hope.⁶² It would take three months to move the arms and supplies in place and often four kilograms of rice was needed to transport every one. Demonstrating a characteristic penchant for statistics, the communists later calculated that

⁶¹ Võ Nguyên Giáp, *Dien Bien Phu* (Hà Nội: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959) 29-30. Cited in Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 51.

⁶² The history of the bicycle is an excellent example of how journeys of techno-modernisation can be anything but straight, narrow and ever-upwardly bound. When first introduced from the West to Việt Nam in the late 1800s, the bicycle’s blinding speed and ability to balance on two in-line wheels led it to be referred to as *xe máy* (mechanised vehicle). In the early 1900s after French automobiles became more common it was degraded to *xe đạp* (treading machine). During the Second Indochina War the bicycle continued to play a critical role in transporting supplies and wounded soldiers along the system of roads and paths known as the Hồ Chí Minh trail. After 1975, bicycle use (re)proliferated as a consequence of widespread poverty and a lack of spare parts. Today the bicycle is still very popular in Việt Nam but generally looked down upon *vis a vis* the burgeoning number of motorised scooters and cars. However, given the bicycle’s history and adaptability, one would not dare to make long-term predictions as to its popularity or demise. Jim Fitzpatrick, *The Bicycle in Wartime: An Illustrated History* (Washington: Brassey’s, 1998) 180.

261,453 people gave up 18,301,570 work hours and used 21,000 bicycles to carry 25,056 tons of rice, 907 tons of meat and 971 tons of other food for the battle at Điện Biên Phủ and the glory of Việt Nam.⁶³

The French were aware that General Giáp was preparing for an attack but had little comprehension of how powerful the assault would be. The shelling began on 13 March 1954 and the Điện Biên Phủ airstrip was taken by the revolutionaries a few days later. General Giáp adopted Maoist human wave tactics and then settled in to a siege utilising the methods of trench warfare. Their tactics and progression would later be succinctly describe as, “siege, assault, strangulation and asphyxiation.”⁶⁴ French air support hurtling napalm into the jungle was countered by Chinese-operated anti-aircraft guns which disappeared into the mountains after each attack. When the US refused to intervene it was all but over.⁶⁵ “Never had our army fought with such endurance and for so long a time as in the winter-spring of 1953-4,” wrote General Giáp.⁶⁶ And referring to Navarre’s greatest mistake Giáp asserted, “He could not visualize the immense possibilities of a people’s army and the entire people who were fighting for independence and peace.”⁶⁷ On 7 May the Việt Minh’s historic victory was complete. The following morning, as if according to schedule, the Geneva Conference began negotiations on the issue of Indochina.

Thiết’s deep black eyes were ablaze with joy when he heard of the victory at Điện Biên Phủ. A week beforehand the historic coastal town of Hội An not far to the east of where Thiết’s was situated had also been liberated as Operation Atlante disintegrated. Already, colonial forces were pulling out of less defensible areas including the fort at Túy Loan near his home village. Việt Minh spirits was

⁶³ Trần Bá Đệ, *Lịch Sử Việt Nam*, 297.

⁶⁴ Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, Chapters IV to VII.

⁶⁵ During the siege of Điện Biên Phủ the US National Security Council considered dispatching US forces to rescue the French and seriously contemplated using nuclear weapons. They decided against these options given complications that might arise with non-aligned states and the communist bloc, but as Trương Bửu Lâm points out after reading the relevant section of *The Pentagon Papers*, “not a word is to be found concerning what they would do to the Vietnamese people or country.” *The Pentagon Papers, Volume I of the Senator Gravel Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) 466-7. Cited in Trương Bửu Lâm, “A Vietnamese Perspective” in *The Pentagon Papers, Volume V of the Senator Gravel Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) 32-40 at 37.

⁶⁶ Cited in Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1964) 156.

⁶⁷ Gibson, *The Perfect War*, 66.

at a high, but there was little room for complacency as the people's forces of Quảng Nam were ordered to fight on with even greater gusto in order to strengthen the negotiating position of their leaders at Geneva.

On 20 July a general armistice was reached at the Geneva Conference. A declaration "on the problem of restoring peace in Indochina" was tacitly adopted (but not signed) by eight of the attending nations. With the subtlety of a hatchet-blow, Việt Nam was divided at the 17th parallel (about one hundred and fifty kilometres north of Đà Nẵng). The Northern half was under the leadership of Hồ Chí Minh while the southern half was led by the ex-emperor Bảo Đại. Under Article 7 of the Geneva Agreement general elections were to be held in July 1956 with an aim towards reunification.

Thiệt was disappointed to hear that their victory, independence and unity was not yet complete, but was heartened by the fact that in two years the issue would be settled for good. More immediately, Thiệt's life was suddenly fractured as the military hospital was dissolved along with his school. His uncle Chín was called to the North for high-level Health Department discussions and the older students of Thiệt's school were sent to Hà Nội for training.⁶⁸ Deeply chagrined by the fact that they were not old enough to see magnificent Hà Nội and participate in the revolution from its source, Thiệt and Biêt waved and yelled to their comrades as they marched off to the Polish ships that would take them to their glorious destinies.

"Say hello to Uncle Hồ for us!"

"We'll see you again in Hà Nội, when the country is united and free!"

"Don't forget that you are from Quảng Nam province when you have found enlightenment and glory!"

⁶⁸ Another explanation for sending soldiers north is that the communists were splitting their forces in preparation for the event that war was not yet over. As a terrible consequence of this Cold War precaution, it would be twenty years before Chín saw his wife again.

The young communists chatted and sang of their promising futures well into the night. The next day would bring a new dawn and, despite the fact that Thiết and his brother had resigned themselves to returning to Bò Bàn, they were buoyed by the certainty that from this historical moment, the nation, the world and their lives could not possibly take a backward step into war and colonialism. As surely as two-and-two makes four, things would never be the same again.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Reviews Vân's convoluted journey into modernity, her feats of everyday resistance, (extra)ordinary sacrifices and high school tribulations.

Thiét: What are you waiting for son? Not hungry?

Kim: No, it's not that. I'm starving. I just reckon that since Mum went to a lot of trouble to make the meal we should wait for her before we get stuck into it. Don't you think that it's disrespectful for us to start eating before her every night? It's sexist, uncivilised.

Thiét: That's the way your mother is. She cooks the meal for us and we eat it. Why else do you think she always sets the food on the table and then runs off to wash her hands or change her shirt? She likes to eat last, that's just the way she is. Your mother's old-fashioned. You know that.

Kim: It's not right and I'm not comfortable eating until Mum does.

(So I let my chopsticks rest and waited for my mother to join us.)

Kim: Smells good Mum, can I offer you some chicken? Why don't you have some soup?

Vân: Thankyou son.

(Mum ate a little rice and picked up a piece of pickled cabbage from a side dish while from the corner of her eye she waited for me to start on the mains. My new-age sensitivities were frustrated by her feigned compliance. On that and many other occasions, I ate my dinner and swallowed my defeat in irate silence.)

Kim to the Reader: For almost a year I wondered why Mum insisted on being the last to start eating. Why did we always have to go before her? How could she be so obstinately attached to her backwardness? It was as if she was embracing her own oppression. There were times at the dinner table when I could empathise with the French and American colonialists; they too had tried to force their grand civilising missions onto the Vietnamese only to be driven away utterly dejected. It took quite some time and much effort before I could even begin to appreciate my mother's propensity for self-sacrifice and her subtle modes of resistance. Even then, I was unable to eat at ease.

Gia Long High School for Girls

On the roads that students pass
 Coming home from school
 They release their souls adrift
 With golden tamarind leaves.
 On the roads covered with memories
 Small footprints of birds remain
 Alongside joyous recollections
 Of soft roses brushing by our hearts.
 On the roads so petite
 Littered with rusted leaves,
 That I once strolled along...¹

¹ *Đường Chiều Tan Học*

Con đường nào học trò

Tan học về qua ngang

Thả hồn bay lang thang

Trên những lá me vàng.

Con đường nào kỷ niệm

Còn ghi dấu chân chim

Một niềm vui còn lại

Thóang hồng nhẹ qua tim.

Con đường nào nhỏ nhỏ

Rơi đầy lá khô vàng

Ngày xưa em lang thang...

"The Road Home After School"

Trần Thị Tâm

The Gia Long High School Alumni Association of Northern California

<http://www.gialong.org/poem_duong_chieu_tan_hoc.htm> accessed 31 November 2002.

After several years of lobbying by Vietnamese educators and intellectuals, the first school for girls in Sài Gòn was opened in 1915 with the admission of forty-two primary school-level students. It initially went by the name of the School of Purple Dresses (*Trường Áo Tím*), the colour purple being symbolic of the primness and integrity expected of the students. The primary school was extended into a high school in 1922 and such was the prestige of this event that none other than the French Minister of Colonies, Albert Sarraut, saw fit to mark the occasion. On the day that Sarraut opened the High School, a marble plaque was revealed displaying the school's new name, *College des Jeunes Filles Indigenes*, the College for Indigenous Girls; however, the old name remained in common usage. At the same time French became the sanctioned teaching language such that Vân's cousin, who had studied there a few years before her, was supposed to pay a small fine into a tin whenever she "accidentally" spoke Vietnamese.

During the early 1950s, a series of reforms was undertaken at the school that included the appointment of the first Vietnamese headmistress, the substitution of French with Vietnamese as the official teaching language, the introduction of an English language program, and the replacement of the purple uniform with a white *áo dài* (long tunic) that was adorned with the image of a delicate yellow *mai* flower that heralded the coming of spring. As a final touch, the school was renamed *Gia Long High School for Girls* after the nineteenth century emperor who unified Việt Nam.²

² Emperor Gia Long (ruled 1802-1820, born Nguyễn Phúc Anh) was the first emperor of the Nguyễn Dynasty. With the assistance of French troops and Bishop Pigneau De Behaine, Gia Long overthrew the Tây Sơn rebellion to take power and reunite the country in 1802 under the name of Việt Nam. Afterwards, he showed little interest in having close relations with the West other than to tolerate an influx of French missionaries in deference to the memory of Bishop Behaine. Gia Long's ascension to the throne heralded the resurgence of a conservative Confucian ethic in Việt Nam. There was an emphasis on education among male elites and literature was stridently promoted. Peasants suffered from the reintroduction of taxes, corvee labour and military service. Perhaps most notably, Gia Long introduced a twenty-two volume legal code that was closely modelled on the Ch'ing Dynasty's (1644-1911) legal code in China. Gia Long's laws were averse to Buddhism, Taoism and all other beliefs that challenged the absolute sovereignty of the emperor and his administration. They also undercut the official status of women, some more details of which can be found in the Introduction to this thesis at page 22. After reunification in 1975 the socialist regime renamed the school after the revolutionary heroine Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai. Danny J. Whitfield, *Historical and Cultural Dictionary of Vietnam* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1976) 89. Phạm Văn Bích, *The Vietnamese Family in Change: The Case of the*

In 1957 Vân started studying at Gia Long High School. On her first day, she paused at the gate and peered inside. Four large rectangular buildings circumvented the main courtyard from which sprouted a litany of cotton buds: girl-women in their white *áo dài* blooming with holiday tales of excitement, adventure and woe. A few students stepped out of chauffeur-driven cars and strode past her like movie stars. Vân envied most those girls whose parents dropped them off with a few reassuring words and a pat on the shoulder. More than anything, she wanted her parents to be with her, but Vân was alone. The young teenager slid her fingers into the suffocating collar of her *áo dài* and at the same time pulled up her pants which always seemed to be precariously close to falling down.

“This is not the way of Gia Long girls!” Vân castigated herself. “Gia Long girls are assertive, reasonable and refined.”

The youth rationalised to herself that her nerves would be quelled in a matter of days, and then took a step forward. It was one small step for Vân, on what would be a convoluted journey through adolescence and the twentieth century. Ostensibly, it was a journey that was often directed by men and the West. Surreptitiously, at critical points it was subverted by the most (extra)ordinary feminine feats. It was a voyage characterised by contradiction, synthesis and ambiguity, hybridity and liminality, yin and yang, destiny and agency, atoms and electrons, radical liberation and constantly renewing tradition. Modernity and the vicissitudes of growing up would at times explode into Vân’s life, and on other occasions drag by with sluggish misdirection of a mule-drawn cart.

At once anxious and excited, Vân took another step and remembered what her father had told her, “Going to such a well-regarded school is a precious opportunity that you must grasp with all your strength. Your fate, my daughter, is

Red River Delta (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999) 111-8. Mai Thị Tú and Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết, *Women in Vietnam* (Hà Nội: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1978) 12-30. *Trường Trung Học Phổ Thông Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai [Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai General High School]* <<http://www.hcm.edu.vn/truong/03FA02/03FA02coban.htm>> accessed 7 November 2003.

in your own hands.” She steeled herself for whatever was to come and strode inside.

The Perils of Progressive Personalism

Of the six remaining straws that fate had placed before her, Vân knew that she was going to get the short one. Statistically she was in a strong position, but numbers meant nothing in the face of doom.

After a few months at Gia Long, Vân was sure that all her victories had slipped away from her and that the qualities that she might have once possessed in primary school had faded beyond recognition. Whereas once she performed arithmetic calculations, scientific analyses and literary critiques with speed and ease, now her mind seemed to overheat in class and particularly during exams. Because scholastic achievement at Gia Long was bundled with social clout, Vân’s newfound realisation of her relative intellectual inadequacy exacerbated anxieties about her family’s socio-economic position and her own aesthetic appearance. In short, she felt dumb, poor and ugly. It was not long before the teenager resigned herself to being below the mean. She resigned herself to doing her best and somehow getting by, floating with the currents like a minnow swept into an oversized pond.

It was with this sense of resignation that Vân reached forward for a straw in her eighth grade literature class; knowing all along that regardless of which straw she chose, it was bound to be the short one, and that it was her star-crossed destiny to undertake the terrifying task of making a speech.

The notion of giving a speech, of expressing Vân’s individual opinion to others as if it mattered, and the prospect of absolute centrality and isolation for one so ordinary, seemed both radical and frightening.³ Vân was more accustomed to

³ Lockhart asserts that in Việt Nam the idea of a person with an individual identity is clearly “modern”, in the philosophical sense that it implies a break with historical traditions. The “individual” (*cá nhân*) only begins to appear in Vietnamese literature in the early twentieth century when the Vietnamese term for “modern” (*cận đại*), as opposed to “new” (*tân*), was itself initially constructed to take account of the unprecedented technological change of the colonial

education being a top-down affair in which teachers project their knowledge and virtue down into ostensibly docile student minds (a legacy of the classical Chinese system or *hán học*). French colonialism had introduced to Việt Nam the notion of education as a process of drawing out each student's unique interpretations and talents such that by the 1950s there had been a significant shift, not only with respect to what students were learning but also to how they were learning it. Technological advancements also played a key role in driving this revolution towards modern education (*tân học*). For instance, while in elementary school Vân had had to copy everything down from a blackboard, in high school she was introduced to a miraculous Roneo copier that could make exact paper duplicates from wax stencils with lightning turns of a handle. Laborious (w)rote learning was thus steadily losing its utility and appeal *vis a vis* more interactive and multidirectional methods.

Perhaps just as critical to explaining Vân's individual(ism) crisis were the ideological and institutional reforms that had been set into motion in the South Vietnamese education system at the time. In May 1958 (the year after Vân started at Gia Long), a commission of fifty scholars and officials convened in the Republic of Việt Nam (RVN) with a view to standardising and reforming the education system.⁴ They were inspired by an obscure body of thought known as personalism (*chủ nghĩa nhân vị*). Personalism's most prominent advocate in Việt Nam was President Diệm's younger brother and closest adviser, Ngô Đình Nhu. Nhu's thinking was influenced by the French humanist philosophers Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier, who in the 1930s observed that modern society was not becoming more liberating; but rather, increasingly "depersonalised" as a consequence of machine technology, mass consumption, and the rise of and blind adherence to universalist collectivist movements such as communism and fascism. They made a distinction between the "individual" who is atomised, selfish and helpless before the totalitarian state and the "person" who is possesses certain inalienable rights derived and protected by her/his

period. Greg Lockhart, "Introduction: Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and the Faces of Vietnamese Literature" in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp (Greg Lockhart trans.) *The General Retires and Other Stories* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992) 1-38 at 18.

⁴ Edgar N. Pike, "Problems of Education in Vietnam" in Wesley Robert Fishel (ed.), *Problems of Freedom: South Vietnam since Independence* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961) 75-98 at 81.

integration into a social organism.⁵ What civilisation and emancipation necessitated, they argued, was a more humane and eclectic grand theory that was customised to time, place and culture.

In line with this tradition, Ngô Đình Nhu, his family and followers attempted to revive what they viewed was the best of classical Eastern values and integrate them with notions of Western twentieth-century modernity. They believed that nation building should be an organic process, firmly rooted in a rich cultural soil.⁶ In a personalist milieu, they asserted, the creativity of the individual could blossom without necessitating that she/he be alienated from her/his family or community. “Should one make a ‘tabula rasa’ of the past, as is advocated by Communism?” Nhu asked. “Or should one, on the contrary, only eliminate the practices which hamper progress while preserving the quintessence of national culture?”⁷ Moreover, personalism would facilitate progressive relationships between human beings, science and God, serving as a well-refined oil in the social machine and a prophylactic against ghastly social contagions such as totalitarianism and anarchy.

From the outset, however, there were signs of depravity and oppression that made the “Personalist Republic” no different to the demonised socialist regimes that it was created to counter.⁸ As a theory, personalism was largely incomprehensible to the general public; and in political practice it provided for the worst of both old and new. Indeed, personalism’s traditional and modern elements converged in their teleological tendency to accumulate more power for the ruling dynasty and militate against individual liberty for ordinary citizens. For instance, President Diệm’s movement for cultural renewal centred upon derivations of the somewhat obscure Confucian notions of *thành* and *tín* that

⁵ Emmanuel Mounier (Philip Mairet trans.), *Personalism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1952), 18-21 and Jacques Maritain (Doris C. Anson trans.), *Christianity and Democracy & The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986) 88-106. Cited in Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 41-2.

⁶ Philip E. Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002) 39.

⁷ *News from Viet-Nam*, 25 January 1957, 2-3 and 2 March 1959, 2-4. Cited in Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 39.

⁸ “Personalist Republic” was a term regularly used by the Diệm regime. Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 42.

exuded a strong scent of feudal supremacy, as if imposed by a lord upon his serfdom. In 1956 while promulgating the new Constitution, Diệm described *thành* as “intellectual loyalty and noble morality, an acute consciousness and clear vision of the compass of one’s duties toward the Creator, toward the country, and toward oneself as well as toward one’s fellow man,” and *tín* as “the sincere and courageous practice of all these duties, no matter how grievous.”⁹

At the same time that his brother was promoting these ideas, Ngô Đình Nhu set about laying down the foundations for a typically modern totalitarian state. He founded his insidious Revolutionary Personalist Party (*Cần Lao Nhân Vị Cách Mạng Đảng*) which was composed of selectively recruited intellectuals, labour leaders, military officers and, most prominently, bureaucrats and was a reflection of a Leninist vanguard. At its peak, the Revolutionary Personalist Party comprised around twenty thousand members.¹⁰ The Party was cell-based, utilised front organisations and implemented political indoctrination courses. It did not contest elections but worked to influence public policy from the shadows by infiltrating organisations and directing them towards the government line.¹¹ In personalism it was possible to observe (over a very short period of time) a theoretical commitment to eclecticism turn into tyranny, pragmatic customisation mutate into brutish assimilation, and the corruptive influence of unchecked power poisoning a polity from the top down.

Despite its darker political manifestations, personalism by and large had a progressive impact upon the education system in the RVN (if only because the previous system was designed to serve a pro-colonial elite). By the late 1950s, there was a push in both public and private schools to make learning more “personalistic, nationalistic, and scientific” and, according to one commentator, “make our students think for themselves”.¹² In promoting a national culture it became compulsory to teach Vietnamese language and literature for six hours a week in lower secondary school. In upper secondary school, philosophy classes

⁹ Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian: Vietnam, South-East Asia, and the West* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964) 308.

¹⁰ Whitfield, *Historical and Cultural Dictionary of Vietnam*, 31.

¹¹ Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 14.

¹² John C. Donnell, “Personalism in Vietnam” in Fishel, *Problems of Freedom*, 29-67 at 53.

had to include an examination of Asian logics as embodied in the ruminations of Confucius, Buddha, Lao Tzu and Vietnamese interpretations and amalgamations of these bodies of thought. In accordance with the modern Western propensity for specialisation, students were encouraged to intensively study either English or French, and in their latter secondary years had to specialise in one of three streams focussing on literature, mathematics or the sciences.

A commitment was also made to introduce laboratory work into all high schools. Gia Long already had a reasonably well-equipped laboratory. However, there was only one for the entire school and so students were lucky to have a single session in the laboratory every month. Like most of her peers, Vân approached these rare and valuable occasions with excitement but also a touch of trepidation. Under the lens of a microscope, she gazed at the cellular beauty of what she previously thought was a mundane onion skin and was intrigued by the innards of a frog (even if she could not stomach dissecting it herself). One day, Vân's science teacher demonstrated the wonders of modern alchemy by mixing a powder into a solution and changing it from blue to red. As if to signify the insolence of youth and how such transformations were at once banal and miraculous to Vân's generation, a brazen classmate pranced around the laboratory with hat in hand soliciting money for the magical-scientific act performed before their very eyes. The introduction of Western and personalist science and philosophy to the education system offered Vân and her peers new-fangled ways to view the world and themselves. Theoretically, they had more choice as to how they would think and act, and were often able to mix-and-match those options: Western now and Eastern later, a little bit of tradition and a dash of modernity. This is not to say that their choices were always easy, enjoyable and efficacious. And no doubt they were sometimes forced to face daunting challenges and changes. There was, for instance, in Vân's case the prospect of that terrifying speech.

The book that the girls in Vân's eighth grade literature class had to analyse, and which she had to present, was Nhất Linh's and Khải Hưng's *The Flower*

Vendor.¹³ Nhất Linh and Khải Hưng were co-founders of the influential Self-Strength Literary Group (*Tự Lực Văn Đoàn*) which in the 1930s sought to modernise Vietnamese literature and society through their novels, journalism and political activity. The group was stridently urban and Western oriented such that in 1936 one of its members, Hoàng Đạo,¹⁴ issued ten theses for a new life, the first of which was “Following the new, completely and decisively following the new.”¹⁵ In *The Flower Vendor*, Nhất Linh and Khải Hưng skilfully illustrate the tensions between tradition and modernity, and cogently assert the efficaciousness of romantic love and individualism without discarding the virtues of yesteryear. In order to nurture her blind husband and save enough money for an operation that would restore his sight, the eponymous flower vendor works tirelessly day and night shouldering her wares to the market. Despite (and in part because of) his wife’s old-fashioned loyalty and assiduousness, as soon as her husband regains his vision he cheats on the flower vendor and leaves her for two up-market call girls. In fact, goes the moral of the story, it was the flower vendor who could not see. Blinded by piety, she could not prevent the neglect nor resist the abuse that she suffered at the hands of her husband until her chance to blossom had almost passed. Nhất Linh and Khải Hưng’s message is one of both admiration and condemnation for the traditional Vietnamese woman whose meekness and adherence to old-fashioned obligations can so often compromise both her own well-being and universal (liberal) notions of social justice.

Unfortunately, for reasons external to the text itself, Vân had no enthusiasm for *The Flower Vendor*. By the time she had reached high school, Vân had well-and-truly overcome her initial war-induced wariness of reading and had developed an

¹³ Nhất Linh and Khải Hưng, *Gánh Hàng Hoa [The Flower Vendor]* (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 1994).

¹⁴ Hoàng Đạo (born Nguyễn Tường Long) was Nhất Linh’s (born Nguyễn Tường Tam) brother.

¹⁵ Hoàng Đạo, “Mười Điều Tâm Niệm” [“The Ten Concepts”], first printed in the journal *Ngày Nay [Today]* between late 1936 and early 1937. Cited in Kim N. B. Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002) 21. Ninh provides the following elaboration of the other nine concepts which “reflect a fervent desire to move away from what Hoàng Đạo felt to be the backward and stagnant past: people should believe in the possibility of progress; live life with some kind of ideology rather than simply following what had gone before; engage in social work to break away from the closed nature of village and family; complement education with a strong will; provide a more equal role for women in society; attempt to gain a scientific mind and break away from superstitions; know that a career is more important and useful than fame; maintain a healthy body; and recognize the need for an organized mentality.” Ninh, *A World Transformed*, 258 (Ninh’s note 22).

appetite for everything from history books to magazines and novels. In reading she found a means of both discovering and escaping from the outside world. *The Flower Vendor*, however, was a marked exception. Vân read this book with the weight of worlds upon her. She understood the imagery and meaning within, but could not enjoy the plot or recognise any correlation with her own circumstances.

“It’s not just you up there, the whole group is behind you,” she told herself. But this did not provide any solace. In fact, she felt even more pressure knowing that the fate of all the other girls in her group rested with her alone and was terrified by the thought of all those piercing eyes.

The day and moment had arrived; and suddenly, as Vân stood before her first ever audience, time came to an excruciating halt. She wanted it to be over, she wanted to skip forward a year, a day or even fifteen minutes, knowing that she could deal with the consequences but not with the event itself. There was a prolonged silence before the young girl’s knees shook violently and then her entire body began to wobble like a jack-in-the-box. There were smirks on the faces of a few, but most of her classmates could feel Vân’s fear and earnestly pitied her. Vân began reading out her group’s analysis of *The Flower Vendor* which, on paper, was relatively incisive and elegant. No-one would have known this however from the stuttering, inaudible lulls and occasional squeaks that came from Vân’s mouth. She buried her head in her chest and hardly opened her eyes as she struggled through the ten minute ordeal, at times straying from the paper and recalling vaguely related statements of fact and fancy. Afterwards, sweating profusely, Vân sat down without receiving even a consolatory word or reassuring touch. When it was finally over, while her triumph was by no means glorious, this much was clear: she had made it through her first major test into a new age of individualism. There would, no doubt, be many more tests to come.

Composites and Complications of Civility

It was late in the afternoon, and Vân was finding it difficult to concentrate on the lesson despite the fact that she had a civics test the following week and her

teacher was going over the examinable material. Vân's stomach grumbled as she thought about the sweet soups and candies that vendors sold just beyond the school gates. She ran her fingers over the names that had been scratched surreptitiously and with significant bravado into her desk as a prisoner might dig her initials into her cell wall. Vân too had once gathered up enough courage to attempt to immortalise her presence at Gia Long. But she had used a blunt hairpin, and so her mark soon faded away.

The teenager straightened her back and looked forward at the teacher, but her eyes continued to wander around the room. There were six rows of three desks, at each one sat three students wearing their white *áo dài* with an embroidered *mai* flower badge. To the uninformed observer, the class was thoroughly monotonous and ordered; it was education in an all-confining and defining milieu of discipline and punishment. Vân, however, saw and scrutinised a litany of instances of personal expression budding up through the dry soil of conformity: on many *áo dài* there were subtly brocaded patterns; hair ties came in all different colours; wooden clogs were a highly noted fashion accessory despite the fact that they were hidden under long broad-legged pants; with the slightest chill came out bright jackets of varied colours; and the weave in conical hats when held up to the light told the poems of the ages with both hieroglyphic and scriptural eloquence.

Vân was slipping away. She reprimanded herself with a mental warning, "Concentrate on the lesson. Concentrate, concentrate! What if teacher calls you up to answer a question? What are you going to do if you fail the exam? Civics is one of the few subjects that you are actually doing well at. You can't afford to blow this one too."

Vân's formal moral and civics education had started in elementary school when she learnt about the importance of punctuality, studying hard, keeping clean, honesty and respecting one's teachers and parents. Much time was spent in these early years consolidating the messages of filial and social piety that students learnt at home through the sayings and stories of their relatives. When meeting an adult, for instance, children had to fold their arms, bow their heads and greet

the elder with the appropriate designation. In certain proverbs, piety towards one's elders and especially one's parents was projected as both common sense and absolute law:

Above has to be above, and beneath has to be beneath.¹⁶

When eating the fruit, remember who planted the tree.¹⁷

When drinking the water, remember the source.¹⁸

As Vân grew older, she gained the impression from lessons at school and her own observations that those who were above were not in a position to exploit and suppress; but rather, had a responsibility to nurture and support those who were below in a mutually beneficial order of care. Vân became convinced that the higher the status, the greater the burden to act as an exemplar; and the lower the status, the greater the need to conform. So went the sayings:

The intact leaves protect the tattered ones.¹⁹

Respect those who are above and yield to those below.²⁰

These and other Confucian virtues such as benevolence (*nhân*) and righteousness (*ngĩa*), were conveyed to Vân via fables, some of which she would remember for many years to come.²¹

There was once a mandarin who was well-known for his intelligence and even-handedness. Being of particularly high rank, he reported directly to the emperor and on these occasions wore a special gown that exuded elegance, wisdom and virtue. One morning, as he prepared to see the emperor, he asked his maid to make him a simple bowl of rice soup. She scurried off to fulfil his command without ever lifting her face such was her deference to him. The young maid took great care to make the best rice soup she had ever cooked, and then hurried back to

¹⁶ *Trên phải ra trên, dưới phải ra dưới*. Cited in Phạm, *The Vietnamese Family in Change*, 28.

¹⁷ *Ăn trái nhớ người trồng cây*. Recounted by Vân. All translations are by the author unless indicated otherwise.

¹⁸ *Uống nước nhớ nguồn*. Hồ Chí Minh also adopted this proverb but referred to the nation, rather than the family, as the source and the justification for great sacrifice.

¹⁹ *Lá lành đùm lá rách*. Recounted by Vân.

²⁰ Phạm, *The Vietnamese Family in Change*, 28.

²¹ Benevolence (*nhân*) and righteousness (*ngĩa*) are two of the five cardinal Confucian virtues (*ngũ thường*). The others are propriety in rituals (*lễ*), intelligence (*trí*) and sincerity (*tin*).

the mandarin with it still steaming hot. Due to her haste, the maid tripped and spilt the rice soup on the mandarin's precious gown. She fell to the ground and prepared to wail for forgiveness and mercy, only to meet the soft eyes of the mandarin who told her that the gown was of no importance and inquired as to whether her hand had been scorched by the boiling soup.²²

As a part of the personalistic, nationalistic and scientific reforms of the late 1950s, two hours were designated each week in high schools for a class on civic and moral duties. For Vân, this meant being introduced to conceptualisations of nationhood, wealth and power as practical ends in themselves, rather than as products and reflections of virtuous behaviour and ritualised relationships. In junior high school, Vân was introduced to the pros and cons of various systems of government: the legitimised nepotism of monarchies; the democratically driven vacillations of republics; the anxious checks and balances of the presidential system; and the fascistic stability of a military state. They also discussed modern revolution and studied eighteenth century France as a quintessential example. "Reform means cutting a rotten piece out of a cake," proclaimed one of Vân's teachers. "Revolution is when you throw the whole thing out and bake a new one." From these lessons and her occasional ruminations, Vân (re)affirmed her impression that oppression was never complete, that at some point subjugated people would rise up to actualise their repressed dreams.

In another civics class Vân was asked to contemplate the question, "What is freedom?" The teenager was impressed by Adam Smith's insights and faith in the efficiency of self-interested urges, but remained unconvinced that an invisible hand was capable of doing anything more than guide a society into anarchy. She was more attracted to Rousseau's political philosophy and the prospect of individual freedom being traded off for social duty and enhanced by the general will, all of which were integrated into a social contract with the state. Vân's civics lessons were based on a colossal textbook, laden with theories and examples from seemingly far away places and periods. That which was closest to them, Diệm's Republic of Việt Nam, remained relatively unexamined due to

²² Recounted by Vân.

government censors, but also because it was viewed as an infinitely positive alternative and bipolar opposite to the communist system that threatened them to the North.

“Communism is a credible theory only on paper,” asserted Vân’s young civics teacher with uncharacteristic passion. “That is to say, it is not a credible theory at all.” In the same class, Vân was told that the communists manipulated unworldly peasants into carrying out misguided and destructive uprisings. She was instructed that communism tried to repress that which was irrepressible: the human spirit and personal endeavour. Most deplorably, the communists were utterly immoral, without religion, family or tradition. It was well-known throughout Gia Long that older students were shown a film entitled, *We Want to Live!* (*Chúng Tôi Muốn Sống*).²³ *We Want to Live!* told the “real-life” story of the 1954 refugees who fled from the land reform programs in North Việt Nam. The film was particularly well known for its portrayal of landlords being trialled by a spurious people’s court before being buried to their necks in the ground and run over with ploughs. In civics classes at Gia Long, students learnt that there were those who were irredeemably uncivil, who should be feared, and had to be overcome at all costs—even and especially if they were Vietnamese.

Vân’s civics lessons arguably closed off as many doors as they opened. They ran for only two hours a week and were not always interesting or enlightening. They did, however, provide her with a range politico-philosophical terms that gave expression to ideas and urges already growing in her teenage consciousness. She also gained different prisms through which she could view the world. Of course, Vân’s understanding of the universe and her role within it was influenced by a myriad of forces that were not wholly confined to the classroom and the family. There was, for instance, the day in eighth grade when the insidiously sweet force

²³ The film was made in 1956 and many of its stars had personal experiences with the 1950s land reforms in the north. *We Want to Live* won a prize at the South East Asia Film Conference in Seoul not long after its release and was shown to students all around the world. In 2002 the film was released on DVD with the aim of “allowing Vietnamese youth to understand why we had to leave everything and flee to every corner of the earth”. See “Phim ‘Chúng Tôi Muốn Sống’ đã Được In Thành Sách và DVD” [“The Film ‘We Want to Live’ has been Released as a Book and DVD”] in *Vietnam News Network* (13 November 2002) <<http://www.vnn-news.com/news/tincd/66.shtml>> accessed 8 January 2003.

of the *Pepsi* Cola Corporation first came into Van's life promoting the ideal image of the twentieth century consumer: pacified and satiated. *Coca Cola* had, by that stage, been operating in Việt Nam for some time, and had established a reputation as a miraculously modern and refreshing beverage. In Vân's experience, however, the advertising team at *Coca Cola* had not yet come close to matching the promotional benevolence of *Pepsi* which, for more than a month, provided huge barrels filled with FREE ice-cold bottles of *Pepsi* in front of the Gia Long High School canteen. It was perhaps unfortunate, but by no means uncharacteristic, that the *Pepsi* bottles could not be resealed or possibly finished in one sitting. Nor could students bring the drinks into class. And so, because the prevailing vision of conspicuous abundance precluded sharing, the girls commonly returned to those steaming cold barrels every hour to get a new bottle of *Pepsi* from which they drank a mouthful before discarding the rest. "Girls of Gia Long!" boomed the announcement over the loud speakers. "Only take a bottle of *Pepsi* if you can finish it. Drink it with friends if you have to, but don't throw it away." Circumventing the school courtyard was a small drain that was gushing with effervescent black crud, signifying the coming tidal wave of mass-consumerism. And while Vân had not yet been significantly affected by this encircling coercive/coopting force, her father had long since become entranced by the bright lights of this grand new world.

The Grand World of Gambling and Vân's Reaction against it

The Southern-born anti-French revolutionary of the early 1900s, Nguyễn An Ninh, encouraged youths to break free from their families and homes; to explore and make the most of the world and themselves. He founded a secret anti-colonial society called the High Aspiring Youth (*Cao Vọng Thanh Niên*) and fervently believed in the power of the modern individual, regardless of circumstance, to choose her/his destiny:

For human beings, living is like gambling. In gambling there are only two doors: winning and losing. In life there are also only two doors: life and death; good and evil. If one fails to choose, if one does not resolve one's own course, one still ends up going through one of those doors to

honor or dishonor, greatness or cowardice...For a person having the determination to live and to do right is the path to victory.²⁴

Vân studied the radical life and works of Nguyễn An Ninh at school and admired his passion for freedom and independence, but could not sympathise with his iconoclastic conception of individual liberty. As she approached young adulthood, Vân did not look forward to a life unhindered; but rather, was wilfully constrained by filial duties and ties. How could she possibly break free and let her loved ones down? How could she rest in comfort if they were suffering? In Nguyễn An Ninh's opinion, she had taken the wrong door and would no doubt lose as a consequence.

The teenager's difficulties at high school coincided with the introduction of new people, challenges and responsibilities to her private life at home. In October 1955, at the age of forty, Vân's mother Sắt gave birth to another boy. Previously Thái and Sắt had given up on having a son, accepting the diagnosis that their stars were incompatible when it came to the procreation of males. They also recalled the frightening astrological prediction from a decade ago that their son would only be successfully conceived at the cost of one of his parents. Thus the surprise birth of Thọ brought much joy to the family, but also a notable amount of fear. The baby's ears were immediately pierced to give him a girlish appearance and all manner of people with knowledge of the other worlds were solicited for advice. To everyone's relief, Thọ grew up without significant health problems of natural or supernatural origin, and both of his parents remained of this earth. After Thọ began walking, a limp was identified in his stride and it was later posited that this imperfection served as a physical concession to the evil spirits, saving him from the fate that had befallen his older brothers and former incarnations. No-one was more pleased to hear this than the young boy himself who was finding it difficult to make friends on account of his earrings.

²⁴ Nguyễn An Ninh, *Hai Bà Trưng [The Trưng Sisters]* (Sài Gòn: Bao Ton, 1928) 45. Cited in David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) 359.

A year after Thọ was born, Sắt gave birth to another girl and at around the same time Vân's oldest sister Châu returned home with her unemployed, draft-dodging husband and their newborn son. There were no less than ten people living in Vân's house in Phú Thọ when the mortgage repayments became unaffordable and they had to move to cheaper accommodation in the dilapidated and dirty docklands. The family was devastated to leave the home that had symbolised their ascension into modern middle class Sài Gòn. And while they were not as desperate as they had been in Bình Dương in the early 1950s, Vân could not resist the feelings of shame and despondency that had followed the sabotaging of her father's taxi business and the dogged hopelessness of homelessness.

With so many new mouths to feed, feet to clean up after, clothes to sew, and crying to console, big sister Vân found herself increasingly deprived and relied upon. Fortunately or otherwise, Vân was not inclined to resent others for her responsibilities. And in any case, who could she blame? She could not blame Thọ for being a male and drawing so much attention and so many benefits, or her younger sisters who were only infants. Nor could she blame her older sister Loan for being crippled by polio or her eldest sister Châu for not finding the time outside of her job as a switchboard operator to take more care of the family. Vân's mother Sắt was also beyond reproach for her doctrinaire domestication, her inability to step beyond home and husband to find a way for them to make ends meet. Being a loyal and obedient daughter, the last person Vân could hold responsible was her father. And yet, occasionally, Vân could not help but wonder whether their lives would have been a little easier and more secure had her father Thái had not been a compulsive gambler.

Thái had played cards for as long as Vân could remember. It was ironic but by no means unusual that he gambled most prolifically when the family was most destitute. In Bình Dương, after the taxis had been blown up, Thái would leave late at night in search of solace and a dazzling bonanza. His gambling fever infected those closest to him; so that the father's fortunes often set the mood for the entire family. When Thái won he brought home an aura of joy and packages of food which were sometimes hidden under his shirt and a melodramatic frown

so as to build up the suspense and relief of those who were waiting at home. When he really did lose, it was difficult to avoid his wrath.

In Sài Gòn, the gambling scene was much bigger and brighter than in Bình Dương. Indeed, it was so developed that it had acquired the euphemism of “entertainment”. Thái was particularly fond of the “The Grand World”,²⁵ an expansive casino run by the Bình Xuyên gangsters who were also known for their pirating, opium dens, brothels and their control over the police. The Grand World was situated on an immense block in Chợ Lớn and was surrounded by a high wall. Inside there were dozens of tents and huts with corrugated iron roofs housing hundreds of gaming tables, the best entertainment that East and West had to offer. Thái’s favourite game was of Chinese origin, *đánh tài xỉu*, and it was at these tables that he stooped over for hours with a face so stern that it matched the visages of politicians in their war cabinets.

As a treat, Thái occasionally took Vân and her older sisters to the Grand World. At first, Vân thought it was all very glamorous and enjoyed watching the circus acts, musicians and Charlie Chaplain mimes who performed around the tents.²⁶ However, these acts rarely changed, and Vân soon grew tired of them. Nevertheless she continued to go and feign excitement because her crippled sister, Loan, relished the opportunity of getting out of the house and needed someone to carry her. What made those trips most depressing for Vân was returning home without her father who occasionally remained lost in the Grand World all night, only to be revived by the unforgiving sunlight and the painful emptiness in his pockets.

While Thái’s gambling addiction was not always present and this sad and seedy image of him was not one that Vân would readily choose to remember in years to

²⁵ The Grand World was commonly known in Vietnamese as *Đại Thế Giới* and French as *Le Grand Monde*. After intense military conflict between the government and the Bình Xuyên, Ngô Đình Diệm shut down the Grand World and other Bình Xuyên casinos in Chợ Lớn in January 1955.

²⁶ Dương Vân Mai Elliott remembers the Grand World as a “ramshackle and depressing place, thronged with people who looked like they could not afford to lose the little money that they had”. *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 251.

come, it nevertheless had a profound and enduring influence on her. The thought of her once indomitable father, debased and broken, made Vân determined to be otherwise. In all situations she would be both prudent and proactive, calculating the worst case scenario and preparing herself and loved ones for that eventuality. Her ability to sniff out even the slightest scent of danger would prove invaluable on journeys in years to come. Moreover, from a very young age, she abhorred anything approaching an “easy come, easy go” attitude to life and had no trust in any seemingly supernatural order of events. Vân was convinced that an individual had to put her/his entire heart, soul and energy into the tasks of everyday life and never give up. She could not accept fate or resign herself to the charity of the Heavens. The teenager had become all too familiar with the following proverb and rejected it outright:

The heavens conceive elephants,
And bestow the grass for them to eat.²⁷

Given her commitment to a spirit of must-do-ism, it was perhaps not surprising that at times Vân was the only person in her family who was bringing home a net profit. Ironically, she accomplished this by selling tickets in the state sweepstakes²⁸ after school and on the weekends. Usually accompanied by Loan, the two girls hired a *cyclo* (a pedal-powered taxi) on which Vân held her sister to stop her from falling into the traffic. When they arrived at a café in Chợ Lớn, Vân unpacked her small table and made it known to passers-by in an uncharacteristically rambunctious voice that she had their lucky number.

There were, however, other rare occasions when Vân’s stoic and steel-like façade, a composite of old-time duty and new age resolve, showed signs of cracking. On one special Saturday evening, Thái treated the entire family to a night at the movies. It was a Hindi film which Vân and her sisters always thoroughly enjoyed. They were captivated by action-packed plots, the intricate and fantastically lavish dance scenes, and the stories of eternal love that were

²⁷ *Trời sinh voi, Trời sinh cỏ*. Recounted by Vân.

²⁸ Known as “the lottery to build the nation” (*Xổ số kiến thiết quốc gia*). Recounted by Vân and David G. Marr.

never ruined by fleeting physical debauchery. As the lights dimmed and the movie flickered on, the baby boy Thọ began to weep with fear in Vân's arms as it was his first cinematic experience. Vân tried to calm her brother, to no avail, and the crowd jeered her for causing the disruption. This only made Thọ cry harder. In the cacophony of crying and condemnation, the young woman realised that there was nothing for her to do but leave. Seconds later, as Vân slouched outside the cinema watching latecomers rush in, she despised her baby brother at the same time she sheltered him from the rain and tears.

A Brief Literary Exploration of Vân and "Traditional"

Vietnamese Femininity

In comprehending how Vân ended up dejected and outside the cinema on that rainy day, the reader must first recall Vân's answer to the author's question concerning her ethical role models during her school days and how it was that she acquired her capacity for sacrifice and endurance.²⁹ Vân paused and thought for an instant before responding, "I never had many real-life role models. Characters in stories probably had more influence on me." For this reason it is useful and revealing to undertake a review of the narratives that were most prominent in the formation of Vân's ideal woman, beginning with perhaps the most enduring story in Vân's vast memory bank of stories, the fable of Lưu Bình and Dương Lễ:

Once upon a time there were two young men named Lưu Bình and Dương Lễ who were best friends. Lưu Bình came from a prosperous family while Dương Lễ was not so lucky. Being a good friend, Lưu Bình helped out Dương Lễ with his finances whenever he could.

Lưu Bình, however, was a care-free and profligate character, and it was not long before he squandered away all his wealth. Meanwhile, Dương Lễ studied hard and became a mandarin. The tables were turned, then, when one day Lưu Bình came to Dương Lễ for a hand out. He was refused and became incensed, "After all that I have done for you!"

Feeling betrayed and despondent, the young man went to a tavern with his last few coins. He found consolation in some rice wine and by

²⁹ See preamble to Chapter Two of this thesis.

talking to a woman named Châu Long. "There is only one way for you to get back at him," she said. "If you study hard and become a mandarin, your friend will realise that he was wrong and will have to respect you as his colleague."

"But how will I do this?" asked Lư Bình. "I have no means."

Feeling sorry for him, Châu Long responded, "I will support you and you can pay me back after you have become successful."

For years the two lived together in a small hut. To Lư Bình's amazement, Châu Long always found enough money to sustain him through his studies despite the fact that she was a lowly-paid silk weaver. He fell in love with her but she refused his advances, "Wait until you're a mandarin."

When the day finally arrived, Lư Bình returned home triumphant from his exams to find that the hut was empty, Châu Long had vanished. He searched desperately for her to no avail.

Still depressed, Lư Bình sought after Dương Lễ to tell him of his achievements. When he reached Dương Lễ's house he was astonished to find Châu Long there. His old companion confessed: "You see, I am a true friend. If I had given you the money years ago you would have squandered it. Instead, I gave up my wife so that you might find success and self-cultivation."³⁰

Through the story of Lư Bình and Dương Lễ Vân learnt that true friendship, in fact any relationship of value, necessitates an element of sacrifice. This requires more than simple sharing, as is often encouraged by Western parents to their children. Sharing is temporal and ownership remains fixed, while sacrifice requires that one party give up something, perhaps even risk the relationship itself, for the wellbeing of the other. Just as important in the fable of Lư Bình and Dương Lễ is the exemplary Châu Long. Her subservience and chastity projects an image of the model Vietnamese woman as a chattel, a loyal wife and reluctant seductress. Vân's model woman took form within a sea of literary characters like Châu Long and via a complex process of cultural osmosis whereby the fish are not always fully aware of the water that sustains them. Such was the efficacy of this process that years later, after she had learnt more about the fundamental biological components of human beings, Vân maintained that, "There are certain elemental characteristics of a Vietnamese woman, an essence that is socialised into her genes."

³⁰ Recounted by Vân.

Any examination of these genes and distillation of this essence must acknowledge the Confucian notions of the three submissions (*tam tông*) and the four virtues (*tứ đức*), as summarised in the following popular proverbs:³¹

A daughter obeys her father,
A wife obeys her husband,
A widow obeys her son.³²

Every young woman must fully practice and scrupulously conform to four virtues: be skilful in her domestic work (*công*), serene in her beauty (*dung*), show etiquette in her speech (*ngôn*), and piety in her principles (*hạnh*).³³

The persuasiveness of these feminine virtues was bolstered by exhortations against their polar opposites such as licentiousness, lethargy, gluttony, and greed. Pedagogical songs embodying these messages were all the more effective because they were sung to and by young girls with whimsical derision.

The seven (wicked) specialties of girls: one, tittle-tattling; two, leaning lazily and wistfully against pillars; three, chasing after boys; four,

³¹ McHale argues that it is not clear when or even if any distinct/monolithic notion of Confucianism was adopted by the Vietnamese. Nevertheless, he maintains that “Vietnamese deeply understood a few key Confucian notions such as the *tứ đức* (four virtues) and *tam tông* (three submissions), and spoke frequently about filial piety and loyalty.” Shawn McHale, “Mapping a Vietnamese Confucian Past and Its Transition to Modernity” in Benjamin A. Elman, John B. Duncan and Herman Ooms (eds.) *Rethinking Confucianism: Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2002) 397-430 at 401.

³² *Tại gia tông phụ*
Xuất gia tông phu
Phu tử tông tử.

Recounted by Vân with reference to Phan Kế Bính, *Việt Nam Phong Tục [Vietnamese Customs]* (TPHCM: NXB Tổng Hợp Đồng Tháp, 1990) 63-4; and Trịnh T. Minh-hà, *Framer Framed* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 83.

³³ *Phận gái tứ đức vẹn toàn,*

Công, dung, ngôn, hạnh, giữ gìn chẳng sai.

Recounted by Vân with reference to Phan Kế Bính, *Việt Nam Phong Tục*, 64 and Trịnh, *Framer Framed*, 83. Translated by the author with the assistance of Uyên Loewald. The four virtues were espoused in the fifteenth century by Nguyễn Trãi’s *Gia Huấn Ca [Family Education Ode]*.

Công là đủ mùi xôi, thức bánh,
Nhiệm-nhật thay đường chi mũi kim.
Dung là nét mặt ngọc trang-nghiêm,
Không tha-thiết, không chiều lá-tà.
Ngôn là dạy trình thưa vâng dạ,
Hạnh là đường ngay-thảo kính tin.
Xưa nay mấy kẻ dấu hiền,

Dung, công, ngôn, hạnh là tiên phạm-trần.

Nguyễn Trãi, *Gia Huấn Ca* (Sài Gòn: NXB Tân Việt, 1953) 26-7.

snacking between meals; five, avoiding work; six, frequently resting; seven, being hasty and careless.³⁴

There were also contesting conceptualisations of feminine beauty and virtue which were influential despite and beyond Chinese Confucianism, and which offered more scope for freedom and openness in love and life. Vân was also well aware, for instance, of the ten things that Vietnamese women popularly loved and were loved for:

The first love,
Is to have long hair tied up in a pony tail,
The second love is of alluring speech,
The third love is to have a dimple on your cheek,
The fourth love is shiny jet black teeth,³⁵
The fifth love is to wear a holster top and amulet around your neck,
The sixth love is a basket hat with graceful pompoms,
The seventh love is to be charismatic,
The eighth love is having rosy cheeks enhanced by powder,
The ninth love is that of twinkling eyes,
The tenth love is flirtatious allure.³⁶

However Vân did not simply digest these sayings without judgment or revision. On the contrary, her undulating journey through adolescence was one of continual synthesis and reinterpretation. She believed; for example, that doctrines like the three female submissions could not be understood literally as a simple

³⁴ *Che la che lấy, con gái bảy nghề:
Ngôi lê là một, dựa cột là hai, theo trai là ba,
ăn quà là bốn, trốn việc là năm, hay nằm là sáu, láo táo là
bảy.*

Recounted by Vân and translated by the author with the assistance of Uyên Loewald. Another version can be found in Trịnh, *Framer Framed*, 82.

³⁵ Before the French arrived it was fashionable for young women (mostly of the upper classes) to coat their teeth with a black sap which also served to protect them from decay.

³⁶ *Một thương tóc bỏ đuôi gà,
Hai thương ăn nói mặn mà có duyên,
Ba thương má lún đồng tiền,
Bốn thương răng nhánh hạt huyền kém thua,
Năm thương cô yếm đeo bùa,
Sáu thương nón thúng quai tua dịu dàng,
Bảy thương nét ở khôn ngoan,
Tám thương má phấn lại càng thêm xinh,
Chín thương đôi mắt long lanh,
Mười thương dáng điệu đưa tình với ai.*

Recounted by Uyên Loewald and Vân. Translated by Uyên Loewald with Vân and the author.

domination of male over female; but rather, had to be read within the context of Confucian benevolence. Like the mandarin who was concerned for his servant, a father had to care for his daughter, a husband had to defer to his wife, and a son had to respect his mother.

In addition, Vân's ideal woman came to life by way of a series of feminine literary characters who demonstrated not simply pitiful subservience, but rather a courageous ability to make do in the face of incorrigible hardship. Such figures filled both her high school literature texts (each the size of a telephone directory) and the books that she read at home.

Particularly well-known to Vân and the Vietnamese was Đặng Trần Côn's eighteenth century classic, *The Lament of the Soldier's Wife*, which tells the story of a woman who is left at home while her husband goes to war for the emperor.³⁷ In this poignant tale of old-fashioned love and loyalty, the author rebukes the social destruction of war and lauds the devotion of so many wives who have waited for their husband to return from the front. The popular folktale of *The Young Lady from Nam Xương* also portrays a woman whose husband goes to battle leaving her to care for the child inside her and an aged mother-in-law.³⁸ After she gives birth to a boy, the woman's mother-in-law dies and she left with only her infant son for company. To comfort the little boy (and herself), the mother tells her son every evening that his father is the shadow on the wall. One day, when his real father returns, the son proclaims that he could not possibly be his father because his father only comes after dusk. The soldier is enraged and accuses his wife of adultery. Overwhelmed by shock, she is unable to refute him. With seemingly no other path to take, the wife drowns herself. Afterwards, the young boy introduces his absentee father to the paternal shadow on the wall, thereby vindicating his mother who was faithful to the very end.

³⁷ Đặng Trần Côn, *Chinh Phụ Ngâm Khúc* (Biên Hòa: Nhà Xuất Bản Đồng Nai, 2001). Wives who were commonly left to take care of a family while their husbands were at war have often been lauded as "Ministers for the Interior". Mai Thị Tú and Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết, *Women in Vietnam*, 69.

³⁸ *Thiếu Phụ Nam Xương*. Recounted by Vân. Also known as *The Wife of Mr Trương* (*Vợ Chàng Trương*). This story can be found in Trần Văn Điền and Trần Cảnh Xuân, *Ngày Xưa – Quê Hương Tôi: Chiếc Bóng Trên Tường [Once in Vietnam: A Shadow on the Wall and Other Stories]* (Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1987).

As was the case in every high school (then and now), much time and effort was devoted in Gia Long literature classes to analysing *The Tale of Kiều*.³⁹ This 3,254 line poem written by Nguyễn Du in the early 1800s tells the story of a talented and beautiful young woman (Kiêu) who reneges a promise to marry her true love Kim Trọng, choosing instead to sell herself into slavery and prostitution to pay for her father's release from jail.⁴⁰ Kiêu endures a chain of sorrowful tribulations, always regretting her past life in which she must have committed the most heinous crimes to deserve such hardship, but also remaining virtuous and true so as to rectify the karmic imbalance if not in this life then surely the next. Finally, at a romantic night-time meeting when she is given the opportunity to unite with her long lost love, Kiêu forgoes unadulterated happiness and gives her younger sister to Kim Trọng believing that she is no longer pure and deserving.

"My fate is fixed," said she
"what is my body worth?"

...

"Love stands on every street
to satisfy your appetite.
Why waste your time tonight
caressing such a withered flower?"

...

"[T]o love each other now
is ten times worse than faithlessness!"

...

Hand clasping sweet hand tight
each thought the other wise and chaste
Kim lit a candle, placed
more incense on the charcoal of
the brazier, like their love
Warm and bright they saw it shine.

...

"I have found again
my honour and good name tonight."⁴¹

³⁹ For a bilingual edition (English and Vietnamese), see Nguyễn Du (Huỳnh Sanh Thông trans.) *The Tale of Kiều* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). For a newer bilingual edition which elaborates the poem in the process of translating it and provides for slightly easier reading see Nguyễn Du (Michael Counsell trans.), *Kiêu* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Thế Giới, 1994).

⁴⁰ The radicalism of portraying a prostitute as a heroine cannot be overstated. It is thought that the story is an allegorical justification of Nguyễn Du's turbulent political life. Nguyễn Du lived to see the Lê dynasty be overthrown by the Tây Sơn rebellion and then the coming to power of Gia Long. He served as an official for both the Lê and Gia Long, contravening the traditional expectation of court officials that they show complete loyalty to one dynasty. In the epic *Kiêu* he suggests that necessity, and indeed a higher virtue, might demand in certain circumstances that strict mores be broken.

⁴¹ Nguyễn Du (Counsell trans.), *Kiêu*, 616-624.

Kiều stands at the pinnacle of Vietnamese femininity in both a Confucian and Buddhist sense, a self-sacrificing woman of great virtue and also willfully acquiescent of her dark destiny.⁴²

While centuries-old Vietnamese stories continued to influence and be interpreted by Vân for many years to come, it was also the case that literature, culture and femininity in urban Việt Nam were changing due to external forces. And so Vân's ideal woman increasingly found herself straddling East and West, as the teenager evaluated and synthesised a myriad of cultural influences. Vân, for instance, collected pictures of Jacqueline Kennedy from magazines and newspapers which she stuck in an enormous scrap book. Jacqueline Kennedy was, quite simply, perfect. She was educated, popular and worldly but for all her public triumphs remained demure and, above all, a devoted wife and mother. The first lady had such alluring eyes, fulsome (but by no means pouty) lips, hair that on occasion flew with the wind and at other times maintained a rigid grace in the most stormy of political climates. She was striking in any gown, and it was as if tiaras were created and trialled on the heads of princesses for her alone to wear. Vân's era also saw the explosion of Hollywood and happy endings and, even if she did not always consider them practical or wholly desirable role-models, the young woman adored the elegant feistiness of characters like Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind* and Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

Exemplary of Vân's hybrid existence were the engrossing works of Hồ Biểu Chánh who famously adapted Western novels into a Vietnamese context. His rewriting of *Les Misérables*, which translates roughly into *Windswept Blades of Grass*, evoked a sense of the familiar in Vân at the same time it asserted exciting messages of individuality and enlightenment.⁴³ Hồ Biểu Chánh masterfully integrated the old and new, tradition and modernity, East and West; providing a secure imaginary setting from which Vân could assess and often adopt radical ideas. Through such stories Vân gained the impression that a person should not be judged by whether she/he is rich or poor, free or indentured, male or female;

⁴² Marr, *Tradition on Trial* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) 155.

⁴³ Hồ Biểu Chánh, *Ngọn Cỏ Gió Đùa* (Los Alamitos, CA: Sài Gòn, 1977).

and came to believe that in certain contexts, one person's virtue can be greater than the combined rules and regulations of an entrenched system. She reflected over the power and the righteousness of romantic love; the value of light over darkness; and acquired a sense that the answer to whether things change or remain the same is at once and intractably, yes.

A Brief Literary Exploration of Vân and "Traditional"

Feminine Resistance

As the M1 Garand semi-automatic shook violently in Vân's arms, mercilessly piercing and pulverising the dark figures that were half hidden behind blades of long dry grass, she wondered whether traditional feminine qualities such as meekness and elegance still had any relevance. She was a bad shot, and was not sure whether she was in command of the firearm or it was in command of her. Or perhaps both girl and gun were totally out of control? Other members of Vân's troop were so traumatised by their encounter with the weapons of men and war that they were brought to tears; while there were a few characters who, in cruel jest, imitated the weeping of those with soft hearts and fragile constitutions. All morning the howling of young women was mixed with that of machine guns at the firing range on the outskirts of Sài Gòn. To her surprise, Vân was left unnerved, cold and immune to the experience. This might have had something to do with the fact that she had often witnessed the destructive force of modern-day weaponry while still a young girl in Bình Dương. Whatever the reason, Vân simply did what she was told before moving aside for the next person.

Along with several thousand others, Vân had been enlisted into a training camp for the Young Republican Women (*Thanh Nữ Cộng Hòa*). Every weekday for three months they converged upon a downtown soccer stadium to fulfil their patriotic duty and to receive a significant number of credit points towards their first baccalaureate.⁴⁴ While there was some basic instruction on how to use and

⁴⁴ The French-based education system required high school students to have two baccalaureates before entering tertiary education. Examinations for the first one took place after completing eleventh and twelfth grades. Those who were successful had to complete an additional year of secondary education before sitting the exams for the second baccalaureate.

maintain firearms, the majority of their time was spent marching in preparation for Women's Day parades and undertaking a comprehensive first aid course, thereby reaffirming their primary wartime roles as carers rather than fighters.

The founder and commanding officer of the paramilitary girls was Madame Ngô Đình Nhu, President Diệm's sister-in-law and irrefutable first lady of the Republic (given Diệm's strident bachelorhood and her own ferocious appetite for power).⁴⁵ It was often said that Madam Nhu was the "man in the family" and *Time* magazine reported that "She rules the men who rule the country."⁴⁶ One morning, Madame Nhu came to inspect and address her troops who she referred to as her "little darlings". Vân stood motionless in a forest of khaki shirts and lemon-scented hair, watching and listening to the larger-than-life figure who—for many young women of the Republic—was the definitive image of modern feminism. Madame Nhu stood on the dais with the confidence of a world-class composer, wearing not a tuxedo but rather a dazzling yellow *áo dài* that glistened in the sun as she made a speech that was at once inspirational and terrifying. "In times of war the baton of power and responsibility is passed on to women and we must show that we can do as well, if not better, than our men in advancing national prosperity and security," roared the first lady.

"Whenever the enemy comes, we must fight to protect our families like so many Vietnamese heroines that have come before us!"

They all knew who she was referring to and on this point tended to agree with her. According to Madame Nhu, Joan of Arc did not even come close to challenging the might of Triệu Thị Trinh and the Trưng sisters.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Madam Nhu's real name was Trần Lệ Xuân. She was the daughter of the Foreign Minister in the Japanese puppet government of Việt Nam during WWII. She was also the Diệm's official hostess and held a seat in the 123 member National Assembly. Warner, *The Last Confucian*, 85. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 17.

⁴⁶ Cited in Jean Lacouture (Konrad Kellen and Joel Carmichael trans.), *Vietnam: Between Two Truces* (New York: Vintage, 1966) 79.

⁴⁷ Lacouture, *Vietnam: Between Two Truces*, 80. One of the statues first built under Diệm's rule was of the Trưng sisters and one of the sisters was said to have been cast in the image of Madame Nhu. It was torn down by a mob not long after they were ousted from power in 1963. Warner, *The Last Confucian*, 37.

In 248 AD, at the age of twenty-three, Triệu Thị Trinh led a revolt against occupying Chinese forces atop a gigantic war elephant and wearing a golden tunic.⁴⁸ Her personal-as-political pronouncements were both shocking and inspiring:

I only want to ride the wind and walk the waves, slay the big whale of the Eastern sea, clean up our frontiers, and save the people from drowning. Why should I imitate others, bow my head, stoop over and be a slave? Why resign myself to menial housework?⁴⁹

Myth has it that Lady Triệu was nine feet tall, her three foot breasts were strapped over her shoulders for battle and her voice rang like a temple bell putting fear into the hearts of men.⁵⁰ The revolt was suppressed because Lady Triệu's army was small and unprepared for siege warfare. Just as importantly, according to legend, Bà Triệu had an Achilles heel. She could bathe in the blood of her enemies, but abhorred even a skerrick of dirt and grime. Knowing this, the Chinese general sent his troops out naked "kicking up dust like wild animals" at the sight of which the great heroine fled in disgust leaving her army in despair.⁵¹ With her troops defeated, Lady Triệu committed suicide, only to reclaim some sense of victory from the other world when she haunted the Chinese general who orchestrated her defeat. The spirit of Lady Triệu caused a plague that could only be repelled by the hanging of wooden phalluses over doors. Later on, she appeared in the dreams of Vietnamese revolutionaries offering support and guidance. Her deeds, words and aspirations would be celebrated through the centuries by even the most conservative of Vietnamese dynasties.

Even more famous than Lady Triệu were the two Trưng sisters. According to legend, in 40 AD Chinese soldiers killed the husband of the elder sister, Trưng

⁴⁸ She is also referred to as Triệu Âu, Triệu Trinh Vương, Triệu Trinh or Bà Triệu (Lady Triệu).

⁴⁹ *Tôi muốn cưỡi cơn gió mạnh,*

Đạp đường sóng dữ,

Chém chạ trượng-kình ở bể Đông,

Quét bờ côi để cứu dân ra khỏi nơi

Đám đuổi chur không thềm bắt chước

Người đời cúi đầu cong lưng làm tì-thiếp cho người ta...

Cited in Trinh, *Framer Framed*, 63 and Marr, *Tradition on Trial*, 198-9. Revised by Vân.

⁵⁰ Marr, *Tradition on Trial*, 198-9.

⁵¹ Marr, *Tradition on Trial*, 199. Chinese records make no mention of Lady Triệu, noting only a barbarian uprising that was wiped out as a matter of course. Keith Weller Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) 90.

Trắc. Subsequently, the sisters raised an army and drove the invaders away, ruling as queens for two years during which time they abolished taxes before being defeated by a resurgent Chinese force. Even then, as popular (and Vân's) belief has it, the two sisters made one last great sacrifice to the nation by drowning themselves in the Hát Giang river.

Almost two millennia later, their achievements and dedication are still celebrated by Vietnamese. In the process, however, the historical legend of the Trung sisters has been imbued with a strong flavour of patriarchal patriotism. There is, in fact, little evidence to suggest that Trung Trắc's husband was killed by the Chinese prior to the uprising. Rather, his murder was manufactured by those who could not or did not want to accept that a wife could ever lead her husband into politics and battle.⁵² In a similar vein, the eminent anti-colonialist of the early twentieth century, Phan Bội Châu, composed a drama about the Trung sisters in which they were skilfully appropriated in order to promote the movement for national independence.⁵³ Phan Bội Châu portrayed the killing of Trung Trắc's husband as a catalyst for the releasing of the sisters' innate nationalistic fervour.⁵⁴ He thereby shifted traditional feminine notions of self-sacrifice and piety from the home to the nation. Phan Bội Châu urged that when a young woman was teased about whether she was married yet she should reply, "Yes, his surname is Việt and his given name Nam, he is more than three thousand years of age, has resisted the Han dynasty and beaten the Ming and yet he does not look old."⁵⁵ For the sake of being "realistic" however, Phan Bội Châu maintained in the play a hierarchy of values and traits that left men unquestionably on top and in the centre.⁵⁶ Thus, when Trung Trắc loses her nerve in the face of adversity she is rebuked by her younger sister, "Come now, we can't give way to ordinary female emotions. We've got to get out and take care of military matters."⁵⁷

⁵² Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 39-40 and 334-9. From this account historical evidence suggests that they did not commit suicide but were caught and beheaded.

⁵³ Phan Bội Châu, *Tướng Trưng Nữ Vương: Truyện Phạm Hồng Thái [Drama of the Trưng Queens: Story of Phạm Hồng Thái]* (Hà Nội: 1967). Cited in Marr, *Tradition on Trial*, 200.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁵⁵ Trịnh, *Framer Framed*, 51; Marr, *Tradition on Trial*, 210.

⁵⁶ Marr, *Tradition on Trial*, 201.

⁵⁷ Cited in Marr, *Tradition on Trial*, 201

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century poet, Hồ Xuân Hương, proved to be far more difficult to appropriate for the purposes of men and the state. The daughter of a concubine and a concubine herself, Hồ Xuân Hương's poetry presented a powerful critique of the Confucian submissions and virtues that had been ascribed to and by so many Vietnamese women. Why should a woman be subservient to a man or anyone else for her entire life? How many women had been abused and kept down by men because of their adherence to supposedly virtuous forms of speech and action? What purpose did feminine chastity serve other than to fulfill the desires of men to own and exploit women? Why shouldn't a woman have just as much freedom, justice and sexual pleasure as a man? And why shouldn't she be able to define what freedom, justice and sexual pleasure means to her? These were but some of the courageous questions that Hồ Xuân Hương asked through her poetry in an effort to highlight the patriarchal double-standards and institutionalised oppression within Vietnamese society. In a masterful and mischievous use of metaphor, she harnessed the popular imagery of food to reproach these injustices and at the same time celebrate the stoic ability of women to subsist and subvert from within. Few poets could match her bravado or capacity to express the inexpressible:

Jackfruit

My body is like a jackfruit on the tree,
 My skin is rough and my flesh thick,
 Honorable sir, if you like me then stake me,⁵⁸
 Please don't finger me, my sap will stain your hands.⁵⁹

Drifting Dumplings⁶⁰

My body is white and my lot in life round,
 Seven times floated and three times sunk
 In the mountains and rivers (of my homeland).

⁵⁸ Staking a jackfruit can lead to premature ripening.

⁵⁹ *Quả Mít*

Thân em như quả mít trên cây

Da nó xù xì, mùi nó dầy

Quân tử có thương thì đóng cọc

Xin đừng mái mó nhựa ra tay.

Cited in Trần Khải Thanh Thủy, *Lạm Bàn Thơ Hồ Xuân Hương: Hay Băm Sáu Cái Nôn Nường Xuân Hương [Discussing the Poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương]* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Dân Tộc, 2002) 32. The author's translation with reference to the following sources: John Balaban (trans.), *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2000) 36; Trịnh, *Framer Framed*, 82; and Nguyệt Cầm, "Boat of Illusions" in *Saigononline.com* <<http://www.saigononline.com/articles/vacets23.html>> accessed 21 May 2002.

⁶⁰ Vietnamese drifting dumplings are made of sticky rice and can have a sweet red bean paste in the middle. The poem can also be interpreted as referring to the nation.

Firm or runny, it depends on the hands that knead me,
Yet I preserve the crimson purity within.⁶¹

Hồ Xuân Hương also wrote poems attacking established institutions such as the imperial court, pagodas, religiosity and polygamy at the same time she promoted and explored the intricacies of free love, single motherhood, vaginal desire and shit. Not surprisingly, she was widely condemned as obscene and anarchical by her contemporaries.⁶² And when official condemnation and censorship could not contain her message, scholars tried to erase her oeuvre from the annals of history by accusing her of plagiarism and asserting that only a man could produce such explicit material.⁶³

Nevertheless, more than one hundred and fifty years later when Vân was in high school, Hồ Xuân Hương's poems remained in popular circulation. Even then however, in an era of self-professed enlightenment and equality, they were not readily taught in schools.⁶⁴ Perhaps this would have pleased the supreme iconoclast as she would not have wanted her work to be sanitised and fetishised by bureaucrats and censors. More important that it survive and be disseminated by young women like Vân via hushed whispers and concealed scraps of paper in all its intended filth, beauty, goriness and wisdom.

Like Hồ Xuân Hương, Madame Nhu was also a controversial feminist icon. As far as Vân was concerned, however, this was where the similarities ended. While Vân respected Hồ Xuân Hương's flair and ingenuity, she had no such admiration for the self-proclaimed First Lady. When she gazed at Madame Nhu with her

⁶¹ *Bánh Trôi*

*Thân em thì trắng, phận em tròn
Bấy nổi ba chìm với nước non
Rắn nát mặc dầu tay kẻ nặn
Mà em vẫn giữ tấm lòng son.*

The author's translation with reference to Balaban, *Spring Essence*, 32-3 and the assistance of Uyên Loewald.

⁶² Marr, *Tradition on Trial*, 209; Trịnh, *Framer Framed*, 57; and Danny J. Whitfield, *Historical and Cultural Dictionary of Vietnam* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1976) 109.

⁶³ Trịnh, *Framer Framed*, 56. There is also evidence that Hồ Xuân Hương had a romantic relationship with the author of the *Tale of Kiều*, Nguyễn Du. See "Hồ Xuân Hương, Nàng là Ai?: Nhất Uyên Phạm Trọng Chánh Trả Lời Phóng Vấn Đặng Tiến" ["Hồ Xuân Hương, Who was this Woman?: An interview with Phạm Trọng Chánh by Đặng Tiến"] in *Việt Luận [The Vietnamese Herald]* 1777 (16 May 2003) 46-7.

⁶⁴ Her poems are now taught quite openly and extensively in Vietnamese high schools.

long garish fingernails, frightening stilettos and skin-tight *áo dài* with its low cut neckline, she was reminded of a licentious colourful bird, its gaudy chest flaring and larynx cackling in desperate search of a mate. How could anyone take it upon herself to so drastically reform/desecrate the national dress? If we are going to slash the neckline, what will be next? What would be left that one could still call Vietnamese? Surely, thought Vân, feminine sexuality had some relationship with sensuality and refinement?

There were, to be sure, other political-personal reasons for Vân's aversion to Madame Nhu. In 1959 she introduced the *Family Bill* which explicitly set out like never before the rights and liberties of women in Việt Nam. Its 134 articles offered an assortment of individual emancipations and dictatorial impositions. It deemed that women and men were equal within marriage and in society, gave twenty-one year olds the right to wed without parental consent, and permitted a wife to work and to refuse to live with her husband's parents if the couple had enough money to live by themselves. In addition, polygamy and concubinage were banned. The first lady believed that without unfair competition from concubines and the abuse of her husband, a woman could "develop her whole personality fully".⁶⁵ At the same time, the bill renewed what Madame Nhu viewed as the best of the past by denying divorce in an attempt to protect society against "structural disintegration" and to assist people to "choose their partner for a lifetime and no longer only for a season..."⁶⁶

For all its attempts at synthesising the old and the new, the *Family Bill* was not widely supported as it was designed more to meet the despicable whims and weaknesses of Madame Nhu and Diệm's ruling clique, rather than the needs of the people. Its strong Catholic flavour was resented by the predominantly Buddhist population, and rumour had it that the articles banning a spouse from "keeping a too-close relationship with any designated person of the opposite sex whom his/her partner considers harmful to the marriage" were directed towards the adulterous behaviour of Madame Nhu's husband.⁶⁷ A second bill prohibited

⁶⁵ Donnell, "Personalism in Vietnam", 51.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

contraceptives, beauty contests and all forms of dancing regardless of whether these performances were an important source of cultural expression and/or fun. Even as evidence abounded that the people were suffering and resentful of Madame Nhu's dictatorship she remarked, "Power is wonderful. Total power is totally wonderful."⁶⁸ In the absence of accountability and reflexion, this modern-day feminist mutation quickly devolved into a reprehensible means of control.

Despite her faults and vices, Madame Nhu (like Vân and many other Vietnamese) no doubt endeavoured to negotiate a tentative balance between individual liberty and faithfulness to her heritage. In *The Crossing Path*, eighteenth century poet Bà Huyện Thanh Quan (the wife of the Chief of Thanh Quan district) provides a glimpse of the demands, predicaments, opportunities and yearnings of generations of women as they approached a stage in life when the nation, the family and the self called upon them to fulfil their duty:

As I arrive at the Crossing Pass,
 The afternoon sunlight casts long shadows,
 Grass and moss break through the rocks,
 And leaves push forth the flowers.
 Down below wood cutters toil on the mountain slope;
 And market huts are scattered along the river bank.
 Longing for its homeland a coot wails, "quốc, quốc".⁶⁹
 Yearning for its nest a weary jungle bird puffs, "da, da".⁷⁰
 At my feet the whole world opens up,
 With whom shall I share a fragment of my spirit?⁷¹

⁶⁸ Warner, *The Last Confucian*, 118.

⁶⁹ "Quốc" means "nation" in Vietnamese. "Cuốc" (the pronunciation of which is very similar to "quốc") is the onomatopoeic name for an aquatic coot bird. Its call, then, sounds like "quốc, quốc!".

⁷⁰ "Da" in Vietnamese is an onomatopoeic name for a jungle fowl and is also a homonym for "gia" which means home/family.

⁷¹ Đèo Ngang ["The Crossing Path"]

Bước tới đèo ngang bóng xế tà.

Cỏ cây chen đá, lá chen hoa.

Lom khom dưới núi tiều vài chú.

Lác đác bên sông chợ mấy nhà.

Nhớ nước đau lòng con quốc quốc.

Thương nhà mỏi miệng cái da da.

Dừng chân đứng lại trời non nước,

Một mảnh tình riêng ta với ta.

The author's translation with reference to <<http://www.hal-pc.org/~dinhvu/deongang.html>> accessed 21 November 2002.

As Vân lay awake in the darkness of the night after her firearms training, she could just make out the canvas on her military-issued tent rustling in the wind. Vân listened to the soft breathing of the two trainees next to her. In the distance she heard the giggling of girls who were too excited or scared to sleep, shortly followed by the brigade leader reproaching them. Survival training necessitated that they spend two nights away from home, camping in the middle of a soccer field in downtown Sài Gòn which, for many girls, could have just as easily been the dark side of the moon. It was the first time Vân had spent a night away from her family. By that stage, however, she had become apt at combining, reconciling and reapportioning her duties to country, family and self as each situation demanded. And so, Vân was not concerned or uncomfortable with being away from her family or integrated into the national war effort. She simply let her eyelids rest and drifted off to sleep.

A Modern Mandate from Heaven marks the Demise of Diệm's Dictatorial Reign

Upon accepting the Prime Ministership of the RVN in June 1954, Ngô Đình Diệm declared:

I have faith in my people. I am convinced of their unsurmountable dislike for the lies and oppressions of dictatorial regimes. I have faith in its deepest love for freedom.⁷²

In those early years, Vân and her family were greatly impressed by President Diệm's accomplishments with respect to liberating and modernising the people: nurses were sent out into the countryside to instruct peasants and the hill tribes about hygiene and sanitation; education was made accessible to the masses; for a time the press flourished; and the countryside was viciously (but in their view, necessarily) pacified of its gangster and guerrilla elements. There were also grand figures from outside of Việt Nam who saw great promise in Ngô Đình

⁷² Phuc Thien, "President Ngo Dinh Diem's Political Philosophy" in Francois Sully (ed.) *We the Vietnamese: Voices from Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1971) 156-8 at 158. Article reprinted from Phuc Thien, *Ngo Dinh Diem of Vietnam* (Sài Gòn: Press Office, Presidency of the Republic of Việt Nam, 1957).

Diệm as a nation builder who could possibly challenge and defeat the mighty Hồ Chí Minh. In the US he was lauded as the Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia, a Miracle Man, or at the very least was acknowledged by sceptics as “the only boy we’ve got out there.”⁷³

There were other commentators like Graham Greene who from the outset were doubtful of Diệm’s leadership abilities, his commitment to democracy, and who saw signs of a dictator draped in the star spangled banner:

Doubtless out of maladroitness rather than deliberate intention, though with the same effect, he [Diệm] succeeded in antagonizing numerous individuals and groups who had every reason, and even every desire, to co-operate with him. The new government seemed unable to make any personal contact with the population, either to find out what they wanted it to do or to persuade them of the rightness of what it proposed to do. Distrustful or perhaps simply ignorant of democratic procedures, its methods were arbitrary and authoritarian without being efficient. There was even a danger that it might make religion an issue in Vietnam, as it had not been for a century. Mr Diệm has visited the areas formerly held by the Viet Minh, there has been a priest at his side, and usually an American one.⁷⁴

After an initial surge of popularity, Diệm steadily fell out of favour with many South Vietnamese. The personalist alternative that he and his family preached did not offer an apposite mix of East and West but rather, a distasteful and often bizarre concoction of self-obsessed tyranny and corruption. Increasingly obdurate in his Third Way, Diệm devolved into the composite of a domineering Confucian lord who was convinced of his duty and ability to mould the masses in his virtuous image, and a modern dictator utilising all the money and technologies of civilisation and control that the US had to offer. It soon became apparent that the president was not so much concerned with building and harnessing support from the people but rather, extracting “a sacred respect” that

⁷³ These comments were all made by US Vice President Johnson on a 1961 visit to Việt Nam. The “Churchill” and “Miracle Man” comments were public statements, the “only boy” comment was made to journalist Stanley Karnow. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983) 214.

⁷⁴ Graham Greene, *The Sunday Times*, London (24 April 1955). Cited in Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina 1940-1955: Viet Nam and the French Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968) 351.

grew out of his role as “mediator between the people and heaven”.⁷⁵ Indeed, reliance upon popular support was seen to be antithetical to effective rule as the amorphous and fickle sentiments of the people would only contribute to a weak and unstable nation.⁷⁶

At that time, it was not uncommon for Vân to find herself compelled to fulfil her duty to the modern emperor Diệm. One day, on the way home from an excursion to the seaside town of Vũng Tàu, her bus was suddenly caught in a traffic jam that stretched beyond the horizon as they waited for the presidential cavalcade to pass. Only Diệm’s approximate arrival time was disclosed to traffic authorities so as to confuse assassins and as a result, Vân and her fellow students were forced to wait as the hours passed and the sea salt encrusted upon their burnt and grimy skin. They waited in the bus under the blazing afternoon sun along with thousands of other subjects of the Republic. And as sunset and then dinnertime passed, even the most strident supporter of the President had time and reason to feel otherwise.

There were other occasions when Vân and students from all over Sài Gòn had to travel to the airport or the presidential palace to greet Ngô Đình Diệm as he returned from an overseas trip. By and large, Vân and her fellow students enjoyed these events as they were given the whole day off from school. If the rally was at the palace, which was not far from Vân’s school, Gia Long girls could be seen arm-in-arm strolling merrily through downtown Sài Gòn in their pale blue *áo dài* that were reserved for ceremonial occasions. When they arrived at the palace, the students were each given small yellow flags of the Republic with three red stripes running across them and intermittently encouraged to sing a tune that had come to fill the airwaves and cinemas:

Praise President Ngô
 Who knows how many years his heels traversed foreign lands
 To save our nation?
 He swore an oath to struggle...
 To deliver liberty.

⁷⁵ Cited in James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000) 72.

⁷⁶ John Mecklin, *Mission in Torment* (New York: Doubleday, 1965) 35.

He opposed feudal exploitation
 And wiped out the colonists...
 All the Vietnamese people
 Are grateful to President Ngô.
 President Ngô, praise President Ngô forever!⁷⁷

With this jingle ringing in their ears, the students were left to wait until the presidential cavalcade passed when they were cued to wave and cheer. Those at the front might even catch a glimpse of their elusive president if the tinted windscreen of his car was wound down a fraction so as to allow in a little fresh air. Vân, who was always at the back, waved and sang regardless because it was the path of least resistance; but also out of relief as the days were long and there were no toilets nearby. In the later years of Vân's high school and Diệm's presidential career, the young woman became increasingly reluctant when it came to showing her support for the RVN leadership. She asked herself, "If education is so important to President Diệm, why does he make so many students miss school?" Vân also pondered critically over Diệm's aloofness and of how her father Thái came home one day cursing because he had just seen footage of the President visiting a flood-stricken village in the Mekong Delta. The flood waters had receded to knee-high level, but a raft was constructed for the President on which he sat and glided as his body guards pushed him from one hovel to another. In his customary white suit, a self-proclaimed beacon of purity and righteousness, the President looked down upon the peasants who had lost everything. His glances were fleeting and revealed revulsion rather than compassion, as if he were looking at a wriggling maggot caught out in the harsh light of day. Diệm was a figure, commented Thái, greatly elevated but of little

⁷⁷ *Suy Tôn Ngô Tổng Thống*
Bao nhiêu năm từng lê gót nơi quê người
Cứu đất nước thê tranh đấu...cho tự do.
Bài phong kiến bóc lột
Diệt thực dân...
Tàn dân Việt Nam
Nhớ ơn Ngô tổng thống.
Ngô tổng thống, Ngô tổng thống muôn năm!
 Recounted by Vân and Tôn Thất Quỳnh Du.

stature. "With that man as President the Republic is doomed," proclaimed Vân's father. "No wonder people are joining the Việt Cộng!"⁷⁸

Thái was referring to the fact that in December of 1960, the National Liberation Front (NLF) was formed in South Việt Nam as a political arm of the anti-Diệm forces.⁷⁹ The NLF was a coalition of, among others, workers, peasants, teachers and students, under the leadership of ex-Việt Minh and communist operatives from the North. Its formation was widely considered to be a declaration of revolution if not war. In its first announcement to Europe and Asia concerning the NLF, Hà Nội Radio broadcast the following proclamation:

A "National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam" was recently formed in South Vietnam by various forces opposing the fascist Ngô Đình Diệm regime.... The National Front for Liberation of South Vietnam calls on the entire people to unite and heroically rise up and struggle with the following program of action:

1. To overthrow the disguised colonial regime of the imperialists and the dictatorial administration, and to form a national and democratic coalition administration.
2. To carry out a broad and progressive democracy, promulgate the freedom of expression, of the press, of belief, reunion, association and of movement and other democratic freedoms; to carry out general amnesty of political detainees...⁸⁰

By that stage, the Saigonese middle class had begun to turn away from Asia's Churchill. For one-time supporters of Diệm's Republic like Vân's father, the vision of South Vietnamese independence now necessitated freedom not only from communism, but also the tyrannical paternalism of their emperor-president. Moreover, it was clear to many that a prosperous Việt Nam meant something more than an abundance of American consumer goods. Dissent was growing, and along with the images of psychedelic multi-coloured flowers that had sprouted everywhere, came a Gandhian conviction in the power of the people as peaceful agents of momentous change. It was from this atmosphere, heavily laden with

⁷⁸ Việt Cộng (short for Vietnamese communists) was a pejorative term promulgated by the CIA and the Diệm regime from the late 1950s to refer to the National Liberation Front (NLF).

⁷⁹ *Mặt Trận Giải Phóng Quốc Gia*.

⁸⁰ Cited in John Clark Pratt, *Vietnam Voices: Perspectives on the War Years 1941-1982* (New York: Viking, 1984) 94-5.

idealism and buzzing with voices for both restoration and reform, that the anti-Diệm protests broke out that would be seen and heard around the world.

Like so many children who clasp their hands over their ears to avoid hearing bad news, the President went to great efforts to shut himself and everyone else off from the reality that was not to his liking. Newspapers like *The Tidal Wave* (*Sóng Thân*) were suspended for not toeing the government line; while in remaining publications, readers regularly came across blank spaces (*đục lỗ*) that had been inserted into articles by Diệm's censors at the last minute. What started out under Madame Nhu as campaigns of moral rearmament to build discipline, restore tradition virtues, and destroy "vices" such as pornography, opium smoking and card playing, expanded into programs for stringent cultural oppression so that cowboy hats and all manner of items not compliant with the government's arbitrary sensibilities were confiscated and incinerated in public bonfires. Music that was not to the First Lady's liking was condemned as being linked to prostitution and banned.⁸¹

As is the nature of megalomania, the more unpopular Diệm and his policies became, the more convinced he was that there was something wrong with everyone else. Moreover, only his guiding hand could lead them back onto the path of righteousness. Diệm disbanded small village councils aiming to centralise all official political power in Sài Gòn. Ordinance 6 was implemented, permitting the arrest and detention of anyone deemed a security threat. It was used to brutal effect in conjunction with Law 10/59 under which special closed tribunals were established to try, imprison and execute perceived enemies of the state. In sweeping anti-communist campaigns, those who opposed or were suspected of opposing the President were swiftly taken into custody. Many people lived in fear of Ngô Đình Nhu's secret police who, Vân heard, kidnapped people at night and took them to dungeons under the zoo where they were interrogated, tortured and left to rot.

⁸¹ Lacouture, *Vietnam: Between Two Truces*, 21.

In the end, Diệm's god-like self-image and wrath was brought to an end by a religious uprising. In May 1963, at the country's Buddhist centre of Huế, there was a clash of festivities when Buddha's birthday fell within a week of the anniversary of the consecration of the archbishop of Huế (Diệm's older brother Ngô Đình Thục). The Catholics were allowed to fly the Vatican flag and parade their sacred objects while the Buddhists (who in Huế lived under the firm-hand of Diệm's younger brother Ngô Đình Cẩn) were forbidden to do likewise. In the subsequent protests, soldiers killed nine Buddhists. Diệm remained defiant, refusing to give the Buddhist majority equal legal status with the Catholic minority. The violent clashes between the army and demonstrators increased in frequency and ferocity such that by mid-1963, a mountain of politico-revolutionary kindling had been laid down awaiting a spark which would come in the form of a seventy three year old Buddhist monk named Thích Quảng Đức.

Thích Quảng Đức turned to an ancient form of Buddhist protest, self-immolation, to highlight the modern-day malaise that had befallen the Republic and to make a most powerful plea for religious equality and political freedom. In early June, the venerable monk was driven in an Austin motorcar one thousand kilometres from Huế to Sài Gòn. At midday on June 11, he sat at the corner of Phan Đình Phùng and Lê Văn Duyệt streets in the downtown area and, with the assistance of other monks, proceeded to douse himself with petrol. Suspended between this world and the next, the monk chanted mantras as he set himself alight. For minutes his body remained rigid in the lotus position, his hands resting in his lap even as the flames rose metres into the sky.

Vân was at once shocked and inspired by his scorched body, the image of which spread rapidly throughout the country and the world. On another continent, author Italo Calvino would also see that picture and admire it as "an exemplary human image of absolute pacifism in the twentieth century."⁸² Eyewitness David Halberstam from the *New York Times* wrote the following account:

⁸² Cited in Cecil Woolf and John Bagguley, *Authors Take Sides on Vietnam* (London: Peter Owen, 1967) 36.

I was to see that sight again, but once was enough. Flames were coming from a human being; his body was slowly withering and shrivelling up, his head blackening and charring. In the air was the smell of burning flesh; human beings burn surprisingly quickly. Behind me I could hear the sobbing of the Vietnamese who were now gathering. I was too shocked to cry, too confused to take notes or ask questions, too bewildered to even think.... As he burned he never moved a muscle, never uttered a sound, his outward composure in sharp contrast to the wailing people around him.... All around this scene of medieval horror were the signs of modern times: a young Buddhist priest with a microphone saying calmly over and over again in Vietnamese and English, "A Buddhist priest burns himself to death. A Buddhist priest becomes a martyr."⁸³

Madame Nhu later infamously remarked, "I would clap my hands at seeing another monk barbecue show."⁸⁴

Sài Gòn erupted, and martial law was pronounced in August as pagodas all over the RVN were raided and monks imprisoned. Many tertiary and secondary students went "down to the streets" (*xuống đường*).⁸⁵ Vân was not immune to the fever of dissent. For the first time since the great anti-colonialist Phan Châu Trinh's funeral in 1926, Gia Long High School boiled over with student unrest. One day, thunder sounded through the halls as students clapped the tops of their desks. The mood was electrifying, but Vân's teacher (perhaps because he was sympathetic to their cause) maintained his composure. "You are all adults now. You know what is right and what is wrong. If you want to protest then leave. If you want to study then stay, but don't impede others from doing so." Without exception, everyone in Vân's class stayed and desisted from their protest. Perhaps if just one of them had made a stand, they all would have followed? But no-one did, and the inertial effect of fear combined with the traditional notion that public politics is the realm of men, kept the young women bound tightly to their seats.

⁸³ David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965) 211.

⁸⁴ Cited in Pratt, *Vietnam Voices*, 130-1.

⁸⁵ It is interesting to note that two years earlier Pike wrote, "In general he (the Vietnamese student) is inclined to be concerned with security rather than experiment or adventure. Thus there is little of the fiery political activity normally found on Asian campuses. The Vietnamese student often abjures politics completely, in his cautious concern for his family and his personal advancement." Pike, "Problems of Education in Vietnam", 78.

Unlike Vân's teacher, President Diệm could not generate any such compliance. The mockery and rumours directed against Diệm's regime were growing ever louder. The entire country was sniggering with disapproval and contempt. These rumours thrived in the cloistered political atmosphere that Diệm had created, allowing for the speedy, safe and anonymous communication of information (and also its elaboration, distortion and exaggeration) about extra-local goings-on that were of vital importance to peoples' lives during this tumultuous and uncertain period.⁸⁶ Whereas once the President was lauded for making a sacrifice of Elizabethan proportions by wedding himself to the nation, now he was derided as gay. Gossip was dictating that Diệm's time had come. It was clear to everyone from the peasantry to the ultra-modern middle class, that Ngô Đình Diệm had lost the Mandate of Heaven; that the cross-world correspondence between his ruling rectitude and the cosmology of the universe had been revoked; and that the Great Wheel was turning to restore a semblance of tranquillity and order to the land. The heart of Thích Quảng Đức had remained intact and was taken to a pagoda where it was worshipped by thousands,⁸⁷ statues of the Virgin Mary wept blood, and one day the sun spun and blurred forebodingly.⁸⁸ Diệm's father's ornate grave was struck by lightning, and from its ruins emerged a plague of caterpillars. While Vân did not understand the full cosmological meaning of these phenomena, she was sure of their outcome.⁸⁹ With the approval of US Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and at least the knowledge (if not under the command) of President Kennedy,⁹⁰ Diệm's regime was overthrown by a junta of

⁸⁶ For more details on gossip and rumour as forms of everyday resistance see James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 142-4.

⁸⁷ It is now allegedly kept by the Reserve Bank of Việt Nam and a photo of it can be found at *Quảng Đức* <<http://www.quangduc.com/BoTatQuangDuc/25photo.html>> accessed 5 May 2003.

⁸⁸ For another personal account of this event see Elliot, *The Sacred Willow*, 298.

⁸⁹ Ironically, when Lansdale first started assisting Diệm and in acknowledgement of the importance of building popular support, he paid popular astrologers to give auspicious readings for Diệm and against Hồ Chí Minh. Jeet Heer, "Revisionists argue that counterinsurgency won the battle against guerrillas in Vietnam, but lost the larger war. Can it do better in Iraq?" in *The Boston Globe* (4 January 2004) <<http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2004/01/04/counterpunch/>> accessed 20 January 2004.

⁹⁰ Kennedy's level of knowledge and involvement is a matter of some debate. In his 1998 book, *The Dark Side of Camelot*, Seymour Hersh concluded after an interview with Lucien Conein (the principle CIA officer at the time) that Kennedy must have known that Diệm would be killed in the overthrow. James Rosen's more recent book, *The Strong Man: John Mitchell, Nixon and Watergate* sets out recently released evidence that Kennedy actually ordered the assassination of Diệm and his brother Nhu. Seymour M. Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot* (Boston: Little Brown

his own generals. On 2 November 1963, Diệm and Nhu were unsanctimoniously killed.⁹¹

Three weeks afterwards, US President Kennedy was also assassinated. However, Vân paid only the slightest attention to these grand political events, as they were overshadowed by a tragedy greater than any that she had ever encountered.

It was perhaps understandable that the grand figures responsible for the momentous repression and unrest of 1963 did not have in mind the wellbeing of one weak-hearted young woman. And so, it is difficult to apportion blame for the fact that Vân's polio-suffering older sister, Loan, was so unsettled and frightened by all the commotion—the horrifying sound of howling military planes and trucks—that her illness was exacerbated to the point of death. During those few bleak autumn weeks, Loan contracted tuberculosis and fell victim to a severe case of pneumonia. When not at school, Vân sat by Loan's side and accompanied her to their home town of Bình Dương after it became clear that she would not recover. In those last days, the two sisters recalled all the fun they had had as young children. They also remembered all the times as young children they had waited desperately at night for a fairy god mother or dashing prince to come and magically cure her so that they could skip and dance once again.

Silently to herself, Van remembered when her older sister was sixteen and courageously decided to start school in order to learn how to read. To get there, Loan rode an infant's bike with training wheels as her limbs were so bowed that she could not manage a full-sized bicycle. Vân walked alongside providing both physical and moral support. Tragically but predictably, the other students teased Loan with unabashed callousness, tacitly suggesting that such afflictions were heavenly retribution for a wicked past life. Vân bit back at them, defending Loan with a level of ferocity that she would never have adopted to stick up for herself. Nevertheless, when Loan died, Vân felt guilty. Desperately, Vân wished that she

and Co., 1997). James Rosen's book will be published by Doubleday in 2004. Cited in Đông Quân, "Bí Mật Đằng Sau Vụ Thảm Sát 1-11-1963" ["The Secrets Behind the Assassination of 1-11-1963"] in *Việt Luận* [Vietnamese Herald] 1825 (31 October 2003) 50.

⁹¹ Warner refers to Diệm as "The Last Confucian" in his book of the same title (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964).

had possessed the impossible strength to shield her older sister from the school yard taunts and somehow allow Loan to live a normal life, if only for a few days.

The 1968 Tết Offensive and the Turning of the Great Potter's Wheel

On a spring day in 1965, Vân remembered Loan and hoped that from somewhere her older sister was shining over her as she graduated from Gia Long High School for Girls. Throughout her time at high school, Vân had worked tirelessly to pass each year. During the mid-year months it was not unusual for the slender young woman to lose almost ten kilograms in the pressure-cooker that was the examination period. After her last exam her entire mind and body seemed to snap like a violin string and Vân would spend at least three days in bed recovering. The only major obstacle that she did not manage to crawl over was the final one when, after performing poorly in another oral examination, she failed her second baccalaureate and had to repeat the year. Vân persevered and became the first person in her immediate family to complete her secondary studies and attend a tertiary college.

Vân's first choice, the most popular among young women at that time, was teaching as it provided a stable career in the outside world without compromising that traditional and still desirable image of women as homemakers and child-nurturers. Specifically, Vân wanted to become a teacher of home science (*nữ công gia chánh*), a new subject that was lauded for its adoption of modern methods and technology to augment traditional domesticity. The competition for entrance, however, was intense and Vân was not surprised when she failed and had to settle for studying law and the humanities.

After a few months of study, Vân acquired a job as a receptionist and gave up her tertiary education for good so as to support her family. The job was at a building supplies business in downtown Sài Gòn. Her bosses, a Chinese couple, made a handsome profit from the construction boom that had resulted from the influx of thousands of US soldiers and support staff. The pay was low and her bosses were

abusive, but Vân had little choice but to endure. Her father had reached the age of compulsory retirement and, deprived of his income, the family had been forced to move back to their home town of Bình Dương to live with relatives. Every day, Vân left for work at six in the morning and came home at eight in the evening exhausted (and also often in significant pain as there was only one toilet at her workplace which she would not use because it was filthy and was surrounded by men on their smoking breaks). Each month, all her wages went to the upkeep of the household in Bình Dương. This, however, was not enough to save them from once again sinking into the vagrancy and deprivation that had haunted them like a bad dream ever since Vân was a little girl.

In the spring of 1966, Vân's father Thái spoke to an acquaintance at the national electricity authority who agreed to give her a job. "Everything I have today, I owe to that man and that moment," Vân reminisced much later. Not long after she started work at the electricity authority, the position of pay mistress and head book-keeper became available which Vân enthusiastically accepted. In a matter of months, she had a private office and a wage that was almost twice what she had received as a receptionist. The job was stable and quite prestigious, without requiring an excessive amount of effort.

With the extra money, Vân and her father decided that it was time for her to move away from her family. Initially, she lived with a relative, before moving out on her own early in 1967 and renting half of a room in the somewhat disreputable riverside area of Khánh Hội.⁹² In the other half of the room, partitioned off by a curtain, resided another young woman and her boyfriend who was a US soldier. They often made a terrible racket and so after a few months, Thái sent his daughter to a boarding house for young women. Such was the shortage of housing, that in a room of around twenty square metres on the first floor of a domestic abode (the family lived on the ground floor), Vân lived with twenty other young ladies.

⁹² Khánh Hội is now the site of quite upmarket waterfront apartments.

Thus, despite having a somewhat lucrative job, Vân never felt like a modern career woman who was (re)defining what it meant to be successful in an exciting new world. On the contrary, Vân lived like a pauper, saving everything that she could to send back to her family whose security and happiness was a prerequisite for her own. She made 5,600 Vietnamese đồng a month,⁹³ almost all of which she sent to Bình Dương keeping only enough for food, rent and transportation back to her hometown on weekends. At the electricity authority, employees had the option of having a cooked lunch every day or receiving five đồng in lieu. Such was the young woman's frugality, that she took the five đồng and bought a one đồng loaf of bread; thereby saving four. She had fenced off her heart, mind and finances from the influence and distraction of fashion, entertainment and young men. "Who would want me anyway?" Vân occasionally asked herself. Sometimes, during those dark moments before sleep, in that hopelessly overcrowded room where there was at least one young woman who was always sobbing, Vân felt infinitely lonely.

In January of 1968, as the year of the ram drew to a close, Vân went to her first ever New Year's (Tết) work party. The lunch was lavish with the finest paté, all manner of chicken dishes and sweet cakes. Vân had been transferred to a new office in Thủ Đức which had recently opened with around four hundred employees. The primary role of the Thủ Đức office was to expand the frontiers of the electrical grid into the countryside, and critical to this task were the technocratic cowboys, many of whom had been recently trained at engineering schools in far off lands such as Thailand and the US. As the pay-mistress at Thủ Đức, Vân had the joyous responsibility of overseeing the distribution of an extra month's pay to every employee, the fabulous thirteenth month of the year. The atmosphere at the Thủ Đức office leading up to the Tết of 1968, then, was one of warmth, prosperity and hope. Then suddenly, a cold front swept through the area. And as had occurred in the tumultuous year of 1954, the temperature dropped to a shivering 17°C. Vân suspected at the time and would soon confirm that this frightening and freakish meteorological phenomenon was an omen of things to come.

⁹³ This was around US\$35 at the time.

At the same time, near the central Vietnamese village of Khê Sanh, a set-piece battle raged where US Marines and anti-communist troops were under siege. Some considered this confrontation to be decisive and likened it to the battle at Điện Biên Phủ which brought about an end to French colonialism. In a statistical sense, the US and its allies were convincing victors in the three month battle of Khê Sanh, killing at least 10,000 North Vietnamese soldiers while sustaining the loss of 500 US marines.⁹⁴ The long-term political victors, however, were not so clear-cut. Indeed, as the year of the monkey dawned, it became apparent that the battle at Khê Sanh was but a diversion.

On 31 January, the first day of the lunar year, the communists attacked every Southern city and sixty district towns. Previously, both sides had agreed upon a truce to mark the Lunar New Year (*Tết*). The soldiers from the Army of the Republic of Việt Nam (ARVN) who were allowed out of barracks and the swell of civilians who passed through the country to be with their loved ones, provided a human veil under which Southern revolutionaries and North Vietnamese troops infiltrated populous centres. With the element of surprise on their side, and a conviction among many that this was the “opportune moment” (*thời cơ*), the communists initially made significant territorial gains. When the full force of the US and Republican armies retaliated, however, the revolutionaries were soundly defeated after holding their positions and fighting defensively instead of pulling back as they had so often done. The communists overran the imperial capital of Huế which they viewed as a vestige of feudalism and a breeding ground for Personalist Party and Diệm loyalists.⁹⁵ They held it for twenty-five days during which time they captured over ten thousand hostages, before being driven out by a massive bombing campaign and a prolonged door-to-door battle with US Marine Corps troops. In their desperate retreat, the revolutionaries slaughtered their hostages, leaving behind thousands of bodies (including those of the elderly

⁹⁴ D.J. Sagar, *Major Political Events in Indo-China 1945-1990* (New York: Facts on File, 1991) 86.

⁹⁵ Bùi Tín (Nguyễn Ngọc Bích trans.), *From Enemy to Friend: A North Vietnamese Perspective on the War* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2002) 67.

and children) in mass graves.⁹⁶ The Southern offensive cost the revolutionaries an estimated 50,000 fighters.⁹⁷ The Republican Vietnamese lost almost 3,000 troops, the US lost almost 2,000 during that month and US public opinion would turn irrevocably against the War in Việt Nam.⁹⁸ More difficult to determine is how many civilians died during the festive season of 1968. What is known is that among the masses was Vân's father, Thái.

The crackling of gunfire and pounding of heavy artillery grew ever louder as Vân's family cowered inside their house in Bình Dương. A day earlier, on the first day of Tết, their home had been filled with the customary festive foods and joy. The ancestral spirits were invited home to enjoy the occasion and the children received new clothes and money, thereby enclosing in a loop of merry contentment those who had come before and those who would go ahead. Now, on the second day of Tết, everyone was strangled by fear. Many years had passed since Vân had been so close to battle. Once again she was forced to recall the havoc caused by the Việt Minh bombs in the marketplace when she was a little girl, and with a fearful sense of *déjà vu* Vân saw ant-like people scurrying past her house. This time they were running into town away from the burning countryside, and the droplets of fire had turned into a deluge. Vân was a mature woman of duty and means—the *de facto* matriarch of her family—but, in that instant, she felt like a frightened child; she yearned for the security and ignorance of youth and thought about how nothing had changed, how time runs in such vicious circles.

“The fighting is everywhere!” screamed passers by. But did this mean all over town, the whole province or the entire country? Were her relatives in Chánh Lư safe? What about her newfound workmates? What about the new office? Surely that was a target!? Would she have a job to return to? “Is this what it is like in

⁹⁶ Figures vary but South Vietnamese officials claimed to have discovered 2,500 civilian bodies in shallow graves. Sagar, *Major Political Events in Indo-China 1945-1990*, 87. The one time communist figurehead Bùi Tín suggests that over 2,000 were massacred but less than 10,000. Bùi Tín, *From Enemy to Friend*, 68.

⁹⁷ Elliot, *The Sacred Willow*, 331; Bùi Tín (Judy Stowe and Do Van trans.), *Following Ho Chi Minh: The Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonial* (London: Hurst & Company, 1995) 63.

⁹⁸ Michael Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochinese Wars, 1772-1991* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 1995) 135.

countryside every day?" Vân thought to herself. "How could the peasants or anyone survive in such hell?" And the young woman despaired at the sorrow that had befallen Việt Nam.

The children in Vân's house moaned with fright and disappointment. Their inability to visit friends and family had robbed them of so many crimson envelopes filled with lucky money. When the sun set, however, they joined the adults in silent consternation as fighting overwhelmed the town. The radio went out, and then the electricity lines were severed, leaving them deaf and blind to everything but the thunderous sounds of war. And when the helicopters and planes started flying overhead, dropping bombs and firing rockets that, in theory, were aimed at saving freedom-loving people like themselves, Vân's father directed the family under the enormous wooden bed made of dark lacquered wood as thick as a man's forearm. Encased in the darkness and asphyxiated by fear, Vân and her family lay quivering through the night.

The next morning, the fighting had lulled when Vân's father Thái opened the front door to find the air thick with smoke and ragged refugees from the countryside filing past their house towards the Phứ Vãn camp which was a few kilometres away. These rakish spectres sparsely clad in black and brown rags, sagged under the burden of their belongings and the thought of everything they had left behind. In that instant, as Thái watched the refugees, a bullet passed through his leg. It was most likely not directed at him. It could have just as easily come from the gun of an ARVN soldier or a NLF revolutionary, from the South or the North. Perhaps that single bullet had travelled over oceans from the US, Korea or Australia before being put into service in Việt Nam? It might have even come from a civilian weapon, a wayward shot from someone warning off looters? It was a bullet without an ideology or purpose that had somehow navigated through the wind, smoke and debris to find Vân's father. And in a fraction of an instant, it bore through his skin, flesh and sinew before carrying on with its aimless journey. For whatever and no reason, on the third day of *Tết* 1968, Thái was shot and hollered out to his wife as he fell to the ground.

Vân and her mother ran out into the street and carried Thái inside. Such was the surgical cleanliness of the bullet wound that Vân was surprised by the absence of blood as she bandaged her father's leg. Nevertheless, he was in the great pain and the severity of the wound was beyond their capabilities and resources. The task of getting Thái to the hospital in the midst of a battle, however, appeared equally daunting. Eventually, Vân's mother found a family friend who was willing to take Thái through the anarchy and rubble to the hospital in the same way that she had got there more than two decades ago as she was giving birth to Vân; by a horse and cart. At the hospital, they managed to swab and bandage his leg and provided Thái with some medicine before sending him home.

In years to come, the family would recall the signs that foreshadowed the coming of Thái's death and regret that they did not have the rational faculties to eschew fate; to stop him from stepping outside the door on that morning or even just to convey to him all that they felt in their hearts before it was too late. A fortune-teller had previously informed Vân's mother that the year of the monkey did not augur well for her husband. He was sixty, coming to the end of his fifth and final twelve-year lunar cycle, and this suggested that the Great Wheel was about to revolve in full for him. As a precaution, Sắt broke tradition by not making the traditional pickled bean sprouts for their New Year's celebrations because "bean sprouts" (*giá*) was a homonym for "widow" (*bà giá*). But this was clearly not enough. When he returned home, Thái coughed the terrible stench of death, and his infant grandchild (one of Châu's sons) broke into tears sensing the presence of his ghost. That afternoon, Vân's father had a heart-attack. Once again they called upon the family friend and his horse to take Thái to the hospital where they tried unsuccessfully to save him before sending the cart home once again, this time with Thái's corpse inside it.

Vân stayed by her father's side into the evening: vigilant, as if looking for his eyelids to rise, his nose to twitch or his chest to heave. Her frightened younger siblings peered into the bedroom where he was placed on the bed that had served as their bomb shelter. Vân was also afraid, but would not let the supernatural spirits or the warmongers outside control her. Having little experience with the dead, she lay the plastic bag that the hospital had provided over her father instead

of putting him inside. The body began to smell terribly. Nevertheless, Vân stayed with her father throughout the night and without rest proceeded the next day to arrange his funeral.

Thái was an exceptionally popular man, and it was only with the assistance of his friends that his family was able to properly honour him. During this mourning period, everyone who stepped outside to visit Thái or help organise his funeral was risking her/his life. And yet they came, declaring to the family that they had come to “share the sadness” (*chia buồn*). There was a distant relative who donated material for their mourning gowns, a Chinese friend who procured a coffin (which were incredibly scarce at the time), and a group of friends who carried it home and placed his corpse inside it. An astonishing crowd of people came to pay their respects and see Thái for one last time in his best clothes, surrounded by his belongings and votive money to ensure that he would not be indigent in the next world.

As the funeral procession left for the burial site, planes roared overhead and they desperately hoped that those pilots far up in the sky would take them on face value as legitimate mourners, rather than a unit of undercover revolutionaries. For if they all died then and there, no one would be left to burn incense and pay their respects. Such frightful funerals were so commonplace that the songwriter Trịnh Công Sơn lamented in one of his most well known songs:

On a winter's day,
 On a well-worn path,
 An exploding mine destroyed
 A funeral cart.
 Two times the person died,
 His flesh and skin blown to pieces.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ *Ngu Ngôn Mùa Đông*

...*Một ngày mùa đông*

Trên con đường mòn

Một chiếc xe tang

Trái mìn nổ chậm

Người chết hai lần

Thịt da nát tan....

Winter Fable by Trịnh Công Sơn. Recounted by Vân and Thiết.

A Buddhist monk led the funeral procession, chanting all the way. At the burial site a crowing rooster was procured to wake Thái's spirit. To help him up from the grave, they constructed a ladder from banana leaves. And as they led the spirit back to their home, Vân's young brother Thọ walked at the head of the procession clinging on to a framed picture of his father. On the forty-ninth and one hundredth day after his passing, the family paid tribute to Thái, remembering all his good deeds and their debt to him in order to erase/lighten his wrongdoings and improve his lot in the next world.

The rituals and sentiments were intricate and diverse, spiced with superstition and in accordance with the proud Vietnamese Triple Religion (*Tam Giáo*). *Tam Giáo* represents a practical conglomeration of the three great bodies of spiritual thought, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. The Western mind (including the author's) has at times found it difficult to reconcile the Confucian notion of ancestor worship and the Buddhist faith in reincarnation, so it is sometimes said that Vietnamese believe that their ancestors' spirits ascend to heaven where they watch over them for a time before descending to earth as another being. In reality it is at once more simple and infinitely complex, as for many Vietnamese there is no temporal disjunction requiring reconciliation. Like the electrons that fly in clouds around the nuclei of atoms, the human spirit cannot be pinned down and measured in one space-time without sacrificing some understanding of its multi-dimensional essence. It is enough to say, then, that Thái was at once in heaven and on earth, and for the rest of their lives his family would remember and pay their respects to him on the third day of Tết, which thereafter gained much significance, but tragically lost much of its joy.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Examines Thiết's ideological defection, progressive modernisation and epistemological stagnation (along with Hương's Saigionisation) in the context of the Second Indochina Technowar.

Kim: OK, let's go through this again Dad. There are two steps. First we have to dial up the Internet Service Provider, the ISP. Now, when we've done that successfully you'll see those two little flashing boxes in the corner. That means we're connected. Then we use what's called a browser, that's a program on our computer that allows us to move around the internet. Sometimes things go wrong. It's not perfect. For one reason or another, the internet site that we want to visit might be down or our ISP might be stuffed up. Nothing's exact or assured. Do you understand? Do you want me to go over it again?! Obviously I went through it too quickly last time.

Thiét: I understand. Don't raise your voice and treat me like I'm stupid. I taught you to ride a bike and drive a car remember. Where's the internet right now, where's my email. The two little boxes are right there in the corner, but I don't see anything.

Kim: That's because you just minimised the window! Do we have to go over this again? Here, give me the mouse. The internet window is currently minimised. You'll remember that this does not mean that the program is closed. You don't have to open it again. It's just down here out of the way. If we click on it, then it maximises. That means that it fills the whole screen. There's another choice, this button here, called restore that allows us to customise the size of the window.

See, I can make the window as wide or as long as I like by clicking and dragging the edges.

Thiét: OK, all I want to do is restore the window or whatever you call it and check my email.

Kim: What do you mean? Do you want to maximise it?

Thiét: No, I want to restore it. Where's that button that you just showed me.

Kim: Arghh! Shit Dad! It's already restored. When it's restored then the restore button becomes a maximise button, and when it's maximised, the maximise button becomes a restore button! How many times do we have to go over this?!

Thiét: Don't yell at me! You don't like to help out your father, that's fine. But you will not yell at me. Mr Thuận's son taught him how to use the internet and send emails and even type in Vietnamese and translate English to Vietnamese. Do you think he ever yelled at his father? You can leave now. I'll figure it out myself. I've done much more difficult things in my time. I'll get there. It's just a matter of hard work and a little bit of luck.

An Urban Escapade

Beams of energised particles emanated from the magical street lights, gleaming down upon Thiét and illuminating the path before him. The young man looked up from his books and stretched his neck, bending it sideways and then back before closing his eyes and basking in the electrical radiance that shone through his eyelids with all the colours of the rainbow. Thiét was tired. It had been a long day like any other, working at his cousin's tailor shop in Đà Nẵng from five in the morning, going to school in the afternoon and now, as pm turned to am, studying in the street where there was space to lay out his books and the light was free and plentiful.

“Enough rest. It’s time to get back to work,” the young man told himself before putting his head down. “You have to work harder to be the top of your class. You have to be the best, number one.” Academic results were of paramount importance to the sixteen year old who dreamed of being an engineer, or perhaps a mechanic, an accountant or maybe even a doctor. In 1958 the exact direction of Thiết’s life and career had not yet materialised, but his fiery intensity and lofty aspirations were evident to all who knew him.

By the time Thiết had returned to his cousin’s tailor shop there were only a few hours left for sleep. He cleared the cutting table, leaving a bundle of material at one end as a pillow before lying down. Usually Thiết fell asleep as soon as the light was out, but that night for some reason his mind did not allow him to rest. Suddenly, in the pitch-black calm—against all common practice, priority and proclivity—Thiết reflected. It was a rare opportunity for the forward-looking young man to look back and wonder how his mother and family were in Bò Bản. He missed them, and very much wanted to see and touch their faces. Thiết knew that they were all very proud of him and at times he was even proud of himself. For while the teenager was closer to the start of his journey than its end, he had undeniably come a long way in the four years since leaving the Việt Minh School and the countryside.

In the late summer of 1954, as Thiết walked back to his home village of Bò Bản from his brief but earth-moving education in the ways of the Mao, Marx, Lenin and Hồ, he was overwhelmed by conflicting emotions. They had won the war against French colonialism, but he did not feel victorious. Victory was to be found elsewhere, in a place that was alive with the roaring activity of socialist revolution. Victory, he believed, was to be found over the line, designated by the Bến Hải River, which divided his country. For Thiết, the 17th parallel seemed at times arbitrary and insubstantial despite the fact that it constantly influenced the lives and thoughts of ordinary Vietnamese in the most profound ways. Many years later he would sing a moving song of great pertinence to several periods in his life, including this one.

Home to Here (My Dear)

Hey people! The South belongs to the Vietnamese.
 Where the rancour of war has broken our hearts,
 Where the Bến Hải River has been wrought asunder.
 Stand up to seek out tranquillity and peace.

Hey people! Why live with such pain and suffering?
 Come home to where clothes and rice are savoured and shared,
 Where the people's hearts are burning with anticipation,
 What reason is there to maintain your detachment?

Come home and live life anew,
 In a free land built to be everlasting,
 On a bridge of love that spans a thousand places,
 In a springtime peace to last the ages.

Hey people who yearn for an end to war,
 For all to live in warmth and comfort,
 We send you word,
 Return to your land so far away.
 From your wanderings come home to here.¹

¹ Về Đây Anh

*Người ơi! Nước Nam của người Việt Nam
 Vì đâu oán tranh để lòng nát tan
 Đây Bến Hải là nơi ngăn cách đôi tình
 Đứng lên tìm chốn yên vui thanh bình*

*Người ơi! Sống chi cuộc đời thương đau?
 Về đây áo com đùm bọc lẫn nhau
 Đây nỗi lòng người dân tha thiết mong chờ
 Có sao người vẫn đang tâm thờ ơ?*

*Người về đây sống vui đời thắm tươi
 Miền tự do đắp xây cho muôn đời
 Nhịp cầu mến thương gieo vương ngàn nơi
 Xuân thanh bình rộn ràng muôn lòng trai*

*Người ơi ước mong ngày tàn chinh chiến
 Để toàn dân sống trong cuộc đời ấm êm
 Ta nhắn gửi về nơi quê cũ xa vời
 Hỡi ai lạc bước mau quay về đây.*

Recounted by Thiết with referece to *evietonline*
 <<http://www.evietonline.com/nhac/details.asp?IDNews=1178>> accessed 5 May 2003. All
 translations are by the author unless indicated otherwise.

This song was produced for propagandistic purposes under the auspices of the Chiêu Hồi (Open Arms) program. From 1963 to 1973 the US funded Chiêu Hồi program encouraged civilian and military defections from the communist-controlled South with the promise of amnesty and welfare.

After returning to Bò Bản, Thiét spent a year planting and ploughing his family's small plot of earth with a heavy stone in his heart and an acrid taste in his mouth. The earth was dark but no longer rich. His work was arduous in terms of input but meagre in terms of output. The chit chat of peasants did not interest him. How could it possibly resonate when compared to the clamour of the glorious world out there? His mother's everyday ways, her chewing of betel nut, her deference to ethereal gods, and even the continual respect that she paid to their ancestors—to his late father Việt—annoyed Thiét's practical sensibilities.

Indeed, there were people in the village whose lives were so confined that they were not accustomed to universal concepts of location. For them there was no left or right, or even east, west, north or south. Rather, everything was related back to the mountains and the river, "Leave that bushel of rice on the mountain side of the hut. Get some eggs from the lady on the river side of the market. Just follow that path until you reach the temple and then take the next turn away from the mountains." The villagers were trapped without even knowing it. Thiét, on the other hand, knew it all too well. Bò Bản was creeping in upon him. He could feel the mountains bearing over him and the river eroding the earth beneath his feet.

Increasingly, the teenager also felt that time was running out. He did not belong in the countryside where distance was imprecisely measured in walking days and time was clumsily fragmented into seasons, sunrises and sunsets. Everything was too slow for him. Thiét did not have much experience with modern clocks, but he knew enough to imagine their arms spinning faster and faster as he stood frozen in time.

Recognising Thiét's manic restlessness his mother, Thừa, provided sincere but ineffective consolation, "The heavens willing, something better will cross your path." To ease his discontent, Thừa released her son from some of his chores and found him an apprenticeship of sorts at the market in the adjacent town of Túy Loan. Despite his total inexperience in the sewing trade, Thiét's employer was immediately impressed by the young man's industriousness. Moreover, because material was sold by the forearm length, the teenager's compact build and stocky

arms served as a significant cost-cutting measure. To be sure, the market was not exactly where Thiết envisaged himself in the long or even intermediate term, but it was better than the solitary confines of his family's hut and their pitiful plot of land. At the market he could talk to different people and while he did not make any money (his employer gave him lunch every day) there was potential for this in future.

After a few months, the restlessness once again settled in. While Thiết's sewing skills were improving somewhat, the tasks of selling material, fixing hems and making simple peasant garbs (*áo bà ba*) had become monotonous and mundane, particularly compared to the grand political developments that were taking place in his country. By the autumn of 1955, with the ascendance of Ngô Đình Diệm to the presidency of the Republic of Việt Nam (RVN) and his rejection of the Geneva Accords, it was clear that the national elections which Thiết had once waited for so anxiously were not going to take place. Việt Nam it seemed was to remain divided and its people not yet free.

Detached from the constant scrutiny of his comrades, however, Thiết had begun to view the situation differently to the Việt Minh, in a manner that only months earlier he might have derided as bourgeois-individualist or just plain childish. "What good would reunification and liberation do me anyway when I'm trapped in Bò Bản!? Nothing is going right for me. Nothing at all."

At other times he was slightly more optimistic and able to situate his individual predicament within a broader socialist program. "How can I possibly help the Revolution if I am trapped in Bò Bản? What if I get conscripted into the South Vietnamese puppet regime's army? What good would I be then? First things first, I have to leave Bò Bản and advance myself before I can advance the nation and the Party."

In the spring of 1956, Thiết's cousin Tuyết offered the young man a means of escape when she opened a small tailor shop in downtown Đà Nẵng (about twenty kilometres from Thiết's village) and agreed to lodge and feed the teenager in return for his labour. So anxious was Thiết for the urban lights that he left his

home village of Bò Bản without the slightest hesitation, convinced that he had a one-way ticket to liberty and progress. The young man thought little of his family who had come to represent a way of life that he could no longer tolerate. In any case, Thiết was sure that they would always be there (which was exactly what enraged him). As the youth left his village, he also neglected to spare a thought for his umbilical cord which, in accordance with an age-old practice, had been buried somewhere in Bò Bản. And so on a brilliant sunlit day, Thiết severed the thread that had connected him to his motherland and served as a symbolic link to his spiritual and cultural origins. That momentous cut, made with surgical certainty, would prove to be irreparable.

Despite his enthusiasm, it quickly became apparent to Thiết that his urban escapade would not be easy. He slept on the cutting table in order to open up the store in the morning, and in return for a full day's work was provided with one solitary meal in the evening at Tuyết's father's house. Tuyết's father was a well-educated and stern man who demanded and received the utmost respect from his children (at that stage he had about ten children but would eventually father seventeen by three wives). With the household already overcrowded and under-resourced, Thiết was constantly aware of his minor status and worth in the scheme of things. He was grateful for the charity he received, and always waited to take the last morsels of the evening meal which the youth ate outside on his own. Sometimes Thiết ate nothing at all. "Life was so chaotic... terrible, very tough," Thiết would recall many years later.

What consoled the young man in his destitution and hunger was that he was finally gaining sustenance of an intellectual variety. With a good education, Thiết was certain that his days as a charity case were limited. Not long after arriving in Đà Nẵng, he heard that a free community high school had opened. The enrolment deadline had already passed, but Thiết was undaunted by such minor details. Taking leave from the tailor shop, he scurried to the school and was directed to a senior teacher's house where he made a passionate case for late enrolment. Shortly afterwards, the young man returned to work with an air of satisfaction and visions of grander things to come.

President Diệm established many tuition-free schools like the one Thiết attended in order to assist those who had missed out on an education due to the war. Along with basic secondary school subjects, Thiết's community school offered instruction in a variety of trades and also ran special classes on basic numeracy and literacy skills. Many of the courses were held at night and the majority of Thiết's classmates were soldiers or office workers who were significantly older than him. While all of them were catching up for lost time, none pursued their studies more doggedly than Thiết who overloaded on core subjects in mathematics, physics, chemistry and literature in order to complete seventh, eighth and ninth grades in the space of two years.

One day Thiết's cousin Tuyết saw him studying and could not help but tease the little country bumpkin (*nhà quê*) who only months earlier had stormed in, muddy and confused, from the countryside like a lost water buffalo. "What are you studying so hard for? Do you want to be an intellectual or something?"

Thiết laughed timidly, but did not reply. He would show her; he would show everyone.

With a Touch of Luck and a lot of Effort, Thiết Discovers his Destiny

In the summer of 1958 Thiết completed year nine with credible results, but was nevertheless left unsatisfied by his accomplishments. At that time he had come to view the community school as small, sluggish and ill-equipped to prepare him for the journey ahead. Pushing onwards and upwards, the ambitious young man approached the nearby private Tây Hồ High School where he had heard there was a teacher who came from near his village of Bồ Bản.² After finding him, the teenager made a passionate and well-reasoned plea for a scholarship to complete his final year of junior high school, based on their common geographical-

² Tây Hồ (Western Lake) was the pen-name of Phan Châu Trinh, the famous anti-colonialist from Thiết's province of Quảng Nam. One of his favourite pastimes was fishing on the Western Lake near his home village of Tây Lộc in Tam Kỳ district. See Chapter One at page 60 of this thesis for more details on Phan Châu Trinh.

spiritual roots, Thiết's economic hardship, his recent academic achievements, and an iron-clad guarantee that he would not let the school or himself down. The teacher was eventually persuaded, and Thiết was true to his word.

And so for the first time in his life, Thiết attended a regular school. Tây Hồ High School provided its students with a broad and open education (at least compared to the strict ideological training that he had received with the Việt Minh and the limited instruction he had gained at the community school). It was also vastly improved in terms of infrastructure. In the classrooms there were freshly polished desks and chairs, and the school boasted a well-equipped laboratory, library and canteen. In addition, this was also the first time Thiết's classmates were the same age as him. To the uninformed eye, Thiết was no different to other students dashing through the hallways with their books underarm. But one did not have to dig deep to discover that this was no regular Tây Hồ student. Almost all of his classmates came from relatively wealthy families, sons and daughters of bureaucrats, shop owners or employees of large French companies. Few of them had to work before and after school as he did. Their Đà Nẵng city accents were softer, more distinguished and intelligible compared to the rustic noises that came from Thiết's village-bred mouth. Such differences, however, did not concern the young man; in part because he quickly came to view Tây Hồ as but a stepping stone to arguably the most prestigious school in the province, Phan Châu Trinh Public School.

After becoming the first person in his family to graduate from junior high school in the summer of 1959, Thiết immediately turned his attention to passing the Phan Châu Trinh High School entrance exams. Weighing heavily on his mind and confidence was the fact that his results at Tây Hồ were little more than average. Fortunately, in recognition of his determination rather than his talent, Thiết's cousin Tuyết lessened his workload at the tailor shop so that he could concentrate on his exams. With a little extra time and inexhaustible effort, Thiết excelled and in the autumn of that year was promoted to the lofty halls of Phan Châu Trinh High School.

Established in 1952, Phan Châu Trinh High School quickly gained a reputation as a modern education institution that encouraged students to challenge themselves, to dare to know. For many students, Phan Châu Trinh High School would linger in their memories as the place where they spent their formative years, where they discovered who they were and who they wanted to be. It was the place where lifetime friendships were forged, love was found and lost, and the universe in all its wonder opened up before them. One such student dedicated a poem to the school which, while lacking in subtlety, abounds with feeling.

Dreaming of the Old School: Phan Châu Trinh

A sound in our hearts resounds from that time,
 A sorrowful past rushes by,
 On long nights we restlessly remember
 ...
 “Phan Châu Trinh!” tweet birds about the school.
 ...
 “Phan Châu Trinh” that eternal musical note.
 ...
 Oh rows of trees! Standing serene beside the school.
 Oh the great unknown! Streets so empty and spacious.
 Oh our souls! Our souls cemented.
 Disheartened, a leaf falls gently on a pathway.
 ...
 I want to clasp every blade of grass on the school grounds,
 To visit those blackboards and empty chairs,
 To hear that soft beloved sound reverberate in my heart,
 I would stand there and silently bury the sadness,
 As afternoon raindrops soak my aching soul.
 ...
 Phan Châu Trinh!
 My love, where are you today?
 The school ground beseeches you to return at haste...³

³ *Mơ Về Trường Cũ: Phan Châu Trinh*

*Có tiếng vọng lòng ta từ thuở ấy
 Dĩ vãng về tựa thoáng băng cay
 Có những đêm dài thao thức nhớ
 ...
 Phan Châu Trinh! Chim hót rộn sân trường
 ...
 Phan Châu Trinh, reo thầm muôn nốt nhạc
 ...
 Ôi hàng cây! bên sân trường thanh vắng
 Ôi xa lạ! Con phố trống thênh thang
 Ôi hồn ta đó! hồn ta lặng động
 Chiếc lá sầu rơi nhẹ lối băng khuôn
 ...
 Muốn nâng niu từng ngọn cỏ sân trường*

Thiết was not inclined towards, nor could he afford, the sort of high school sentimentality that breeds nostalgia. While the young man was attending the school of his dreams, he had not forgotten the harsh and solitary nature of the reality around him. While Phan Châu Trinh was a public school where students did not have to pay fees, the scholastically taxing entrance requirements meant that most students were from wealthy or middle class families. By and large, Thiết's classmates had grown up in domestic environments conducive to academic learning and were privy to private tutoring. Thiết did not fit in, but this did not bother him. The young man did not crave for empathy, belonging or solace through his awkward adolescent years. He had no money for, nor interest in trends and fashion. He made acquaintances, but no real friends, and girls simply did not register on his radar. Thiết was there to study, nothing more and nothing less. Even his studies, however, were undertaken in a narrow and purposive manner. While he had moved away from the Việt Minh idea that all valuable knowledge is directed towards socialist revolution, Thiết still viewed learning in strategic terms. The young man was a thinker of the calculating variety so that metaphysical questions such as "Who am I?" and "What is the meaning of life?" were luxuries that he simply could not afford. Meditation and reflection would have to be postponed, left to better times and generations to come. Years later Thiết would recall Phan Châu Trinh High School and many other monuments in his life as being similar to a bus stop, a place of little inherent significance, useful for getting from one place to the next with minimal fuss.

*Xin thăm hỏi bằng vôi và ghé trống
 Để nghe lòng vang nhẹ tiếng thân thương
 Ta đứng đó chôn nỗi buồn căm nín
 Giọt mưa chiều ướt sũng thấm hồn đau*

...
*Phan Châu Trinh! giờ này em ở đâu?
 Sân trường đó xin hẹn ngày trở lại...*

Vương Ngọc Long, "Một Thời Phan Châu Trinh Đà Nẵng" ["A Time at Phan Châu Trinh Đà Nẵng"] in *Phan Châu Trinh Alumni Website* <<http://phanchautrinhdanang.com/b/move.htm>> accessed 15 April 2003.

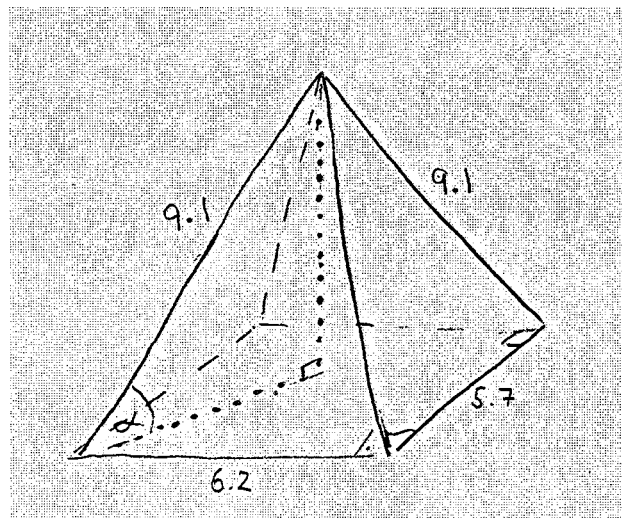
Outside of school, the young man had felt like a burden upon his cousin Tuyét ever since he started going to school during the day. At the same time, he also viewed Tuyét as a restriction; she represented a filial tie that kept him from true independence. Increasingly, Thiét was anxious to get by on his own merits and determined to leave behind his past as a peasant and an artisan. Harnessing the prestige that came with being a Phan Châu Trinh student, Thiét was able to find employment in a bookstore. His remuneration consisted of room, board and, most valuably, books. Along with working as the shop assistant in the mornings and afternoons, Thiét tutored his employer's two children in the evenings. The eighteen year old was thus frightfully busy, but there was solace in the fact that he was no longer judged purely by the agility of his hands or the strength of his back but rather, the sharpness of his mind.

In the spring of 1961, after completing eleventh and twelfth grade, Thiét faced the next great challenge of his academic career, attaining his first baccalaureate. He passed the initial written examination without much trouble, and was then invited to the imperial capital of Hué (about a hundred kilometres north of Đà Nẵng) for the concluding oral examination. It was in Hué that mandarins had once been tested and selected for the imperial civil service and, like the thousands of other candidates from several provinces, Thiét was daunted both by what had come before him and what lay ahead.

The venue for Thiét's exam was a school that had been vacated for the summer. Success required that he pass three tests in mathematics, physics and chemistry. As he waited for his mathematics test in a corridor filled with nervous students, Thiét heard the faint shuffling of shoes, the dropping of a pencil, and an occasional sneeze that broke the heavy air. Mustering all his powers of concentration, the young man went through his mental database of notes and tried not to focus on the line of students ahead of him which was dwindling one-by-one like skydivers pushed from a plane.

Suddenly there was no-one ahead of Thiét and he was dragged into the room in which his fate awaited him. Thiét's confident stride belied the frantic beating of his heart and the swirling clouds inside his head. Before him a dour and

disinterested teacher held a book of questions from which half a dozen would be chosen for Thiét to answer out loud or with the diagrammatic assistance of a blackboard. The exam began. The questions were graded from least to most challenging but none of them was designed to build confidence. The young man took deep breaths. He was nervous but stayed in control by purging himself of emotion. He stepped outside of his meagre body and—as an objective observer from above—calculated the correct thing to think, do and say. Thiét answered question after question without incident before reaching the final one which was shocking in its simplicity.



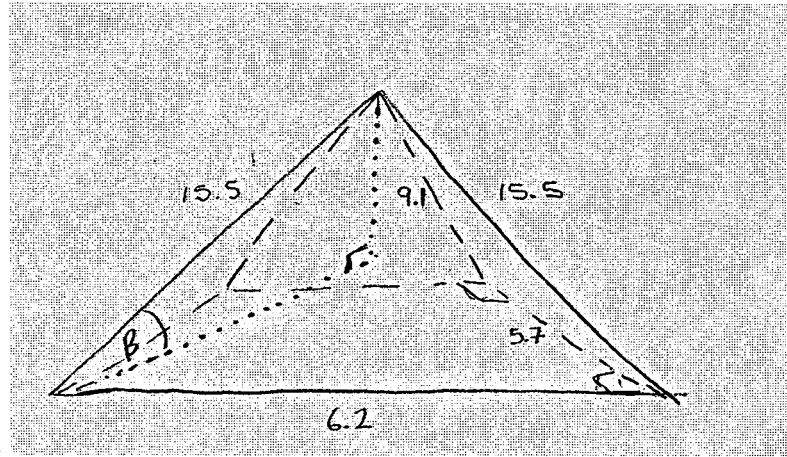
The young man effortlessly applied the timeless knowledge of Pythagoras and the universal laws of trigonometry to arrive at an irrefutable value for α that he checked and rechecked. He released the chalk from his commanding grasp and took a step away from the blackboard.

“Thank you teacher,” he said stoutly to the examiner.

“No need for thanks,” the teacher replied. “At least not until you have completed the second part of the question.”

Thiét apologised for his presumptuousness and returned to the blackboard, picking up the piece of chalk which now seemed significantly heavier. He followed the teacher’s instructions, redrawing the original diagram before

coming to the frightening impression that the solution was not immediately apparent to him.



The startled youth stared at the diagram for some time before resorting to careless calculation and aimless action. Desperately, as if in a mathematical fit, Thiét computed and generated number after number that had, at most, only a vague relationship to the one that he sought. As the seconds ticked by the atmosphere in the classroom became comparable to that of a corporate boardroom and for Thiét the stakes were just as high. If only he had not been so gung-ho with respect to the first half of the question, perhaps he would still have the presence of mind to answer the second half. If only he could solve this one problem then everything—his studies, his life, the war and the world—would surely turn out for the best. But it was too late; the crystal through which everything seemed so uncomplicated had become sullied with doubt, and now the only thing that was clear to the young man was that he did not know the answer.

Thiét did not have to get a hundred percent to pass, but was nevertheless bitterly disappointed as he dusted his diagrams and calculations from the blackboard. It was as if everything he had worked for had come to just that, specks of dust in the wind, the culmination of a student career and a life-time dream embodied in a few ephemeral scribbles. Those problematic pyramids would surely pester him for the rest of his life.

Fortunately, the youth was able to refocus sufficiently to complete his two other oral examinations in physics and chemistry without any major difficulties, after which time he was left alone to await the results and flagellate himself for being confounded earlier that morning. “Stupid! You have done much harder questions in practice. Do you know what that one mistake might cost you!?” he asked himself as he sat in the school quadrangle and watched the shadows lengthen. It was late in the afternoon before the scattered herds of students mustered themselves towards the board where the names of the successful examinees were posted. Thiết burrowed into the crowd and searched desperately for his number and name. Something told him that he would not find it. He scanned the list and scanned it again. And then there it was, “Huỳnh Văn Thiết,” he checked again, and then a third time to make sure. There was no mistake. Thiết was to receive his first baccalaureate.

Overjoyed, the young man joined some acquaintances from school and, using all the money that he had in the world, hired a bicycle and rode to Thuận An beach where he sang and celebrated into the early hours of the morning. It was only during these exceptional instances—when the future was buzzing with expectation of untold promise and progress—that Thiết could live for the moment, appreciate and enjoy the wonders of life in its immediacy. Metaphorically, the youth had climbed a mountain, but it was not the achievement below him that filled him with excitement, but rather the awe-inspiring vision of a grander mountain to climb. And then there was blue expanse above his head and the infinite universe beyond that. Topographically, he was at sea level and fell asleep on the sand, wanting for nothing more than a little rest. It was the first of several pivotal moments in his life when Thiết would find himself beached, with the Great Pacific Ocean stretching out before him, the sound of waves lapping against the sand and the white water reflecting the moonlight.

Upon returning to Đà Nẵng, Thiết was faced with a number of choices. His heartfelt ambition was to be an engineer, a career that would undoubtedly provide him with a satisfying, prestigious and secure life. In the new Việt Nam of the 1960s, one observer noted, such technical education was “perhaps the single

most pressing need".⁴ Moreover, Thiét admired engineers for their knowledge of systems and materials that were alien to the ordinary mind. They knew how to make immense buildings and bridges; how to harness the power of the earth, wind and sea; and even defy the gravitational forces that pin our feet to the ground. In Thiét's mind, the great individuals of tomorrow would not be known for their virtue, loyalty or literary prowess (which is not to say that they could not also possess these attributes); they would be men and women of action, specialists in an age of technocrats.

There were other factors, however, that made engineering seem somewhat less attractive. University entrance required another year of secondary school study and exams before he could receive his second baccalaureate. Thiét would then have to sit the entrance exams for the four year engineering degree. If he stumbled along the way he would be in a most precarious position, as without work or study Thiét would surely be called to the front line. Just as significantly, at twenty years of age, Thiét had never had his own money let alone been able to support his family as his sister Hường had done since she was a young girl. Thiét was tired of being dependent and impoverished. He was sick of others seeing him in tattered clothes and assuming he was dirty and uncivilised. For these reasons, Thiét decided to shelve his engineering dreams and use his first baccalaureate to find a job.

In summer of 1961, a fantastic opportunity arose for Thiét to satisfy both his immediate and longer-term ambitions. The Phú Thọ Higher Technical Centre in Sài Gòn had recently been established with multi-million piastre support from US and French aid agencies, and was taking enrolments for a three year technician's course. The diploma was less prestigious than the full engineering degree, but there were several distinct advantages: entrants needed only to have completed their first baccalaureate; were practically guaranteed a secure job upon completion; and after three years were automatically eligible to sit the entrance exams for engineering school.

⁴ Edgar N. Pike, "Problems of Education in Vietnam" in Wesley Robert Fishel (ed.), *Problems of Freedom: South Vietnam Since Independence* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961) 75-98 at 85.

Hundreds came from all over Central Việt Nam to Huế for the Phú Thọ Technical Centre exams. Evidently, Thiết would have to perform at his very best. He approached his exams in a systematic and robotic fashion, totally concentrating on the question before him and determined not to allow over-confidence to threaten his chances. Afterwards the young man felt like he could not have done any better, and yet he knew that his chances were slim. Returning to the bookshop, Thiết waited anxiously for the results that would prove unequivocally whether dreams really did come true. When the day finally arrived, he was astonished to see his name among only five others in the announcements section of the local newspaper. The young man read and interpreted those few small letters over and over, as if they were a front page headline.

“Huỳnh Văn Thiết Gets Into Phú Thọ Technical Centre! Peasant Boy Overcomes the Odds! Watch Out World!”

Never had Thiết been afforded such good fortune. But surely his momentous achievements were not a matter of pure chance? In philosophy class at Phan Châu Trinh High School, Thiết had come to appreciate the thoughts of the eighteenth century French Enlightenment thinker, Voltaire. For Voltaire, belief in the fortune of gods was an unmistakable sign of backwardness.

A peasant thinks that it has hailed on his field by chance; but the philosopher knows that there is no chance, and that it was impossible, in the constitution of this world, for it not to hail on that day in that place.⁵

We are all, Voltaire asserted, “equally the toys of destiny”.⁶ But this does not mean that we should descend to fatalism or indifference. For some of us are destined to reason well while others are destined to reason badly.⁷ Some of us are predisposed to “much merit and great talent” and we shall never know if we do

⁵ Francois-Marie Arouet Voltaire (Peter Gay trans.), *The Philosophical Dictionary* (New York: Harvest, 1962) 236.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

not live our lives proactively and to the fullest potential.⁸ Thiết succinctly paraphrased and mildly modified (in accordance with his recent experiences) Voltaire's philosophy, constructing a formula for living life that he would draw on over the years in both times of triumph and woe. "Success requires three things: hard work, talent and just a little bit of luck."

The young man had but one decision left to make. He was eligible to undertake one of two diplomas at the Technical Centre, civil engineering or electrical engineering. Even this decision, however, seemed straightforward. In fact, it was as if the choice had been made for him years ago, when his grandfather took him the city for the first time and he touched that shimmering block of ice and felt that unforgettable electrical surge.

A Grand Transformation?

The community rice kitchen in downtown Sài Gòn provided the cheapest lunch in town to anyone who turned up on its doorstep. As word got around, diners had to eat their meal while also shuffling along the benches which always managed to squeeze in one more. By the end of 1961, Thiết had been frequenting the rice kitchen for over three months; that is, ever since the bus had dropped him off in Sài Gòn where he boarded with a relative of the bookstore owner that he had worked for in Đà Nẵng. Thiết was a regular of sorts at the food hall, but such was the fluid nature of those who dined there, that he rarely talked to the same person in any one week. Dynamism was the common characteristic of the community rice kitchen's patrons. *Cyclo* drivers were the most prominent faction; but scores of labourers and students also took advantage of the Diệm regime's social welfare program. All of them were in need, but few were without hope.

Thiết sat back and put his hand on his rounded stomach. The food was far from lavish, they almost never had meat, and when vegetables were on the menu one could be assured that it was bindweed (*rau muống*) which was either overcooked to the point of mash or undercooked so that the stems were hard and wiry. No-

⁸ *Ibid.*, 236-7.

one complained though, largely because the rice and fish sauce were limitless. Like many others at the soup kitchen, Thiết had become apt at gradually expanding his abdominal bursting point so that on most nights he could make do without dinner.

It was perhaps the sensation of post-lunch warmth and drowsiness that clouded Thiết's Marxist-Leninist perspective. Whatever the reason, this one-time Việt Minh devotee was utterly unconcerned for the plight of the suffering proletariat all around him. In the bustling city, industrial exploitation was growing to Dickensian proportions as workers with nothing but their labour to sell had their blood and sweat siphoned off and converted into ever-fattening profits for capitalist landlords. Maintaining this socialist critique, the very food Thiết ate was a seductive and hegemonic weapon that served to mollify the revolutionary fervour of the masses. Such proletariat provisions and capitalist concessions softened the oppressive blows of the ruling clique, but did nothing when it came to wrenching away their abusive power. In fact, this welfare-state hand-out dissuaded the workers from turning to the true light of the left, and insidiously maintained the underlying systems of ownership and production that alienated and impoverished them. The movement for Vietnamese independence and the global socialist revolution itself was no doubt greatly hindered by Thiết's ideological prevarication and noontime gluttony. And yet, the young man was untroubled. In fact, Thiết felt more content and secure in the community kitchen than he ever had in the Việt Minh-controlled jungles or even in his home village. His belly, so full that it ached ever so slightly, convinced him that he was no victim of false consciousness.

Between 1954 when he had left the Việt Minh School and 1961 when he arrived in Sài Gòn, Thiết had undergone a reformation of sorts. No longer did he view personal salvation as being attainable through the benediction of an intermediate institution like the Party. Specifically, Thiết had come to believe that independence and development did not necessitate that Vietnamese show pious obedience to the Party's decrees and set up shrines to prophets like Hồ Chí Minh. On the contrary, they were wholly dependent upon an individual's own thoughts, actions and effort.

Unlike Martin Luther, however, Thiết's revelation and reformation did not come about suddenly. Nor was it inspired by a near-death experience, a moment of divine perception or a violent ethico-philosophical coup. Rather, Thiết's ideological allegiances and revolutionary consciousness were steadily converted by an amorphous weight of evidence, almost as if he was a juror coming to a decision at the end of a prolonged court case. Astonishingly, however, for much of the time during which the young man's world view shifted from the extreme left to the mild right, he was not even aware of the case that was being made or the change that was taking place within and outside of him. He was so absorbed in the everyday tasks of survival and achievement, that decades would pass before he was motivated to think deeply about what exactly had turned him against Vietnamese Marxism-Leninism.

One of the reasons for this momentous shift was simply his detachment from Việt Minh propaganda, which created space in the young man's heart and mind for alternative perspectives and loyalties. As soon as he had left the Việt Minh fold, Thiết had started to see a disjunction between the political theory that he had learnt at school in Cây Sành and the everyday reality around him. After returning to Bò Bản in 1954, when he was still an aspiring communist revolutionary, Thiết could not help but notice that harvests were bigger than ever in peacetime under the capitalist reactionary regime. And while he had never risen above urban impoverishment in Đà Nẵng or Sài Gòn, the young man was inspired by the hope of following others who were clearly prospering in the new US-funded economy. In the late 1950s, construction in Đà Nẵng seemed ubiquitous and the economy was booming with the assistance of massive amounts of American aid. Ingenuity and industriousness, perceived Thiết, abounded in the absence of constant self-criticism and the heavy hand of the Party. This progress was clearly not a consequence of stringent state planning and collective ownership. On the contrary, it was a direct result of the efforts of individuals who had been presented with the incentive to work and succeed for themselves and their families.

Gradually, Thiết became convinced that communism was not only misguided but also deceitful and malicious. While at that stage Thiết had little time or interest in public affairs, it was clear from the morsels of information that he received from acquaintances and radio reports from the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) and VOA (Voice of America) that much of Eastern Europe was not a nirvana of wealth and happiness; it was a dismal place of severe oppression and need. The communists were also devoid of filial respect and devotion (*vô gia đình*), indoctrinating young children to spy on their parents who had nurtured and sacrificed so much for them. Thiết knew this better than anyone, as he too had once been enchanted by utopian promises and Việt Minh camaraderie. He too had believed that his links to the Revolution and the Party were the only ones that truly mattered. Better than anyone, Thiết believed, he knew the power of the communists to manipulate the ignorant and downtrodden should not be underestimated.

Whether it was a cause or a symptom of his ideological shift, as Thiết grew older he began to learn more about his father's, Việt's, death at the hands of the Việt Minh and came to view such actions as despicable and unjustifiable by even the grandest of theories. No doubt from within the anti-communist cliques in which he occasionally found himself, it was easier and at times efficacious to recount how the Việt Minh terrorists had brutally slain his father. The evocation of that permanent vision of Việt's skeleton, its wrists bound with wire, confirmed in the young man's heart and mind that communism was not only defective, but also deceitful and depraved. The Việt Minh freedom fighters that Thiết had once admired thereby turned into despicable Việt Cộng terrorists.

It must also be noted, however, that while many things changed for Thiết during his impressionable teenage years, what remained intact was a desire for the modern, for straight-line progress, economic-as-industrial development, and to know and control the world around him. Nor had he jettisoned his faith in positivist science (the acceptance as true of only that which is meticulously measurable and objectively verifiable) as being the optimal means of both comprehending the world and achieving civilisation for Việt Nam and humankind. In fact, this disposition was reinforced over the years so that his

radical ideological shift was accompanied by epistemological, and perhaps even teleological, accentuation. In other words, when Thiét day-dreamed about the perfect world in which he wanted to live—a world which was achievable in his time—he saw a bustling city that glowed with the promise of tomorrow; he saw everyone in their cars, eager and able to get to where they wanted to be; he saw children with loving parents who could provide them with every opportunity in life; he saw the dissipation of barbarous superstitions, tribal bonds and religious responsibilities that had long ago fostered differences and conflict; and he saw a government that could not be seen (the vanguard party and proletarian dictatorship had indeed withered away to become an invisible hand). Everyone would be smiling, wealthy and healthy; their needs, security and comfort would be, by and large, unified and fulfilled. Arguably, then, Thiét's political journey—its direction, end point and method of travel—had not really changed at all.

Of course, at that time, it did not occur to Thiét that the two contending grand theories in his life and international politics might have so much in common. The Cold War was underway and everyone and everything seemed either to bask in angelic light or dwell in the devilish darkness. For Thiét, at the age of twenty, the idea that change could coincide with and indeed facilitate sameness was an alien one. His life had never been more vibrant; everything was surely heading up never to come down again. Soon after starting his diploma at the technical centre, Thiét did so well that he attained a scholarship from the Nông Sơn Coal Mine. It was not a lot of money; but enough to elevate him out of the rice kitchen every lunch time. Most notably, except for his brother Biét who remained in Central Việt Nam, his family was reunited. His mother and sister, Trương, moved down to Sài Gòn and they all lived in a house that his oldest sister Hương had purchased. Hương's journey to the city was also one of harrowing progress. Her story tells of fortitude and woe and is instructive of how the resilience and unbending character of ordinary people can turn abject defeats into the grandest of victories and visa versa.

The Saigonisation of Hương and Americanisation of Sài Gòn

Hương arrived in Sài Gòn with all her worldly possessions balanced over her shoulders and areca leaves characteristically bound to the soles of her feet as shoes. In the autumn of 1956, the twenty-one year old had embarked on a Buddhist pilgrimage with family and friends. The small band of pilgrims was determined to walk three hundred and fifty kilometres to the seaside city of Nha Trang, stopping along the way to visit temples, holy sites and popular tourist destinations. While the two month trip was gruelling, it was also thoroughly invigorating for Hương who had never come so close to being on vacation. Upon arriving in Nha Trang, the young woman was physically exhausted, but her spirit of adventure was not yet quenched. Notably, this spirit was wholly unrelated to Buddhism, which she was not really interested in anyway. Rather, Hương felt liberated, far away from her family and her responsibilities as the eldest child. She was excited by what lay ahead, by what she might achieve on her own and by herself. And so when an opportunity arose to hitch a ride to Sài Gòn, Hương eagerly accepted. Before continuing on her personal sojourn, the young woman thanked her fellow travellers and wished them a safe return to their villages and ordinary lives. To one relative she added, "Please tell my mother not to worry, that I have gone to make a fortune in the city and that she should receive a letter and some money from me in the not too distant future."

Upon arriving in the capital of South Việt Nam, Hương stared agape from the bus window at what the French had referred to the city as the "Pearl of the Orient" or the "Paris of the Far East". Sài Gòn's wide promenades were lined with graceful old tamarind trees and were bustling with vehicles. Wave after wave of well-dressed people flowed out from the regal buildings and vendors sold everything that a person could possibly want, wear, eat, use and discard.

Without a place to stay, Hương sought out a distant relative who lived in Sài Gòn with his family. Hương had never met her Uncle Sơn before and so was not sure if she would be greeted with warmth. As she approached his house the young woman reminded herself, "Fortune has brought you this far, surely it will not abandon you now." To her great relief and surprise, Sơn not only took her in but

also gave her a job as the live-in maid and offered to pay for her education (Huong could hardly read at the time). "Who says that city-living is unforgiving and unvirtuous?" thought the wide-eyed young woman from Bò Bàn.

Not long after moving in with Son and his family, Huong realised how naïve she had been. The law of the city was, if anything, more brutal than that of the jungle. Blinded by the dazzling Pearl of Indochina, Huong had forgotten for a crucial instant the universal precept that she had learnt at home, "Nothing in life is free and anything accepted as such will prove to be very costly indeed." Less than a fortnight after Huong started working for Son, the two maids who had previously served the nine-member household were fired, leaving Huong with the heaviest of burdens. She had to wake up well before sunrise to feed and walk the dogs, fetch water, wash the clothes and make breakfast for the entire household. During the day there was no respite from the scrubbing, dusting, sweeping, boiling, peeling, shopping, massaging and shrill complaints of her captors. Despite toiling over each meal, she was left with only scraps of vegetables and burnt rice to eat. To make matters worse, these morsels were often acridly spiced with admonishment and insult as the Southerners had different palates to Huong's; their fish sauce was sweeter and their soups more sour. When she raised the issues of payment and the education that had been promised to her, Huong was chastised for being ungrateful.

The situation turned violent after a few weeks when both Son and his son revealed their dark and licentious intentions. During moments of seclusion and shame, they advanced upon Huong and abused her in ways so horrific that they resist recollection. One day, after Huong fought back, she was beaten and thrown out. Aimlessly, the young woman ran through the streets of the city before collapsing on a sidewalk. Through all her ordeals in recent years she had never allowed herself to cry, never allowed anyone to know that she was vulnerable. Now the tears of rage and despair glazed Huong's marble cheeks as hundreds of unconcerned well-to-do city-folk walked blindly by. "I should have never left the countryside," she told herself. "Who was I to think that I could come here without a roof over my head or a piastre in my pocket and make something of

myself? I've gone nowhere...In fact, I've gone backwards. I've been exploited, abused and discarded like a piece of trash."

This fiery burst of negativity, while no doubt intense, was quickly extinguished by Hương's reservoir of pride and will. With her head between her knees and her long ragged hair spewing out into the gutter, the young woman resolved that she was not yet broken and never would be. At that moment she realised that she had also gained something of great value during those first few months in Sài Gòn, something that she would hold on to for the rest of her days. She was street-wise (even more so), possessing irrefutable and invaluable evidence that men could not be trusted. Indeed, Hương concluded, to trust anyone is to be vulnerable and eventually to surrender. The young woman was on her own in a brutal zero-sum world, and would have it no other way. That same afternoon Hương stood up, stopped feeling sorry for herself and set out to (re)make her destiny.

Sáu ran a cake stall at the local market and had much sympathy for Hương who regularly bought things from her for Son's family. A few years Hương's senior, Sáu had adopted the role of older sister and was also her only friend in the world. Upon seeing Hương in such a desperate state and after learning more about what she had suffered, Sáu allowed the distraught but determined young woman to live and work with her. Hương tidied up around Sáu's little house, helped her at the market and ran errands to earn her keep. Long after the two had lost contact, Hương would remember and be grateful to Sáu for these precious moments of reprieve. It was clear, however, that this could only be a short-term arrangement as Hương had not come to Sài Gòn to do what she could just as easily achieve in Bò Bán.

In fact, it was only a matter of days before Hương was offered a way out from her demoralising toil. On that morning, fate placed under her gaze a sheet of newspaper that fluttered in such a manner that it seemed to call out to be picked up. Despite her paltry reading skills, Hương was quick to recognise the opportunity before her. On the discarded piece of paper there was an advertisement for saleswomen with "good looks and poise" that the young woman immediately recognised as her calling.

Days later, Hương arrived at the job interview wearing borrowed shoes and a loosely fitting brown peasant's outfit (*áo bà ba*). Never before had she seen so many striking women in one place, most of them arriving on scooters, all of them were stunning in their vibrant gowns. Unable to resist feelings of inadequacy and intimidation as she waited for her interview, Hương felt like a moth in a kaleidoscope of butterflies. She was tempted to give up, but told herself that she had everything to gain and nothing to lose. When the time came for Hương to perform, she encased herself in confidence, in a diamond-like armour that also served to magnify her exquisite beauty. There were just two positions on offer that day, but the odds were irrelevant. Hương got the job and a day later started her training as an advertising saleswoman for the *Transportation Rules and Regulations* (*Giao Thông Luật Lệ*) magazine which supposedly had a national and international readership of 2,500,000. On her identification card she looks over her right shoulder (as was the style at the time), her dark-as-coal eyes, pure-white face and finely chiselled lips glistening under a crown of brilliantly braided raven black hair. This was Hương's first ever photograph. It captures an unshakeable determination and air of self-assurance for which she would become well-known. But there is also a glimmer of girlish purity, a trace of the countryside that is absent in all subsequent images of her. Decades later when Hương had a cupboard full of photo albums and garish personalised calendars, she would keep that faded identification card on a shelf where it remained easily accessible and dear to her heart.

Getting the job at the newspaper proved to be somewhat easier than the work itself. All day, Hương and her partner had to walk around the city selling advertising space in the *Transportation Rules and Regulations* magazine. The salary was miniscule, such that the job only became worthwhile if they could take advantage of the thirty-percent commission. Initially, Hương was held back by her partner who was not endeared to manual labour and feared the unforgiving rays of the sun. The partnership was only a week old before the more entrepreneurial of the two suggested that they split up in order to cover more ground. Freed of her encumbrance, Hương's commission increased rapidly. Success, however, militated against more success as the tasks of collecting

money from existing clients and convincing them to renew their contracts left little time for Hương to seek out more business. She needed to move faster; she needed to learn to ride a bicycle.

And so, one afternoon in early 1957, Hương borrowed Sáu's bicycle and made a commitment to learn how to ride before the day was through. Riding the contraption was not that difficult for her, but she struggled with the art of stopping. Invariably, Hương suffered numerous bumps and grazes, made more painful by the caustic mockery of bystanders. Nevertheless, scarcely two or three stars had bespeckled the sky before Hương was content that she had mastered the bicycle and could set off for home swathed in the bloody and sweaty satisfaction of a job well done. It was with the same gritty sense of purpose that while working for the *Transportation Rules and Regulations* magazine during the day, at night over a period of three years Hương learnt how to read, keep accounts, speak English and use a typewriter.

There was one more thing that Hương had to do before she could claim any significant level of achievement—fix her accent. As each day passed, Hương was increasingly revolted by the taste of dirt (the soil of a Central Vietnamese peasant) on every word that oozed from her mouth. It was Hương's impression that Southerners had an air of sophistication and civilisation emanating from their proximity to Europe. In 1861 the French established themselves in Sài Gòn and from there set about conquering/civilising the rest of Việt Nam. Cochinchina (*Nam Bộ*) in the South became a full colony under France in 1884, while Annam (*Trung Bộ*) in the Centre and Tonkin (*Bắc Bộ*) in the North were but protectorates (in a practical administrative sense there was very little difference). The Southerners, Hương believed, were more open to Western influence and as a result had benefited from the investment of capital and ideas.

Accordingly, Hương wanted fervently to be a Southerner, and with typical resolve set about eradicating what she saw as the heinous habit of Central-speak which had been inappropriately instilled in her from the earliest possible age. She undertook an intensive program of cultural-linguistic assimilation, listening to herself as if she were her own elocution instructor and meticulously rectifying

each syllable, vowel and tone. Not long afterwards, anyone would have thought by looking at and listening to the young woman that she had been born in Sài Gòn and had never left. In fact, her assimilation was so complete that years later Hương would berate one of her employees without the slightest concern for contradiction, “You insolent and foul-mouthed wretch!” she screamed at the young receptionist. “I should have never hired someone from the Central Vietnamese countryside. I know that I was born there but I was not meant to be. Listen to my accent compared to yours. Truly I am from the South.” Never did Hương realise that the tenaciousness and ingenuity that allowed her to succeed in Sài Gòn were rooted in that small village of Bò Bản, her arduous and violent (lost) childhood, her peasant’s ability to make do, and her personal proclivity to make better.

After two years of working for *Transportation Rules and Regulations* Hương was the head saleswoman, but she was still not content. The advertising market was saturated and she yearned for much more money and to be her own boss. As a stepping stone towards these goals, Hương took on an additional night job as a manager at a bar named the *Simone* in Chợ Lớn in 1958. When the *Simone* came up for sale the owner was flabbergasted to discover that Hương had the means to buy it, and was also taken aback by the ferociousness of her negotiating skills. Little did he know that while living with Sáu like a pauper, Hương had accumulated a queen’s treasure and developed an unyielding regal air.

Early in 1962, a better business proposition arose in the form of a restaurant named the *Lido* in downtown Sài Gòn, and so Hương hastily sold the *Simone* in order to purchase it. By that time Hương’s mother and sister had joined her in Sài Gòn, and along with Thiết (who was studying at the Technical School of Electricity) they lived in a small apartment annexed to the *Lido*. Together the family renovated the restaurant, revamping the furniture, fitting air-conditioning and installing a sound system. Two renowned Chinese chefs were hired along with a French manager named Pierre and half a dozen tuxedoed waiters to serve the thirty tables. Each night after organising the music and setting up the restaurant for business, Thiết left to study and sleep at a nearby temple where it was quiet. With the family’s concerted effort and Hương’s astute business sense,

it was not long before the *Lido* had become a popular haunt for the Saigonese *nouveaux riche*. The hippest new-age Vietnamese singers in the land performed there—including Thanh Thúy, Minh Hiếu, Hoàng Oanh, Thanh Tuyền, and Phương Dung—and they were often transported to and from gigs by Thiết on his scooter. Classical music was usually played during meals, and when the band had free rein it would quicken the tempo with a *Cha, Cha, Cha* or some Elvis rock ‘n’ roll. Marie Linh was well-known at the *Lido* for her renditions of Western music. Particularly popular was Chubby Checker’s *Let’s Twist Again*; however, there was no dancing as the first lady Madam Nhu had prohibited such flagrant forms of decadence. Among the famous patrons were the generals Tôn Thất Đính and Trần Văn Đôn who in 1963 would orchestrate the coup that brought down the Diệm dynasty. One of the richest Vietnamese men in Sài Gòn had a table permanently reserved. But the main attraction was undoubtedly Hương, who at exactly midnight every evening, made a grand entrance into the *Lido* in order to collect the takings and capture the attention and adoration of patrons. “Who is that?!” newcomers would ask, and upon discovering that she was the boss they would exclaim, “Who, that baby-san?!”⁹

At the *Lido* it was possible to gain an impression of the modern world that US money, culture and influence were creating in the RVN and in Sài Gòn in particular. The *Lido* was a microcosm of the highly urbanised, consumerist, Westernised society that one of the leading US political thinkers and practitioners at the time, Walt Rostow, had endeavoured to promote in order to win what was known as the “other war” (closely related to the tasks of nation building and Winning Hearts and Minds [WHAM]).

In his influential book first published in 1960, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, Walt Rostow argued that there was a unilinear path to socio-economic growth in which societies like the US had reached an ultimate level of development exemplified by high levels of consumption; while

⁹ Hương sold the *Lido* not long after Diệm’s assassination in November 1963 to a Frenchman who renamed it the *Crazy Cow*. The club was close to the radio station (a primary target for the revolutionaries) and with the instability and conflict increasing at that time, Hương decided that that it was better to move on.

underdeveloped nations like Việt Nam were yet to take off.¹⁰ For Rostow, Western intervention in Third World countries was by its very nature progressive as it is only via such contact that underdeveloped peoples could be infused with Western entrepreneurial values and thereby be projected forward and upwards in the direction of the developed world. Importantly such contact and values, he argued, also served as a prophylactic against communism which Rostow labelled as a “disease of transition”. Rostow also believed that urbanisation was a critical step towards the transition from a traditional to a modern society. In this sense he was supported by another influential political figure, Samuel Huntington, who would have no doubt put forth Hương’s (and indeed Thiết’s) migration to the city as a prime example of how (forced) urbanisation = financial enrichment = progress:

The urban slum, which seems so horrible to middle-class Americans, often becomes for the poor peasant a gateway to a new and better way of life. For some poor migrants, the wartime urban boom has made possible incomes five times those which they had in the countryside.¹¹

With respect to the conflict in Việt Nam, both Rostow and Huntington constructed and promoted “the other war” in a manner that justified the horrors of “the military one”. Specifically, the massive destruction of lives, crops, homes and social structures in the Vietnamese countryside as a consequence of US bombing,¹² the spraying of defoliants,¹³ and mass dislocation¹⁴ was portrayed as

¹⁰ Walt W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹¹ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Bases of Accommodation” in *Foreign Affairs* 46 (July 1968) 645. Cited in James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000) 234-5.

¹² During the War the US exploded more munitions than were used in both World Wars and the Korean War combined. Thomas J. McCormick, *America’s Half Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War and After* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) 153.

¹³ Defoliants were used to clear the jungle cover used by the communists even after the debilitating long-term effects on the ecology, future generations of Vietnamese and US soldiers were well-known. From 1965 to 1971 3.2 percent of the cultivated land and 46.4 percent of the forest land of South Việt Nam was sprayed by defoliants, the most notorious being Agent Orange of which around 44 million litres was used. The chemical companies Dow Chemical, Diamond Alkali, Uniroyal Chemical, Thompson Chemical, Hercules, Monsanto, Ahsul and Thompson Hayward all provided the US government with materials in its campaign of ecological terrorism or “ecocide” as it has since been condemned. Michael Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochinese Wars, 1772-1991* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 1995) 237. D.J. Sagar, *Major Political Events in Indo-China 1945-1990* (New York: Facts on File, 1991) 152. Edgar Lederer, “Report on Chemical Warfare in Vietnam”, presented to the second session

being of little significance when compared to the civilising effects of increased income and the satisfaction that comes with the purchase and consumption of goods.¹⁵

US aid given to the Vietnamese in the name of winning “the other war” did not just serve to obfuscate US military destruction. In many ways, the aid itself—the haphazard way that it was distributed and the systems of corruption that it nourished—had a deleterious impact upon Vietnamese society and as a consequence undercut American attempts to secure hearts and minds. But how can money and goods have a negative impact, particularly for a poor nation like Việt Nam? The problem was not one of insufficient supply. The Vietnamese economy was, after all, the product of the most “expensive foreign aid project in history”.¹⁶ This expense had as much to do with the political philosophy of the providers as it did with the need of the recipients. For instance, by the 1960s it was accepted by US officials that the only way to get around Vietnamese corruption was to saturate crooked Vietnamese officials with so much aid that a desirable amount might eventually trickle down to where it was intended.¹⁷ The US government, it was believed, had:

...no choice but to force its supplies upon the Vietnamese people: thousands of tons of bulgur wheat, thousands of gallons of cooking oil, tons of pharmaceuticals, enough seed to plant New Jersey with miracle rice, enough fertilizer for the same, light bulbs, garbage trucks, an atomic reactor, enough concrete to pave a province, enough corrugated tin to roof it, enough barbed wire to circle it seventeen times, dentists’ drills, soybean seedlings, sewing kits, mortars, machine tools, toothbrushes, plumbing and land mines.¹⁸

of the *International War Crimes Tribunal on Vietnam* (20 November to 1 December 1967) <<http://www.infotrad.clara.co.uk/antiwar/warcrimes/index.html>> accessed on 26 March 2003.

¹⁴ It was estimated that by 1970 five to six million Vietnamese had been moved from the countryside to the city and refugee camps. Between 1958 and 1968 the population of Sài Gòn increased from less than one million to three million. Don Luce, “Tell Your Friends that We’re People” in *The Pentagon Papers, Volume V of the Senator Gravel Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) 91-100 at 94.

¹⁵ Gibson, *The Perfect War*, 235.

¹⁶ US economic assistance from 1954 to 1975 has been modestly estimated at \$US8.5 billion with a further US\$17 billion in military aid. On average it constituted about 25% of Việt Nam’s gross national product. Dacy, *Foreign Aid, War and Economic Development*, 1, 20.

¹⁷ Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1972) 461.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 462.

These mountains of mal-directed US aid served only to exacerbate socio-economic inequalities and facilitate graft, creating a wealthy minority and a burgeoning dissatisfied underclass. Vietnamese development would have no doubt been better served by the steady nurturing of local industry and the encouragement of a broad-based sustainable Vietnamese economy, but such programs were antithetical to the politico-military prerogatives of the day and the enduring cultural arrogance which demanded the rapid wholesale reconstruction of Việt Nam in the image and interests of the US.

Thus, while resources were not being extracted out of Việt Nam in the same way as they had during the French era, the US presence nevertheless exuded the stench of self-serving and savage imperialism. This was in part due to the rural destruction that coincided with urban construction during the US era. Even in the cities, however, many ordinary people did not feel like agents or beneficiaries of Western progress and fraternity. On the contrary, Vietnamese quickly realised that the only way to survive and occasionally prosper in the new Việt Nam was by servicing the wealthy minority of Vietnamese and the growing hordes of American soldiers and advisors. As this service economy grew in all its gaudiness, so too did a sense that the Americans were not there for the Vietnamese, but rather, the Vietnamese were there for the Americans. This was nowhere more evident than in the cardboard cities that had built up around US bases where Vietnamese served to live.

...from An Khe to Nha Trang, Cu Chi, and Chu Lai, there had grown up entire towns made of packing cases and waste tin from the canning factories—entire towns advertising Schlitz, Coca-Cola, or Pepsi Cola a thousand times over. The “food,” “shelter,” and “job opportunities” that Westmoreland had promised came to this: a series of packing-case towns with exactly three kinds of industry—the taking in of American laundry, the selling of American cold drinks to American soldiers, and prostitution for the benefit of the Americans.¹⁹

The much-heralded Saigonese middle-class, then, was still-born into a world of excess and an age of scavengers. In a society where money had come to mean

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 470-1.

everything, a small group of opportunists became exceedingly wealthy and constructed shaky new social ladders upon which they climbed upwards. It was not long before traditionalists cried out that greed had replaced the virtues and values of generations. Society had been turned upside-down and for many Vietnamese its face was hideous. In the past it was sometimes said that Confucianism placed scholars first, peasants second, artisans third, and merchants fourth (*sĩ, nông, công, thương*), but now prostitutes were first, cyclo drivers second, taxi drivers third, and maids fourth.²⁰ The economy and society were dependent and frail, and when the Americans left it would all be laid to waste.

It should also be noted, however, that many of these prostitutes, shoe-shine boys, cyclo drivers and maids made do as best they could in an environment that was not of their making or choosing. One should not skim over their inspiring personal stories only to derive a message of dependency, decrepitude and woe. At a personal level, it is argued, one can discover micro-narratives of triumph, sacrifice and determination: of a prostitute who does what she must to provide her younger siblings with food and an education; of a *cyclo* driver who pedals through the city in the heat of the afternoon to support his elderly parents; of a “*boi*” waiter who runs tables to pay for books; of a street vendor who deals in pilfered goods from the US military store (the Postal Exchange or PX) to fund a shrine for her deceased father; of a man who scavenges for scraps of food and material from an army garbage heap, and of a woman named Hương who is in some ways indicative of all these everyday people. To be sure, their efforts were not always respectable or righteous, but they can nevertheless be admired for their resilience and endeavour.

In 1960, in midst of everything else that was happening in her life, Hương gave birth to a son who she named Tâm. Tâm’s father, Tãng, was the director of the Broadcasting Department and was first smitten by Hương at a beauty contest in which he was a judge (she came second and won so many prizes that she had to hire a separate cyclo to take them home). “He was the most handsome man in

²⁰ Dương Văn Mai Elliot, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 315.

Sài Gòn,” Hương would later recall of Tãng. “He had the rosy cheeks of a Frenchman and owned over two hundred suits.” Despite these endearing qualities, Hương discarded Tãng not long after Tâm was born upon discovering that he wanted more children. Hương had resolved to give birth only once. During her pregnancy she had felt as if she had been invaded by a foreign being, and the process of giving birth itself was excruciating beyond all justification. Perhaps Hương would have felt otherwise if she had conceived a girl, but there was no way she was going to find out.

There were many other men who would come into Hương’s life only to be used and rejected. A particularly distraught fellow stormed into the *Lido* in 1962 with a knife and a bottle of whisky, threatening to kill himself unless Hương took him back. After she flatly refused, the man drank the remainder of the whisky and stabbed himself in the gut over and over again. Hương coolly called for a doctor before taking a step back to examine the pitiful thing on the floor that had once been her fiancé. “He looked as stupid as a fish,” she recollected, “as if he was waiting for the liquor to flow out from all those bloody wounds.”

Hương’s relationships with men are not easily understood. Often she looked down on them and found satisfaction in stomping upon them as if they were unpleasant insects. No doubt, they revolted her and yet for some reason she needed them. She needed them to reaffirm her worth and status as a higher being. She needed them to desire, praise and adore her. Not unlike relations between Việt Nam and the West, Hương’s dealings with men were inherently contradictory so that shame and strength seemed to coexist in one instant, and divisions between the oppressed and the oppressor, the exploited and the exploiter, were never quite clear. Equally perplexing was that while Hương could not live without the attention of men, she was repulsed by their brutish touch. The cause of this allergic addiction is unclear. What is known, however, is that while Hương never revealed to anyone the full extent of the crimes committed against her when she first came to Sài Gòn by her Uncle Son and his son, those horrific acts could not be erased from her memory and would forever scar her soul. These issues of sexuality, exploitation and violence were alien to Hương’s younger brother Thiết who at that time had a head full of numbers.

Managing and Engineering the Second Indochina Technowar

$$7/2 [(4.567 - 1.546) + 3.114 - 7.80(1.202 \times 0.548)] =$$

$$4.565/1.222 [(9.985 \times 3.245) \times (6.754 \times 4.520)] =$$

$$0.213 \Pi/1.222 [5.640 + 7.853(1.223 \times 5.735) - 3.123(1.114 + 4.97) + 8.008] =$$

With the age of abacuses all but gone and calculators yet to arrive, Thiết had to solve such questions in quick succession with nothing but his brainpower, a well-chewed pencil and a few sheets of paper. It was common for students of mathematics at the Phú Thọ Higher Technical Centre to be confronted by problems that were embedded in pure theory with no inherent practical relevance other than to find the simple numerical beauty at the end of an abstract and convoluted process. During the numerous exams that he undertook, time limits were always strictly monitored in order to determine who was the most proficient and efficient automaton, who could revel in all the pressure and perspiration. This was quick-draw mathematics and Thiết was in his element.

There were also slightly more practical classes in Thiết's Technical School of Electricity that covered energy transformation, substations, electrical machines and mechanics. In these subjects students gained a glimpse of the grand forces that they would some day command in the real world. For example, in one exam Thiết was presented with an abstract quantity of water for which he had to calculate the amount of energy that could be harnessed as it fell from a given height and rushed at a particular speed. Even when diagrams were provided, however, Thiết viewed such questions as purely abstract. There was never enough time to consider what the numbers might actually represent or mean. In fact, there was barely enough time to compute them. Throughout his studies and particularly during exams, Thiết always felt like he was one or two equations behind. And yet it was not uncommon for the young man to emerge from his studies drenched in adrenalin as if he had run and won a steeplechase, surmounting obstacle after obstacle at great speed. These vigorous problem-

solving pursuits often left Thiét's spirits so high that the world seemed small beneath him.

The halls of the Technical School of Electricity were full of forward-looking youths like Thiét who projected a sense of can-doism. The twelve students in his class, all male, were cowboys advancing the frontiers of Vietnamese knowledge and control. The very language that they used—*capacitors, diodes, electrodes, mega-volts*—evidenced their status as pioneers, exemplars of technical adroitness and innovation.²¹ At around the same time a comparable sense of can-doism, an evangelical belief in futuristic forms of scientific thinking-as-acting and a concomitant newfangled vocabulary was evident in the White House, the Pentagon, the US State Department and various other American foreign policy making institutions. It was manifest in individuals who advocated intervention in South-East Asia based on a perceived ability of the US to fight and win what would later be described as a “technowar”.²²

A technowar is fought in accordance with the principles of modern-day big business. The “warmanagers” who command technowars conceive of themselves as production supervisors, soldiers as factory-line workers, the actual war as merchandise, those for whom the war is manufactured (the US public, the South Vietnamese and the global community for instance) as customers, and the enemy as numbers to be crunched. All inputs and outputs deemed relevant to this production process are meticulously quantified and imputed into a war ledger. As in business, victory is afforded to the side that is the most profitable and efficient. Importantly, warmanagers view profit and efficiency as being achieved with the largest investment of capital and advanced technology as this minimises per/unit cost in a market where it is assumed firstly, that all consumers want pretty much the same thing (universally desirable US-defined freedom, progress and logic for instance) and secondly, that these wants can best be promoted and satisfied not by increasing the quality of the product but rather, decreasing the cost (the

²¹ As a result of their reliance on French texts, Thiét spoke and wrote in French during classes and exams. Outside of school he reverted/converted to the burgeoning Vietnamese technical vocabulary (*điện cực* instead of *electrode* for instance).

²² Gibson, *The Perfect War*.

quality factor often being compensated in the consumer's mind by more concerted advertising).

In order to understand technowar and its underlying logic, it is useful to sketch the career of US Defence Secretary Robert S. McNamara and the head of the US Military Assistance Command, Việt Nam (MACV) General William C. Westmoreland, who during the 1960s were two of technowar's strongest and most prominent advocates. McNamara is responsible for commencing and escalating the Second Indochina War by (mis)representing it as controllable, manageable, limitable and therefore *desirable* foreign policy.²³ Westmoreland contributed to the prolonging of hostilities even after McNamara had lost faith. Both figures represented the "best and the brightest" of what the American military and academy had to offer. And yet their strident appeals to hard-science and complete faith in high-technology made the killing of Vietnamese easier (like pushing a button) and at the same time militated against the sort of qualitative understanding of the Vietnamese that was necessary for an honourable outcome to the conflict or that might have prevented it in the first place.²⁴ In addition, it will be demonstrated that the supposed objectivity of the warmanagers was but a thin and tattered veil over their arrogance and racism.²⁵

During World War II, Robert McNamara left his position as an associate professor at the Harvard School of Business Management to join the air force.²⁶ As an air force statistical control officer he synchronised the schedules of multitudes of planes, pilots and crews in order to optimise the efficacy of their bombing raids. McNamara excelled in his role as a human computer, digesting

²³ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁴ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (London: Pan Books, 1972).

²⁵ McNamara has since shown elements of remorse over his role in the Second Indochina War. In the last chapter of his memoirs on the Second Indochina War he asserts that American misjudgements during the War were a consequence of a profound ignorance of Vietnamese history, culture and politics and excessive faith in high-technology. Moreover, his leadership and commitment to the World Bank from 1968 to 1981 *prima facie* suggest that he possessed a genuine desire for global economic development that is antithetical to the precepts of racism. However, what shall be examined is not so much his character but rather, how it was that in the technowar system the personal decency, or lack of it, of leaders like McNamara should have so little effect upon their indecent actions. John Ralston Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West* (New York: The Free Press, 1992) 23. See Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995) 322.

²⁶ The following short account is based on McNamara, *In Retrospect*.

the mass of facts which would have intimidated less disciplined and committed minds. After the war, he became an executive at Ford Motors where he also demonstrated consummate confidence, calculation and control. At Ford, McNamara was both an icon and an iconoclast. He helped to streamline the production process, introducing cutting-edge technology that improved product value without increasing costs. He also haplessly pushed for the sale of smaller, safer and more fuel-efficient cars in the belief that America's desire for big and fast automobiles could be overcome with the logic of asceticism. McNamara was convinced that there was no insurmountable cultural barrier to his concerted rationalism.

So renowned was McNamara's ability to "scan a balance sheet with unerring speed and skill" that President Kennedy appointed him as Defence Secretary in 1961.²⁷ The new Defence Secretary had no experience in military or international political affairs beyond the bombing schedules that he had drafted fifteen years earlier. His mental database on Asia, empathy with the impoverished, and experience in politics were scant if not bare. However, Kennedy and his advisers believed that McNamara's expertise in production technology and skill in exercising bureaucratic power had universal application and value. As McNamara himself asserted, "Running the Department of Defence is not different from running the Ford Motor Company, or the Catholic Church, for that matter. Once you get to a certain scale, it's all the same." Characteristically, on a trip to Việt Nam in 1962, and after only forty-eight hours after stepping onto Vietnamese soil, McNamara asserted that "every quantitative measurement...shows that we are winning the war."²⁸

²⁷ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983) 254. For the same reason, he was mocked by critics as "an IBM machine with legs".

²⁸ *Ibid.* The one-time South Vietnamese ambassador to the US, Bùi Diễm, recalls when McNamara went to Việt Nam and attempted to show his solidarity with the people by raising his fists with the Vietnamese leader General Khánh and hollering in Vietnamese, "Long Live Vietnam!" (*Việt Nam Muôn Năm!*). McNamara's pronunciation was so "Westernized" as Bùi Diễm recalls it, that the Vietnamese thought that he was saying, "Vietnam wants to lie down!" (*Việt Nam Muốn Nằm*). Others thought that he said, "The Southern duck wants to lie down" (*Vịt Nam Muốn Nằm*). "Interview with Bùi Diễm" in *National Security Archive, Vietnam, Episode 11* (6 December 1998) <<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-11/bui2.html>> accessed 30 March 2003.

Secretary of Defence McNamara was at the forefront of tens of thousands of US biologists, anthropologists, sociologists, agronomists, weapons technicians, economists, mathematicians, psychologists, and political scientists who were hired to record everything that was externally observable about Việt Nam and its people.²⁹ Each one of them contributed to the tonnage of analytical material on Việt Nam, but none of them managed to make a significant contribution to the US leadership's qualitative understanding of the Vietnamese and their millennia long struggle against foreign aggression. Such subjectivities were considered of minimal relevance to the war, and could even potentially trigger the sort of sentimentality that clouds rational analysis. US experts in the 1960s and 1970s also largely ignored the abundant historical parallels provided by the French colonial experience in Việt Nam. A few decades earlier, these Western liberators had also come to Indochina heralding a new age of science and wielding technological whiz-bangery. After causing immense death, displacement and destruction they were defeated and driven off. For many of the US military and political experts, Vietnamese and French history amounted to little more than cumbersome baggage. Unprecedented in their scientific sophistication and perception, they could fly into Việt Nam and find out everything they needed to know in a matter of days before retreating to their quiet, air-conditioned, thick-carpeted offices to devise plans to plant landmines in populous areas and bombard villagers with napalm.³⁰ Emotional categories such as death, hurt, burning, and even people had been expelled from their conceptualisations of conflict. A B-52 payload would have had to fall on Cambridge Massachusetts, it was asserted, before the National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy could perceive that it "tears skin, crushes skulls, and draws blood from the mouths of human beings in their ancestral home".³¹

After taking little heed of the European colonial experience in Việt Nam, it is not surprising that history would return to haunt the Americans. It was not long before they faced the same problems that the French colonialists had. During the

²⁹ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 125.

³⁰ James C. Thomson Jr., "How Could Vietnam Happen? An Autopsy" in Douglas Fox (ed.), *The Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy Making* (Pacific Palisades: Goodyear Publishing Company Inc., 1971) 299-309 at 305.

³¹ Robert Scheer, *Thinking Tuna Fish Talking Death: Essays on the Pornography of Power* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988) 144.

early and mid 1960s, consecutive puppet regimes in South Việt Nam fell despite the assistance of tens of thousands of US advisors and vast amounts of military, technical and financial aid. Massive bombing campaigns did not diminish the determination and capacity of the enemy to wage the war and reunify Việt Nam under the leadership of Hồ Chí Minh.³² Such was the profoundly intractable nature of the conflict that by 1965 even McNamara recognised that the situation was grim. Early that year he advised President Johnson that “the books point this out...Mr. President, I don’t believe there’s more than a 1 in 3 chance, certainly not at best more than a 1 in 2 chance to win this war militarily.”³³ Shortly afterwards McNamara and McGeorge Bundy sent the President what became known as the “fork in the road” memorandum explaining that the US had two options in Việt Nam: negotiations aimed at salvaging what little could be preserved; or sending in a vast number of troops.³⁴ Despite evaluating that in all likelihood the war could not be won militarily even if the second option were taken, McNamara urged that the troops be despatched thereby propelling Việt Nam and the US into full-scale war.

By the end of 1965, there were 184,300 US military personnel in Việt Nam, eight times more than a year earlier.³⁵ This figure would peak at around 540,000 four years later with 230,000 war-related personnel in the surrounding region.³⁶ Before leaving his post in 1968 McNamara had overseen the death of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese and tens of thousands of Americans, all the while privately convinced that the US was on the road to defeat, all the while publicly

³² Dickson argues that US bombing failed because North Việt Nam was a country of subsistence farmers which was obtaining most of its military hardware from the USSR or China. As a result the military damage achieved by bombing could be compensated by aid. Dickson cites a top-level report in 1966 which estimates that \$86 million dollars of damage had been inflicted upon North Việt Nam by that stage while the aid that had flowed in amounted to between \$US 250 million and \$US 400 million. Paul Dickson, *The Electronic Battlefield* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976) 24.

³³ Robert McNamara, “In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam”, A presentation to the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 25 April 1995 <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/ifactory/ksgpress/www/ksg_news/transcripts/mcnamara.htm> accessed 26 March 2003.

³⁴ An extract of the memorandum can be found in McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 167-8.

³⁵ Gabriel Kolko, “The United States in Vietnam 1944-66: Origins and Objectives of an Intervention” in *International War Crimes Tribunal on Vietnam* (2-10 May 1967) <<http://www.infotrad.clara.co.uk/antiwar/warcrimes/index.html>> accessed on 26 March 2003.

³⁶ D.J. Sagar, *Major Political Events in Indo-China 1945-1990* (New York: Facts on File, 1991) 209. Gabriel Kolko, “The American Goals in Vietnam” in *The Pentagon Papers, Volume V of the Senator Gravel Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) 1-15 at 11.

asserting that the war would be won.³⁷ Such unconscionable lies and mass-killing are contrary to any credible notion of reason and any humane ethic. And yet it was rational according to the logic of the warmanagers. In years to come McNamara would explain that the killing was prolonged in Việt Nam because it was believed, correctly or otherwise, that a victory to the communists in South Việt Nam would lead to the falling of nations throughout South East Asia and eventually bring on World War III.³⁸ The secret military history of the Second Indochina War, commissioned by McNamara and later revealed spectacularly as *The Pentagon Papers*, provides a more enlightening explanation for the use of so many people as fodder in an unwinnable war. In the most clear-cut language, *The Pentagon Papers* expose that US leaders were also driven by irrationality, by arrogance, egotism and fear of losing credibility. In January 1964 McNamara told Johnson that “we cannot disengage U.S. prestige to any significant degree.”³⁹ Later that year General Maxwell Taylor warned against the disastrous consequences of leaving “Vietnam with our tail between our legs.”⁴⁰ Designing US foreign policy to “avoid humiliation” and “preserve our reputation” appears in countless memoranda after 1965.⁴¹ Perhaps most tellingly, Assistant Secretary of Defence John T. McNaughton estimated in *The Pentagon Papers* that seventy per cent of America’s aims in Việt Nam concerned avoiding “a humiliating U.S. defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor).”⁴² Twenty per cent concerned keeping South Việt Nam free from China and a mere ten per cent was allocated to permitting the people of South Việt Nam to enjoy “a better, freer way of life.”⁴³ It is fair to say then that by their own calculations, US warmanagers were far

³⁷ McNamara went on to head the World Bank which some viewed as his penance for his involvement in the Second Indochina War. Of his role in the World Bank John Raulston Saul asserts, “The way in which McNamara approached the Vietnam War was identical to the way in which he attacked the problems of the Third World while at the World Bank. The pure logic which on paper would win the war was the same logic which he applied to the massive recycling of the money deposited in the West by oil-producing companies, which in turn led to the Third World debt problem.” Saul, *Voltaire’s Bastards*, 23.

³⁸ McNamara interview on internet, *In Retrospect*.

³⁹ *The Pentagon Papers Volume II of the Senator Gravel Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) 193. Cited in Kolko, “The American Goals in Vietnam”, 9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 10. See also Richard B. Du Boff, “Business Ideology and Foreign Policy: The National Security Council and Vietnam” in *The Pentagon Papers, Volume V of the Senator Gravel Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) 16-31 at 19.

⁴² *Pentagon Papers*, as published by the *New York Times* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1971) 255.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

more interested in avoiding the puncturing of American pride than maintaining world peace and liberating the Vietnamese.

Without derogating from McNamara's moral culpability it is likely that, even if he had expressed and acted upon his doubts, the war would have continued relatively unabated. The managerial mindset of technowar was entrenched not only in the highest civil echelons but also among military elites. Most notably, the head of the US MACV during the critical period of the war, General Westmoreland, was both a WestPoint and Harvard Business School graduate. A gallant and inspiring figure, he skilfully reassured those in Việt Nam who were disheartened by the reality and/or numbers in front of them with more promising statistics that reaffirmed American preconceptions and bolstered US military resolve. Westmoreland and other US war-managers were particularly pre-occupied with statistics on enemy casualties which were critical in the pursuit of the General's magical "crossover point" (defined as when enemy casualties exceeded replacements and the war would be all but won). Given the immensity of US fire power, these figures were bound to offer comfort to those who paid tribute to them. Moreover, for the warmanagers, the possibility of increased production always held the possibility of great victory.⁴⁴ However, there were fundamental problems with the scientific manner in which these body-count statistics were collected, interpreted and embraced. Vietnamese deaths were often imputed into elaborate point systems whereby US soldiers were credited for killing the enemy, debited for losing one's weapon and so on.⁴⁵ But as in any game, the score could be rigged. The alacrity of US commanders for promotion and the inability of troops to distinguish between guerrillas and villagers meant

⁴⁴ Gibson, *The Perfect War*, 280.

⁴⁵ Picking up upon the popular conception at the time of the war as both big business and sport, a manufacturer of guidance and control systems for planes placed the following advertisement in a military trade magazine.

Scoring is hard work, and it will continue to be, unless you do it automatically with Litton's Airborne Range Instrumentation System (ARIS). For the first time in history a proven high-precision bombscoring system can be set up in hours against *any* range, including cultural targets. Litton's ARIS provides results in seconds, *automatically*—no tone, no voice and no plot. ARIS offers unprecedented simulated bomb drop scoring accuracy, set-up flexibility, and reduces manpower requirements....If bombscoring efficiency and flexibility concern you, we can help you score!

Reproduced Dickson, *The Electronic Battlefield*, photographs preceding 70.

that any corpse, civilian or military, was often recorded as an enemy kill in accordance with the “Mere Gook Rule” which dictated that that if it was dead and Vietnamese then it was Việt Cộng. After manufacturing a false body-count report, one American marine explained:

Well actually what had happened was one of our jeeps had turned over and killed this old man. And we had one sure kill...It was always better if you had a good kill count 'cause everything would come your way. You'd get better supplies; steaks, booze once in a while. Everything would come your way.⁴⁶

Even if the figures had been reliable, there were fundamental problems with assuming that enemy casualties would lead to a decisive military victory. This assumption, which had also been made by the French colonialists, illustrates how wilfully ignorant US warmanagers were of the stated motivations and commitment of the Vietnamese communists. As Hồ Chí Minh had stated to the French on the eve of the First Indochina War, “You will kill ten of my men while we will kill one of yours. But you will be the ones to end up exhausted.”⁴⁷ If there was any doubt that this determination had not carried over to the Second Indochina War they should have been extinguished by reports that the North Vietnamese were prepared to fight to the year 2000.⁴⁸ When confronted by this psychology of human sacrifice, however, US military leaders maintained that the French had failed because they were lacking in both will-power and fire-power. Their predecessors simply “Didn’t kill enough Vietcong”.⁴⁹

While it is argued that the Second Indochina War was lost by the politically and morally deficient US warmanagers, it should not be forgotten that it was also won by the practical ingenuity, rock-hard resilience, and astute organisational and political manoeuvrings of Vietnamese revolutionaries from the North and South. The revolutionaries were particularly adept at efficiently turning the tools of technowar against their American foes which constituted a significant

⁴⁶ Michael Maclear, *Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War* (London: Thames Methuen, 1981) 226.

⁴⁷ William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Hyperion, 2000) 379-80.

⁴⁸ Maclear, *Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War*, 227.

⁴⁹ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 229.

proportion of their arms (particularly during the 1960s when they had not yet stockpiled large amounts of military hardware from China and Russia).⁵⁰ Such was the excess of US military supplies to ARVN troops and the skilful ease with which they were being captured by the revolutionaries that the communists popularly referred to Ngô Đình Diệm as their “supply sergeant”. After observing an interview between French journalist Bernard Fall and the North Vietnamese Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng in 1962, Halberstam recalled:

Instead of finding Dong upset by the newest infusion of American aid, Fall saw that he was rather amused by it all. Poor Diem, Dong was saying, he is unpopular. And because he is unpopular, the Americans must give him aid. And because the Americans must give him aid, he is even less popular, and because he is even less popular, the Americans must give him even more aid . . . At which point Fall said he thought that sounded like a vicious circle. “Not a vicious circle,” Dong said, “a downward spiral.”⁵¹

Before the war took a more conventional turn in the early 1970s, the Vietnamese communists concentrated on refining and redefining technology to suit the environment in which they were fighting. Contrary to the precepts of technowar, they continued to modify bicycles into heavy-duty, all-terrain, stealth, fuel-efficient, pin-point guided, transportation vehicles;⁵² applied scented soaps to confuse the German shepherds that were sent down their hidden tunnels at Củ Chi; harnessed fresh coconuts to feed saline drips, and used buffalo dung to put off ultra-sensitive human-detecting sensors on the Hồ Chí Minh trail (the Việt Cộng were also known to brazenly piss on the sensors).⁵³ Most importantly, the revolutionaries concentrated on building a different quality of capital in addition

⁵⁰ Jean Lacouture (Konrad Kellen and Joel Carmichael trans.), *Vietnam: Between Two Truces* (New York: Vintage, 1966) 185.

⁵¹ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 226.

⁵² During the Second Indochina War, despite (and arguable because of) the fact that Americans were flying tens of thousands of sorties a week and the North Vietnamese army had developed into the fifth largest military force in the world, the bicycle continued to play a critical role in transporting supplies and wounded soldiers along the system of roads and paths known as the Hồ Chí Minh trail. So much so that the Pentagon produced a report on the enemy’s use of bicycles in 1965 and in 1967 it was suggested to Senator William Fulbright at the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee that “without bikes, they’d (the Vietnamese communists) have to get out of the war” because the machine was as essential to the North Vietnamese as the auto is in Los Angeles. Cited in Jim Fitzpatrick, *The Bicycle in Wartime: An Illustrated History* (Washington: Brassey’s, 1998) 180.

⁵³ Maclear, *Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War*, 254.

to the pecuniary and technological variety that were the preoccupations of US warmanagers. In the battlefield/marketplace to win active support among the people and especially the peasantry of Việt Nam, the revolutionaries were far more proficient than the ARVN or the Americans and it was this comparative advantage that, in the end, would prove decisive.

In the preface to his memoirs of the period McNamara asserts that, "I truly believe that we made an error not of values and intentions, but of judgement and capabilities." US administrations had "failed to take an orderly rational approach to the basic questions underlying Vietnam" because "we faced a blizzard of problems, there were only twenty-four hours in a day, and we often did not have time to think straight."⁵⁴ At a symposium shortly after the book's release he indicated that, as far as US leaders were concerned, the Second Indochina War could not possibly have come about as a result of malevolent values as, to his knowledge, no-one took values into consideration; they were simply left out of the equation. Therein lies the failure and injustice of technowar, as feelings, prejudices, morality and history cannot simply be erased from complex decision-making processes and replaced with value-free calculation. To believe otherwise is to obscure and leave unscrutinised the ugliest forms of subjectivity.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, xvi-xvii.

⁵⁵ This is not to say that *In Retrospect* is a book wholly without value and insight. Indeed he enumerates eleven specific mistakes and lessons of the Second Indochinese War some of which resound with relevance today. They include the following:

- Our judgments of friend and foe alike reflected our profound ignorance of the history, culture, and politics of the people in the area, and the personalities and habits of their leaders;
- We failed...to recognize the limitations of modern, high-technology military equipment, forces and doctrine...;
- We failed to draw Congress and the American people into a full and frank discussion and debate of the pros and cons of a large-scale military involvement...before we initiated the action;
- We did not recognize that neither our people nor our leaders are omniscient. Our judgment of what is in another people's or country's best interest should be put to the test of open discussion in international forums. We do not have the God-given right to shape every nation in our image or as we choose.
- We did not hold to the principle that U.S. military action . . . should be carried out only in conjunction with multinational forces supported fully (and not merely cosmetically) by the international community.
- We failed to recognize that in international affairs, as in other aspects of life, there may be problems for which there are no immediate solutions....At times, we may have to live with an imperfect, untidy world.

To remove that veil of objectivity from the US technowar campaign, is to see that the Mỹ Lai massacre and President Johnson's infamous exhortation for US troops to "nail that coonskin on the wall" were not aberrations or miscalculations in an otherwise just war but rather, unsterilised truths that seeped out from behind a wall of rationalised lies. These truths attest to the fact that American arrogance, ethnocentrism and racism were key motivating factors in why and how the US fought and lost the war. Put simply, the Việt Nam War was a racist war. It was racist in the sense that the US' incapacity to identify and tolerate radical non-aligned states was exacerbated by a popular perception of the poor and coloured people of the Third World as insufficiently civilised to make their own history. As the Kennedy Administration adviser Arthur Schlesinger Jnr observed, Americans regarded Việt Nam as a "young and unsophisticated nation, populated by affable little men, unaccustomed to the modern world, who, if sufficiently bucked up by instruction and encouragement, might amount to something."⁵⁶ Most notably, according to James Thomson (who served in the White House and State Department during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations) there was a subliminal "cryptoracist" view among many Americans in political circles and beyond that Asians, particularly peasants and communists, were sub-human.⁵⁷ This view evolved from a traditional Western perception that "There are so many Asians, after all; that Asians have a fatalism about life and disregard for its loss; that they are cruel and barbaric to their own people; and that they are very different from us."⁵⁸ Thomson asks a question that must be asked of so many other American military incursions that took place during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, "Would we have pursued quite

In Retrospect was well received by the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam after its publication in 1995. The book was quickly translated to Vietnamese and a copy can be found encased in glass at the War Remnants Museum in Hồ Chí Minh City. Vietnamese edition: *Nhìn Lại Qua Khur: Tân Tham Kịch và Những Bài Học về Việt Nam* (người dịch Hồ Chính Hạnh) (Hà Nội: Trường Chinh Tri Quốc Gia, 1995). On a subsequent trip to Hà Nội, McNamara jovially commented that no copyright had been sought or royalties received for the translation.

⁵⁶ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jnr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965) 543. Cited in Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002) 19.

⁵⁷ Thomson, "How Could Vietnam Happen?", 306.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

such policies—and quite such military tactics—if they [the Vietnamese] were white?”⁵⁹

Despite/Due to all their analysis and calculations, US warmanagers failed to empathise with the Vietnamese or scrutinise and understand themselves. These two failures operated synergistically, generating ever more ignorance and death. Any assertion that the war was a miscalculation or some sort of awaiting quagmire into which well-meaning Americans fell, simply maintains the illusion that protectors of ignorance and perpetrators of death like McNamara and Westmoreland were free from prejudice and blame. It is also incorrect, however, to suggest that all ordinary Vietnamese were somehow diametrically opposed to the modern processes and logics of technowar. Thus, one can only hope that upon harnessing immense power, the best and the brightest Vietnamese like Thiét would somehow employ their knowledge in more humble and humane ways.

Thiét Defeats the Darkness but cannot Overcome his Fear and Arrogance

Thiét's three years at the Technical School of Electricity in the Phú Thọ Higher Technical Centre were by far the most comfortable of his life thus far. During this time he lived with his mother and two sisters, working diligently at the *Lido* and helping out Hương with her other business interests. At school he made several good friends who were also ambitious, hardworking and intelligent young men, convinced like Thiét that they not only had their hands on the control levers of the universe but were designing the machinery itself. No doubt, Voltaire would have been proud of them.

All living bodies are composed of levers, of pulleys, which function according to the laws of mechanics; of liquids which the laws of hydrostatics cause to circulate perpetually; and when one thinks that all

⁵⁹ James C. Thomson, “How Could Vietnam Happen? – An Autopsy” in *The Atlantic Monthly* 221:4 (April 1968) 47-53 at 51.

these beings have a perception quite unrelated to their organization, one is overwhelmed with surprise.⁶⁰

In the spring of 1964, at the age of twenty-three, Thiết graduated from the Technical School of Electricity coming second in his class. Thiết's first job offer came from the Nông Sơn Coal Mine but he rejected it, not wanting to leave Sài Gòn and knowing that something better would come along. Sure enough, he received another offer from the National Electricity Authority as a power line designer which he readily accepted. Finally, Thiết's life had risen from the potholed and dusty runway that was his childhood and adolescence. Now he was hurtling off into the distance where his dreams would be forged into solid reality. Ten years earlier no-one would have believed that Thiết would have a secure office job, that every day he would wear well-pressed trousers and a clean collared shirt, and that people would look up to him for his intelligence and training. No-one that is, except for Thiết.

Over the next two years, Thiết worked diligently at the Electricity Authority. He was aware of but not overly concerned about the war escalating around him, by all the new and renewed generals in the RVN's leadership as one coup overthrew another. In early August of 1964 the Gulf of Tonkin Incident provided a trigger for the bombing of the North and foreshadowed the landing of 3,500 US combat troops on Đà Nẵng's China beach on 8 March 1965—the (un)official beginning of a war that would never be declared. Like many Vietnamese, Thiết was tired of all the fighting, but grateful for US assistance. With democracy, liberty and such a powerful benefactor on their side, how could the South Vietnamese possibly lose? In short, while acknowledging that times were dark for the nation, Thiết believed US leaders who continually alluded to the “light at the end of the tunnel”.

In early 1966 Thiết was offered a promotion of somewhat astronomical proportions when he was asked to head the electricity office in Quảng Tín province (which was just south of his home province of Quảng Nam). There

⁶⁰ Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*, 97.

were two possible reasons why the twenty-five year old was afforded such responsibility and prestige. He had quickly gained a reputation as a conscientious and talented worker who would no doubt serve the Electricity Authority well in such an elevated position. In addition, there was also the fact (still evident from his accent) that Thiết was from Central Việt Nam which would perhaps make him more endearing than a Southerner to colleagues and associates in Quảng Tín. Notably, however, the position also posed significant drawbacks. Thiết would be away from his family who now relied on him for his (moral and administrative) support and whose company he had grown fond of. Just as importantly, he would be away from the relative safety of urban Sài Gòn. The Quảng Tín provincial capital where Thiết was to be stationed, Tam Kỳ, was a sizeable town but was by no means immune from battle. Indeed, Tam Kỳ was not much more than a day's walk from Cây Xanh where Thiết had trained to become a Việt Minh revolutionary twelve years earlier. But if there were wartime forces that made the job unappealing, other military factors exhorted him to take it. Most notably, his position at the electricity authority was not yet senior enough to guarantee protection from the national draft. If conscripted, taking into account his education level, he would become an officer but this would not save him from the battlefield. Being the electricity chief of an entire province, however, would preclude him from national service. And so, on a balance of threats, Thiết decided to take the job.

Like so many other young Vietnamese men from varied political and ideological camps, Thiết had modelled his life around avoiding conscription. And while it was a difficult draft-dodging decision that Thiết had to make in taking the promotion, this did not compare to the horrifying calculations of those who had no educational or financial credentials and thus no choice but to resort to self-harm. Thiết knew young men who had starved themselves of food and sleep to such an extent that their sub-thirty-five kilogram waifish bodies were deemed incapable of battle. Others deliberately broke bones prior to medical examinations, but (along with the notable pain) the drawback of this ruse was that bones had a tendency to heal and thus leave a young man once again vulnerable. With this in mind, the severing of index/trigger fingers became a well-known way to permanently avoid conscription without hampering one's

ability to make a living.⁶¹ Unfortunately, when this mode of tactical evasion became common-place, those with severed fingers were recruited to carry supplies to the frontline where they were left open to attack without even a weapon to defend themselves. As the war stretched on, the opposing forces of military enlistment and personal preservation engaged in a horrifying contest which demanded greater and more gruesome sacrifices from ordinary people. It was not long before desperate young men had to dig out one of their eyes in order to ensure the upkeep of themselves and their families. These active victims of necessity would live the remainder of their lives in shame and the shadows, the unrecorded casualties of war and unacknowledged conscientious objectors.

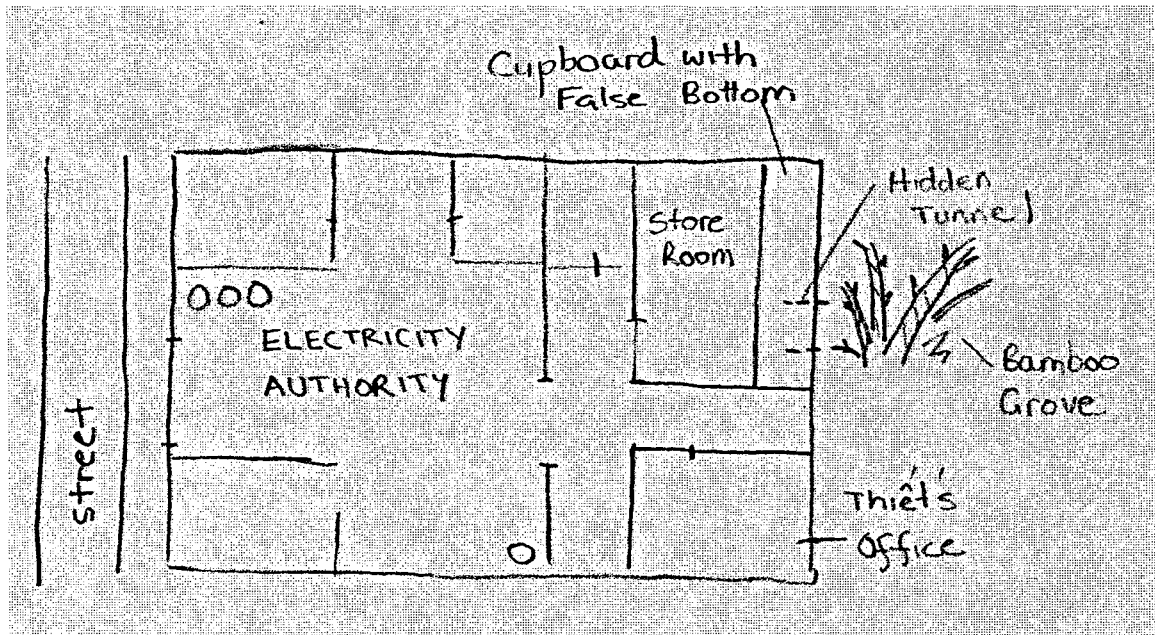
Thiệt returned to Central Việt Nam in the summer of 1966 as the electricity chief for the entire Quảng Tín province (although the electricity grid did not extend beyond Tam Kỳ). There were fifteen staff members under his immediate command, many of whom were his superiors in terms of years, but not with respect to technical knowledge. In Thiệt's mind it was the latter advantage that mattered, and he did not hesitate to make this clear. Never had the young man been above and in charge of others. It was a sensation that he found highly appealing and to which he quickly became accustomed. Thiệt spoke to his employees in such a manner that they always knew who was in charge, made decisions without consultation or negotiation, and expected his word to be treated as gospel. Years later Thiệt would regret the fact that his handsome self-assurance had devolved into ugly arrogance. But at that time he did not have the reflective capacity to recognise this mutation. Moreover, Thiệt's arrogance was affirmed and bolstered by the company that he kept. As electricity chief, the young man regularly attended meetings with the provincial chief, the police chief, the education chief and other key administrative figures. Furthermore, his confidence, company and command were regularly validated and reinforced by

⁶¹ It has been reported that in one village where an Army of the Republic of Việt Nam (ARVN) regiment butchered livestock and raped women, the men of the village cut off their trigger fingers in protest. Don Luce and John Summer, *Việt Nam: The Unheard Voices* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969) 279. Cited in FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 410. During the first New Year (*Tết*) festivities in 1976 after the end of the war, the well known historian Nguyễn Khắc Viện saw young people celebrating in the street with their trigger fingers cut off and asserted that this was a sign that the war was finally over. Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Southern Vietnam: 1975-1985* (Hà Nội: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1985) 17.

success. Prior to Thiét's arrival, the city had been plagued by voltage drops during the peak hours of the early evening. Drawing upon his extensive mental database and adopting cutting-edge technology, the young man built a substation that increased voltage supply and saved the town from darkness. Never in history has the linkage between knowledge and power been more evident.

For all its benefits, electricity on its own did not save the good people of Tam Kỳ from the gloominess of war and fear. Thiét was regularly awoken at night to the sound of gunfire between Việt Cộng guerrillas and Republican soldiers. One evening, the battle came to his doorstep and he could not resist peering out of the window. To his fright, Thiét saw a shadowy revolutionary lurking in an alleyway directly across the street. Their eyes met and for an instant the valiant champion against whom the weapons of the night were blunted was paralysed with fright.⁶² Were the Việt Cộng after him? Even if they weren't, the guerrilla might not want to risk Thiét recognising him. Was this the end? After an excruciating instant of uncertainty, the machine gun wielding peasant slipped away into the night. Thiét returned to bed but could not sleep. Suddenly it was apparent that his prominence and success had made him a target. Precautions would have to be taken. Thus, like many other times in his life, Thiét lay awake in the night so committed to a complex and concrete problem that he was unable to rest until he had devised a solution. On a scrap of paper he designed a hidden tunnel that would offer him some protection at work.

⁶² Primo Levi (Stuart Woolf trans.) *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996) 57.



In the event of a raid, Thiét could scramble down into the tunnel and either hide in the bamboo until the trouble had passed or make a break for it. If the enemy was in pursuit then he could impede their advance by throwing a grenade back into the darkness. His friend the police chief gave him some grenades and a pistol that were the first and only firearms or munitions he would ever own. For added protection outside of work, Thiét did not sleep at his official residence. Instead, at dusk he stealthily walked half a kilometre to an alternative abode. During these brisk but poignant journeys, the young man could not help but recall when as a child he had frantically followed his mother from their thatch hut to the relative safety of his grandfather's brick house whenever the war was upon them. Mournfully he reflected over how he had been pursued by war from the time of his very first memory.

In 1967, a year after Thiét arrived in Tam Kỳ, a senior provincial official suggested to him that he investigate the possibility of extending an electricity cable to a series of strategic hamlets just outside of the city outskirts. Initially, Thiét was enthusiastic about the prospect of using his knowledge and expertise to liberate others from darkness. He could think of no greater charity than to provide electricity and all its wonders to the long-deprived peasants who were reflections of his not too distant past.

In this sense, the young man was not dissimilar to President Diệm and his brother Nhu who had initiated the strategic hamlet program in 1961 with the following objectives: to provide security to the peasants; enact meaningful political, economic, and social reforms; create a nationwide self-defence force at the village level; facilitate the desire and will to resist communism among villagers; and strengthen the peasants' image of the RVN.⁶³ In other words the hamlets were the ultimate solution to Diệm's trio of enemies, "Communism, Underdevelopment, and Disunity" and were potentially a model for development all over the Third World.⁶⁴ Nhu in particular viewed the strategic hamlets as a way of not only protecting villagers against communism, but also fostering an ethos of grass roots decentralised democracy and facilitating new systems of small scale trade. The commitment to bottom-up democracy, however, was entwined with a paradoxical conviction in top-down control. As Nhu explained, "I am temporarily curtailing freedom to offer it in unlimited form. I am strengthening discipline to do away with its external bonds. I am centralizing the state in order to democratize and decentralize it."⁶⁵ A new three-tiered system of social organisation was established in the hamlets which placed combatants and their families at the top, hamlet leaders and locally elected officials below them, and poor peasants and workers after that.⁶⁶ Theoretically, all were entitled to a level of civil and material benefits that came with citizenship, but those who had higher rank were privileged when it came to the distribution of land or access to education and medical facilities.⁶⁷ Nhu envisaged the strategic hamlet program as nation building at its grandest, a foundation for the complete transformation and modernisation of South Vietnamese society.⁶⁸

Unfortunately, the strategic hamlets were contaminated by the megalomania and heavy-handedness that pervaded from the core of Diệm's regime outwards. The breakneck speed at which the program was implemented (Nhu proposed that all

⁶³ Maynard Weston Dow, *Nation Building in Southeast Asia* (Boulder: Pruett, 1966) 156. Cited in Louis A. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors: Displaced Persons and Other War Victims in Vietnam, 1954-1975* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 37.

⁶⁴ Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 118, 129.

⁶⁵ Mieczyslaw Maneli (Maria de Gorgey trans.), *War of the Vanquished* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 145. Cited in Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 128.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 117-140.

sixteen thousand of the nation's hamlets be "strategized" in twelve months with US\$1.4 million) and the fear of officials to criticise or be criticised, meant that quantity was always elevated over quality and Diệm and Nhu's idealised vision of a strategic hamlet never came close to being constructed.⁶⁹ As a result, the guerrillas found it easy to campaign against, sabotage and/or terrorise the strategic hamlets and those who inhabited them did so at best grudgingly. Characterised by "form over substance and coercion over consent," the strategic hamlets became not bastions of modern civility, but rather haphazardly constructed detention camps, plagued by corruption and more effective at generating discontent than developing the country and its people.⁷⁰

After the abject failure of the strategic hamlets and Diệm and Nhu's assassination in 1963, the US rebadged the rural relocation program as the New Life Hamlet program. Despite additional funding and time, however, the New Life Hamlets would also fail miserably in terms of halting the communist assault and contributing to the modernisation of the peasantry. Like the strategic hamlets before them (and the agrovilles before that), the New Life Hamlets served as a striking and horrifying example of how, when the Vietnamese landscape and the Vietnamese themselves did not suit the military strategies and cultural preconceptions of grand policy-makers, it was the strategies and preconceptions that were taken to be unnegotiable.

Largely in contrast to the Vietnamese communists who possessed a Maoist understanding of the relationship between the revolutionary soldier and the general population (that is, like a fish in water), the Americans calculated that the optimal way to guard villagers from communist recruitment and terror was to facilitate their migration to the New Life Hamlets which were often fortified with moats and barbed wire. If for some irrational reason the villagers rejected US-

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 133. The program was enthusiastically propelled by its second in command (under Ngô Đình Nhu), Colonel Phạm Ngọc Thảo. Thảo was actually a secret communist agent and there is some evidence to suggest that he promoted the hamlets hoping that they were a politico-strategic disaster for the RVN and would "estrangle South Vietnam's peasants and drive them into the arms of the Vietcong." Thảo was killed in 1965 during a coup attempt. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983) 257. Cited in Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors*, 52. Other sources question the level of Thảo's influence on, if not in the speed of the program, certainly its direction. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 133.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

made freedom, if they felt like they were being uprooted and imprisoned rather than protected and liberated, then they were forcibly moved for their own good. As General Westmoreland brusquely pointed out:

Until now the peasant farmer has had three alternatives. He could stay put and follow his natural instinct to stay close to the land, living beside the grave of his ancestors. He could move into an area under government control, or he could join the VC.... Our operations have been designed to make the first choice impossible, the second attractive, and to reduce the likelihood of any-one choosing the third to zero.⁷¹

Pursuant with these operations, leaflets were printed and dropped which on one side enticed villagers to “Come to the New Life Hamlet, come to peace, freedom, and justice.”⁷² The terrifying subtext informing peasants of the consequences of not yielding was unmistakable even to those who could not read. On the other side of the leaflet was a picture of a B-52 bomber.

When Thiét arrived at the New Life Hamlets that had been earmarked for electricity, he was disappointed to discover that most of the registered residents had left, despite the risks of returning home and the alienating prospect of urbanisation. Around thirty families were living in each hamlet but there was room for many more. As far as he could tell, the facilities were not intolerable, at least for peasants who had never had electricity or hot running water. But they fell well short of the “New Life Hamlets” that Thiét (and no doubt the residents) had heard about and expected. There were no schools, medical facilities or functioning latrines. Moreover, knowing something about being a peasant himself, Thiét could see that some of the people had been ruthlessly torn away from their lives. He spoke to a handful of the inhabitants and confirmed that for many older peasants who were not used to travelling, being moved a few kilometres was no different to being planted on a distant universe. They could not easily get to their crops or markets which in some cases had been wiped out by napalm and bombs. Many of their homes had been designated as “free-fire zones” into which peasants could not enter without being automatically

⁷¹ Reported by Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, *Twenty Years and Twenty Days* (New York: Stein and Day, 1976) 140-1. Cited in Gibson, *The Perfect War*, 228 and Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 58-9.

⁷² Gibson, *The Perfect War*, 229.

categorised as Việt Cộng. To make matters worse, the hamlets were only sparsely fortified and guarded so that they were effectively left open at night to guerrilla attack.

Thiét reported back to the official that there were not enough peasants in the hamlets to justify the cost of expanding the electricity grid. To his disgust, the official inferred that they start the program anyway because at the very least it would provide both of them with a lucrative source of income. It was no surprise, thought Thiét, that they had not yet beaten the communists.

On another more distant and time-consuming work trip in 1967, Thiét travelled into the highlands around the villages of Kon Tum in order to repair an electrical line that had been sabotaged by the communists. He had never been to the highlands and was impressed by the cooler climate and vibrant flora, but was all too conscious of the fact that in these heavenly surroundings the communists could pounce upon his work group at any time. The repairs necessitated that Thiét hire some of the natives. Never had the young man come into sustained contact with the highland people who were commonly known by the French designation, “Montagnard”.⁷³ Many ethnic Vietnamese (*Kinh*) still referred to the over 500,000 highland people of varied cultures and dialects as “*Mọi*” or savages (although the RVN had by that stage banned the use of the word in all official correspondence).⁷⁴ The Montagnards were living evidence of how Vietnamese nationalism took form not only in a context of resistance but also invasion, occupation, dehumanisation and plunder.

Thiét’s impression of the Montagnards was not an uncommon one among *Kinh* Vietnamese and was distinctively colonialist.⁷⁵ It was an impression linked to a

⁷³ There is some controversy over whether “*Montagnard*” is a pejorative term. However, in the absence any widespread functional alternative the author adopts it hesitantly and apologises to those who are offended. For a discussion of the term see Vietnamese Studies Group, “The Great Montagnard Debate Parts I, II, and III” in *VSG Email Discussion List 1999* <<http://www.lib.washington.edu/southeastasia/vsg/Elist.html>> accessed 1 December 2003.

⁷⁴ Joseph Buttinger, “The Ethnic Minorities in the Republic of Vietnam” in Wesley R. Fishel (ed.) *Problems of Freedom: South Vietnam Since Independence* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961) 99-122 at 105.

⁷⁵ Currently, ethnic minorities make up around 13 percent of the Việt Nam’s population and primarily live in the mountainous regions (a notable exception being the Chinese minority who

paternalistic Confucian conceptualisation of the world in which an ideally ordered kingdom consists of the Emperor Son of Heaven who sits at the core, his cultured subjects all around him, and the socio-economically deficient “barbarians” on the margins who were targeted for pacification and civilisation.⁷⁶ This perspective was bolstered by colonially introduced notions of social scientific evolution and also twentieth century unilinear blueprints for development. While the ideologies and scientific reasoning behind the treatment of minorities in Việt Nam had changed over the generations, an underlying prejudice remained. And like all prejudices, this one was founded on ignorance and insecurity.

Thiét was attracted to what he perceived as the Montagnards’ exotic backwardness. While the young man was aware that there were dozens of tribes and ethnicities, he tended to lump them all together. The men wore loincloths, exposed their bare chests and sometimes donned turbans. The women wore sarongs and colourful jewellery around their arms, necks and ankles. Many of them lived in thatch houses on stilts with incredibly high roofs. Generally, they were impressive in stature and Thiét never ceased to be amazed by their resilience and by their ability to carry inhuman loads on their backs without even wearing shoes. Mixed in with these morsels of admiration were large quantities of degradation. In Thiét’s eyes, there was no doubt that the Montagnards were lesser beings. For generations, he believed, they had been isolated in the harsh mountainous environment and excluded from the wealth, trade, leisure and innovation that came with living in the fertile valleys or by the sea. Most critically thought Thiét, the Montagnards were opposed to change and distrusting of outsiders who had their best interests in mind, who wanted to help them be civilised. They did not want to cultivate their land “properly” and persisted with wasteful slash-and-burn techniques, sometimes in the belief that to use a plough was to disturb their animistic spirits.⁷⁷ Moreover, according to Thiét, Montagnard

reside largely in and around Hồ Chí Minh City). Vietnamese ethnologists have distinguished 53 ethnic minorities along language and cultural lines. Frank Proschan, “Vietnam’s Ethnic Mosaic” in Nguyễn Văn Huy and Laurel Kendall (eds.) *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind, and Spirit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 53-4.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 58-9.

⁷⁷ There are several systems of slash-and-burn agriculture (also known as swiddening) which in the right context can be environmentally sustainable and economically viable. *Ibid.*, 65-6.

societies were not only backwards but also upside-down. Some of the tribes were matriarchal, such that husbands were expected to go and live with their wife's family. Arguably, Thiết's loathing of the Other was intricately connected to a loathing of the self. After all, the Montagnards had been there first and Thiết knew that the ethnic minorities of Việt Nam had paid in blood and land for the Kinh majority's nationhood. Even if he dismissed the thought outright, the young man was aware that Kinh Vietnamese often pondered over whether the enduring and brutal wars (against the Chinese, the French and now the Americans) that they had suffered over the centuries were a karmic consequence of the murderous way in which they had disposed of the Chăm, Khmers and Montagnards who had previously occupied Central and Southern Việt Nam.

This is not to suggest that the Montagnards did not resist Kinh colonisation. Indeed, in response to repeated RVN annexation of Montagnard land in the 1950s and 1960s, FULRO (The Unified Front of Oppressed Races) was formed, a military front that openly revolted against the Southern Government.⁷⁸ In recognition of the strategic importance of the region, US forces tried to win over the Montagnards with arms and supplies. The communists, however, who relied on the highlands as a place to recuperate their forces and for the transportation of troops and supplies, were far more capable when it came to winning over hearts and minds. This was largely due to the experience that they had had with the hill tribes in Northern Việt Nam during the First Indochina War and the emphasis that they placed on forms of political propagandising that were in tune with existing cultural practices. In Kon Tum Province at the end of 1954, the Việt Minh left sixty cadres in the area with the task of persuading the seventy thousand Montagnards that the DRV provided them with a genuine prospect for independence and prosperity.⁷⁹ The cadres were unarmed and practiced what they called the "Three Withs" (*Tam Cùng*): eating with; sleeping with; and working with the locals. They married Montagnard women and had families, adopted local styles of dress and learnt how to use cross bows and blowpipes. Radio Hà Nội's multilingual broadcasts into the area acknowledged local grievances against the RVN's appropriation of land, and promised autonomy

⁷⁸ *Front Unifié pur la Lutte des Races Opprimées*.

⁷⁹ Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1964) 191.

after the Americans and Diệm were expelled. And while communist relations with the Montagnards were by no means always peaceful or perfect, they were generally far more sensitive and successful, thereby demonstrating (as did the strategic hamlets) the utility of empathy and understanding, even and especially in war.

Thiét (Re)Discovers his Heart and Soul

Ostensibly, little else mattered to Thiét during the 1960s than his studies and his work. Being wholly comprised of mind and stomach, Thiét's conscious life did not extend far beyond his physical existence and professional ambitions. Nevertheless, by the end of the decade, two truly grand events of love and war had come to challenge the structural integrity of his logic-encased and fact-inforced life. These events inspired a broader comprehension of humanity in the young man and reminded him that he had a heart and soul.

The first of these grand events concerned his older brother Biét. After the two boys had returned to Bồ Bản from the Việt Minh School in 1954 Biét was also anxious to move beyond their village. Biét wanted desperately to be otherwise, to discover and develop himself as a modern individual. Not unlike Thiét, he increasingly came to view his past and his family as burdensome and backward. Even his name reeked in his nostrils of a primitive and pitiful past.

Like many Vietnamese peasants, Biét's parents had not put a lot of effort into naming their children as they believed that their place in society was largely fixed from one generation to the next. It did not occur to them that their children might someday want to belong to a different class of people and should thus be given names that left some leeway for social manoeuvring. Instead, the children were named in accordance with a lyrical whim, Hương and Trưng for the girls, Khiết, Biét and Thiét for the boys. Other parents of the peasantry did not even go to the trouble of providing their children with names other than the numbers that represented the order in which they had been born. Forced to bear the indelible mark of the unambitious classes, they would forever be known as Ms Six, Mr Two

or Ms Last Born. Biết had not received his name until some years after he was born when his father Việt observed that he was a particularly intelligent infant (learning to crawl and speak quite early in life) and thus deserving of the name “Biết” (to know). While this was no doubt an accurate description, like other common names including “Tốt” (good) and “Được” (can, good, adequate), it was wholly lacking in subtlety and style.⁸⁰ And so, one day when public records officials came to Bồ Bản in order to collect data for a post-War census, Biết decided to start his life anew and change his name. He opted for the more refined, Nho (Confucian scholar), and thereafter urged all to refer to him as such.

While it is unclear whether his name change had any broader implications, Nho did not do well at school. While Thiết studied and worked in the bustling city, Nho was left to wallow in their village. Nho lacked that spark of good fortune, that essential factor in Thiết’s Voltairean equation for success. Adding to his frustration was the fact that even in the countryside there was rapid development under President Diệm’s rule. Partly due to the weight of this ubiquitous evidence, by 1958 twenty year old Nho had jettisoned the thought of being either a revolutionary or a peasant. It was then that he took the radical step of joining the Army of the Republic of Việt Nam (ARVN). He did not so much care for Diệm’s regime, but was driven by a desire to get out of Bồ Bản, to travel, to meet new people and experience new things. Moreover, Nho knew that he would probably be conscripted later anyway and was thus better off signing up voluntarily and having some choice as to where he was placed. Avoiding the infantry at all costs, the young man was drawn to the mammoth weapons of war, the artillery guns and mortars that were positioned away from the front lines.

For much of his time in the ARVN, Nho was stationed at the barracks in Đà Nẵng. It was here that he met and fell in love with a young woman named Hào who he promptly married. With Thiết studying nearby, the two brothers met regularly for coffee and to discuss how their lives were progressing and

⁸⁰ One can learn much about the aspirations of ordinary Vietnamese during the twentieth century by examining trends in names. During the First and Second Indochina Wars it was not unusual for people to be named “Thắng” (victory) or two children in a family to be named “Hòa” and “Bình” (peace). After the war and the beginning of the economic renovation period names like “Phú” and “Quý” (wealthy and of high status) have become more popular. The author has even heard of tactless parents naming their child “đô la” (dollar).

diverging. Nho had come to appreciate ordered army life and was an adept artillery man. He quickly rose to the level of sergeant (which was as high as he could go given his level of education) and fought in battle with both valour and cool-headed proficiency. Tragically, however, this did not save him. On 17 February 1964, revolutionaries attacked the base near Việt An where Nho was stationed. It was on this day that Sergeant Huỳnh Văn Nho née Biết was killed. He was due for leave only a few days later to see his newborn baby who entered the world just as he left it.

Soon afterwards, Thiết and the family in Sài Gòn received a telegram informing them that their son and brother had made the supreme sacrifice to the nation and that his body had not been recovered. Thừa almost fainted when she heard the news. She had hoped that those terrible times of the late 1940s were over; that even if her family were not free from the war, they had somehow escaped odious and unnatural death. Engulfed in grief, Thừa and Thiết hastened to catch a plane for Đà Nẵng.

Upon arriving they discovered that no-one had informed Nho's wife of the tragedy as she was still recovering from the birth of their daughter, Nhi. Thiết was able to contact some of the soldiers who had fought with his brother, all of whom confirmed his virtue and courage. One of them, who had been with Nho during his last moments on earth, provided valuable information but little consolation: Nho had been wounded by gunfire and had died slowly and painfully. His body was placed in a body bag and hastily buried without ceremony. They could not, however, go in search of the grave and recover Nho's body because the area had been designated a free-fire zone and was constantly being bombarded. Almost thirty years would pass before Thừa recovered her son's remains. Their sorrowful predicament and determination to carry on in the face of such loss was commonplace among ordinary Vietnamese during the war. This is poignantly captured in one of the songs of the distinguished song writer Trịnh Công Sơn.

I Will Go Visit

When my country is at peace, I will go visit
I will go visit, many desolate graves and
See tombstones littered like mushrooms.

When my country is without war
Elderly mothers will go into the mountains,
And find the bones of their lost children.

When my country is at peace, I will go visit
I will visit my village turned to rubble,
Each and every site of scorched bamboo.

When there is no more killing in my country
The people will flow into the streets,
Calling out with laughter and smiles.

When my country is at peace, I will go without stopping
From Sài Gòn to the Centre, from Hà Nội to the South
I will go with great happiness,
And let's hope I forget
The tragic tales of my country.⁸¹

Never before had Thiết experienced such pain, as if one of his limbs had been severed. He summoned up images of his brother and the times they had shared: their mystical adventures on banana leaf boats through flooded rice fields; their discovery and embracing of Việt Minh communism in the jungles of central Việt

⁸¹ *Tôi Sẽ Đi Thăm*

*Khi đất nước tôi thanh bình, tôi sẽ đi thăm
Tôi sẽ đi thăm, nhiều nghĩa địa buồn
Đi xem mộ bia đều như nấm*

*Khi đất nước tôi không còn chiến tranh
mẹ già lên núi, tìm xương con mình*

*Khi đất nước tôi thanh bình, tôi sẽ đi thăm
Tôi sẽ đi thăm, làng xóm thành đồng
Đi thăm từng khu rừng tre nám*

*Khi đất nước tôi không còn giết nhau
mọi người ra phố, mời rao nụ cười*

*Khi đất nước tôi thanh bình, tôi sẽ đi không ngừng
Sài Gòn ra Trung, Hà Nội vô Nam
Tôi đi chung cuộc mình
và mong sẽ quên
chuyện non nước mình*

Recounted by Thiết with reference to *Trình Cộng Sơn – Songs*
<http://www.comp.nus.edu.sg/~nguyenvu/Artists/TC_Son/Songs/TCson_songs---Toi_se_di_tham.htm> accessed 3 May 2003.

Nam; the coffee they had consumed in downtown Đà Nẵng over conversations that they believed would have no end. Thiết could not help but feel guilty, they had drifted apart. He had been so consumed with his studies and trying to move up in the world that he had neglected his brother. Now it was too late. Nho's death reminded Thiết of what was really important in life.

Thừa was also wrought with grief, exacerbated by the fact that if her son had in fact died and they were unable to recover the body and perform the appropriate rituals, then his soul could not possibly rest. Nho's spirit would wander the land in despair until the end of days. This terrible eventuality contributed to Thừa's denial. After all, without a body there was no irrefutable proof of his passing. The elderly woman became convinced that the only way to confirm Nho's whereabouts was to enlist the services of a spirit diviner. In fact, such was her desire for certainty that she hired three independent diviners. All of them called upon Nho's spirit and confirmed that her son was indeed alive, that he was being held captive. Obediently, Thiết accompanied his mother on these supernatural outings, but stood in the background with his arms crossed and rage in his eyes. Like his mother, Thiết was devastated by his brother's passing. He too had been troubled by nightmares in which Nho called out to him (dark dreams that would haunt him through the decades), but there was nothing that they could do and there was no use in prolonging the pain by giving money away to comen. "People die," thought Thiết. "That's it, there's nothing more. We just have to make the most of our time on earth".

Thừa ignored her son's protestations. She knew that he was young and brash, prone to challenge the knowledge of generations and destined to be proven wrong. Their disagreement symbolised a momentous conceptual clash over the very nature of life, death and the history of time. It was a conflict between the "modern-West" and the "traditional-East," between understandings of time as straight-line and finite as opposed to cyclical and never ending. This was by no means the last battle between these two combatants from opposing worlds, but for now they had to simply accept each other's different ways of grieving and console one another as best they could.

The other grand event of the late 1960s that challenged Thiết's predilection for reason concerned an anguish of a different kind and a love not lost but found. It would come at a fortuitous time, distracting him from much of the pain caused by his brother's passing. In 1968, Thiết was relocated to the new Thủ Đức electricity authority office just outside of Sài Gòn. Finally, he thought, he could settle down into a secure job and a content life. It was not long, however, before he began to desire more. Thiết was approaching twenty-seven years of age and suddenly he noticed that all around him friends and acquaintances had found life-time companionship. Many of them already had children. Thiết had never really had any time or energy for the opposite sex, and as far as he could ascertain they had shown no interest in him. Then one day he noticed the young pay mistress Vân. Vân came across to him as a meek, competent and beautiful woman. She wore delicate white shirts at a time when the general rule for clothing and everything else was "the more colour the better". The young Thiết found reasons to linger around her office, occasionally making clumsy but amusing conversation. During moments of lucidity he would rationalise to himself that this female was not only beautiful but also functional. He would evaluate her in the same way that a trainer might a race horse—she was physically sound, mentally astute and had excellent breeding potential. However, in those silent solitary moments before sleep and in the first grey light of morning, Thiết embraced Vân in his heart and soul. Despite having at his command all the calculative tools and problem-solving proficiencies of an electrical technician, during these instances of passion and truth the young man found himself engulfed in a fire that could not be extinguished by cool reason and overwhelmed by a desire that could not be quelled.

CHAPTER SIX:

Tells of the infrapolitical and international political totalitarianism and resistance during the first years of Van's marriage to Thiết and the last days of the Second Indochina War.

(One evening I was behind in my writing again and was trying to make up for it in my room when Mum barged in)

Vân: You know, the crows and magpies are after our gold fish. I see them eyeing them off every morning.

Kim: Yes Mum.

Vân: You know, I saw this ballet dancer on TV today, poor girl. You should have seen her feet! They were all crumpled up like a bird's claw.

Kim: Yes, yes Mum. That's very interesting. (I was trying to fob her off)

Vân: Today I saw this woman on TV. She was ninety-three years old and still working. Well actually, she retired from nursing thirty years ago, but has been helping out with Meals on Wheels ever since.

Kim: Yes Mum.

Vân: This ninety-three year old is retiring for good. She's still very lucid though. She says that it's time for her to move to the Gold Coast where the weather is warmer. She'll probably find something to do there.

Kim: Yes Mum, very good Mum.

Vân: Don't you think that's amazing? I was going to call your office today and tell you about it, but you don't have a TV anyway.

Kim: It was probably a good idea not to call Mum.

Vân: I was going to call you because she looked just like your (maternal) grandmother when she was still with us. It was amazing! She walked, swung her arms and contorted her face just like your grandmother used to. She had a sagging chin just like grandma too. Your grandma loved you and your brother so much. She used to cradle your brother and he used to stroke the layers of skin under her chin. Once he said that it felt like an elephant's chin. She was so gentle. She never took things to heart. She just giggled and said that that was a cute compliment from a cute little boy. Did you know that son? This is the sort of thing that you might want to put in your thesis?

Kim: Yes Mum. (I typed furious nothings so that she might see that I was too busy for her ramblings)

Vân: She loved you even more than your brother. She held you in her arms and sang to you all day. You became so used to leaning against her chest that your neck muscles did not develop properly and every time we put you down you fell over as if your skull was made of lead. You used to like to play with your grandma's hair and even after we came to Australia, when you were three or four, you used to say, "Let me play with your hair for just a little bit Mum?" Heh, he he...do you remember?

Kim: Yes Mum. (And finally she left, before Dad loitered past my still open door)

Thiét: Hmrrphh, that woman watches too much TV, and talks too much.

Kim to the Reader: Dad said what we both were thinking, but the bluntness of his words made me think again. I thought about how difficult it had been for Mum since, after a lifetime of sacrifice and labour, she stopped working and had to find new ways to fill her days and feel productive. And I thought about the stories that she and all of us adopt to make do in life.

Breaking the Ties: The Trial of Tradition vs Modernity

In February of 1975 Vân lost sight of her feet. She was pregnant again; that is, for the third time and if the pressure to give birth to a healthy child had been intense before, it was now almost unbearable. Her first baby, a boy named Hoàng, came into the world at a mere three pounds in November 1971 and died after a few hours. A year and a half later she was pregnant again, only to suffer a miscarriage at the end of her first trimester. While it is impossible to describe adequately the agonising experience of losing these babies (particularly Hoàng who Vân had cradled for a precious and unforgettable instant); what can be conveyed is that throughout the following decades Vân and her husband Thiét often thought about their lost children. Triggered by the sight of a young man who was about Hoàng's age, or often for no apparent reason, the couple would remember and grieve for their first-born son. During these recurring periods of mourning they would ask an eternally aching question, "If only he were here, then perhaps...?"

Vân's mother, Sắt, viewed her daughter's inability to bear children—particularly baby boys—as a most malevolent case of *déjà vu*. The spirits that had haunted Sắt during the early years of her motherhood and inhibited her from giving birth to a son had returned to cause the family more pain and hardship. "You had the best obstetrician in the country and he wasn't able to do anything. There are things that modern medicine just can't explain or fix," said Vân's mother. Despite her modern education, Vân could not dispute the stark correlations between her current predicament and that which had faced her mother thirty

years earlier. She was thus open to the possibility that insidious supernatural forces were at work. After the second child was lost, and at her mother's request, Vân enlisted the services of a shaman to repel the other-world evil from their family line. The shaman deftly enchanted a piece of paper inscribed with some ancient symbols before burning it and telling Vân to consume the ashes with a glass of water. Vân was sceptical of the mystical and somewhat repulsive procedure, but was willing to do anything to ensure that she did not lose another baby.

Just as concerned was Vân's mother-in-law, Thừa, who was convinced that the Huỳnh ancestral lineage could only be carried by a male. If Thiết could not raise a son, she believed, then the spirits of their ancestors (including and especially her beloved husband, Việt, and her two deceased boys, Khiết and Biết) would be so distraught by the dissipation of their legacy that they could never rest in peace. The horrific prospect of not producing any boys to burn incense for their ancestors meant that Thừa had no sympathy for her (ac)cursed daughter-in-law, who had come to live with the family early in 1971 after Thiết and Vân's wedding. The old woman stood over the younger one, keeping a constant and tyrannical vigilance during this all-important third pregnancy.

A victim of gerontocratic authoritarianism, Vân felt that power was being imposed upon her in the most arbitrary, insidious and unjust of ways. Importantly, Thừa almost never explicitly told Vân to do or not to do anything. Rather, her domestic domination was carried out in accordance with a largely hidden transcript that had been compiled and revised over the generations through countless instructive precedents, stories, proverbs and songs which exhorted deference to one's elders and complete deference from a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law. Thus, while the rules and hierarchy in the household were never officially or explicitly laid down, Vân knew them all too well; and she knew that non-compliance was not an option.

During her first pregnancy it was dictated that, in accordance with a well-known but somewhat anachronistic custom, Vân should remain active in order to restrict the size of the foetus and make for an easier birth. Vân did not wholly object to

this practice however, Thừa and her two daughters Hương and Trương (who also lived with them) characteristically took their traditions to an extreme and uncompromising degree. Once again, the three older women did not directly order the younger one to comply with their customary laws, but Vân unambiguously ascertained from whispers, snide comments made behind her back and less than subtle looks of disapproval, that pregnancy was no excuse for laziness. In fact, it was a reason for increased endeavour. And so, Vân kept working at the electricity authority and at the family electrical goods store right up until she was due to give birth. On the weekends she was weighed down by endless chores and shopping. As the due date approached and more offerings had to be made to their ancestors, it was Vân's job to carry trays of fruit and bowls of rice up and down the spiral staircase to the family altar. Many years later, she would maintain that this was one of the times when she should have stuck up for herself; when she should have rebelled against (rather than make the most of) her oppressive circumstances; when she should have made sacrifices not for the avid advocates of yesteryear but rather, the innocent embodiments of tomorrow.

After Vân lost her first two children, her obstetrician diagnosed that she was not providing the babies with enough nutrients and demanded that the foetus-starving strategy be abandoned. Thừa acquiesced, but did not relinquish her firm grasp over the third pregnancy. Implicitly but forcefully, Thừa decreed that her daughter-in-law should not be allowed to lift a finger lest the baby become exhausted by her effort. Accordingly, Thiét was made to haul his and Vân's heavy wooden bed down the winding stairs of their house to the sitting room so that his wife would have no reason to go upstairs. For a time, Vân was allowed to take short walks, but even then she had to be accompanied and was prohibited from opening the heavy metal gate. While the baby was better off than its older siblings, its mother remained totally bereft of personal privacy and individual empowerment.

Lying on her bed in the middle of the day, Vân endured the passing of every minute as she waited for Thiét to come home. The thirty year old woman was seething with anger and felt as if her life had been hijacked. "I've got both my baccalaureates, I've been working for ten years and have supported my family

for much longer than that. Now I can't even get myself a cup of tea. I don't even know if I'm allowed to drink tea!" Despite her frustration, however, Vân never expressed her dissatisfaction to her in-laws. While she did not wholeheartedly ascribe to Confucian patriarchal prescriptions of submission and subservience from a wife to her husband and his family, she was also not totally opposed to them. With her allegiances mixed and her duties muddled, Vân again chose fortitude over revolt. This choice was facilitated by Vân's knowledge of the curse that had been passed on to her from her mother, the ever-painful memory of the two children she had already lost, the demoralising disregard that Thiết's mother and sisters showed for her, and the naturally occurring emotional tribulations of pregnancy, which all combined to leave her feeling utterly incompetent and acutely depressed. Everything, it seemed, was her fault.

Reading provided the only way for Vân to temporarily escape from her incarceration and despair. Since she had left school, Vân had been so busy with work and family commitments that she had had little time to read. Now, in dire need of escape from the cycle of boredom and harassment, she lost herself in a travel book from Egypt, Chinese classics like *Journey to the West* translated into modern Vietnamese, a cook book from Southern France, poetry collections written in the Vietnamese six-eight syllable verse, and bundles of modern novels from Việt Nam and beyond. Each afternoon Hương's son Tâm exchanged books for Vân from a nearby store and, as the baby's arrival approached, Vân had quite literally read almost everything that the shop had to offer. Vân had always been a fast reader, but during this period of woe and reprieve her speed improved dramatically to a point where she could devour over a hundred pages in an hour and at least two books a day.

That afternoon, as Vân waited for her husband, she finished reading a rather nondescript text and was pleasantly surprised when she turned to her pile of unread books to find Nhất Linh's novel, *Breaking the Ties*.¹ Like many people in the Republic of Việt Nam (RVN), Vân had analysed this modern classic in high

¹ Nhất Linh, *Đoạn Tuyệt: Tiểu Thuyết [Breaking the Ties: a Novel]* (Hà Nội: NXB Đại Học và Giáo Dục Chuyên Nghiệp, 1988).

school. First published in 1935, *Breaking the Ties* was a ground-breaking novel in terms of its impact on how Vietnamese viewed the world and themselves. The book epitomised a series of works by the Self-Strength Literary Group (*Tự Lực Văn Đoàn*) that sought to illustrate the unjust and obsolete nature of traditional Confucian role-based relationships in Việt Nam and simultaneously champion the wonders of modern individualism and romantic love.² In *Breaking the Ties*, Nhất Linh depicts the trials of a young woman named Loan who, under the pressure of filial piety marries not her beloved but rather her betrothed, a man named Thân. Loan and Thân's wedding day forebodes imminent and intense conflict. When the bride is taken to the groom's house, she finds a charcoal brazier on the threshold over which she must leap.³ The charcoal, her superstitious mother-in-law believes, will incinerate any evil spirits that might have attached themselves to Loan and burn off all her intransigent and rebellious attributes, thereby preparing her for a life of servitude.⁴ In all likelihood, Nhất Linh introduces the brazier of brimstone to symbolise the hell into which our heroine is entering. Outrageously and courageously, Loan knocks over the brazier with her foot and then feigns clumsiness.

The villain of the story is Thân's mother who treats Loan like a animal or chattel that has come into her possession. It is not uncommon to find abusive mothers-in-law in Vietnamese families; this bitter woman, however, is particularly callous in her adherence to the ways of old. When Loan gives birth to a baby boy who falls ill, the young mother stands aside and allows her mother-in-law to hire a traditional healer. The healer's barbaric and brutal practices serve only to bring the boy to the brink of death; such that by the time Loan is able to provide her son with Western medical treatment, it is too late. The mother-in-law shows only contempt for the grieving Loan, "What you have to realise is that he may be your child, but he's my grandchild. If you want to kill him, then you can't just go ahead and do so. You don't have the right."⁵

² The Self-Strength Literary Group is also discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis at page 158.

³ Nhất Linh, *Đoạn Tuyệt*, 68.

⁴ For more details on this practice, see Toan Ánh, *Phong Tục Việt Nam: Từ Bản Thân Đến Gia Đình [Vietnamese Customs: From the Person to the Family]* (Cơ Sở Xuất Bản Đại Nam, 1985) 348.

⁵ Nhất Linh, *Đoạn Tuyệt*, 118.

When Vân first read *Breaking the Ties* in high school she enjoyed the story-line, but the book itself had little impact upon her. She had read it as if it were pure drama, savouring little more than its riveting plot and lively characters. While teenage Vân knew that the modernist novel was iconoclastic for its time and of great historical value, she was of the impression that Loan's dilemma was somewhat of an anachronism. She half hoped and half reasoned that the injustices which Loan suffered at the hands of her mother-in-law had become a thing of the past, replaced by a new era of equality and feminine empowerment. "If I ever get married, there's no way I'll end up like that," Vân had thought to herself. Now, as she read the novel again and reflected over her five challenging years of courtship and marriage, Vân realised how naïve she had been.

The Feminine Infrapolitics⁶ of Chastity and Courtship

Throughout high school and for most of her young adulthood, Vân was of the impression that she would never marry. During her late teenage years and early twenties, the image that she both saw in the mirror and carried in her mind was so humble and homely that she was certain no man would ever give her a second look. But Vân's unmarriageability (*ế chồng*) was not just a physical matter. She was convinced that the more a young man knew about her, the less attractive she would become. Her family was poor and had no prestige or connections to offer potential suitors. On the contrary, to marry Vân was to be entangled in a sticky web of obligations. After her father was killed in the 1968 Tết Offensive, Vân took full responsibility for supporting her family. Her mother was elderly, her older sister had her own children and financial woes, and her two younger sisters and brother were still in school. With Vân's wages and thoughts wholly committed to her family in Binh Duong, there were times when she was inclined to reject any and all cravings for lifelong companionship. She would ask herself,

⁶ "Infrapolitics" is a term coined by James C. Scott that incorporates an "offstage discourse" in which power is exercised (for reasons of resistance and control) in low-profile ways and in accordance with a hidden transcript. Infrapolitics does not simply restate the public/private or high/low political divides, but rather points to a shady political infrastructure that underpins and pervades throughout. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 19, 184. For a cogent argument that women can often be more apt at navigating and manipulating infrapolitics than men see Susan Carol Rogers, "Female Forms of Power and the Myth of Male Dominance: a Model of Female/Male Interaction in Peasant Society" in *American Ethnologist* 2:4 (November 1975) 727-757.

“What if I got married and my husband didn’t want me to work? Who would look after my mother and my younger siblings? What do I want to get married for anyway? The last thing I need is another person and family to worry about.”

Vân was not alone in her (self)imposed loneliness. Uncertainties arising from the prolonged war made many young urban women think twice about the prospects of marriage. By the late 1960s, a generation of Vietnamese men had been claimed by combat, and inflation was rampant. Registered marriages between Vietnamese in Sài Gòn fell from 3,889 in 1965 to 2,838 in 1969.⁷ Running against this trend was the demographic phenomenon that saw a burgeoning number of marriages between Vietnamese and Westerners. In 1965 such couplings constituted only four per cent of the total registered marriages in Sài Gòn, but by 1970 they accounted for nineteen per cent.⁸ Vân had no such aspirations. She was well aware that girls who took US husbands (*me Mỹ*) were often looked down upon as being unchaste and culturally disloyal, in the same way that the Vietnamese brides of Frenchmen had once been (*me Tây*). For her, there was a strict hierarchy to eligible bachelors which she had formulated during her school days and accepted ever since. Notably, this ranking excluded foreigners. Vietnamese graduates from Đà Lạt officer’s school were by far the most debonair and ranked first in this grading of “real catches”. They were followed by the dashing pilots of the South Vietnamese air force, ever-dexterous (and often overseas-educated) engineers, and teachers who could be relied up to take care of children.

All of this earnest and careful reasoning over matters of the heart, however, were only applicable in the absence of true love. Whether it was a product of old Vietnamese fables, Bollywood and Hollywood films, modern novels, real-life role models or the interaction of cascading physio-psychological genes, Vân held on to a hope—not an expectation but certainly a hope—that she would one day meet a man who would sweep her off her feet, lighten her load and befriend her for a lifetime. Of course, this was pure fantasy, and Vân knew it, but she also

⁷ Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 339.

⁸ *Ibid.*

knew that there was no harm in dreaming, nor any irrefutable evidence that dreams did not sometimes come true.

Vân's employment with the electricity authority in 1966, when she was twenty-two years old, represented her emergence into public life. After spending her youth cloistered in her family home and at a girls-only school, she was suddenly surrounded by a wide variety of people from different places and various ages, many of whom were men. With the new people came exhilarating new experiences, particularly after November 1966, when she settled into her position as pay mistress at the Thủ Đức office. For the first time in her life, Vân was astonished to find that she was popular. Being an unassuming and non-threatening sort of person, she had little difficulty getting on with her female colleagues. Moreover, Vân had her own office which provided close acquaintances with a secluded place to chat and nap during lunch breaks. Most astonishingly, Vân slowly discovered that men were showing an interest in her.

As the office pay-mistress, Vân was in an advantageous position when it came to meeting young gentlemen who needed only to manufacture a polite salary inquiry in order to see her. This is not to say that she was the most beautiful or popular person at the electricity authority, but there is little doubt that men saw something in Vân that they liked very much. In a way, she represented a functional and attractive combination of worlds. She was young, but not so young as to be ignorant; she was meek, but not so meek as to be incompetent or naïve; she was educated but not in a way that made her arrogant or unruly; she had a strong body that had never known idleness, but was not wiry like those peasants who worked in the rice paddies.

One of the boldest and brashest of Vân's admirers discovered the address of her boarding house and stopped by to woo her. Vân, however, was not one for modern proactive courting practices and was put off by his uncouth assertiveness. The closest that she came to dating (which was not very close at all) was occasionally to accept a male colleague's offer to pick her up on the way to a fellow worker's wedding. There were also a handful of office-related outings where Vân allowed male workmates to take pictures of her with their new-

fangled cameras; but she never smiled, choosing to immortalise an air of refinement rather than ever disclose that she was having a good time. She knew that the greatest sin for a young woman was to be seen as licentious; that even during the relatively swinging sixties, sexual mores for many young Vietnamese women were strictly interpreted and infringements severely punished by means of social condemnation and ostracism. Thus in many ways, Vân embodied and complied with the Confucian principle of chastity for women (*trinh*), which necessitated the determined defence of virginity and “a purity of spirit that was meant to transcend worldly desires”.⁹

Vân’s self-defence of her chastity was facilitated by the fact that no man had come close to catching her eye, let alone won over her heart. Perhaps she was a little aloof? Most certainly, Vân was often repelled by the brazen nature of men and their desire to control her. There was one suitor for instance, a quite senior bureaucrat at the electricity authority, who made it known from the outset that he viewed her as a potential wife. During a business outing to the beachside town of Vũng Tàu, however, he observed Vân going out one evening with a group of girlfriends. This image of her, laughing and enjoying herself in public, made his blood boil. This man was of a patriarchal mould and wanted a woman who would never leave his side, who knew no fun and saw no light unless it was with him. The arch-conservative spoke poorly of Vân to others, but did not succeed in undermining her integrity. Nevertheless, the already wary Vân heeded this warning and decided that if she ever went out with a man, he would become her husband.

By early 1970, Vân was twenty-six years old and the pressure on her to find and acquiesce to a husband was building exponentially. Her mother Sắt, who had married while still in her teens, was not one to lecture her children but made it known to Vân that, as far as she was concerned, a woman was not really a woman until she was attached to a man. So went the proverbs:

She who is married is like a dragon with wings,

⁹ David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) 192.

She who has no husband is like a rice-mill with a broken axle.¹⁰

Unstable like a hat without a chin-strap,
Like a boat without a rudder, is she who has no husband.¹¹

That same year, Vân moved in with her older cousin and her family in Sài Gòn. Her cousin's husband, who was an advisor to General Dương Văn Minh,¹² was aware that Vân had carried a heavy burden since her father had died and was happy to help her out financially by refusing to accept rent. At the same time, he knew that this charitable act would contribute to Vân's marriageability. "It's not right for a young lady to live on her own, moving from one seedy dormitory to another," he said. "In fact, a pretty and talented girl like you should really have a family of her own by now."

Vân was eventually persuaded by the logic of her elders and the precedence of her peers. Much of what her mother and cousin's husband said seemed incontestably true. She was closer to thirty than twenty, and if she wanted to have children then she could not afford to dawdle in finding a spouse. Moreover, Vân was attending more and more weddings as a guest and felt left behind as friends and acquaintances started bearing children. Most importantly, despite the war and all the socio-economic problems that confronted Việt Nam, these friends and acquaintances seemed to be able to transcend the dreariness of the outside world. Even if anarchy abounded, they could be happy and secure in and with their own little families. Suddenly, more than ever, Vân yearned to live in one place with one person. Critically, this person had to be both compassionate and reliable. For in desiring security for herself, Vân could not condemn her family in Bình Dương to insecurity. Always, she had one eye looking forward and the other looking back.

¹⁰ *Gái có chồng như rông có vây,
Gái không chồng như cối xay gạo gãy.*
Trịnh T. Minh-hà, *Framer Framed* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 67.

¹¹ *Trông trăng như nón không quai,
Như thuyền không lái, như ai không chồng.*

Author's translation with reference to Toàn Ánh, *Phong Tục Việt Nam*, 335. All subsequent translations are by the author unless indicated otherwise.

¹² Dương Văn Minh led the 1963 coup that overthrew President Ngô Đình Diệm and was also the last president of the RVN in 1975. At that time (1970) he was an opposition leader against President Thiệu. A year later he briefly ran for president only to withdraw claiming election rigging.

This is when Thiét came into her line of vision. Vân had known Thiét for a couple of years but they never had an opportunity to speak, until one day when they were assigned together on a business trip to the city. With some time to spare on the way to Sài Gòn, Thiét suggested that they (Thiét, Vân and the driver) stop and have a bite to eat. Vân flatly refused, thinking it unprofessional for them to be eating during a work trip, and unpropitious for a young lady to have breakfast with strange men at a crowded roadside eatery. "As you please," said Thiét before leaving Vân in the car to wait while he and the driver dined. Vân's fumes of rage surpassed those rising up from Thiét's steaming bowl of beef noodle soup. She glared at him wolfing down his meal, lifting the bowl to his mouth and using his chopsticks to flick the noodles and broth down his throat. Vân's first impression of Thiét was that he was an arrogant buffoon.

While their initial meeting was not a successful one, Vân gradually gained a different impression of Thiét. Secretly, over the months and years, she watched him watching her. Now and then, he would build up enough courage to talk to her. And from these somewhat whimsical but meaningful conversations, Vân started to see a different man. Under that external bravado, there was a caring and somewhat shy person. He still lived with his family and clearly understood the importance of filial obligations. From Vân's independent inquiries, she confirmed that he was clean-living, did not smoke, drank very little and never gambled. Most importantly, he was patient and devoted. Thiét would eventually pursue her for two years, never overtly expressing his sentiments, but also never giving up. Somehow, he recognised that he should not rush things, that he had to frame and time his advance in just the right way.

By the middle of 1970, the moment had come. Thiét adopted the appropriate courtship protocol by making a seemingly offhandish inquiry to one of Vân's friends as to her availability. Pretending ignorance, the friend responded that she was pretty sure Vân did not have anyone in her life, but would have to check. "Please don't say anything directly to her about me," Thiét pleaded, knowing all along that Vân would learn of his inquiry within the hour. It was a masterful move which, while requiring some boldness on Thiét's part, did not hold great

risks for either of them of losing face. Vân asked her friend to relay back to Thiét that she was single, thereby providing a minimal but sufficient amount of information required for him to increase the frequency of his awkward visits. For Vân, it was imperative that she direct the hidden transcript of their courtship in such a way that Thiét felt, and others believed, he was in control of the public performance. Vân could not be seen as the instigator of their relationship as this was contrary to the social mores concerning feminine submission and male assertiveness. Their coming together, then, was very much a tactical product of everyday feminine resistance; evidence that practical gains can be made not in spite of, but rather under, the shrouded protection of male domination.

In the autumn of that same year, Vân started accepting Thiét's invitations to breakfast which quickly became a regular and enjoyable pre-work appointment. It allowed them to get to know each other over glasses of coffee sweetened with condensed milk as they watched the sun rise and another bustling day begin. After a few weeks, their relationship became at once more serious and exciting, as they started venturing into the night on Thiét's motorbike. They talked until their throats were dry (which is not very long when rushing through the city), and then stopped for some sugarcane juice or sweet soup. Vân held on to Thiét and, as much as anything, she enjoyed those silent moments when she allowed herself to be hypnotised by the lights of the Paris of the Orient. During these fanciful flights of escape, her fear of the war, her duties to her family, and the everyday drudgery of life seemed to shrink in significance. When she was with Thiét, Vân realised that there were things to live and fight for—such as companionship and love—that were not costly obligations, but rather, profitable pleasures.

"His name is Thiét, and he works at the office," Vân explained to her mother one weekend. "He's an upstanding young man from a good family, and he wants to meet you. I'm pretty sure that he wants to marry me." Four months had passed since Thiét had inquired as to Vân's relationship status and the two of them had embarked on just a handful of outings. Nevertheless, their comfort with and knowledge of each other was growing rapidly. It was not an explosive romance, but neither Vân nor Thiét were expecting it to be. Love, they believed, would develop over time. What was important now was that they had a solid foundation

of respect. With this established, they could take the all important step of meeting each other's family; a move that everyone, particularly Vân's mother, would interpret as a precursor to marriage. "Invite him over next weekend," Sắt replied to her daughter. "It's not right for a woman to play with a man's heart. If he's a reasonable sort of fellow, then you should marry him and be done with it."

Later, Thiết would admit that he had never been more nervous than on that Sunday morning before visiting Vân's family in Bình Dương. Of course, Thiết had everything planned in advance. He had remembered the names and pertinent details of her siblings and had a clear idea of what he was going to say to Vân's mother, and how he was going to say it. He would break the ice with some easy conversation about his drive over, ask Vân's mother about her health and comment that she was looking well for her age, outline his family situation, and say something about his job using terms that she would probably not understand but admire nonetheless. Thiết left on the thirty kilometre trip from Sài Gòn to Bình Dương with plenty of time to spare, believing that the worse thing he could do was to be late. While speeding along in Hương's car, the anxious suitor checked his wrist watch and discovered that he was too early. At the same time his growling stomach reminded him that he had forgotten to have breakfast. Thus, Thiết pulled over into an area famous for its vermicelli noodles and shredded barbeque pork (*bún bì*) dressed with fish sauce, scallions and coriander. After finishing his meal, the young man felt confident that his stomach would not trouble him and that nothing could stand in his way.

He offered a glittering smile and respectful bow to Vân's mother who greeted him at the door. Over the next hour or so, he presented himself as a fun-loving and dashing fellow to Vân's siblings; while also making sure that Vân's mother knew that he was an honest and gentle young man who would take good care of her daughter. On the way home, Thiết glowed with the knowledge of a job well done. It was not until some time later that Vân confirmed and disclosed to him that during that brief meeting he had effectively gained a reputation among her family members as a charming, respectable and reliable individual, whose teeth just happened to be of a polarity that attracted vegetable matter. Earlier that morning at his barbeque pork stop, Thiết had collected a piece of coriander that

for the rest of his visit had clung stubbornly and conspicuously to his front incisors.

A Shotgun Wedding of Tradition and Modernity

Thiệt never asked Vân to marry him; nor did Vân expect him to. The relationship was progressing in such a definitive way that the path before them was both singular and uncluttered; and so, such overt acts seemed gratuitous, carrying with them the excessive dramatics of a dancing peacock. Instead, Vân and Thiết concurred that it was time to take the next logical and almost irreversible step towards life-time commitment, and introduce their mothers to one another. It was at this point that the couple's largely smooth-running relationship ran into some small but significant obstacles. Since Thiết had already come to Bình Dương, it was agreed that Vân's mother, Sắt, should be the one to go to Sài Gòn. The problem was that Sắt was violently averse to travelling in the machines of modern men. She was nevertheless determined to facilitate Vân's matrimony, and so steeled herself and her stomach for the two hour ride from Bình Dương to Sài Gòn (the trip usually took less than an hour but numerous stops were necessary). Sắt's primary concern, however, did not materialise until she arrived at Thiết's house and spoke to Thừa. Suddenly, it dawned upon her that Thiết's family were from the Central Vietnamese countryside and the prospect of her daughter joining such a family was very frightening indeed.

Sắt already knew from Thiết's accent and proclamations that he came from Central Việt Nam, but the urban Đà Nẵng accent that he had acquired in his youth was easily comprehensible, and thus carried a degree of civility which she found reassuring. Moreover, Thiết was noticeably coming around to the Southern way of speaking. Thừa's pronunciation, on the other hand, was heavily tainted with the grit of rural Central Vietnam and was often difficult to understand. The stark sound of Thừa's utterances made Sắt apprehensive for her daughter. This is not to say that Vân's mother thought that, as a Southerner, she was in any way superior to or more Vietnamese than those from Centre. But what if linguistic divides gave rise to or were symptomatic of irreconcilable real-life tensions?

What if Vân was unable to quickly comprehend her mother-in-law's commands? How could Vân possibly cook anything that would please Thiết's family? She had no idea how to prepare Quảng Nam noodles and her fish sauce would be far too sweet for them.

It is sometimes suggested that regional socio-psychological differences in Việt Nam have geographic origins; that the environment in the Southern part of Việt Nam is more predictable and benign than that found in the Centre and North.¹³ With life in the South being more liveable, Southern villages and social structures were always less disciplined and more tolerant of individual initiative and cultural heterodoxy.¹⁴ These differences were exacerbated by historical and political developments. As the most recent frontier zone, the Mekong region was not settled by significant numbers of Vietnamese until the seventeenth century.¹⁵ It is thus relatively lacking in ancient historical landmarks and cultural hang-ups, the people demonstrating a less doctrinaire attitude when it comes to their customs. This attitude was extenuated by the French colonists who directly administered the South (Cochinchina) as a colony where they made more of an effort to cultivate a socially liberal environment.¹⁶ As a consequence of all this Southerners, it has sometimes been asserted, are more easy-going than their Central and Northern compatriots.

As Sắt sat sipping tea and making polite conversation with Thừa and Thiết's two older sisters something told her that these women would make life very difficult for her daughter. They were far richer than Sắt's family and made it known to her that Vân's intrusion had effectively scuttled their plans to marry Thiết off to more well-to-do prospects. Sitting with them, Sắt could not help but be reminded of the Central Vietnamese cassava (*củ sắn*) which is noxious and needs to be soaked for days before it can be eaten. The Southern variety (*củ mì*) is significantly sweeter and can be consumed without preparation. Despite her anxieties, Sắt decided to say nothing to Vân (expressing her concerns only to her

¹³ Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 5. Of course this is not to discount the fact that the Mê Kông is prone to extreme flooding.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

other daughters). She reasoned that she was probably over-reacting, that marrying into a richer family was better than marrying into a poorer one, and that there was little point in scaring her daughter now that there was a wedding to arrange.

After consultations with an astrologer, it was determined that Saturday 2 January 1971 was the most auspicious day for Vân and Thiết to get married.¹⁷ Such was Thiết's excitement on the day that he woke up at four in the morning. And when the time came for the groom's wedding procession to make its way to Bình Dương to retrieve the bride, he had a terrible headache. The physical pain, however, was surpassed by his emotional ecstasy. Since leaving his home town of Bồ Bản at the age of thirteen, Thiết had been a loner. For a long time this did not bother him, as he was focussed on his studies and work. In recent years, as he approached the age of thirty, the cumulative effect of his isolation had become irrepressible and Thiết started to fear the prospect of spending the rest of his life alone. Vân dissipated that fear, bringing light to his darkness. From that Saturday onwards, Thiết would have a permanent companion, a person with whom he could share his burdens and successes. His happiness in those weeks leading up to his marriage was evident to all observers, such that one colleague who was surprised to see him wearing a pair of cut-off jeans (which had just come into fashion) commented that, "Thiết is so happy about marrying Vân that he has grown half a metre!" The young man was also greatly looking forward to the wedding itself. He and Vân had meticulously organised the guest list, cars, clothes and the reception, and timed it all to perfection. Everything would surely go to plan.

At around eight in the morning (in fact Thừa had determined an exact astrological schedule for the entire affair) the groom arrived at Bình Dương with his entourage bearing the traditional betrothal gifts of jewellery, tea, cakes and areca nuts and betel leaves.¹⁸ Vân was wearing a pale blue organza long tunic (*áo dài*) with a Western-style veil that she and Thiết had bought together at the

¹⁷ The 6th day of the 12th month in the year of the dog according to the lunar calendar.

¹⁸ Betel leaves are coated with a limestone paste and used to wrap areca nuts to make a mild chewing narcotic. From an old Vietnamese folk story, the areca nut and betel leaf have come to symbolise devotion between husband and wife.

famous Thiết Lập designer store in Sài Gòn.¹⁹ When Thiết first saw her, he beamed a brilliant smile and, in spite of his ultra-rational atheist convictions, wondered whether a greater power had indeed blessed him.

A crowd gathered to peer inside the front door of Vân's grand uncle Tư's house, which was the setting for all her family's major events. They saw one of Vân's uncles who had a model family—prosperous and unmarred by death—welcome Thiết in and then light a candle in honour of the newlyweds who together followed his example. Afterwards, the couple paid their respects to Vân's ancestors, informing them of their sacred union, before Thiết's gifts were officially presented to Vân and her family. As photos were taken of the groom and bride, the guests casually sipped tea and waited for the time to take the bride to her new home. As was customary, a sign was prominently displayed in front of Tư's house heralding *Phu Quy*, "that the bride is going to the groom's house". Despite the fact that Vân had not lived with her family for several years, her mother, sisters and some aunts wept uncontrollably when the time came for her to go. In all the weeping commotion it seemed that Vân was the only one who had held her poise. So much so that a jesting cousin pleaded to the bride that she force a few tears just to make everyone else feel at ease.

Vân was too focussed on fearful path before her to cry. In accordance with another common practice, Vân had never seen Thiết's house and so as the red bridal Cadillac weaved its way to Sài Gòn Vân was terrified. "Just relax, this is the day that you've been waiting for," she told herself. "Just relax, you've been on your feet for weeks. There's nothing more to do now. Just relax and enjoy it." Vân was totally worn out and felt the accumulated pressure of organising everything from the gladiolis, to the seating arrangements, to cutting her sisters' hair. She had a bridesmaid and all her family to help, but such was Vân's sense of independence that early that morning, before anyone had woken, she got up and proceeded to curl her own hair and get into her dress without any assistance.

¹⁹ Many brides wore pink dresses but this did not appeal to Vân. White was forbidden by Thừa as this is a colour of mourning for Vietnamese. The pale blue dress was a compromise that pleased all involved.

On the day of her wedding, the sense of security that Vân had felt during her courtship with Thiết turned into insecurity. This was not a simple case of cold feet; she knew that Thiết was the man for her and had no intention of letting him or anyone down. Nevertheless, Vân could not repress her angst over what she had gotten herself into. From that day onward, she would be tied to Thiết and his family (she hardly knew the latter). “There’s nothing to be concerned about,” she reasoned to herself. “Many brides are forced into arranged marriages where they don’t even know their husbands. You’re lucky. At least you’ve got to know Thiết before all of this.” Nevertheless, the young woman remained troubled by the thought of losing her autonomy and more importantly, losing touch with her birth family. So went the saying, “Expel the family when you join with the husband.”²⁰

Foreseeing such anxiety, Vân’s mother and aunts told her to put her wedding dress over Thiết’s tuxedo on the wedding night as a secret symbol of her intransigence, and also to take a cube of sugar to put it in her new family’s tea as a harbinger of the sweet goodness that she would bring into the household (and also to sweeten the disposition of her in-laws). These tactical acts of superstition and insurgency, performed within the realm of that hidden transcript of rarely reported everyday (feminine) action, would have real-life consequences for her marriage. They persisted in the background of Vân’s life and mind as a reminder of her ability to resist and subvert the patriarchal and generational oppressive forces that would challenge her home life. At that stage, however, as Vân sat solemnly in the bridal car wearing her pale blue wedding dress and with a cube of sugar in her purse, she could not help but think that these tactical traditions were absurd. The very fact that they had developed over the generations only confirmed to her that her apprehension was well placed.

When she arrived at Hương’s two-storey house on Trương Minh Ký Street in Sài Gòn, Vân faced the first fiery confrontation of her marriage. Upon approaching the front door of her new home, she found that Thiết’s mother, Thừa, and his sister, Hương, had set up a coal brazier on the threshold which they

²⁰ *Xuất giá tông phu*. Recounted by Vân.

encouraged/threatened the young Vân to jump over. Thiết, who was just as surprised and utterly perplexed by this bizarre and outdated practice, suspected that his mother had got the idea from a fraudulent friend or shameless shaman. He knew all too well that Thừa was prone to the allure of superstition and that her (il)logic was so entrenched and misguided as to not be worth questioning or rebelling against. Placing his arm over Vân's shoulder, Thiết tried to guide and reassure his wife, "Just do it. Just do it for them Vân. Get it over with."

Vân was not so sure. She clearly remembered the story-line of Nhật Linh's *Breaking the Ties* and how Loan's mother-in-law had set up just such a brazier on her wedding day to burn away Loan's residual individuality. Other than that remembrance, however, there was little time for this real-world character to contemplate or calculate what she had to do. Everyone was watching and waiting, her husband and his family (now her family) pushed her forward into the flames which had been over-stoked and were licking at her knees. They would surely burn her dress, if not her flesh. And yet, despite its scorching repulsiveness, the fire was also warm and inviting. What was one small leap? A contraction of the quadriceps was perhaps all that was necessary to avoid decades of disagreement. Witnesses to this oppressive anachronism who had read and recalled *Breaking the Ties* must have savoured the soap-opera-like sense of anticipation, "Which way will she go? Will she kick the coals over like Loan, or obediently comply with the will of her mother-in-law and the dictates of tradition?" For Vân, who was the central actor in this show without a script, there was barely enough time to think about what was the right or most practical thing to do. She could only allow the (self)socialised habits and values of a lifetime to converge into instinct. Vân took a step forward...and then verged to the side and, with the sangfroid and grace of a professional ballet dancer, strode through the doorway, for now escaping the flames that rose up from both the red-hot coals and the eyes of her in-laws. In recent world history, possibly only Neil Armstrong had taken a more courageous step.

The rest of the day progressed without incident. During the joyous lunch-time reception at the classy Đồng Khánh restaurant in Chợ Lớn, the bride wore a stunning red velvet long tunic with white silk gloves and a sparkling tiara. A few

guests would comment that the bride's outfit was not only beautiful and elegant, but was also an effective and fashionable integration of East and West and old and new. Her radiance inspired almost all of them to forget about the doorstep incident between the bride and the groom's mother. Even Vân enjoyed the party, going around each table and watching her family and friends have a wonderful time. The only drawback was that she missed her mother who had acquiesced to Thù's suggestion that she should remain behind in Bình Dương because an astrologer had pointed out that Sắt's age did not complement the bride and groom's, and also that if she was car sick all the way to Sài Gòn, then that would be a terrible omen for the wedding.²¹ Not surprisingly, Vân and Thiết were left to clean up afterwards and when they came home in the late afternoon they were overcome with emotion and fatigue. The couple went for a nap that was cut short by a shrill cry from Thù, "You two not up yet? How much sleep can you possibly want?!"

The Infrapolitical Totalitarianism and Resistance of the Mother-in-Law/Daughter-in-Law Dynamic

Like many other Southern Vietnamese newlyweds, Vân and Thiết spent their honeymoon cruising around the small islands off the barmy seaside town of Nha Trang before taking in the brisk mountain air and rushing waterfalls of Đà Lạt. It was all very pleasant and immensely civilised, as they strolled side-by-side with nothing much to do but be together. Sadly, these few days would mark the high-point of their early relationship. Upon returning to Sài Gòn, things got steadily, if not rapidly, more challenging. These challenges were partly foreseen by Vân; and so, along with her pacifying cube of sugar, she offered these few humble words to Thù on her first day on the job, "My duty is to love and care for you. But I went to school and worked all my life, so I do not know how to cook and look after people as well as other women do. But if you can teach me, I will learn quickly and do well." Thù coolly replied that she need not worry because they

²¹ It is also possible (but could not be verified through the author's interviews) that Thù was influenced by a sparsely practised custom that prohibits the bride's parents from attending her wedding so as to emphasise her transfer from one family to another.

had maids. This much was true, but the maids did not work on weekends and in any case could not save her from the demoralisation and difficulties to come. So went the folksong:

A daughter is the child of other people,
A daughter-in-law is only truly the child of her parents-in-law,
As it is they who have bought her.²²

Long afterwards, Thùà would categorically deny that she had shown anything but the utmost affection and respect for her daughter-in-law and assert that neither of them ever did anything to displease the other. “I loved your mother even more than I loved my own son,” she would proclaim to the author. As matriarch of the family, Thùà was convinced that she could and should act without others questioning her, and even revoke or revise those actions after the fact. For her, truth was determined by interests; and it was in everyone’s interest for an old woman to remain unchallenged, for her truth to be the only truth. And so, given Thùà’s abject silence and/or radically reactionary reconstruction of this period, it is necessary to rely upon the observations and explanations of others to determine the reasoning or otherwise behind Thùà’s persecution of Vân.

In all fairness, Thùà did not object to everything about Vân. For one thing, Vân was born in 1944, the year of the monkey; and thus, as far as Thùà was concerned, she was not a bad astrological match for Thiế́t who was born in 1942, the year of the dragon.²³ Beyond that, however, Thùà showed little sign of approval for or kindness towards her daughter-in-law. Her chilling demeanour is in part explained by Thùà’s impression that her only remaining and youngest son was being taken away from her by an alien and enemy element. Indeed, despite the fact that he was almost thirty years old, Thùà was convinced that Thiế́t was not capable of determining who he would spend the rest of his life with and, more importantly, who would bear his children. In Thùà’s eyes, her son was

²² Cited in Mai Thị Tú and Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết, *Women in Việt Nam* (Hà Nội: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1978) 48.

²³ People born in the years of the monkey (*thân*), dragon (*thìn*) and mouse/rat (*tý*) are said to be good matches.

inexperienced in matters of the heart and unable to appreciate the bigger picture and longer term.

According to Thừa, a successful marriage was based upon a scrupulous matching of families rather than the haphazard affections of two individuals. In times not long past, it was common for Vietnamese parents of the upper classes to insist that the fathers of the bride and groom were of similar age and status, as this was a good indication of the equality and compatibility of the families. In comparing families, it was not only the living members who were investigated, but also up to three generations of ancestors.²⁴ The importance of finding just the right filial match was captured in a popular proverb which exhorted that one should always, “choose a suitable breed and branch of the family when marrying.”²⁵ A verse from the epic poem “The Tale of Kiều” had also become well-known and quoted in such circumstances, “I have always planned for our lifelong union. So I must inquire about the source and sound the bottom of the river (i.e. your ancestral heritage).”²⁶ In marrying Vân, Thiết had eschewed all of these age-old control factors and while Thừa did not consciously set out to break up the newlyweds, she considered it her duty to show them the error of their ways.

If Thừa had only coldness for Vân, Thiết’s oldest sister Hương derided her sister-in-law with a red-hot zeal. In many ways, Hương was the Rasputin of the household. She was always conniving, constantly contriving and, through her menacing whispers, forever suggesting in subtle but unmistakable ways to Thừa (who had more leverage over Thiết) that Vân was no good. Before Vân’s arrival on the scene, Hương had gone to considerable trouble to find someone who she saw as a suitable wife for Thiết. Despite the fact the Huynhs were of undeniably peasant ancestry, through Hương’s enterprise they had been catapulted into the upper echelons of the *nouveaux riche*. Hương (even more so than her mother) promoted and held on to this newfound socio-economic status as if it were an age-old legacy. Accordingly, the three candidates who Hương and Thừa had put forward to Thiết during the late 1960s (before they knew of Vân) were beautiful

²⁴ Phạm Văn Bích, *The Vietnamese Family in Change: The Case of the Red River Delta* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999) 106.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

and youthful daughters of doctors and wealthy entrepreneurs. But Thiết would not even look at them, insisting to his overbearing sister and mother that he would make his own choice. All that time, Hương realised, her younger brother had had his eye on Vân.

It was perhaps inevitable, then, that Thừa and Hương were disappointed when Thiết finally made his choice. Vân was of a poor family from Bình Dương, and had little history or prospect of fame and fortune. Her family would do nothing to elevate the status of their's. Indeed, if anything, they would drag it down towards the shameful depths of indigence. When Thiết told them that Vân was a hard-working and responsible young woman who had supported her family for many years, his mother and sisters did not view this as a positive attribute but rather, a distinct liability. Her independence was tantamount to unruliness and placed question marks over her loyalty. In addition to and underlying all of these factors, Hương's latent suspicion was that Vân was a gold-digger, in it for the money.

Unfortunately, Thừa and Hương's prejudices were by no means unique to them. It was not uncommon in Việt Nam for a groom's family to test the honesty of the new bride during her first days. For instance, a mother-in-law might drop some money and then ask her daughter-in-law to sweep the floor in order to see if she would return it, all along half-hoping that she did not.²⁷ Vân was not subjected to such tests but it was clear from the start that she would have to be on her guard. Only a few days after returning from her honeymoon, Vân cautiously went downstairs to the kitchen when she thought that nobody was around to get some food. She had barely managed to open the refrigerator when she was startled by the sound of the kitchen door slamming behind her. There stood Thừa, half naked and dripping wet. While having her bath, she had somehow sensed Vân's unsanctioned movement and overcome the frailty of her years to pursue her daughter-in-law with great haste. In the silent standoff that followed, nothing was (or needed to be) said between the two figures; there were no accusations of theft

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

or insanity. In the war-like context of the traditional Vietnamese household, the logic of this act was clear. Vân was in enemy territory.

One weekend, when Vân was late in preparing the family's evening meal, her other sister-in-law Truong (who was a devout Buddhist and Taoist and strictly vegetarian) angrily inquired, "What's taking you so long?! How difficult is it to cook dinner?"

"I am sorry older sister," Vân explained. "I accidentally dipped the chopsticks from one of the non-vegetarian dishes into one of your vegetarian dishes. I had to start again, but it will be ready soon." The tirade that followed from Truong would last for days, "Do you have any idea of what you could have done? In fact, who knows how many times you've done that before without knowing? I've been piously suppressing earthly desires and following the Way since I was eighteen years old. And now...now you come along and jeopardise everything? But how would someone like *you* know anything about the holy Buddha and the wisdom of Lao-Tzu?"

At the same time a wave of neo-Confucianism swept through the household that engulfed its most recently indentured member. A horrifying hierarchy had been established that placed Vân and the servants at the very bottom of the heap. One day, Huong accused Vân of being monstrously disrespectful and totally lacking in filial piety after she left for work without bowing in deference to her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law. Thereafter, Vân would have to carry out this contrived and humiliating ritual of bowing to the three older women every time that she entered and exited the house. Even this, however, she would have accepted and endured (For what is wrong with respecting one's elders?) had it not been for the fact that Huong and Truong almost never bowed to their mother.

Truong's severe scolding and Huong's hypocritical hierarchy illustrate that it was not so much the institutionalised values stipulating a wife's devotion to her husband and his family that angered and subjugated Vân. She was quite willing and capable of bowing her head to honour her in-laws even as she bent her back

to serve them.²⁸ What the young woman could not tolerate, what irritated every sinew in her body, was the hypocrisy and arbitrariness that comes with the imposition of untrammelled power. What sort of Buddhist could treat another human being with such disdain? Was Lao-Tzu so unforgiving in his Way, Confucius so supportive of sinister double-standards? Vân knew that her perilous predicament had little to do with spirituality, that Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism were just grand traditional excuses for the petty hatreds of her wardens and overseers.

Given that Vân's primary role was to be a baby-making machine, a little servant girl without any wages,²⁹ it was perhaps predictable that things only got worse for her when she failed to fulfil her only redeeming function of continuing the Huỳnh family line. "Look at that flat arse!" Trương viciously voiced not long after Hoàng had passed away. "With an arse like that how will she ever bear children!?"

To make matters even more challenging, in the autumn of 1973 Thiét went away. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity for him to visit Taiwan where for three months he would research hot-line work; that is, how to repair electricity lines without switching off the power. Thiét was reluctant to leave his wife, but there was no way that she could go with him. Nor could he possibly reject this offer which carried comparable promise to his first urban expedition to Đà Nẵng almost a quarter of a century ago. At the airport, the couple struggled to hold back the tears as they thought of the prospect of being apart for the first time since getting married. They promised to write often.

This they did, and the letters (long since discarded) along with the critical distance and soul-wrenching separation from Vân, helped the young man fathom the extent of his wife's suffering. Without Thiét as a buffer, Vân was left open to continual and unrestrained verbal battering from her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law; the new bride was, in accordance with the old folksong about daughters-

²⁸ Le Ly Hayslip (with Jay Wurts), *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 1989) 12.

²⁹ Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 139.

in-law, “a basket for abuses”.³⁰ Thiét did what he could to alleviate his wife from despair. He sent her pictures of him, plump from eating too much Taiwanese food, and reassured her that it would be better once he came back, that they could discuss moving out on their own. One day, when Hương opened Vân’s mail and read it, she scorned her sister-in-law for being ungrateful and unhappy. To rub salt into the festering wound, Hương accused Vân (after seeing the picture of a well-fed Thiét) of not knowing how to look after her husband. Trapped and alone, Vân hummed the lullaby that stranded mothers sang to console their babies and themselves. It was a ditty that in the coming years would have just as much significance for them as they left their homeland.

In the late afternoon,
As I stand at the rear door of my house,
And gaze back upon my homeland,
I feel a gut-wrenching nostalgia.³¹

At one time, when the situation became intolerable, Vân retreated to Bình Dương to visit her mother who did her best to reassure her. “Don’t cry my dear. It’s good for a woman to be tested sometimes. You’ll be stronger and wiser for it. What’s important is that your husband loves you. You could have all the love in the world from your in-laws or anyone else, and it would not amount to anything if your husband didn’t love you.”

Sát was right. The tyranny of Thừa, Hương and Trương’s tradition which Vân had endured since marrying Thiét had heightened her levels of endurance and honed her ability to silently resist from within. Her threat-perception had further evolved into a constantly vigilant and wide-reaching socio-biological radar that allowed her to be prepared for any scenario, particularly the most perilous ones. These skills and qualities would prove life-saving in the years ahead as other grand tyrannies (re)emerged to threaten her family’s security.

³⁰ Mai Thị Tú and Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyét, *Women in Việt Nam* 53.

³¹ *Chiều chiều ra đứng ngõ sau,
Trông về quê mẹ ruột đau chín chiều.*
Recounted by Vân.

Sát was also right about Thiét. While there were invariably times when Vân wondered whether she had married into the right family, she almost never doubted that Thiét was the right man for her. She knew that he was a devoted husband, and sometimes felt more sorry for Thiét than she did for herself. No doubt, it was also a very strenuous time for Thiét, and it was not uncommon for him to have to suffer acidic complaints from her, his mother and his sisters all at once. But without significant exception, whenever he was tested, Thiét came through for her. When she was pregnant for the first time and Thừa had insisted that she keep doing her “share” of the housework, Thiét washed the laundry secretly in their bathroom and then proclaimed to his sceptical mother how astonishingly hardworking his wife was. And when she had great cravings late at night but knew that her in-laws did not want her to “over feed” the baby, Thiét would say that he felt like a late-night snack and smuggle noodles back into their bedroom. Despite and indeed because of their domestic ordeals, the couple became closer. They knew that they could rely upon one another and gradually, their mutual respect forged into something resembling love. This too would prove critical to their survival in the near future.

Thiét’s commitment to and love for Vân was demonstrated one weekend in 1974 when, at a family lunch, Thừa openly agreed with one of Hương’s overtly pernicious suggestions. “If that Vân is going to insist on being barren,” announced Hương, “then we’ll have to consider getting Thiét a concubine.” Vân had suffered oblique threats of this nature from her sister-in-law many times before; however, Thừa’s approval of this soul-shattering plan proved too much for her to bear. Disregarding all decorum and piety, Vân stood up from the table and stormed to her bedroom. After a second of shock-induced paralysis, Thiét sprang up and ran after his wife. He brusquely grabbed her by the wrist and took her back to confront his mother and sisters. In that instant, Vân’s world seemed to collapse upon her. Never had she felt more threatened and alone. The ferocity with which her husband had grasped her arm and taken her back to the table made her suspect that he had turned against her. In that heated and frightful moment, she thought that Thiét would make her apologise to his mother and sisters for her outburst, or that he would do so on their behalf. Perhaps he had spoken to them and planned this in advance? Surely all was lost. The valiant and

iconoclastic proclamation from Thiết came as a surprise to all. “I don’t care if we never have children,” said Thiết to his mother and sisters. “Vân is my wife and she is the only wife I will ever have!”

“That’s fine with me son (*cậu*),” replied Thừa, who oddly used the designator “*cậu*” to refer to Thiết. Usually adopted by Central Vietnamese to convey respect to a young man, it will never be known whether Thừa used “*cậu*” that day out of awe for Thiết’s explosive courage, or as a scornful and sarcastic jibe against his insolence. Nevertheless, what is clear is that had it not been for Thiết’s support and valour, Vân might have ended up like Loan in *Breaking the Ties*.

Breaking the Ties: The Verdict?

On that autumn afternoon in 1975, as Vân lay on her bed in the living room with her hired copy of *Breaking the Ties* propped up against her bulging stomach, she once again lost herself in the story.

Loan’s marriage deteriorates under the pressure of her in-laws and before long, Thân is unfaithful and has a child by another woman. Thân’s mother forces the unhappy couple to accept the illegitimate child’s mother, Tuất, as Thân’s concubine. During the ceremony to introduce Tuất into the household, Loan is abhorred by the humiliating and inhumane treatment dealt out to her and particularly her husband’s new concubine. Before she can withdraw or protest, Loan is firmly reminded that, “Where there are rituals, those rituals must be performed; above must be above, below must be below.”³²

Tension in the house escalates, until one night the situation erupts when Loan refuses to turn off her night lamp until she has finished reading. In fact, Loan is not all that interested in her book, but it is only eight in the evening and she knows that Thân is anxious to bring on the darkness so that he may slip downstairs to be with his concubine. Ostensibly, this seems like a measly domestic issue; however, symbolically our heroine feels that she is being stripped

³² ...*lễ nghi thì phải cho ra lễ nghi, phải trên ra trên, dưới ra dưới*. Nhật Linh, *Đoạn Tuyệt*, 128.

of not only her book and illumination, but also her enlightenment and dignity. Thân and Loan then launch into a bitter argument that wakes the entire household. Invariably, the mother-in-law enters the fray, exhorting her son to beat Loan for her impertinence. Loan sticks up for herself.

“No-one has the right to abuse me; no-one has the right to beat me.”

“I have the right,” responds the mother-in-law, “why don’t you start abusing me and we’ll see who has the right to beat you.”

“I am not accustomed to abusing anyone,” reasons the beleaguered Loan. “When we abuse others, it is our own mouths that are sullied.”

Her reasoning has no leverage, and the mother-in-law’s commands for Thân to assault his wife become edicts for murder, “Beat her to death for me! Once she’s gone I will accept the responsibility.”³³

Unable to restrain herself for any longer, Loan stares her mother-in-law straight in the face and makes a clarion call for liberal individualism and radical equality that would shudder the existing social hierarchies and resonate through Việt Nam for generations, “You are a person and I am a person. Neither of us is any better or any worse than the other.”³⁴ At the behest of his mother who does not want to “dirty her hands” (*bẩn tay*) Thân attacks his wife. She grabs a knife in self defence, and in the subsequent tussle Thân falls upon it and dies. Despite the fact that she has been arrested, handcuffed and is about to be incarcerated; as she leaves the house and steps over the threshold, Loan feels like she has escaped from jail.

Not unlike Hồ Chí Minh and other modernist authors, Nhất Linh uses a court house as a metaphorical tool to make his case for the justice and expediency of

³³ *Không ai có quyền chửi tôi, không ai có quyền đánh tôi.
Tao có quyền, mày cứ chửi lại xem nào.*

Tôi không quen chửi. Chửi người khác tức bản mồm mình.

Đánh nó chết đi cho tôi. Chết đã có tôi chịu tội. Nhất Linh, *Đoạn Tuyệt*, 143-4.

³⁴ Translated quotation from Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 141. Nhất Linh, *Đoạn Tuyệt*, 144.

the new, over the tyranny and futility of the old.³⁵ The prosecution accuses Loan of being arrogant and romantic, and rebukes her for trying to fulfil, “the wonders of what she read in books with the commonplace reality before her eyes”.³⁶

Who knows how many young girls whose heads have been turned by that blast of romanticism I've just mentioned have forgotten all about their heaven-mandated roles of being devoted daughters-in-law and gentle wives, of being pillars of the family like the virtuous women in old Vietnamese society. In their twisted state of mind they want to destroy the family, which they mistakenly look upon as a place of imprisonment for them. . . . If the family is destroyed, the society will be destroyed; and it will be our fault.³⁷

It seems that all is lost for Loan until her defence lawyer gets underway, passionately and rationally arguing that Loan is not a criminal or a threat to society. She is a victim of tradition.

Find Loan guilty of the crime of murder? Loan did not murder anyone! Find Loan guilty of disturbing the family? Loan was the very person who most earnestly wanted to live in peace with the family. The only thing of which Loan is guilty is going to school, with her books tucked under her arm, to try to develop her intellect and become a new person, and then to return to live with old-fashioned people. That is her only crime. And that crime she has already atoned for with untold misery.³⁸

In the end, Loan is found not guilty and modernity is gloriously vindicated. She celebrates by getting drunk and proclaims that, “This is the day, the day that I am breaking the ties with my old life. . . .”³⁹

³⁵ Hồ Chí Minh adopted the court metaphor in 1925 to condemn French colonialism. He ends his prosecution with a call to the Vietnamese youth to stand up and be modern, “And what are our Youth doing? It is sad, very sad to say so: They are doing nothing. Those who are without means dare not leave their villages; those who have any, wallow in their laziness; and even those who are abroad think only to satisfying the curiosity of their age! Poor Indochina! You will die, unless your old-fashioned Youth comes to life.” Hồ Chí Minh, “French Colonization on Trial” in Bernard B. Fall (ed.) *On Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-1966* (New York: Praeger, 1967), 68-123 at 123.

³⁶ Translated quotation from Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 143. Nhất Linh, *Đoạn Tuyệt*, 158.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Translated quotation from Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 145. Nhất Linh, *Đoạn Tuyệt*, 162.

³⁹ *Ngày nay em đoạn tuyệt với cái đời cũ...* Nhất Linh, *Đoạn Tuyệt*, 169.

Like many Vietnamese, Vân admired Loan's courage and Nhất Linh's creative genius; however, she did not try to recreate the wonders of such books in her commonplace reality. Vân's commonplace reality was, in fact, far too complex for her to think and act as if she was a juror in a courtroom. There were few opportunities for Vân and many Vietnamese women of her time to simply choose justice over injustice or the new over the old. To live efficaciously, Vân often had to juggle various conflicting social and individual prerogatives. She had to remain loyal to her birth family even after she was financially independent. She exercised free will in marrying Thiết, but also without question, moved in with his family who were complete strangers to her. Eventually, Vân would gain the respect of her in-laws and years later maintained that, "It was my role to serve your grandmother and aunts, and while I don't think they were ever really happy with me, it was still my role to fulfil."

The Utility of a Just Cause: Why the South was Lost

Without diminishing the international political significance of these events in Vân and Thiết's lives, there were times when momentous personal concerns were pushed aside by intervening global affairs, when their yearnings for freedom and independence were radically redirected away from the self and the family towards the nation and the world. In March and April of 1975, the grand theories of world politics seemed to converge in South Việt Nam and then Sài Gòn itself for one final showdown. This was one of those times.

By that stage, Vân was into the third trimester of her third pregnancy. She and Thiết's family lived in Hương's house on Trương Minh Ký Street near Tân Sơn Nhất airport and during the last days of April, as the impact of shelling reverberated through the earth and air, Thừa once again ordered Thiết to move his and Vân's bed. This time it was positioned under the stairs so as to protect Vân (or more importantly, the baby) from anything that might crash through the ceiling.

During the communist Spring Offensive to take the South, Sài Gòn was abuzz with news and speculation. People were streaming in from the Central Highlands, Huế, Nha Trang and then all over the country. Houses were overcrowded and anxious newcomers spilled out onto the streets with accounts of being shot at as they fled. In cafes, at work and on the pavement outside the house the atmosphere was both electrifying and frightening as Thiết gathered information about the revolutionary advance and the Republic's downfall. In Đà Nẵng twelve South Vietnamese police officers were apparently forced to march down the main street naked before being beheaded, and the Catholic bishop of Buôn Ma Thuột had been cut into three.⁴⁰ These atrocities did not actually occur, but for Thiết and many other Saigonese at the time it was as if they could see, smell and almost touch the tidal wave of blood rushing towards them. At first there was some debate over where the new border with North Việt Nam would be drawn, as it was believed that the communists could not possibly take over the entire South. But as the offensive drove closer to Sài Gòn, the discussion turned to what life and (perhaps more critically) death would be like under communist rule. Only weeks earlier, they had all heard about Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge driving more than two million residents of all ages and (dis)abilities out of Phnom Penh at gunpoint, and it was feared that the Vietnamese communists were no different. There was little doubt that the imminent communist victory would be lethal for Chinese business owners, prostitutes, Amer-asians, anyone of significance in the armed forces or public service. Young women were petrified of the prospect of being forced to marry blind and crippled veterans from the North, such that churches were bursting with desperate mass weddings.⁴¹ Many suspected that if Sài Gòn were captured, a bloodbath would follow that would make the Huế massacre during the 1968 Tết Offensive look trifling. The US and RVN administrations promulgated this gruesome prospect in the belief that it would harden the resolve of the soldiers and the general population against their foe. On 16 April US Defence Secretary James Schlesinger told Congress that at least

⁴⁰ Tiziano Terzani (John Shepley trans.), *Giai Phong! The Fall and Liberation of Saigon* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976) 52. Also recounted by Thiết.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

200,000 Vietnamese might be killed in the event of a communist victory.⁴² These stories would only fuel the pandemonium.

As the turmoil reached the southern capital, visa and plane ticket prices soared. Over a hundred thousand people tried to escape to nearby countries by boat, most of them were rescued in the South China Sea by the US Seventh Fleet. At that time, Vân and Thiết never considered leaving their family, friends and homeland, reasoning that they would probably not be persecuted as they did not hold positions of authority. If they could just survive the fighting, they thought and hoped, life under communism might even be easier. At least there would be peace, and perhaps their child would never experience the hardship and sorrow of war. This was the message conveyed to Vân and Thiết by their more optimistic friends and the communists through radio broadcasts. They wanted desperately to believe it, but the scepticism of experience prevailed.

Vietnamese leaders in Hà Nội and the Party Central Committee Office of South Việt Nam (COSVN) sensed the terminal discontent and dissention of urban Vietnamese like Vân and Thiết against the Thiệu administration and also viewed President Nixon's resignation on 8 August 1974 as a debilitating blow to US confidence.⁴³ In September and December of 1974 and January of 1975, Party leaders met to devise a strategic plan that would bring a final conclusion to the war.⁴⁴ After more than a hundred years of division and foreign occupation, the strategists of the Spring Offensive had predicted that it would take at least two years to reunify and reclaim Việt Nam.⁴⁵ The Spring Offensive would exceed their predictions, starting in March and completed by the end of April with the Hồ Chí Minh campaign to take Sài Gòn.

⁴² Terzani, *Giai Phong*, 52.

⁴³ Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 1354. See also Bùi Tín, (Nguyễn Ngọc Bích trans.) *From Enemy to Friend: A North Vietnamese Perspective on the War* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2002) 113.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

On 26 April General Văn Tiến Dũng ordered 130,000 northern troops to march upon the beleaguered RVN capital.⁴⁶ The next morning rockets were launched into the city and Chợ Lớn and on 29 April the Northerners struck the airport not far from the family's house. That day, Thiết rode his scooter home from work early as he was not getting much done anyway. The usually bustling streets of Sài Gòn were dead-still; people had either gone home for lunch and remained at home or not gone to work at all. Shops were barricaded as looting was an imminent possibility. Thiết did not plan to go to work the next day. There had been no formal announcement, but according to the VOA radio news reports and word of mouth, it was only a matter of days or even hours before the communists arrived. That evening, the family shared a simple meal of fried fish, bindweed and rice, eaten in solemn silence as if the nation was being laid to rest. The pantry was well-stocked with enough food and water for a month. Although the citizens of Sài Gòn had been relatively insulated from the war, most knew enough to be always prepared for an emergency. The household went to bed early, but nobody slept very much. Văn and Thiết lay awake speculating as to what it would be like for their baby to grow up under communism. They were ever conscious of the staircase, darkness and defeat bearing down upon them.

In the final days there were those for whom the looming takeover was so unimaginably terrifying that they held on to their faith in the US and the "Free World" coalition. Even as the bombs fell around their homes and the enemy marched through the streets, these hopeful souls did not despair. This was all a ploy, they insisted, to draw the communists out from their guerrilla positions into the open where they could be defeated by the forces of liberty and democracy. Thiết and Văn were far more pessimistic, and had been so since around the time Richard Nixon won the US presidential election in November of 1968. During a round-the-world tour that included six Asian nations, President Nixon held a press conference on 25 July 1969 in Guam where he outlined what would become known as the "Nixon Doctrine". Repudiating the old Cold War strategies of containment and domino theory, the Nixon Doctrine asserted that US-allied nations confronting communist aggression had to take a greater role in their own

⁴⁶ Michael Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochina Wars, 1772-1991* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 1995) 215.

defence. "When you are trying to assist another nation defend its freedom," the president would later explain, "U.S. policy should be to help them fight the war but not to fight the war for them."⁴⁷

Following massive nation-wide protests against the war in October 1969, Nixon explained how this doctrine would be applied to the War in Việt Nam. Put simply, Vietnamisation meant the withdrawal of American combat troops from Việt Nam and their replacement with South Vietnamese.⁴⁸ The aim was to avoid the further loss of US soldiers and at the same time prevent further damage to the US' reputation as the Free World's guarantor. To these ends, the US would continue to provide air and naval support to the Army of the Republic of Việt Nam (ARVN) in addition to rearming it with the best military hardware on offer.⁴⁹ "It is a plan," proclaimed the president, "which will end the war and serve the cause of peace not just in Vietnam but in the Pacific and in the world."⁵⁰

At that time, there was arguably good reason for the president to be confident. From March of that year, in the hope of putting the enemy off balance and improving their negotiating position, the US administration secretly and unconstitutionally spread the war into Cambodia and then Laos via massive bombing campaigns aimed at annihilating communist supply routes and descending North Vietnamese soldiers. By the end of 1969, both the communists and the American-led alliance were shocked by the US' ability to simultaneously escalate and disengage from the conflict. This inspired a "new optimism" among US leaders in Việt Nam and Washington, not so much at the prospect of winning the war but rather, at forcing the communists into accepting a favourable

⁴⁷ Richard Milhous Nixon, "Vietnamization Speech" (3 November 1969) in *From Revolution to Reconstruction - an .HTML project* <<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/P/rn37/speeches/vietnam.htm>> accessed 8 October 2003.

⁴⁸ US defence secretary Melvin Laird had coined the term "Vietnamisation" early in 1969 as a linguistic/strategic improvement on "de-Americanisation". However, the echoes of colonialism were evident in the fact that when the French were stuck at an impasse during the First Indochina War and were facing sustained protest from their domestic population, they too devised a Vietnamisation program which they had sometimes more bluntly and honestly referred to as a "yellowing process". David W.P. Elliot, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta 1930-1975 Volume 2* (Armonk: East Gate, 2003) 1129.

⁴⁹ Stephen Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998) 227.

⁵⁰ Nixon, "Vietnamisation Speech".

negotiated settlement in which Hà Nội recognised a US-supported government in the South.⁵¹

This new optimism would have horrific consequences for the South Vietnamese. In order to buy time for the Vietnamisation of the war, an accelerated pacification program was put into motion under which the defoliation of the countryside and forced urbanisation of peasants increased dramatically. And while as Commander of US forces in Việt Nam General Westmoreland had made some (rhetorical) measures to promote sympathy for refugees who had been forcibly urbanised, his successor General Creighton Abrams made no such pretence in his pursuit to “drain the water from the pond to catch the fish”.⁵² From 1969 Abrams replaced “search and destroy” with “clear and hold” programs which, by and large, meant the strategic elevation of the “destroy” element with less emphasis on searching. In a vicious six-month operation named Speedy Express that was carried out in the Mekong Delta, US Ninth Division units claimed 10,899 VC KIA (“Việt Cộng Killed In Action”). By their own statistics, Speedy Express captured only 748 weapons; the stark disparity between kills and guns suggesting that many of the VC KIAs were unarmed civilians.⁵³ It was also during this period—characterised by frightening levels of zeal and blood—that the CIA’s infamous Phoenix Program was undertaken whereby, in the name of rooting out and nullifying communist insurgents, between 20,000 and 40,000 Vietnamese were killed during a “morass of individual vendettas and settling of accounts, as well as extortion”.⁵⁴ The head of the program, William Colby, subsequently and with shameful euphemism reported to Congress, “A lot of things were done that should not have been done.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 1128.

⁵² Adopting Mao Zedong’s metaphor this meant the forced relocation of the rural population which the revolutionaries relied upon for their camouflage and survival. *Ibid.*, 1134.

⁵³ Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics*, 170. Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 1134.

⁵⁴ Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 1137-8. ARVN put the figure at above 40,000 and the North Vietnamese admitted in 1969 that far more than the official US figure of 21,000 had been slaughtered. James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000) 301.

⁵⁵ Paul McGeough, “Fight to the Death” in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (20-21 December 2003) 21, 28 at 28.

By 1971, the most that the Vietnamese communists could say for themselves in terms of facilitating national-democratic revolution in the South was that they had “held on”.⁵⁶ The pond that was the Vietnamese countryside had indeed been drained in many places, but the most resilient fish had not been caught. As they had done many times before, the revolutionaries recuperated and regrouped such that during the Easter of 1972 a massive offensive was launched involving around 125,000 North Vietnamese soldiers.⁵⁷ Driving south across the demilitarised zone with support from tanks and artillery, the Easter Offensive blunted the enemy’s accelerated pacification program, undermined the pretences of Vietnamisation, reclaimed lost territory and widened their sphere of military operation.⁵⁸ While by the communists’ own assessment, the balance of forces had not necessarily changed; the momentum had turned in their favour. After the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements in January 1973 by the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRV), the US, the RVN and the Southern revolutionaries, the Party announced that this would be a year of “regaining lost momentum”.⁵⁹

Many South Vietnamese like Thiét were convinced that the conclusion of the Paris Agreements was clear evidence that the Americans were abandoning them outright. There was a palpable sense that an increasing number of Americans wanted to forget about the morally messy undertakings of their immediate past. The war had divided American society and the domestic protests were becoming more and more virulent. Most notably, on 4 May 1970, during student protests at Kent State University, four more lives were added to the war-time body count.⁶⁰ Moreover, the prolonging of the conflict via Vietnamisation had inflicted a heavy toll on the US economy which by the end of 1973 was suffering unprecedented

⁵⁶ Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 1211.

⁵⁷ D.J. Sagar, *Major Political Events in Indo-China 1945-1990* (New York: Facts on File, 1991) 106.

⁵⁸ Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 1328.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1347. In the final two weeks of 1972 when negotiations were deadlocked President Nixon commanded the most intensive bombing program of the war, unleashing over 20,000 tons of bombs upon Hà Nội and Hải Phòng. Sagar, *Major Political Events in Indo-China 1945-1990*, 110.

⁶⁰ All four were killed by national guards. None were actually taking part in the protest and the only one with strong political views was a pro-War Republican. *Ibid.*, 98.

double-digit inflation.⁶¹ With these sorts of facts in mind, Thiết suspected that the US would not sufficiently equip the South Vietnamese for the fight ahead. He had heard that the aircraft and artillery imported by the US were hand-me-downs from South Korea and Taiwan and were often outdated if not unusable. Thiết knew that once the Americans had their prisoners of wars, the conflict in Việt Nam offered them diminishing political returns. He strongly suspected that during/via the Vietnamisation of the war and the Paris peace process, US administrations were looking for a quiet way out. And if the Vietnamese of the RVN were massacred by the North Vietnamese troops who were marching into the South, then this was viewed as a regrettable but tolerable outcome that might even verify the inhumanity of the communists and thereby justify why the US had become involved in the war in the first place. He was thus convinced that this was no “peace with honour” as Nixon had proclaimed prior to the finalisation of the Paris Agreement. On the contrary, the US had, so went the old saying, “Squeezed all the juice out (of Việt Nam) and was now discarding the peel.”

Of course, it is not the case that the South Vietnamese were wholly detached and not responsible for their own defeat. And this raises the question of why the RVN lost in such a swift and complete manner? It is an issue that cannot be explained by a lack of military hardware on the South’s part. In fact, a US study found that in the highlands during the final offensive, ARVN soldiers were firing sixteen times more rounds of ammunition than the communists.⁶² Nor can the ARVN’s defeat be attributable to insufficient troops. With funding from the US under the Vietnamisation program, President Thiệu undertook a general mobilisation campaign recruiting all males from the ages of eighteen to thirty-eight into the armed forces.⁶³ During his presidency the ARVN expanded from around 700,000 to 1,100,000 and by the end of the War it was, on paper, the

⁶¹ Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism*, 228.

⁶² A.J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War 1954-1975* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) 643.

⁶³ As a result of this drive, one day as Thiết and Vân were innocently walking in the street, they were confronted by two military policemen who demanded to see Thiết’s identification papers. Proclaiming that Thiết’s papers were false, the police promptly put him in jail for draft dodging. Thiết was not released until the next day when a frantic Vân managed to get the personnel manager at the electricity authority to attest to the fact that her husband was making a vital contribution to the war effort as a technician.

fourth-ranking military power in the world.⁶⁴ In terms of training and fighting capability, commented the one time communist revolutionary figurehead Bùi Tín, soldiers from the North and South were “on the same level”.⁶⁵ On both sides there were brave and disciplined soldiers, but also no shortage of deserters.⁶⁶

Vân and Thiết rightfully viewed the deficiencies of their military and political leaders as being a primary cause of the tragedy that had befallen their country. The highest ranking officers of the armed forces were almost all products of the French military academy or had risen to their rank through the French expeditionary corps so that it was difficult for people to view them as nationalist heroes and not colonial *collaborateurs*.⁶⁷ Moreover, since Diệm’s assassination in 1963, the parade of RVN politico-military leaders (most notably Khánh, Kỳ and Thiệu) who had come to power were incapable of capturing the will and might of the South Vietnamese, of articulating a *chính nghĩa* (just cause) that was worth fighting and dying for. By and large, they had been more concerned with accumulating individual wealth and power than serving the people, and as a consequence many people tended to avoid, subvert and oppose public politics rather than to engage with it. Never had the decrepit nature of the South Vietnamese leadership been more apparent to Vân and Thiết than during those final days. On 21 April, President Thiệu fled Việt Nam with what was rumoured to be a bounty of gold after publicly accusing the US of breaking its promise to “react vigorously” against North Vietnamese aggression and blaming the defeat on cuts in military aid.⁶⁸ His former Vice-President, Marshall Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, swore not to abandon the nation and urged his fellow citizens to valiantly resist

⁶⁴ Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism*, 238, 240. In 1975 the RVN had an estimated 465,000 regulars, 1,400,000 defence personnel, over 500,000 individuals in various paramilitary formations and 1,200 operational aircraft (however it is unclear how many of these were “ghost soldiers” who were on the books but had paid their way out of the armed services). The North Vietnamese army was also one of the largest in the world and was well-equipped with Chinese and Soviet arms. Soviet military aid increased markedly in the early 1970s to counter the Enhance program under which the US sent supplies to the RVN. John C. Donnell, “South Vietnam in 1975: The Year of Communist Victory” in *Asian Survey* 16:1 (Jan 1976) 1-13 at 1.

⁶⁵ Bùi Tín, *From Enemy to Friend*, 97.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 97-8.

⁶⁷ Bùi Tín also suggests that the ARVN had a “birth defect” that grew out of the colonial training and affiliations of its top members which precluded them from generating popular support. He puts forth the examples of Trần Văn Đôn, Nguyễn Văn Hinh, Đỗ Mậu, Đỗ Cao Trí, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, Dương Văn Minh as French trained leaders of the ARVN. Bùi Tín, *From Enemy to Friend*, 95.

⁶⁸ Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism*, 249. Donnell, “South Vietnam in 1975”, 4.

the communist onslaught before also taking flight.⁶⁹ Reflecting upon the woeful ethical and political role models in the RVN leadership, one disgruntled ARVN soldier would comment:

If we must go to the root for the problem, it is our leaders who are to blame for having brought this on the whole nation. They all were people who lacked the necessary knowledge, experience, and authority to uphold our sovereignty and national prestige, and the result was this national humiliation. At the Geneva Conference, our delegation was forced to sit behind the French, and we did not protest! In Paris, our delegation put their signature to an agreement that had been negotiated behind our back by Washington and Hanoi! Our leaders were imbeciles and our allies tricky bastards....⁷⁰

There were, to be sure, stories of ordinary soldiers who fought to the death, who would rather give up everything than live under communism (if not to preserve the Republic). But these individual cases of heroism were so isolated that few, if any, would become martyrs. The structure, discipline and most of all spirit that characterise an effective fighting force were conspicuously absent in the ARVN. In the absence of immediate and compelling reasons to fight, a discernable moral dividend, or most importantly an overarching just cause that was directly and effectively linked to the historic victories over French and Chinese colonialism, the ARVN were so soundly defeated in those final days that the most widely noted resistance that they put up against the revolutionaries were streets laden with boots and clothing. These items, an estimated two billion US dollars worth of serviceable equipment, had not necessarily been abandoned by cowards who did not value freedom and democracy; rather, many were protestors against a war that had never been fought on their behalf. While by no means pro-communist, they could also not be pro-American or sufficiently devoted to the RVN. For much of the war they had been more apt at “search and avoid” and pilfering US goods than fighting for their country, and it was to such sly diversionary tactics that they turned to in the last days. However, as Frantz Fanon once observed in describing the colonised native, his slowness and deviousness “is not natural to him, but merely a manifestation of his resistance to his colonial master—a

⁶⁹ Terzani, *Giai Phong*, 64.

⁷⁰ Trần Trị Vũ, *Lost Years: My 1,632 Days in Vietnamese Reeducation Camps* (Berkeley: University of California, 1988).

resistance that he often does not dare to admit to himself.”⁷¹ In the end, the ARVN soldiers voted against the war with their bare feet.

On the last day, Vân was out of bed before the sun rose. The sleepless night and the bleak battle had combined to put her in the most sombre of moods. After breakfast, the family sat in the living room listening to the radio. Like many Vietnamese residences, there were two altars prominently positioned in the living room (one dedicated to Buddha and other to their ancestors). All morning Thừa, Hương and Trương lit incense and prayed for protection. The incense mixed with smoke wafting in from a distant battle or the burning of documents, pictures and memorabilia nearby; people had started incinerating all evidence of their ties to the Southern Government. Some neighbours flew Việt Cộng flags in front of their homes hoping to appease the new rulers.⁷² The streets which would usually be crowded with vendors and commuters were desolate. Everyone wanted to be with the people who were important to them.

At quarter past ten, the last President of the Republic of Việt Nam (he had been inaugurated two days earlier), General Dương Văn Minh, made an announcement over the radio. “I, General Dương Văn Minh, president of the Sài Gòn government, appeal to the armed forces of the Republic of Việt Nam to lay down their arms and surrender unconditionally to the forces of the National Liberation Front. Furthermore I declare that the Sài Gòn government is completely dissolved at all levels.”⁷³ This was followed by a speech by the outgoing Prime Minister. “In the spirit of harmony and national reconciliation, I, Professor Vũ Văn Mẫu, prime minister, appeal to all levels of the population to greet this day of peace for the Vietnamese people with joy. I appeal to all employees of the administration to return to their posts and continue their work.”⁷⁴ After hearing these statements, Thiết broke down. For some minutes Vân and Thiết held each other, unable to come to grips with the fact that the communists had finally

⁷¹ FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 511

⁷² The Việt Cộng or National Liberation Front flag consisted of a blue base, a red top half and a five-pointed yellow star in the middle. It was the flag of South Việt Nam from 30 April 1975 until 2 July 1975 when the country was unified and the current flag with the totally red background was adopted nationally.

⁷³ Terzani, *Giai Phong*, 96.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

arrived. Thiết thought it likely that, in time, communism would spread like a cancer across Asia and the world, bringing unimaginable turmoil, misery and death. And for those few moments, he was certain that millions of other people across the nation and around the world were mourning for the Republic of Việt Nam.

To examine that scene scrupulously, from the outside-in and inside-out, of Vân and Thiết embracing as all that was solid melted into air,⁷⁵ is to comprehend that, while the couple's sentiments were undoubtedly shared, their politico-philosophical outlook was not. For in many ways, Thiết had lost more than Vân. His great dream of nationhood, modernity and wealth for himself, his family, South Việt Nam and beyond had been laid to waste. At one time, he believed that this light-filled dream could be and invariably would be realised through Việt Minh communism; later he had invested the same faith in liberal-capitalism and the Americans. Now, as the Việt Cộng converged, he saw only darkness. Vân too was bereft, but she had not invested so much in this vision. Somehow, she knew that ideologies—no matter how earth shattering—would come and go. What would remain was the stoic ability of everyday people to make do and carry on regardless. She was also convinced that with virtue and fortitude, she would find a way to subsist until the day when it turned once again. And so to examine that scene scrupulously, from the outside-in and inside-out, is to see that it was Vân, pregnant with her precious child, who was holding and sustaining Thiết. It was the image of the pieta or perhaps the final scene from Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* where, intertwined with despair and death, it is possible to find the hope of resurrection and the endurance of humanity.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels (Samuel Moore trans.), *The Communist Manifestos* (London: Penguin, 2002) 223. First published in 1848. See Chapter I "Bourgeoisie and Proletariat".

⁷⁶ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (London: Heinemann, 1971). In 1967 after visiting Việt Nam, Steinbeck came out in strident support of the US war effort. The post 1975 socialist regime in Southern Việt Nam acknowledged the politico-literary merits of *The Grapes of Wrath* (which depicted the plight of the impoverished and dispossessed Oklahoma Dustbowl Refugees of the 1930s), but regarded his later work as counterrevolutionary. Terzani, *Giai Phong*, 210.

The Utility of a Just Cause: Something to Live and Fight For

Without diminishing the significance of these grand events in Vân's and Thiết's lives, it is accurate to say that there were times when even momentous forces of global politics were pushed aside by intervening personal affairs, when Vân and Thiết's immediate concerns and compassion for loved ones subsumed the universe out there. The 13th of June 1975, was one such time.

Their baby was more than a week overdue and everyone involved, except perhaps the baby itself, was extremely anxious. While they did not have ultrasound to determine the sex of the foetus, an X-ray revealed that it was of a good size; but also, that it was lying comfortably on its side and would not come into the world willingly. A caesarean birth was deemed in all likelihood to be necessary. However, Vân's obstetrician wanted her to wait until the last minute in order to preserve the possibility of a natural birth. In her desperation, on that morning of the 13th, Vân resorted to superstition to induce the birth. This customary practice involved going to the houses of seven neighbours and asking for a small quantity of rice which she cooked and consumed. Sure enough, after dinner that night, Vân's waters broke. Thiết bundled Vân, her youngest sister Liên (who had come to offer her support during the school holidays) and an overnight bag, and drove at breakneck speed to Hùng Vương hospital in Chợ Lớn. They were fortunate in terms of timing because if the baby had decided to come a few hours later, the trip would not have been so easy to make on account of the curfew that the communists had imposed.

At times overwhelmed with the pain and fear, Vân's memory of giving birth is not always clear. So extreme was Thiết's stress level that he too provides a scant and somewhat blurry description of what took place. In fact, the anxiety surrounding the birth narrowed the couple's perspective to such an extent that, years later, both of them would strenuously maintain that Vân's diminutive teenage sister, Liên, was not present at the hospital that evening. Even after reading Liên's detailed account (written to the author) of this emotional and historic event, they would remain only half-convinced:

We met your mother's doctor at the hospital who diagnosed that she would have to have a caesarean and somehow got her into an operating room straight away. I was there and saw your mother lying on the table as it was being pushed into the theatre. Later she told me that the last thing she saw before going under was a big silver peace pendant hanging from her surgeon's neck. Pretty ironic don't you think, given that hospitals are meant to be hygienic places and that the communists had just taken over? Anyway, I also saw your father. And, at that moment, I felt so sorry for your parents because I knew that they were terribly frightened. And in that instant, I loved my sister with all my heart, and gave her all my strength to help her get through this.

While your mother was in the operating theatre, your father and I waited outside with our hearts thumping. Half an hour or so passed before the doctor came out. Your father sprang to his feet and asked the doctor how she was. He laughed and congratulated your father, telling him that your mother was fine and that he had a baby boy. This was a joyous moment. Afterwards, your father could not sit still, pacing up and down as he waited for your older brother and your mother to come out of the operating theatre.

A little later, a nurse emerged cradling your brother. She (the nurse) said that he was strong and healthy and looked like his father. I had never seen your father so happy, and he gave the nurse a small amount of money so that she would take extra special care of his boy. This was the first time I had ever seen a new-born baby. Your brother was so red and small, lying naked in a blanket with a piece of umbilical cord rolled into a knot, which would later fall off to form his belly button. The nurse took him to the incubation room, leaving your father and I to wait anxiously for your mother.

Some time later we saw another nurse push her out of the theatre, still unconscious from the anaesthetic. Your father and I ran after them to the recovery room and, as she was transferred from the table to her bed, your mother woke up. Your father hollered, "A boy, a boy, you gave birth to a boy!" Your mother burst into tears of joy, but also because the caesarean wound hurt so much. What a tender sight it was, to see your mother crying from the ecstasy and agony of child birth.⁷⁷

Given all the external pressures, one could be forgiven for thinking that Vân and Thiét wanted a baby for no other reason than to please others. This was not the case. Due to the harsh prerogatives and divisive nature of the wars, neither of them had ever really been close to their parents. Both had lost their fathers prematurely. Consequently, they desperately wanted to have children, and to provide those children with what they themselves had never really received: their total attention and commitment. Together they vowed that there would be no

⁷⁷ Translated by the author from an interview conducted in January 2002.

limits to the love and care that this baby boy would be given. If need be, they would deprive themselves of everything, so that he would be deprived of nothing.

Vân named the baby “Thạch” which means “rock” or “stone” and symbolises an everyday resilience. Moreover, combined with “Thiết”, which he took on as a middle name, “Thiết Thạch” connoted a sense of the ever-lasting. For years to come, Vân would shake her head and wonder ruefully about what would have become of her had it not been for Thạch. Would she and Thiết have been able to withstand the dictates of Thừa’s tyrannical traditions, the weight of the old world bearing down upon them? There was little doubt that Thừa, Hương and Trương were not about to call off their crusade to find a holy heir. For Thiết, the birth of Thạch put the destruction of his country and his modernist dream into perspective. Suddenly, he realised that the politics and economics of the nation were but means to an end; that world affairs were important only to the extent that they could influence the well-being of this baby boy. In this way and for this one reason, Thiết’s dream of building a bright future was re-ignited. In years to come, both of them, but particularly Vân, would sincerely refer to Thạch as their saviour. He was their *chính nghĩa*, their just cause. He gave them something to live and fight for.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Tells of how Vân, Thiết and Hương subsisted and resisted under the tyranny of post-1975 Vietnamese socialism. Explores the personal, economic and political reasons for why Thiết and Vân decided to leave Việt Nam.

Thiết to Kim: The worse thing was the lies. We had to constantly celebrate our newfound freedom and democracy, even though freedom and democracy were never so far away. Your mother and I had been poor before. We could put up with not having money. But what we couldn't stand—what drove us from our homeland—was the lies and limitations. Do you know what the communists called people like us? They called us “ngụy”, which means we were false, deceitful and didn't know what was true or good. Supposedly, the ngụy needed to be made over. But in fact it was the communists who were the biggest and worst liars. You and your brother will never know what it's like to live in such a place. That's why we risked everything to escape; so that you would not remember and would never know.

Revolutions, Propulsion and Revulsion

On the weekends it had become customary for Thiết and his young family to visit his mother and two sisters who still lived on Lê Văn Sơn (previously Trương Minh Ký) Street. The petrol ration at that time was only two litres a month, so they could not afford to take their scooter. Moreover, a drastic spare parts shortage resulting from US trade sanctions meant that automobiles that broke

down after 1975 invariably remained broken. The upshot of all this was that Thiết and his family had to make the ten kilometre trip to and from their apartment in Thanh Đa by bicycle. For the well known communist historian, Nguyễn Khắc Viện, the proliferation of the bicycle in Sài Gòn after 1975 was a sign of techno-economic progress or at the very least normalisation:

Bicycles have become much more numerous in Saigon streets...stealing the place of scooters and cars. I remember a Western journalist's joke about Hanoi, to the effect that this two-wheeled vehicle is the distinctive mark of Vietnamese socialism. Of course, riding a bike is no more specific of capitalism or of socialism, but for a still little industrialized country, this means of transport is by far the most economical. And for a Vietnamese peasant who before the revolution might have starved to death after each flood, to have a bike is a considerable progress. For Saigon, to go back to the bicycle after having used and abused motor vehicles means returning to a normal situation for a still underdeveloped country which, moreover, has been ravaged by thirty years of war.¹

Thiết could find no reason to celebrate the bicycle's resurgence. In fact, there were times when he detested the two-wheeled vehicle. One Sunday afternoon in the spring of 1979, the family was confronted by the searing sun as they set off for home after visiting Thừa, Hương and Trương. The humidity had risen to such an extent that Thiết's shirt clung to his back, a fact noted with much concern by Vân as she sat on the rear wheel rack holding their one year old baby boy, Kim. Oblivious to the weariness that inflicted both his father and the nation, the couple's three year old son, Thạch, sat on the handlebars and hollered with glee as Thiết painfully pedalled through the streets of what he still liked to think of as Sài Gòn.

After only a few minutes, the muscles in Thiết's thighs and calves turned into hot coals, his throat was lined with dust and the cityscape blurred behind great beads of sweat that fell from his brow. The young father pushed onwards—one agonising rotation after another—and thought back to when he was a boy; when he had chased a bamboo hoop through the dusty streets of Bồ Bản and dreamt of someday owning a bicycle. But Thiết was not an ignorant child anymore, and his

¹ Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Southern Vietnam: 1975-1985* (Hà Nội: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1985) 148-9.

expectations were far more dynamic and lofty than any bicycle could possibly fulfil. He had seen and touched all the affluence, ingenuity and freedom that the modern world had to offer: such that as a young man in the 1960s, Thiết had envisaged Việt Nam taking off like a powerful jet plane into the boundless blue sky of affluence and development. Before the Second Indochina War, if someone had asked him to predict what Việt Nam would be like in twenty years time, he would have told them that there would be a breath-taking forest of skyscrapers, an abundance of food (or perhaps even the ultra-nutritious supplements originally developed for astronauts), and a super-sleek automobile for every citizen. The young man's vision had been annihilated by the war and its aftermath. It was 1979 and Thiết was hungry, exhausted and astride an iron beast from what seemed like the dark ages. Never in his life had he felt so acutely the wrenching absence of progress and hope. Thiết reflected over how everything and nothing had changed. He rued what he saw as the patently obvious fact that the Vietnamese were more economically and socially indentured than ever. With steaming vehemence, the young father brewed over his family's descent into indigence and backwardness. Gritting his teeth, Thiết pushed ahead and thought about all the reasons why he had come to hate the communist functionaries of the new Việt Nam.

*From this Victorious Day We Will Build the Country Tenfold:
Personal-Economic Oppression and Everyday Resistance in
Post 1975 Sài Gòn*

Not long after Sài Gòn fell, Vân and Thiết's apprehension and grief were supplanted somewhat by a sense of relief as the widely predicted bloodbath failed to eventuate. The war, it seemed, was finally over and there were instances when this was more important to them than the fact that their new leaders were despised enemies and self-avowed communists. Neither of them had known a time when war was not present or imminent in their lives. Perhaps now, they thought, mothers would no longer have to say goodbye to their battle-bound sons, the seeds of opportunity that had lay dormant for generations could sprout through the rubble of their homeland, and the country could divert all its energy

into constructing an unprecedented era of peace and prosperity. The communists proclaimed that there were untapped gold and oil resources in the North and, along with many others, Vân and Thiết likened the plight of the nation to that of the epic Vietnamese heroine Kiều whose great talent and happiness was continually foiled by her star-crossed destiny, but who was eventually recompensed with a karmic dividend for all her suffering and virtue. Most importantly, Vân and Thiết were convinced that in spite of everything Việt Nam had always been one nation. At that stage their hope was stronger than ideology and experience. It would, however, not stay this way for long.

At least initially, there was reason for Vân and Thiết to be optimistic with respect to the reunification process. Drawing upon the words of the late Hồ Chí Minh, the former head of the National Liberation Front (NLF) Nguyễn Hữu Thọ proclaimed, “Việt Nam is a single country. The Vietnamese people are one. The rivers may dry up, the mountains crumble, but nothing can alter this truth.”² In May 1975, the Central Post Office reopened and a new stamp was issued depicting the late Hồ Chí Minh,³ dressed in his distinctive peasant clothes and watering a symbolic sapling of Vietnamese unity and independence. For the first time in over two decades, people were allowed to send letters directly between the South and the North. Transportation links between the severed halves of Việt Nam were restored, work started to rebuild the thousand-mile rail line from Sài Gòn to Vinh, and the new regime promoted stories of thousands of people renewing long lost ties after having been kept apart for two decades by a demilitarised zone.

Throughout the spring of 1975, their new leaders demonstrated an encouraging degree of temperance. It was proposed that the profound social and economic differences between the two halves necessitated that reunification be

² Tiziano Terzani (John Shepley trans.), *Giai Phong! The Fall and Liberation of Saigon* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976) 175-6.

³ Hồ Chí Minh died on 2 September 1969, but the Party Central Committee declared that he had died on 3 September 1969 so as not to sullen 2 September (the National Day on which he had declared independence in 1945). The Party has since made this fact public. For more information on Hồ's death and his testament see Vietnamese Study Group, “Ho Chi Minh Testament” in *VSG Discussion List Archive* (2003)

<<http://www.lib.washington.edu/southeastasia/vsg/elist/hochiminh%20testament.htm>> accessed 2 January 2004.

implemented gradually over a period of at least five years in order to avoid arousing hostility.⁴ That summer, the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRV) in the North and Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) in the South applied for separate UN membership, and for a time it was accepted that Việt Nam should have two economic systems with the one in the South maintaining a relatively high level of private enterprise.⁵

But there were also indications from the very beginning—Or perhaps it was the very end?—that the communist victors would be neither gradual nor gracious with respect to post-war reconstruction. The wholesale renaming of streets, institutions, parks, holidays and many other public and private institutions in the South was swift. On the evening of 30 April 1975 it was announced over the radio that Sài Gòn had become Hồ Chí Minh City. Shortly afterwards, the luxuriously appointed Caravelle Hotel was renamed the Independence Hotel and Vân's high school was no longer the namesake of the nineteenth century emperor Gia Long, but rather the communist revolutionary heroine Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai. After the official reunification of the country as the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam (SRV) in July 1976, Hà Nội became the new capital, the North Vietnamese flag was chosen as the national flag and the North Vietnamese Anthem "March to the Front" became the national anthem. And while Vân and Thiết did not expect everything to remain fixed in time, they were disheartened by the at times callous and gratuitous eradication of their identity. Whenever the couple was forced to use the new names, they felt the shame of a country defeated and the anger of a conquered people. In times gone by, both Diệm after 1955 and the French colonists before that had altered street names to exalt their own glorious history and suppress an ignominious past. After 1975, Justice Avenue became August Revolution Avenue and Freedom Avenue was re-badged General Uprising Avenue. "What's wrong with Justice and Freedom?" Vân and Thiết asked themselves. Many similarly disgruntled Saigonese murmured in reference to the avenues and their lives that the general uprising had swept away their freedom.

⁴ John C. Donnell, "Vietnam 1979: Year of Calamity" in *Asian Survey* 20:1 (January 1980) 19-32 at 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*

In August 1975, the Party Central Committee decided to bypass the period of separate existence in favour of a rapid shift towards national socialist revolution. The prominent ideologue, Trường Chinh, viewed the North and South as having “essential and decisive” similarities and thus there were no significant barriers to an accelerated program for unification.⁶ Others were concerned that Northern revolutionaries in the South were being corrupted by the “parasitic” lifestyle as stories circulated of revolutionary soldiers being seduced and even dancing to rock ‘n’ roll music.⁷ On 21 November it was announced that general elections would be held in the first half of 1976 to elect a national assembly which would compose a new constitution for the unified SRV. Whereas previously the Party had two distinct strategic tasks—one focussing on a socialist revolution in the North and the other on a nationalist revolution in the South—by 1976 only one remained, “to complete the Revolution by achieving socialist construction, the decisive condition of which is to set up and strengthen the proletarian dictatorship and develop the collective mastery of the working people.”⁸

There were Party members who had learnt, from Maoist-Leninist teachings and the failure of previous modern uprisings, that the seizure of power is by no means the final or necessarily the most arduous stage of a revolution.⁹ However, the Vietnamese situation threw up certain undeniable facts that militated against such cautious assessments. Under the helmsmanship of the Party and Uncle Hồ, the Vietnamese revolutionaries had defeated not only an expansive French empire but also a prodigious American superpower. Surely, the whole world would respect their might and will? Who would dare challenge them now? The Glorious Spring Offensive of 1975 had not long passed before the leaders of the new Việt Nam started showing signs of hubris and triumphalism. It was these

⁶ William J. Duiker, *Vietnam Since the Fall of Saigon* (Ohio: Center for International Studies, Paper in International Studies, Southeast Asia series no. 56, 1980) 9.

⁷ *Ibid.* Nguyễn Khắc Viên counters by asking the rhetorical question, “For every one that falls to this form of corruption or seduction, are there not ten others whose example, devotion and simple and austere way of life have rather awakened national feeling, industriousness and the hope of a new and wholesome life among the population?” Nguyễn Khắc Viên, *Southern Vietnam: 1975-1985*, 212.

⁸ Douglas Pike, “Vietnam during 1976: Economics in Command” in *Asian Survey* 17:1 (January 1977) 34-42 at 35.

⁹ Duiker, *Vietnam Since the Fall of Saigon*, 1.

attitudinal defects (characteristic of grand theorists) that would confirm their conversion from adroit and disciplined revolutionaries into rigid and doctrinaire ideologues. As the respected observer of Vietnamese politics and admirer of the Vietnamese revolution Gabriel Kolko argued, the communists “lost touch with their own history,” and thereby forfeited “the victory for which millions suffered and perished”.¹⁰

The hubris of the post-1975 communists was evident in the popularly held perception that economic development could be achieved with the same lightning speed and daring as the Final Offensive. “This is our Third Resistance,” said a Radio Hà Nội commentator, “the economy is our new battlefield”.¹¹ Victory on this front, however, was not seen to be reliant upon popular support, but rather on the clear vision and firm guidance of a vanguard Party which would mobilise the nation to dismantle feudal structures, transform small scale production to large scale production, and manufacture the socio-economic conditions for communism. An ambitious Five Year Plan was drafted for 1976-1980 and a slogan at the time proclaimed that, “Economics is in Command”. One Central Committee member commented, “Now nothing more can happen. The problems we have to face now are trifles compared to those of the past.”¹² No doubt, this was nothing short of “the end of history”. Feeding this exceedingly optimistic outlook, First Party Secretary Lê Duẩn promised that every family would have a radio, refrigerator and television by 1985 and that, while it would be difficult, the country should expect to have reached the utopian state of communism within twenty years.¹³ This overbearing positive perspective was also evident on that steamy Sunday as Thiết rode home with his family on that solitary bicycle when he lifted his eyes from the bitumen and saw one of the red banners that seemed to cover every blank space of wall and sky. Paraphrasing the late Uncle Hồ it read, “From this victorious day, we will build the country tenfold!”

¹⁰ Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a Peace* (London: Routledge, 1997) 1-2.

¹¹ Pike, “Vietnam during 1976”, 35.

¹² David G. Marr and Christine P. White, “Introduction” in David G. Marr and Christine P. White (eds.), *Postwar Vietnam: Dilemmas in Socialist Development* (New York: Southeast Asia Program, 1988) 1-8 at 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6. Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 361.

It quickly and painfully became apparent to Thiết and many outside observers, however, that if the economy was the new battlefield then Việt Nam was losing badly. It was (optimistically) estimated that GNP growth declined from 9% in 1976 to 2% in 1977 and 2.3% in 1978.¹⁴ At the same time, per capita income languished at around \$US150 per annum while the price of most goods increased.¹⁵ The steadily growing population only exacerbated the nation's poverty and dependency (particularly on Soviet aid). To be sure, there was advancement in sectors like coal, cement and textiles, but this generally occurred in concentrated areas of the North and did little to compensate for the nation's poor performance in the agricultural sector which accounted for the vast majority of the economy.¹⁶ In June 1977, the rice ration was reduced to an average of 250 grams per person per day, as low as it had ever reached in the North during wartime and far lower than Southerners had ever endured.¹⁷ Malnutrition and disease were rampant, particularly among young children.

At the personal level, with their stable jobs, savings and guile, Vân and Thiết were able to insulate themselves and their family from acute financial deprivation. Like squirrels ahead of winter, they had become apt at hoarding. After the communists arrived, Hrong and Thiết purchased three sewing machines and rolls of material that could be used to generate an income in the event that all else was lost (Thiết had not discarded his skills as a tailor). They also purchased appliances like rice cookers, often at discounted prices from wives whose husbands had held high positions in the old regime and had been sent to reeducation camps. Even late in 1974, when Vân discovered that she was pregnant with Thạch, the family had the foresight and capacity to stockpile Guigoz baby formula.¹⁸ So despite the fact that milk was the rarest of commodities even before Sài Gòn fell, the baby Thạch was never deprived of it

¹⁴ Donnell, "Vietnam 1979", 30.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Marjorie Niehaus, "Vietnam 1978: The Elusive Peace" in *Asian Survey* 19:1 (January 1979) 85-94 at 86.

¹⁶ Pike, "Vietnam during 1976", 36.

¹⁷ Douglas Pike, "Vietnam in 1977: More of the Same" in *Asian Survey* 18:1 (January 1978) 68-75 at 69.

¹⁸ Guigoz infant formula was also promoted throughout much of Africa from the 1960s onwards as a more convenient and nutritious supplement for breast milk. In more recent times its now parent company, Nestlé, has been widely criticised after it was reported that African babies were becoming dependent upon infant formula and dying when they were eventually deprived of it (their mothers' milk and funds drying up in the process).

(that is until Vân found out that she was pregnant again in 1977 and his portion was reduced in preparation for the arrival of her second child). Other less fortunate mothers of the Revolution had to have their breasts measured before they were issued with a ration ticket for dairy products which corresponded precisely to their production capacity. “From each according to ability, to each according to need,” was the motto that had appealed to Thiết during his Việt Minh adolescence. Now he was certain that the realisation of this slogan would result in everyone being equally destitute.

A similar sentiment is expressed in Tường Năng Tiên’s memoir “Communism and Guigoz-Canism”.¹⁹ In this gripping account Tiên draws some alarming parallels between his life after 1975 inside reeducation camps and “outside” in socialist Việt Nam after he was released. Tiên recounts from his camp experience that while in theory he was learning about the wondrous affluence of collectivism, in practice he faced life-threatening starvation on a daily basis. The most “precious appliance” in this harsh environment was a Guigoz powdered milk can, which prisoners used for cooking and storing the life-saving scraps of food. The prisoners kept their stashes hidden away in their cans and only pulled out morsels of food to consume in dark corners, away from greedy eyes and thieving hands. Communist collectivism in the camps, argues Tiên, went hand-in-hand with brutal Hobbesian self-preservation. To his horror, shortly after he was “set free” Tiên witnessed his niece spooning rice into a Guigoz can to bring to work, and realised that Guigoz-canism was not confined to the camps. As if reciting a popular new political slogan his sister proclaimed, “To each his own Guigoz can!” The increasingly despondent man found work at a construction site where he discovered that *everyone* was using the cans for storage and often in secrecy. One day, the worker in charge of heating the Guigoz cans of food for the construction site bosses (the “top comrades” including the director, political commissar and managers) tripped and dropped the cans. The contents spilled out to reveal an abundance of lavish contents—snow white rice and a mountain of fish and meat. Clearly, these champions of egalitarianism had exploited the ration system for their own benefit, and hidden their bounty in their cans. Tiên

¹⁹ In Huỳnh Sanh Thông (trans. and ed.), *To Be Made Over: Tales of Socialist Reeducation in Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1988) 164-172.

suddenly realises that not all Guigoz cans are equal. His account concludes with a caveat for his captors: like the wheel of history, the Guigoz can was at that time rolling in the communists' favour and crushing many people in its path, but sooner or later it would begin to roll in the other direction.²⁰

In many ways, Vân and Thiết's second child was a product of these harrowing Guigoz can times. With their new communist bosses from the North in charge at the electricity authority and the accompanying reduced salaries for workers, Vân dared not ask for the extended maternity leave that had been granted to her prior to Thạch's birth. Instead, she kept working well into her third trimester. To make matters worse, many doctors had fled the country after 1975. There were also no drugs to reduce the chance of miscarriage.²¹ As a consequence of all this, by the time she was due to go to the hospital (once again a caesarean birth was deemed prudent), Vân was nothing short of petrified.

Hygienically and administratively, the Gia Định People's Hospital was in a shambles. When Vân checked in on the 13th of September 1977 she was told that there was no reliable schedule to determine when she might be admitted to theatre. The young mother could only hope that her baby did not decide to greet the world prematurely as she sat, waited and worried. A full day passed and on the 14th Vân left the maternity ward and went on a short walk. At this time she gained a frightening impression of why the hospital had come to be known as one of the dirtiest and most dangerous places in town. In some wards there were four patients to a bed, the sheets were infrequently changed, in the bathrooms and toilets one could not find a clean place to stand let alone sit, bandages were soaked with blood and pus, broken equipment and instruments were left to clutter the hallways, and people moaned in agony as if they had been operated upon while still conscious. With the chaos and suffering all around her, Vân could not help but think that the war was still underway.

Two years earlier when Thạch had been born, the pressure of giving birth to a healthy child/boy was so intense that Vân had been unconcerned about the pain

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 172.

²¹ Perhaps Delalutin or progesterone.

of delivery or even her own well-being. Vân had felt so isolated and insecure that she believed that she had nothing to lose. This time around, Vân had everything to lose. As the hours passed, the young mother became more and more anxious, not only for her unborn baby, but also for herself and her family. What if she did not make it? What would happen to Thiết and Thạch? Who would look after them? And as always there was her family in Bình Dương. The stakes had never been higher. On the 15 September, overwhelmed with fear and the omnipresent odour of disease, Vân persuaded Thiết to take her home.

That same afternoon a hospital worker came to escort Vân back to the hospital. Early the next morning, to her simultaneous relief and horror, she was admitted to the operating theatre for the caesarean birth. The last thing that she heard before going under was one of the surgical nurses saying to another one, "Make sure you get a sharp scalpel!"

Vân and Thiết's second son was delivered at less than five pounds, more than two pounds lighter than his older brother at birth. Due to the paucity of high-quality anaesthetics and anaesthetists, it was an entire day before Vân regained consciousness and could hold her newborn son. In the interim, Thiết scrambled between the infirmary and his wife's room to check on his loved ones. He was astonished by his second son's diminutive size and the infrequency of his movements. Kim lay in his cot crumpled and still, like a bird fallen from its nest, and Thiết could not help but occasionally prod the baby with a chopstick to ensure that he was still alive. In the absence of painkillers and antiseptics, Vân's wound became infected and festered profusely. For decades to come, the ugly scar on her stomach would remind her of that horrid time. And yet in spite of the difficult conditions and his scrawniness, the baby boy somehow managed to survive. His grandmother Thừa decided that he should be named "Kim". "Kim" was a derivative of the Cantonese word for gold and was chosen because of an old proverb stipulating that rocks (Thạch) and gold (Kim) bind together in productive and enduring ways. In an era of poverty and despair, Kim was a symbol of their most earnest yearnings.

The Rationale behind Rationing

Shortly before Kim was born, Thiết and Vân moved to an apartment in Thanh Đa and when Vân returned to work at the electricity authority her mother, Sắt, and teenage niece, Phương, came to live with them in order to look after the children. Without their assistance, Vân and Thiết would have found it very difficult to make ends meet as in addition to looking after Thạch and Kim, Sắt and Phương collected the family rations. The communists had introduced rationing in an effort to control shortages and impose a concept of socialist equality upon the Southerners. Throughout the war, Southerners had never experienced rationing and so it is not surprising that it generated a great deal of hostility. But it was not just the drastic reduction in choice and quantity that Vân and Thiết abhorred. It was also and especially the excessive amount of time required to obtain anything that was in high demand or could easily go rotten. With Vân and Thiết at work, at least once a week Sắt and Phương had to leave before sunrise with their household registration booklet (*hộ khẩu*) in order to get a reasonable position in the queue at the government warehouse. Here they would stand in line for hours protected by little more than tattered plastic and paper; they stood and waited through the hideous heat of the dry season and the pounding rain of the wet season to receive rotten fish every two weeks, half a kilo of meat a month and three metres of the same drab cloth each year.

Profound boredom and discomfort fomented resentment as they thought of how the communist officers, as champions of the revolution, received more bountiful and superior rations than ordinary citizens. Rumours spread that the best goods were sent to Mother Russia and Older Brother China. And so whether they were rich or poor before 1975, many Southerners viewed that pre-revolutionary era as a golden age, when the markets were full of fresh produce delivered with the expediency of private enterprise and abundance of USAID dollars. Among the nostalgic were Sắt and Phương who so often waited weary and bent in the grey light of dawn for their rations. They were stirred only slightly by scuffles at the back of the line where the tension and frustration was even more palpable, where one place might mean the difference between receiving a life-saving ration or going home hungry and desolate. Generally, no-one intervened to adjudicate

these disagreements for fear of losing their own position. And in any case, it had nothing to do with them. What justice could they possibly mete out in such an arbitrary world? Despite and indeed because of the ubiquitous rhetoric of collectivism, they had never been more malevolent, isolated and self-centred.

Thiét experienced similar desperation-induced rioting at work where rations were also distributed. After 1975, electricity authority employees spent much of their time looking out the window rather than working. They looked skywards and dreamt of better times even as they scanned the street for delivery trucks to alleviate their present-day predicament. When a delivery truck arrived, a wave of whispers flew through the office followed by a frantic flood of people from their desks to the kerbside. Here workmates fought ferociously over morsels that they would have once quite happily shared or even given away. “What is happening to us?” Thiét sometimes thought before throwing himself into the fray. “What have we been reduced to? We fight like crows over a rotting carcass.” And he was taken back thirty years to his earliest memories and the caves of Ngọc Kinh Mountain where his loved ones had been driven into barbarism by the First Indochina War. Secretly, Thiét was certain that this modern-day barbarism had been strategically imposed upon him; it was extreme austerity for the sake of punishment and manipulation. The Northerners, Thiét believed, wanted to starve the Southerners in order to teach them that all their precious notions of liberty and justice amounted to nothing; that only Marxist materialism matters. One of Thiét’s colleagues murmured to him, “This is the way the communists want it. They want to keep us hungry, grip our stomachs in order to divide and control us. They know that when we’re satisfied, we’re dangerous.”

Moreover, while he had never read Orwell’s *1984*, Thiét had developed an element of Winston Smith’s sensitivity to the modern-day means of manipulating reality and constructing gratitude. Thiét was not convinced by government news reports heralding unprecedented levels of Vietnamese productivity. He thought to himself, “How can the communists announce a cut in the tobacco ration one day, and then praise themselves for increasing tobacco production the next? How could anyone believe them? It doesn’t make sense.” And yet at times this all seemed so clear to Thiét. Memory and reality itself had become subservient to

the prerogatives and righteousness of the Party. But the Saigonese were not yet malleable like the citizens of Oceania in 1984. They were still capable of covertly composing and transmitting rhymes of resistance to help them cut through the rhetoric and remember what was real. One such ode reappropriated, as a whimsical synonym for one's genitals, the most revered of Vietnamese communist icons, "With only three metres of material, how are we going to cover our Uncle Hos?"²²

The Tragedy and Corruption of the Commons

Undeniably, the leaders of the SRV were confronted with a daunting economic challenge. After the fall of Sài Gòn, there were an estimated two million unemployed in the South from the existing regime in addition to one-and-a-half million who had formerly been employed in the Republican armed services.²³ The US failed to pay \$US4-5 billion in reconstruction aid to the new Vietnamese regime (the promises being intimated during the 1969-1973 Paris negotiations).²⁴ And while it is debateable whether the US was legally obliged to pay this money, there was certainly no strategic need nor moral justification for the defeated superpower to impose an embargo on trade between the SRV and American companies in addition to Western exporters like Japan and grain producers like Canada and Australia. In addition, US Congress successfully pressured other nations and international lending institutions to desist from doing business with the SRV. Compounding these economic obstacles was the crippling weather—a series of severe cold fronts, droughts and floods—which undermined production between 1977 and 1979.

²² *Một năm ba thước vải, Làm sao mà che Bác Hồ em ơi?* In reaction to the deification of the late Uncle Hồ, disgruntled Southerners were quick to associate him with anything that they considered ungodly. At the refugee camp in which Vân and Thiết would later find themselves, it was common for those who used the filthy latrine pits to say that they were off to visit Uncle Hồ's tomb. Nguyễn Khắc Viên asserts that false rumours like "the State has just run out of stocks of fabrics, such and such factory has been burned out, the authorities are going to raid such and such sector.." caused panic buying. Nguyễn Khắc Viên, *Southern Vietnam: 1975-1985*, 156.

²³ John C. Donnell, "South Vietnam in 1975: The Year of Communist Victory" in *Asian Survey* 16:1 (January 1976) 1-13 at 6.

²⁴ Bùi Tín (Nguyễn Ngọc Bích trans.), *From Enemy to Friend: A North Vietnamese Perspective on the War* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2002) 108-9.

In Vân and Thiết's minds, however, the communists were primarily responsible for their impoverished standard of living. They blamed their leaders for not taking advantage of the good will that existed among many Southerners after 1975 to make the most out of peace and reunification. Instead, socialism had been ruthlessly and ineffectually forced upon them such that it was no surprise that the meticulously planned SRV economy and society resisted attempts to manipulate it from the top down. In June 1977 the Party Politburo acknowledged that the effects of the natural disasters were exacerbated by error and bungling on the part of agricultural planners and commune managers.²⁵ In his National Day address on September 2 of that same year, Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng castigated cadres for "confused management" and later fired the Minister for Agriculture Võ Thúc Đông.²⁶

Many times over it was (re)affirmed in Vân and Thiết's minds that the nation's economic woes were not simply a matter of incompetent implementation and inappropriate practice. The theory itself was fundamentally flawed. The prospect of socialism and the vision of communism had not inspired the people but rather sapped their will to work. In the countryside where long-suffering peasants had had their land collectivised and stringent production quotas were imposed, Vân and Thiết saw the tragedy of the commons unravel as the dominant attitude became, "Why grow more rice, build more houses or raise more chickens when I will receive the same measly income regardless?"

The deficiencies of Vietnamese socialism in theory and practice were most evident to Vân and Thiết at the electricity authority where, after the fall of Sài Gòn, "experts" from the North were inserted into all the management positions. While invariably there would be integration difficulties with their new bosses, these problems were aggravated by the fact that many of the Northern experts were perceived by their "inferiors" as incompetent, insecure and spiteful. They had risen to their lofty positions not as a consequence of their technical and managerial capabilities, but rather their pure revolutionary backgrounds and

²⁵ Pike, "Vietnam in 1977", 68.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 68-9.

overt political zeal. The managers at the electricity authority were soldiers or youthful country bumpkins who, in Vân and Thiết's eyes, did not have much education or life experience beyond the jungle, let alone know how to run a national power grid. Those who did have some qualifications and experience with electricity knew only about Soviet and Chinese equipment and infrastructure, which is to say that in the context of the US-modelled South Vietnamese system, they knew nothing at all. Great power, thought many employees at the electricity authority, now rested in the hands of those with very little knowledge. The Party promoted the slogan "To be red exceeds expertise" in order to emphasise the importance of institutional-ideological fidelity over intricate technical know-how; while frustrated Southerners adopted and subverted the very same slogan to convey how obsequiousness and a lowly upbringing were more important to the communists than proficiency and diligence.²⁷

Unwilling to accept their inadequacies or openly ask for assistance from their underlings, the new electricity authority managers stubbornly implemented their projects for reform. Thiết's new boss for instance devised a project that required roving maintenance teams to clear land and plant crops while they were out in the jungle repairing the electricity lines between Hồ Chí Minh City and the Đa Nhim power station which was around 300kms to the north-east. Thiết's boss was convinced that this innovation would increase national agricultural productivity at the same time that it infused an appreciation of the peasantry in his *nguy* inferiors and provided them all with a little more to eat. As the exhausted maintenance teams returned home, however, the jungle and wild pigs invariably overwhelmed their newly-planted crops.

In the face of many such failures, the electricity authority managers became preoccupied with keeping up appearances via the crude manipulation of reports and statistics. To fulfil the primary task of portraying socialism and themselves

²⁷ *Hồng hơn chuyên*. Recounted by Thiết. all translations in this chapter are by the author unless indicated otherwise. Also mentioned in Huỳnh Sanh Thông, "Introduction" in Huỳnh Sanh Thông, *To Be Made Over*, vii-xiv at x. Võ Kỳ Điền's story, "Brother Ten" tells of a revolutionary who had spent much of his life as a soldier and hardly knew how to read, but was nevertheless put in charge of education for an entire province. In Huỳnh Sanh Thông, *To Be Made Over*, 26-35.

as supremely hardworking and efficient; any and all bleak realities, setbacks and blunders were promptly erased. As one experienced and disillusioned *apparatchik* noted, “Under communism, the writing of reports became a realm unto itself, immune from reality and hostile to fact. Good performers who were poor report-writers didn’t stand a chance against inept performers who were clever report-writers.”²⁸ By grossly underestimating the amount of work that could be accomplished each year, Thiết’s section reported to the Minister that they had exceeded their productivity projections by three times. In actual fact, Thiết was convinced that they could have easily been fifty times more productive. The upshot of all this was that after the Revolution, frustration and animosity were perhaps the only things that were produced in great volume at Vân and Thiết’s workplace. This was only exacerbated by preponderant corruption.

Corruption had always existed at the electricity authority but, as far as Vân and Thiết could tell, it only occurred in isolated cases and at relatively low levels. Since the communists had arrived, however, this seedy aspect of work and life had spread both insidiously and exponentially. In her position as pay mistress, Vân was particularly vulnerable and often had to employ vixen-like skills of evasion in order to avoid complicity in the crooked behaviour of her superiors and ensure that retribution did not fall upon her. One late afternoon, for example, her superior approached her with a proposition.

“Comrade Vân, you should be commended for working so late.”

“It is a small sacrifice for the nation,” Vân replied, hoping all along that he would go away but knowing that he was there for a reason.

“You are aware that the petty cash fund is anything but that. Indeed, it has grown into a sizeable amount. Perhaps that sort of unaccountable cash should not be left in the office where so many unreliable people can get their hands on it? Can I suggest that you take half home and I take the remainder?”

²⁸ Hoàng Ngọc Thanh Dung, “To Serve the Cause of the Women’s Liberation” in Huỳnh Sanh Thông, *To Be Made Over*, 43-77 at 70.

Vân knew exactly what he was insinuating. She thought about how the figure standing before her, a life-time Party member from the North, must have come to the South and been overwhelmed by the opulence. He had surely been told since he was a child that the South was oppressed under the yoke of imperialism; that the rich were few but the poor were many; that the North was civilised under socialism and that the South was colonised, decrepit and backward. He must have looked wide-eyed upon the relative prosperity of Sài Gòn after 1975 and cursed his life of frugality. He must have secretly resented the Party exhortations to cadres to remain uncontaminated by the false bourgeois culture of the South: the expensive cigarettes, helter-skelter music and vivacious women. He must have convinced himself that after years of sacrifice and scarcity, he deserved his share of luxury. Vân saw her boss before her and thought of how he was at once so pathetic as to be deserving of pity, and yet so powerful as to demand great caution.

The young mother was intensely conscious of the fact that if she took up the offer and they were caught, then her superior would point the finger at her. But she also knew that it was extremely imprudent to anger or condemn her boss. "This is a well-reasoned proposition comrade," Vân judiciously responded. "It is not proper practice though. And I don't know about you, but the money would not necessarily be any safer at my house than it is here. Sài Gòn is not a safe place anymore you know. There are criminal elements everywhere." Vân's boss sullenly agreed.

Such was the frequency of corruption at all levels and sectors of the SRV at the time that a song was composed by dissident citizens depicting the unscrupulous and upside-down nature of collective mastery (*chủ tập thể*) in the new Việt Nam. Mocking the socialist depiction of the Party as the servant and the people as the masters, it was lyrically asserted that:

The servant travels in a Volga (*a Russian car*),
 The families of the masters wait at the station for a train,
 The servant has a nice villa,
 The families of the masters use oil paper to keep out rain.

The servant attends banquets, noon and night,
The families of the masters eat greens and pickles every day.²⁹

Work Makes Free

Master Thiết kept peddling, propelling his family home on that old bicycle. The temperature was declining but the humidity was yet to peak, and as the father tired and the bicycle slowed, his family was robbed of the cool breeze that only accompanies significant speed. They had reached the base of another slight incline that could have just as easily been a towering mountain. Thiết somehow remained upright and kept peddling as his wife and sons sat sweltering. The sky turned shades of pink and crimson (as it had a tendency to do at around sunset at that time of year) and vibrant horizontal rays of light lit up another red banner that was strung across the street at the top of the incline, “Work is glorious! Idleness is starvation!”³⁰ In the same vein they were also constantly reminded that, “With people power we can turn rocks to rice!”³¹ Thiết thought about how hard he was working, and yet his family were without rice and many others were starving. His fury inspired him to pedal harder.

Along with many other colleagues at the electricity authority, Vân and Thiết were regularly transported to barren fields in the countryside to plant banana palms, sweet potatoes and other crops or even bury unexploded missiles. Moreover, the communists asserted that such “proletarianisation” projects were personally beneficial as it was supposedly satisfying to be out in the sun ploughing the fields and contributing to national productivity. In the process, they would also (re)discover empathy and admiration for the peasants who were Uncle Hồ’s chosen people. Ever aware that such programs were controlled from the top down, Vân and Thiết became convinced that the new leaders were motivated by revenge rather than reconciliation. They observed that the communist leaders almost never participated in the manual work that they lauded

²⁹ Bùi Tín (Judy Stowe and Do Van trans.), *Following Ho Chi Minh: The Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonial* (London: Hurst & Company, 1995) 108-9.

³⁰ *Lao động là vinh quang, lang thang là chết đói.*

³¹ *Với sức người sỏi đá cũng thành cơm.* Taken from Hoàng Trung Thông’s poem “Hãy Im”. See Vux Quân Phương “Hoàng Trung Thông” in *Nhà Xuất Bản Kim Đồng* (18 December 2000) <<http://www.nxbkimdong.com.vn/tacgia/hoangtrungthong.htm>> accessed 16 February 2004.

with such zeal. And as the months passed, Vân and Thiết became convinced that “This is like Nazi Germany...except they are killing us slowly.” And they were right, to the extent that the communists could have easily and ironically hung a banner of the now infamous sign of the Auschwitz work camps, “*Arbeit macht frei*”, “Work makes free”.

The defective theory and horrific consequences of proletarianisation as a grand and final solution to the challenges facing the new Việt Nam were particularly evident when it came to the New Economic Zones (NEZ).³² Based on smaller programs implemented in the North since the early 1960s, the NEZs were situated on tracts of lowly-populated land designated by the communists for the relocation of the hordes who had swelled into the urban centres. Often tribal minorities were ruthlessly displaced as the government proclaimed that it was saving them from “their unstable nomadic way of life on the mountaintops” and making them more “civilised” like the Vietnamese.³³ It was estimated that by 1978 a quarter of a million highland people had been relocated and that by the end of that year, eighty-three NEZs had been constructed in the South, with over 1.3 million residents, and 350,000 hectares of land “reclaimed”.³⁴ The rationale behind these staggering figures is compelling, provided one discounts the fact that the numbers represent real people with meaningful lives, relationships and choices.

Economically, the NEZs were viewed by the communists as an effective way to address a massive unemployment problem in the cities, reduce the strain on food distribution lines and as a means of social welfare that assisted both families and the nation. There were also ostensibly cogent socio-political reasons behind their establishment. Via the NEZs it was believed that the metropolitan bourgeois population of Southern Việt Nam, particularly in Sài Gòn, could be redistributed and reformed into a more pastoral and productive one. It was even conceived that prostitutes, drug addicts, rambunctious youths (“Sài Gòn Cowboys” or “Soul Youths” as they were sometimes known for the affiliation to the US) and other

³² *Vùng Kinh Tế Mới*.

³³ Broadcast from Hà Nội 16 May 1977. Cited in Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 365.

³⁴ Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 365. Duiker, *Vietnam Since the Fall of Saigon*, 63.

misfits of the corrupt urban milieu could be remade into industrious members of socialist society.³⁵ Importantly, individuals who were potential security threats to the SRV such as soldiers in the Army of the Republic of Việt Nam (ARVN) (and from 1978 onwards Chinese-Vietnamese) were prime targets for relocation to NEZs where they could be isolated and more easily controlled.

The leadership went to considerable effort to entice people to migrate to the NEZs by promising a sizeable plot of land for each family and material to build a house. The push factors, however, were more compelling than the pull factors. Specifically, people were forced to move because their rations had been cancelled, their property had been repossessed or simply because the government ordered them to go. Vân's older sister, Châu, whose husband was an ARVN soldier, fell into all three of these categories. Châu's NEZ tale was not unusual: her family was dropped off on a remote road and had to hike to the desolate patch of jungle that was to be their home. There was a lack of fertilisers, tools and draught animals; and an abundance of mosquitoes and unexploded bombs. Moreover, the best land was given to the soldiers of the Revolution and the Party faithful, many of whom had migrated from the North in search of prosperity. Châu struggled to grow even cassava and potatoes on her land and returned to Sài Gòn whenever possible to borrow money from Vân and their mother. Other returnees simply survived on the streets, waiting to be deported. The houses and shacks that they had once owned had been either demolished or now provided accommodation for the influx of Northerners. For these reasons, the NEZs served to foment resentment among Southerners; a sense that for all the talk of reunification and peace, they were being punished and exploited.

By the end of 1977 it had become apparent that the NEZ program was falling short of its lofty objectives. Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng asserted that this was a consequence of "ideological shortcomings", not so much in the program itself but the recalcitrant people who showed at best inadequate "emulation and motivation", and at worst were openly hostile.³⁶ In the mind of the Party, NEZs were theoretically faultless and therefore their failure could only be attributable

³⁵ Pike, "Vietnam during 1976", 40.

³⁶ Pike, "Vietnam in 1977", 71.

to the people. The only solution, then, was to apply the theory more forcefully in order to generate greater faith and resolve. Consequently, the number of people targeted for relocation in 1978 was raised to 475,000, a move that was indicative of a doctrinaire turn in party policy that would have profound and horrifying consequences for Vân and Thiết's future.³⁷

The Operation to Destroy Compradore Capitalists

Early in 1978, against the background of compounding economic and social crises, the DRV leadership in Hà Nội decided to take swift and comprehensive control of the Southern economy. Previously, in the autumn of 1975, it had carried out a campaign against the "compradore bourgeoisie" and the "feudal landholding class". Big businesses were nationalised and a handful of prominent business people were jailed after being accused of and condemned for colluding with the US imperialists and the old puppet regime in the establishment of unholy monopolies and the accumulation of odious amounts of individual wealth. The formidable Chinese traders based in Chợ Lớn were hardest hit, such that the campaign was promoted as a struggle against both "class oppression" and "national oppression of a colonialist type" (the latter referring to the millennia old Vietnamese struggle against Chinese invasion and the contemporary tensions arising from China's attempts to build its powerbase in Indochina through Pol Pot's Kampuchea).³⁸ After this initial flurry, the leadership's stated aim was gradually to eliminate capitalism in the South by the

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Võ Nhân Trí "Party Policies and Economic Performance: The Second and Third Five-Year Plans Examined" in David G. Marr and Christine P. White (eds.), *Postwar Vietnam: Dilemmas in Socialist Development* (New York: Southeast Asia Program, 1988) 77-89. The SRV's oppression of Chinese traders had profound consequences for its foreign policy in the late 1970s acting as a catalyst for, among other things, war against China, the defection of highly-ranked Party members, and a flood of refugees.

The opportunistic qualities and business acumen of the Chinese in Chợ Lớn was evidenced as the Communists took over Sài Gòn. Terzani recalls that they replaced their portraits of Chiang Kai-shek with ones of Mao and had manufactured tens of thousands of NLF flags of varying quality and size, of cotton, silk, and even plastic. Some revolutionaries were repulsed by this trade which was enriching a handful of businessmen and confronted the Chinese-run communist flag and Hồ Chí Minh picture stands proclaiming that "Uncle Ho is not for sale" and that the people's organisations would distribute copies free to every family, factory, and office. "But people were in a hurry and the trade continued, with circumspection, under the counter as though it were cocaine: a black-and-white portrait, five hundred piasters; in color, one thousand." Terzani, *Giai Phong*, 129.

end of 1979. Many small traders, however, were cautious and steeled themselves for the next campaign against the remnants of private enterprise. They were both vindicated and devastated, then, when in February 1978 the Operation to Destroy Compradore Capitalists struck like lightning all over the city.

At that time, Thiết's mother and two sisters were selling fans, radios and other electrical goods from the lounge room of their home which opened out on to the busy Lê Văn Sơn street. Prior to the fall of Sài Gòn, Hương had owned an electronics store which she sold in early 1975 while retaining the stock (most of which had been sold by 1978). There were many rumours leading up to that day that a widespread asset inventory (*kiểm kê tài sản*) was coming. But as Thiết would explain many years later, "How can you prepare for an event that will turn your life upside-down and blow it apart? You just can't! It was like the seasonal floods that hit my village of Bồ Bản when I was a boy. Everyone knew that they were coming, but when they hit they were always terrifying and destructive."

"Under the aegis of the Operation to Destroy Comprador Capitalists, we declare that you are guilty of trading, hoarding and living beyond your means and hereby reclaim your ill-obtained property in the name of the people of the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam!" cried the band of six government functionaries on the morning they stormed into Hương's house. Thereafter, Thiết's two sisters and his mother were held hostage in a surreal and severe world as the stern young communists went through their home making a meticulous inventory of "necessities" which they could keep, and "commercial goods" or "luxuries" which were "redistributed" for revolutionary purposes.

Each night Thiết visited his mother and sisters to support them and it was at this time that he was also interrogated. When the cadres asked him, "How can your sister have such a nice lounge suite and yet have no money?" Thiết flatly replied that she had spent all her money on the lounge suite and necessities such as food and water. He was fearful of what might happen if they found out or even assumed that he was lying, but reasoned that the probability of the house being confiscated and the family being sent to a NEZ (like so many Chinese in the Chợ Lớn district before them) was totally independent of whether or not they were

honest. Such earth-shattering outcomes were totally contingent upon the whims of their captors. Beholden to absolute and arbitrary power, Thiét could only advise his mother and sisters to look as frail as possible. He did not think that the communists would have any pity for the three ladies, but hoped that they might be astute enough to recognise that Thừa, Hương and Truong would only burden others if sent to the hinterlands and, thus, spare them on account of their inability to contribute to the economic productivity of the fatherland.

Nevertheless, one day a surly cadre (perhaps hoping to claim the house for himself) confronted Hương with a simple command, "Get out!" No doubt these two words had provided sufficient force and justification to drive many families from their homes forever, but Hương was not easily bullied.

"How can you tell me to get out? I have nowhere to go!"

"I don't care where you go, just get out of here."

"I'm not going anywhere. This house is all I have. I've worked hard for it, and deserve to stay here."

"It was the proletariat and peasantry who worked hard for this house, those people who lay the bricks and cut the timber. All you did was exploit them. What's more, my compatriots and I have lived in the jungle for thirty years. How can you say that you deserve this house more than anyone? More than me?"

"You and your comrades are different. You're men who are strong and brave. We three are old sick women. We will die if you take our house. So I'm not moving. You'll have to come with guns and kill me before I go anywhere."

After a moment of tense silence during which Hương did not budge in her stance or flicker in her glare, the cadre acquiesced.

While by his own proclamations this particular cadre had been an active revolutionary, Thiét and his family secretly scorned many of the junior cadres as

“April Thirtieth Revolutionaries”. They were naïve, cowardly and opportunistic individuals who had no intention of waving their red (or red and blue) flags until the very day that Northern tanks rolled through the streets. Now, it seemed, the April Thirtieths were trying desperately to make up for all the enthusiasm that they had previously lacked. They were usually in their early twenties if not younger, and had come from either the countryside or more often the urban slums. They were cold and calculating, always referring to their captives and each other as “comrade” (*đồng chí*). It was a far cry from the charismatic revolutionary propaganda scouts who had first taught Thiết about imperialism, nationalism and the revolution, and who had spoken passionately to the villagers of Bò Bản as if they were long-lost family members. Thiết was convinced that this was because the communists were no longer interested in communing with the people and winning over their hearts and minds, but rather breaking their spirits and crushing them into submission. One cadre had so utterly discarded Vietnamese traditions of respecting elders that he castigated Thừa by saying that she had, “Greedily manipulated the flow of goods to make profits. Got rich on the blood, sweat and tears of the workers.” And that she was “lucky to be keeping anything as she had produced nothing!”

After a few days, the three most senior cadres left. The three who remained behind, one young woman and two young men, brought their own measly food and slept on austere bamboo mats at night in front of the exits and the stairwell. The fact that they were from rustic backgrounds, and the propensity of the communists to operate in groups of three, gave rise to a sniggering conspiracy among disgruntled Southerners. Surreptitiously, it was posited that the communists always needed one person to read, one person to write and the third to keep track of their “lofty intellects”.³⁹

After the first week, every tangible and visible item in the house had been categorised and most of them were piled in the lounge room and out into the

³⁹ Bùi Tín, *Following Ho Chi Minh*, 113.

street waiting to be taken away.⁴⁰ The light-fittings had been checked for hidden treasure, electrical goods dismantled and the ancestral altar stripped bare. Nevertheless, the cadres remained, offering no indication of when they might leave or what fate might yet befall the family. With little else to do, they turned to the constant and crushing task of surveillance. Everyone who came into and left the house was meticulously searched. One time, Hương's boyfriend brought a live chicken for dinner, but the three women refused to kill it as they were certain that to spill blood in the house was to exacerbate their misfortune. Before the chicken could be returned to the outside world, however, the cadres painstakingly probed its throat and cavity for concealed riches. Particularly traumatic were mealtimes when the family had to construct a façade of normalcy and calm even as the cadres watched over them like hungry hawks. At the table, Thiét, his mother and sisters talked reservedly about mundane matters with their faces directed into their bowls. To look up, to glance at a gecko skirting across the wall, was to risk having one of their captors rush over to that spot with a hammer. Moreover, a nervous tic, an unconscious look of anxiety, a habit of muttering to oneself, an improper expression such as incredulity when elation was expected, were all indictable offences—what was known in a comparable (if fictional) place and time as a “facecrime”.⁴¹

Gold, the only reliable currency in the chaotic post-war economy, was the underlying objective of the cadres, and the family had a sense that they were not going to leave until they found it. A master in the art of tactical concealment, however, Hương was not about to make it easy for them. Before the fall of Sài Gòn she had bought great amounts of the precious metal from jewellery stores and had concealed it all over the house and the city. There was a bundle hidden in a nearby drainage pipe which, they later discovered, was almost stolen by a voracious rat. There was also some under the seat of Hương's son's, Tâm's, scooter and in the handlebars of Thạch's bicycle. Thin taels of gold were stuck to the tops of their bedroom doors and it was even woven into the seams of

⁴⁰ Some Southerners were given receipts for the gold and property that was confiscated from them which they later used to claim compensation during rectification programs. Thiét's family, however, did not receive any such receipt or compensation and any thought of such a prospect at the time was unimaginable to them.

⁴¹ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin, 2003) 71.

pillowcases. Once, when the cadres came close to finding one of Hương's stashes, she filled her son's pockets with loot and directed him to tip-toe past the sleeping cadres in the dark of night. In addition, a significant amount had already been transferred to Vân and Thiết which they had concealed in their apartment, placed in a secret safe under Vân's desk at work, or given to close friends for safekeeping.

Through her great effort, and fortune, the cadres never discovered any gold. But as her property was hauled away, Hương became incensed as if each requisitioned chair and cushion left a burn under her fingernails. "How can they take what belongs to me? Those heathens and crooks don't deserve a thing! Their wives will probably cut up my best dresses and use them to wrap rice cakes!" Hương knew all too well that after the revolution, all the abandoned and repossessed houses were taken by/given to high and middle-ranking communists. In her eyes, the greediest figures of the new Việt Nam were those who professed to be most committed to building the wealth of and for the masses. She was all too aware of a secret saying among many disaffected Southerners that, "If it has legs (referring to furniture and other goods like Hondas and radios), it will eventually walk North."

After three weeks, the cadres left as suddenly as they had arrived. Before doing so, they forced Hương to sign a declaration stating that she would undertake manual work for a living and never again skim profits off the labour of others (the declaration was as worthless as the paper it was written on, and indeed represented a great waste like much of the communists' bureaucratic activities at that time when paper was extremely scarce). While the family had lost almost all of its belongings, they still had their house, gold and each other. However, these facts alone were not cause for celebration as fear lingered with the knowledge that their ideological bailiffs could return at any time to claim a debt that Thiết's family could never repay.

Huong's Pyrrhic Victories over Time, Truth and Despair

There was no way that Thiết's oldest sister Hương was ever going to ride a bike again. She had not travelled by such undignified means, propelling herself and sweating like a swine, since 1957 when she had pedalled around the city selling advertising space for the *Transportation Rules and Regulations* magazine. Riding a bike was tolerable back then, when she was still in her twenties and was a pitiable nobody. Now, however, she was well into her...well, let's just say that she was more mature, and that she had a stellar reputation to maintain. Thus, in 1979 when Thiết was transporting his entire family around the city on a rusty bicycle, Hương insisted on driving her car. By that time, almost every automobile had been requisitioned by the government for official use. So only the most audacious private citizens dared to drive in the open without proper registration plates or a uniformed cadre travelling with them.

Hương, however, considered herself to be above such earthly laws. By the end of the 1970s, she had become convinced that the SRV would exonerate her of all her crimes, and Heaven would absolve her of all her sins; all of them that is, except for poverty and faint-heartedness. And so, Hương stuck on the windscreen of her little white Peugeot a bold sign, "I Have the Right to Drive!"⁴² For those lowly cadres who were not satisfied with her self-registration sticker and failed to recognise her commanding air, Hương kept in the glove box irrefutable documentation of her righteousness. This allowed her to stand over the young communists who stopped her in the street and declare in a manner that deftly exploited their fear of offending power, "See here, I have a driver's licence from the 1950s. This other certificate proves that I am a movie star and member of the People's Film Council. I am also an important exporter and a prominent figure in society. Now, I must go in haste, I am very busy." Her demeanour was so full of pomp, her self-belief so complete, and her voice was so vociferous that Hương was always allowed to continue on her way. In the surreal zero-sum world that was post-1975 Việt Nam, Hương was in many ways at home and at times reigned supreme.

⁴² *Tôi Có Quyền Lái!*

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Hương had not been overly concerned on 30 April 1975 when the communists arrived. To be sure, she was anxious that there might be a massacre and had even tried (unsuccessfully) to escape on a plane to the US with her boyfriend at the time. But Hương was not running away from communism. Communism, republicanism and all the other “isms” made absolutely no difference to her. Indeed, revolution, independence and even liberty were nothing more than vacuous concepts—words in the wind. The fact that anyone would bother to fight or even die for them was amusing and pathetic to her. From Hương’s perspective, there were only two political camps: there was her camp (which consisted of her alone); and the enemy camp (into which just about everyone else fell). Naturally and immutably, her camp would seek to accumulate as much financial clout as possible, and just as naturally and immutably, the other camp would try to stop her through various laws, principles and institutions. For this she despised them, but to revolt and attempt to change the official leadership of the day was pure folly. It would make no difference; it was like striving to postpone nightfall. After the blood of the rebellion had dried and the dust of the uprising had settled, nothing as far as Hương was concerned would change. The rational thing to do, then, was to exist and resist from within those oppressive structures; to break the rules and rituals to one’s advantage in such a way that those who were “in control” were left unawares. Using these evasive tactics, in the age of French colonialism, through the Cold War, and now into the new and modern era of Vietnamese socialism, Hương had managed and would manage to survive and thrive like a glistening fern under the thick canopy of ideology.

On 1 May 1975, Hương stepped out into the city. It was May Day and the sun had risen for the first time in almost thirty years over a Việt Nam free from foreign occupation—a new page had turned in the nation’s proud history. From a contrasting and mournful perspective, this was the first full day of communist oppression and if a new page in Việt Nam’s history was in fact turning, then the people were like tiny bugs being squashed in the spine. Either way, Hương did not care for such dramatics. What concerned her was that there was money to be made. And so she carefully analysed the market prospects and determined that—with boldness, cunning and a few connections—she could take advantage of the

prevailing chaos. Not long afterwards, she was at the bustling black markets with a suitcase full of gold and cash (US dollars, Republican piastres and the new Uncle Hồ money). The middle-aged woman was a sagacious speculator and guileful go-between, buying currency from one desperate soul and selling it to another, almost always for a significant profit. This is not to say that she was invincible or all commanding; a fact that became evident a few months after the fall of Sài Gòn when an individual posing as a prospective customer stuck a gun into her chest and took off on a waiting motorcycle with twenty-four taels of gold.⁴³ Hương returned home furious, but was far from disheartened.

In the years after the revolution, Hương, her mother Thừa and sister Trưng, moved house and changed trades almost continuously. In the natural world, their equivalent would be the insects that fly in jagged and unpredictable paths in order to avoid the piercing beaks of birds, or the chameleons that blend into their surroundings by changing the colour of their skin. Among other things, they sold the electrical goods that were left over from their store, sticky rice, blocks of ice and Huế-style beef vermicelli soup. There was even a striking sense of *déjà vu* when the three women turned to vending, with considerable success, the donuts made of cassava flour that had lifted them out of destitution a quarter of a century earlier in Bò Bán. At another time and from another abode, Hương sold coffee, green bean pudding and balloons. Such was popularity of her wares that during the New Year's festive season they opened for six days straight, and so many customers were flowing out into the street that the local authorities arrived to direct traffic. In the mid-to-late 1980s, when the economic climate was more amenable to big business, Hương would set up factories that manufactured solder and nails for export to Kampuchea and the USSR. Of course, she never engaged in manual labour herself, leaving such menial work to her relatives and hired help. Hương was beyond and above dirtying her hands, but she was always there in the background, orchestrating the affair, determining when it was time to pull out and move on. She also devoted herself to the big deals, to trading in the cut-price properties and below-value bullion that came onto the black market whenever families exiled themselves from Việt Nam.

⁴³ This is almost one kilogram or around 32 ounces.

It should be acknowledged, however, that making money was not everything to Hương. There was also the critical matter of accumulating status and fame. From the 1980s onwards, Hương determined that this goal could be best achieved in the nascent SRV film industry. She paid her way into cameo roles and was soon hobnobbing with famous directors and movie stars like Thanh Long. Her glamorous lifestyle and elevation to the highest socio-artistic echelons demanded a name-change, and so those who could be bothered to read the flying credits and small print of her films did not know her as the mundane, Huỳnh Thị Hương, but rather the more illustrious, Trang Thiên Hương (derived from *trang nhã* which means well-bred and refined and *thiên hương* which connotes a pure and natural fragrance). Not surprisingly, the movies were all made in the socialist realist tradition. They whole-heartedly praised the Party and the Revolution, depicted the bravery of the peasants in overcoming the categorical evil of the French and American colonisers, and condemned the dastardly collaborator puppets of the old Republic. But this did not mean that Hương had turned red. On the contrary, without being fully conscious of it, her appearances in these movies represented the ultimate subversion from within an otherwise supremely suppressive society.

We can take for example her role in *Old Lady Number Six (Bà Sáu)*, which was the story of an elderly woman who put her life on the line during the War of Resistance against the Americans to smuggle letters between NLF guerrillas and their loved ones. The villains of the film are the generals and leaders of the South Vietnamese puppet regime who are depicted as unprincipled, slovenly, vicious and rich beyond all reasonable means. One memorable scene was filmed on site at the Reunification Palace (previously the Independence Palace) where a small band of treacherous millionaires can be seen dancing to lurid Western music. The camera pans across them to portray the corrupt, profligate and obscene nature of the defeated Republic. And it is in this instant that Hương can be seen: dazzling in a pink taffeta dress; laden with her most garish jewellery; cha cha cha-ing with an elderly gentleman in an oversized pin-striped suit. Before the eyes of the nation, *Old Lady Number Six* allowed Hương to flaunt everything that the communists had tried to take away from her and even be congratulated for it. Prior to the Revolution she had never come close to being invited to the

Presidential Palace, let alone been permitted to glide through its lofty halls. And so in this sense, it was only after 1975 that Hương was free to realise her dreams.

But Hương's freedom was far from enduring or complete, and her victories over time, truth and despair were at best pyrrhic ones. In another film entitled, *The Undisguisable Blemish (Vết Dơ Không Dấu)*, Hương played an ARVN general's wife and in one relatively raunchy scene, the script demanded that she wear a lacy ivory coloured negligée. Afterwards, Hương's director/friend complimented both her acting and beauty, but mentioned that her breasts were uneven and saggy and could do with a little work. Hương, who prided herself on being twice the age of her movie star friends but no less youthful, immediately sought out a plastic surgeon who introduced to her the revolutionary procedure of silicone injection. Soon afterwards, a thick clear sludge was inserted into Hương's once-proud chest and pumped directly into her drooping forty year-old-plus arms. Immediately, the silicone began to poison her from within.

It is arguable, however, that psychologically, spiritually and ethically, Hương had already been contaminated. Decades of existing in the shadows had made her adverse to the light, and allowed a malignant tumour to take hold of her soul. Since she was a teenager, Hương had evaded the authorities, brazenly bent the truth, and sacrificed all principle in order to survive and at times flourish. Somewhere along the line, despite all her skills of adaptation, she had become incapable of acting out a public transcript in which she could be honest, open, earnest, and herself. At crucial points in her life, Hương did not recognise that she could make real choices involving something more than momentary survival, the avoidance of death and the accumulation of wealth. There were also available to her the options of virtue, dignity and compassion which Hương either never saw or could not bring herself to take. Perhaps this had something to do with the very real and violent wrongs that had been committed against her in her youth by figures—republican soldiers, Confucian fathers and communist revolutionaries—who had promoted themselves in the public limelight as exemplars of justice and righteousness? No doubt she was wholly cynical of civic virtue and believed that those who promoted themselves as possessing such qualities were deserving of scorn. As Hương saw it, the world out there was bad and could never be made

good. She was unable to turn her outward hardship into inner triumph and somehow prove to all and herself that she was “worthy of her sufferings”.⁴⁴ And so, despite and probably because of her riches and her undeviating mission to make do in the face of hardship, Hương progressively rotted away.

Why Vân and Thiết Felt Trapped: Personal-Political

Oppression and Everyday Resistance in Post 1975 Sài Gòn

As night fell, many of the banners and posters that the still pedalling Thiết had come to despise were blurred or concealed by the darkness. But there was one banner that was inescapable, which Thiết could feel hanging over him even if he could not see and read it. “Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom” was perhaps the most popular of Uncle Hồ’s venerated utterances.⁴⁵ This deified doublespeak weighed him down and irritated him to no end, like a lice infested cloak. This tedious truism seemed to fill the pages of the government-controlled newspapers, was blurted out from loudspeakers that spewed propaganda from early in the morning until past sunset, and was repeated *ad nauseum* on the monopolised radio and television stations. Officially, the message for the Southerners was that while they were once subjugated and misguided, under the leadership of the Party they would break free and see clearly that which was virtuous and that which was not. With the passing of the months, years and every agonising metre during that long bicycle trip home, Thiết came to believe that the more the communists proselytised a message, the more they could be sure of its disassociation from his everyday reality.

One of the first tasks that the new regime undertook was a radical social restructuring program, fundamental to which was the formation of solidarity

⁴⁴ Dostoevski once said, “There is only one thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings.” Cited in Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

⁴⁵ *Không gì quý hơn độc lập tự do*. Some critics of the current leadership in Việt Nam contend that the quotation is not complete and originally contained the additional phrase, “...and without freedom there is no independence”. See endnote 1 to the “Introduction” of William J. Duiker, *Hồ Chí Minh* (New York: Hyperion, 2000) 582.

cells.⁴⁶ Each cell consisted of around fifteen neighbouring families and was fronted by whoever appeared the most devoted to the socialist revolution. Above the cells there were clusters, precincts, communes, districts and provinces. Promotion at the bottom levels was often a result of rudimentary elections; while the highest political positions were reserved for senior Party members who came to power by means obscured to ordinary people. In addition to this rigid pyramid structure which pervaded the nation, there was also a fatherland front that consisted of a myriad of organisations including youth groups, women's groups and unions.

The cadre who sold this new system to Vân and Thiết depicted it as the ultimate in representative government. "Finally, power is in your hands. In the corrupt puppet regimes of the past you had no power. You could not choose who would be your leaders and how you would be led. Now the whole of Việt Nam is underpinned by the glorious solidarity cell which will be the first critical step in the formulation of policies that are receptive to the needs of the masses!"

In actuality, thought Vân and Thiết, this system provided the basis for stringent top-down control. Continually, they were reminded that their first responsibility as citizens was to maintain a constant vigil for anyone displaying counter-revolutionary behaviour. Because spying was prevalent and rewarded, it was not long before people could not trust one another. The community was dictated by piercing glances and acidic whispers. "I didn't see comrade Mai at the meeting last night. Actually, she was absent at last week's parade and I don't think she participated in street sweeping for the fatherland on the weekend. Do you know where she is? I asked her son and first he said that she was sick and then he said that she was visiting a sick relative. What about comrade Dũng? I've seen his light on late at night and I can hear the voices of at least two men. I'm not sure who's visiting him at such an hour, someone should probably go over and check." Vân and Thiết learnt to be suspicious of friends and even family. They were in constant fear of being denounced by someone who had a personal

⁴⁶ *Tổ* is literally translated as "cell". The adjective "solidarity" is added in Terzani, *Giai Phong*, 246 and by the author in order to enhance the translation by emphasising both their much lauded purpose and ironic failure.

vendetta against them or who just wanted to get onside with the new administration. The entire society had been incorporated into the secret police network. “If freedom, democracy and security are the objectives of our new leaders,” thought Vân, “Why do I feel trapped, as if I am the enemy?”

As for the supposed policy and leadership advantages of the new system, this was refuted in Vân and Thiết’s minds by the example of their own cell leader, Tuân. Tuân was a simple and ostensibly ardent woman whose husband had preceded her as cell leader. On the day that the communists arrived her husband, who was a lieutenant colonel in the defeated Republican army, donned a communist infantry pith helmet and rode around on his scooter in the simple peasant garb of Uncle Hồ proclaiming that everyone should/must celebrate and be grateful because the revolution had come. Rumour had it that Tuân’s husband was buoyant on the day that he presented himself to the authorities as a one-time ARVN officer. He was immediately sent to a re-education camp, leaving Tuân to assume his position with equal if not greater zeal in the hope that she might expedite her husband’s return. Tuân was not from the countryside, but in order to promote the wonders of agricultural production she conspicuously raised chickens and ducks on the small balcony of her third storey apartment.⁴⁷ Such practices were not wholly illogical given the scarcity of food, but peasant-envy had become so absurdly fashionable that one devout comrade living a floor below Tuân was raising a cow in his apartment!

Tuân had recently joined the Association of Liberated Women (*Hội Phụ Nữ Giải Phóng*) and was designated a Patriotic Woman (*Phụ Nữ Yêu Nước*). Above that she aspired to be a United Woman (*Phụ Nữ Đoàn Kết*) and then finally a Liberated Woman (*Phụ Nữ Giải Phóng*), although this highest level was generally reserved for those who had been active in the revolution before 1975. Tuân fulfilled her duties with infuriating enthusiasm: shooing away street vendors; trying to persuade recent immigrants to move back to the countryside; and constantly organising meetings. For hours she harped on about their

⁴⁷ One of Thạch’s clearest memories of Việt Nam was the commotion on the tragic day that Tuân’s twelve year old son fell to his death chasing a baby duck that had fallen from their balcony.

benevolent new leaders and the need for everyone to embrace the glorious SRV. There were so many tedious meetings to attend that they no longer had any time to themselves. And this, believed Vân and Thiết, was exactly what the communist power-brokers wanted: to erode every meaningful relationship that they had in their lives and impose the Party in their place. For a time, Vân and Thiết had some sympathy for Tuân who was doing her best to take care of her two sons and bring back her husband. But soon enough they despised her as an obsequious sniffer dog, hunting out prey for her communist masters. The couple thought to themselves, “Tuân isn’t committed to the Party or the people. She’s only doing this for her husband and herself. Is this the face of the new Việt Nam? Are we to be scrutinised, criticised and commanded by obnoxious and duplicitous simpletons for the rest of our days?”

If Vân and Thiết could not find sanctuary from the Party’s eyes and ears at home, it is no surprise that life at work was not any easier. Indeed, it was at the electricity authority through the forced writing of personal histories (*lý lịch*) that the Party made their most intrusive investigations into “who you are”. As a Việt Minh devotee in his youth, Thiết had learnt that behaviour and belief are wholly determined by class. More than two decades later, he discovered that this doctrine remained at the forefront of communist theory/practice. The invading communists were not interested in a person’s character, but rather her/his relationship to the means of production. Consequently, every two or three months, Vân and Thiết had to submit their personal histories to officials at the electricity authority. The histories were almost ten pages long and intricately set out the educational, work and residential background of every family member reaching back up to four generations. The theory was that, “It takes ten years to cultivate a tree, but one hundred years to cultivate a person,”⁴⁸ and therefore an individual’s traits could only be identified by totally uprooting his or her family history. Thiết divulged that his brother Biết had died fighting for the ARVN, but decided not to mention the fact that his father had been accused of spying against the Việt Minh and executed. He reasoned that he would only be caught if someone who knew him well turned him in, or if there was an inconsistency in

⁴⁸ *Trồng cây mười năm, trồng người một trăm năm.* Attributed to Hồ Chí Minh.

his histories. Like many others, Vân and Thiết avoided this latter prospect by completing several personal histories at one time and then copying them upon demand.

The communists asserted that the personal histories were not for the benefit of the Party but rather, the people who wrote them. Along with the criticism and self-criticism sessions which provided a context for people to purge themselves of their sins against Vietnamese independence and socialism, the personal histories supposedly served a cathartic and reflexive purpose. As one cadre proclaimed to Vân at the electricity authority, “You will know yourself after writing your personal history. All the myths of your past, whether they be bourgeois or feudal, will be swept away. The self-deceit, haughtiness and reticence of the old age will be annihilated, allowing you to see with clarity and objectivity who you really are and what path you must take to be a progressive person in the new Việt Nam.”

“If all of this drudgery is really for our benefit,” thought Vân, “Why do we have to write our histories every few months? Why are we castigated for the smallest discrepancy?” Vân suspected that the personal histories provided the communists with yet another means to control and persecute them. They could be deemed criminals, not only for their acts, words or even their thoughts, but by virtue of their origins. In her view, the grand ideology provided but a tattered veil over the most reprehensible prejudice. Vân and Thiết’s nephew, Luong, for instance, had come first in the country in his high school examinations but was prohibited from going to university because his father had fought in the ARVN. Unable to study further or get a job on account of his “unclean” background, Luong spent his days helping out at his family’s café.

This prejudice was nowhere more evident than when it came to the repression of Southern cultural practices. According to leading Party ideologue, Trường Chinh, one of the major tasks of the Revolution was to “level” all differences between

North and South.⁴⁹ The North represented the apex of human thought, to which the South—if not all societies—should inevitably develop. For this to occur, however, it was first necessary to purge the Southern population of its misguided cultural legacies. Trùng Chinh was convinced that the Southerners had grown accustomed to a degree of heterodoxy, individualism and freedom of thought that was antithetical to true progress.⁵⁰ After 1975, the adjectives of scorn and condemnation referring to the Saigonese way of life fell like torrential rain. In addition to being *nguy*, they were debauched, enslaved, reactionary, and maintained cultural vestiges that served a neo-colonial conspiracy to lull the people into gloom, nostalgia, lust, depravity and animalisation (dehumanisation).⁵¹ One communist committee described the recalcitrant Saigonese as being “addicted to a *bourgeois*, parasitic way of life, despising labour, egoistic, running after physical pleasures, with a ‘here today, gone tomorrow’ attitude, heeding neither conscience nor morality.”⁵²

Accordingly, the bans on forms of expression in the South after 1975 were widespread and severe. The crack-down on the noxious weeds of Western bourgeois culture resulted in over-zealous cadres cutting the hippy-ish long hair and flares of stunned youths. Women wore make-up at their own risk, as frightening rumours circulated of painted fingernails being ripped from fingers. Women and girls were fearful of wearing the elegant long tunic (*áo dài*) in public in case they were seen and despised as compradore bourgeoisie (*tu sản mại bản*), opting instead to be seen in simple drab-coloured peasant clothes. Even Hương temporarily put away her most outlandish outfits and toned down her make-up. One day from a carelessly left-open window, a passing cadre heard Hương’s son, Tâm, listening to the “yellow music” of the old corrupt regime. The cadre stormed into the house, dashed up the stairs, rammed open Tâm’s bedroom,

⁴⁹ Trùng Như Tàng, *A Viet Cong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Viet-Nam War and Its Aftermath* (New York: Random House, 1986) 285. Cited in Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 360.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam’s South* (Honolulu: Allen & Unwin and University of Hawai’i Press, 2001) 39-30, 51-52.

⁵² The Hồ Chí Minh City Committee of the Communist Party of Viet Nam, *With Firm Steps: Southern Viet Nam Since Liberation 1975-1977* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1978) 9.

smashed his stereo, pulverised his guitar, and confiscated his entire music collection.

Whereas once Vân might have found respite from such real world tyranny in the pages of books, this source of sanctuary was one of the first to be targeted after the fall of Sài Gòn. On 15 May 1975 an official communiqué was released from the Office of Information and Culture demanding that the circulation, sale and lending of all publications during the American occupation had to cease within a week. Major publishing houses and libraries were pounced upon and ransacked of their contents. There were rumours of enormous bonfires being lit, incinerating the contaminants of the reactionary past and clearing the ground for the seeds of socialism to be planted. Romance novels were deemed escapist, Kung Fu stories did not “make for good citizens,” the work of French intellectuals like Camus and Sartre were considered decadent, many of the Self-Strength Literary Group novels (including those of Nhất Linh and Khải Hưng) of the 1930s were labelled reactionary, and religious texts were designated as spiritually misleading.⁵³ While laws were enacted to this effect, fear and hearsay more effectively controlled the regressive sections of the population. Vân’s mother Sắt, for example, was greatly concerned about a small library of books that her late husband Thái had collected. Included were many novels from the Self-Strength Literary Group and the precious bound Chinese Four Books and Five Classics. Thái had viewed these books as his legacy, to be passed on for generations as guides to ageless forms of wisdom and virtue. It is therefore difficult to imagine how Sắt must have felt as she secretly converted them into smoke and ash.

The SRV was not just burning old books; it was also replacing them with sanctioned classics. Within a year of the fall of Sài Gòn, more than three million books were printed in Hồ Chí Minh City with the most prominent authors being Hồ Chí Minh, Marx, Lenin, Engels and the North Vietnamese poet-laureate Tố Hữu.⁵⁴ Moreover, 170,000 books were sent down from Hà Nội along with 450,000 pictures (mostly of Hồ Chí Minh) which could be obtained from some

⁵³ Terzani, *Giai Phong*, 220.

⁵⁴ Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 362-3.

two hundred Libration Book Stores in the South.⁵⁵ The heated art-for-art's-sake versus art-for-humanity's-sake debate that had taken place repeatedly during the twentieth century (particularly in the late 1930s) had, it seemed, been categorically decided in favour of the latter. One Vietnamese social-realist writer had aptly explained this triumphant position when he argued that, "As far as I am concerned, literature is not a way to bring the reader escape or forgetfulness. On the contrary, literature is an effective and exalted weapon which we can use both to protest and change the cruel and dishonest world which we face, and to make human hearts cleaner and richer."⁵⁶ In a similar vein, the SRV leaders proclaimed that finally the voice of the workers, peasants and soldiers could be heard over the shrill cries of their bourgeois oppressors. The problem, however, was that all other voices were silenced as legitimate artistic expression was confined to that which reflected the objective reality of class struggle.

Tragically, it was not enough for the regime simply to eradicate all the books without going after those who had written them and who had the capacity to produce more. According to one commentator:

No group of people suffered more at the hands of the party than the writers and poets and journalists of the Republic of Vietnam. In April 1976 those literary artists who had not already fled the country or been arrested were rounded up in a series of swift raids, as if they were dangerous criminals, and trucked off to forced labor camps like a consignment of pigs to the market.⁵⁷

Some of them would never return or would do so with imaginations crushed beyond recognition and repair. After being imprisoned for years in labour camps the poet Nguyễn Chí Thiện managed to smuggle a hand-written manuscript of poems to the British Embassy in Hà Nội in 1980 before disappearing once again. In these aptly titled "Flowers from Hell," Thiện decried the "red lords" who "store dreams away in jail".⁵⁸

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Thạch Lam (another original member of the Self-Strength Literary Group) cited in Ngô Vĩnh Long, *Vietnamese Women in Society and Revolution: 1. The French Colonial Period* (Cambridge: Vietnam Resource Center, 1974) 57.

⁵⁷ Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 364.

⁵⁸ Nguyễn Chí Thiện (Huỳnh Sanh Thông trans.), "Flowers from Hell [Hoa Địa-Ngục]: Forty-four Quatrains" in *Vietnam Forum*, 2, 141-153 at 153. Cited in *Ibid.*, 372.

On Uncle Ho's own soil
 life's sadder than a tomb

...
 The Party holds you down and you lie still.
 When all are equal—scholars, dunces, beasts—
 the paramount, hair-graying question is:

two meals, oh for two meals.⁵⁹

The re-education camps were horrifying evidence of the fact that the Party did not consider it sufficient for a person living in the SRV to be idle, unthreatening or neutral. Each and every person had to sincerely and whole-heartedly love the Party above and beyond all else. Re-education (*học tập*, literally “study-practice”) was aimed at fulfilling this ideal by “reforming” or “making over” (*cải tạo*) potentially counter-revolutionary elements of the population into “new people” (*người mới*). According to the Party, this process could potentially take a very long time, once again due to the slogan/fact that, “It takes ten years to cultivate a tree, but one hundred years to cultivate a person.” But there was little doubt that they would eventually succeed. Indeed, the communist historian Nguyễn Khắc Viện looked to the US for inspiration and evidence of the fact that with sufficient technical know how, anyone or anything could be properly conditioned:

Isn't America the country of conditioning, by which psychologists, using ingenious equipment, manage to get rats and pigeons to perform the most unexpected stunts? A rat gets things to eat when it takes the way traced by the experimenter, and an electric shock when it strays from it. With this system complexified by the experimenter's ingenuity one can get the animal to do whatever one wants. What can be done with the rat and the pigeon can be applied to man, especially when one has sophisticated electronic devices. Doesn't one treat sex maniacs by fitting apparatuses for automatic management of S.O.M. (sexual orientation method) proceedings? Couldn't one condition not only the individual, but a whole society? Haven't advertisements and mass media given their proofs? (Burrhus Frederic) Skinner, an advocate of behaviour psychology, says that culture is like the experimental surrounding used in the analysis of behaviour and planning a culture is like planning an experience. History, traditions, moral values, all that is but an epiphenomenon.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 373.

⁶⁰ Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Southern Vietnam: 1975-1985*, 170.

Around 1.5 million members of the Republican armed forces and senior public servants of the old regime were called up for transportation to re-education camps.⁶¹ The communiqués euphemistically announced that the new society demanded that they study the new ideology, and they should bring enough food for a week or ten days. While the majority would be released in weeks or months and the figures are unclear, it has been estimated that between one and three hundred thousand would remain in the camps for more than a year.⁶² Many would not return for over a decade. At one meeting that Vân attended in early 1976, a woman asked the convening cadre when her husband might return from re-education. The cadre responded, “Comrade, you must be grateful to the Party for the leniency and clemency that it has shown in establishing re-education camps for individuals like your husband. Obviously, our leaders have faith that even the most die-hard and wayward reactionaries can be made over!”

As the months and years passed, Vân and Thiết started to hear stories about those who had come back from re-education camps. At first the reports emerged slowly as upon their return the political, military and cultural leaders of the old regime were often kept under house arrest, threatened into silence, or had been so shattered by their experiences that they could not possibly recount them. The sheer number of those being re-educated, however, precluded blanket censorship. And as they heard more horrendous accounts of violence and cruelty their anger and hatred against the Party intensified. “What did freedom have to do with imprisoning ex-Republicans, using them as fodder against the Kampuchians, enlisting them to clear landmines, starving them to the extent that they craved for the sustenance of spiders and frogs, and torturing and brainwashing them in ways that suggested the war had never ended?”

⁶¹ Pike, “Vietnam during 1976”, 38.

⁶² *Ibid.* The lower figure of 100,000 is offered by an SRV sympathiser in Bùi Tín, *Following Ho Chi Minh*, 91.

To See The Truth and To Be Made Over

“Comrades and compatriots of Tân Sơn Nhất district Hồ Chí Minh City, the new society calls upon you to fulfil your duty. It calls on you to reform, to seek enlightenment, to undertake re-education! Living in a new society requires that you undertake consciousness-raising activities and are indoctrinated with a new ideology.”

The loudspeakers around Vân and Thiết’s apartment frequently and vociferously advertised the three day re-education program in which everyone who had worked for the old regime was required to participate...or else. For the wilfully deaf or forgetful, local cadres and April Thirtieths nonchalantly barged into their homes to remind them of this life changing event. It was June 1975 and because Vân had only just given birth to Thạch, she was excused from attending the meeting. At that time they were still living with Thiết’s mother and two sisters, but Thừa, Hương and Trương were also excused because they had never been officially affiliated with the RVN. Thiết was on his own.

On the designated day, Thiết walked to the open space adjacent to the local market where more than a thousand people had gathered. He found the patch of ground reserved for his solidarity cell and sat down. Thiết was more perturbed by the inconvenience rather than fearful for his safety as he knew that no-one was going to take him away. In market places, community houses and schools all over the South, many such meetings for lower-level civil servants had already taken place without major incident. Thiết steeled himself for what he knew was coming: long sermons on the wonders of the Party and the righteousness of Hồ Chí Minh; explications/celebrations of Marxism and Leninism; condemnations of capitalism, imperialism and their *nguy* backgrounds; and exhortations for personal and national reform. Thiết had heard that at such events, “The most important thing is to sit motionless; the second most important thing is to agree.”⁶³ Moreover, while the communists promoted the old pedagogical axiom that study (*học*) goes hand-in-hand with practice (*hành*); it had not gone

⁶³ *Nhất ngôi li, nhì đồng ý*. Nhật Tiến, “In the Footsteps of a Water Buffalo” in Huỳnh Sanh Thông, *To Be Made Over*, 3-13 at 4.

unnoticed by many Southerners that *hành* was also the homonymous word for torture and torment.

A table was placed at the front of the audience where three cadres sat in their green uniforms wearing hats with a red star in the middle. There was a handful of other uniformed cadres around them and Thiết suspected that many others in plain clothes were scattered throughout the crowd. One of cadres at the table stood up and spoke into a microphone welcoming them all as compatriots in his Northern accent. After minimal formalities and a reminder that, “studying is a privilege, not a punishment,” their re-education began.⁶⁴

“There are certain historical facts that you as *nguy*, and I as a member of the glorious Việt Nam Worker’s Party (VWP) agree upon. We agree that we speak the same language, that we look alike, share one culture and one ancient history, and that we are all the sons and daughters of Lạc Long.⁶⁵

No doubt every one of us is proud of our history and acknowledges that no country in the world can claim more heroes than Việt Nam: from Lạc Long himself; to the Hùng kings; to the Trưng Sisters; to Trần Hưng Đạo; to Lê Lợi and finally Hồ Chí Minh. All of them devoted themselves to building a strong, just and prosperous Việt Nam by driving away our foes and drawing the people together. It is in their tradition and honour that I stand before you today and appeal to you to devote yourself to the new independent Việt Nam.

All of us in our hearts have opposed imperialism. We have wondered how many lives were claimed by the French invaders. How many Vietnamese were illiterate and without a modern education while the rest of the world moved forward

⁶⁴ The following evocation is based on interviews with Thiết and with particular reference to political speeches recorded in the following sources: David Chanoff and Đoàn Văn Toại, *Vietnam: A Portrait of its People at War* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1986); Đỗ Mười, “Speech by the General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party at the Conference for Party cadres summoned by the Party Secretariat” Hà Nội (3 March 1994) <<http://www.ndhd.net/Files/Nguyen%20SI%20Binh1.htm>> accessed 5 December 2003; Huỳnh Sanh Thông, *To Be Made Over*; George Orwell, *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1950); George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; and Trần Trị Vũ, *Lost Years: My 1,632 Days in Vietnamese Reeducation Camps* (Berkeley: University of California, 1988).

⁶⁵ A mythical king of great courage and aptitude who was born of a dragon heritage and, along with the fairy Âu Cơ, conceived the Vietnamese race.

through the stages of industrialisation and modernisation? How many people were shamed by the French sitting on our heads, exploiting our resources and murdering our people? Every one of us would condemn the French colonialists and Japanese fascists for causing the famine of 1945 that killed two million people. None of us ever wants to be a slave again. Never again!

But from 1945 and particularly 1954, many of you have a false understanding. You have been lied to and misled. You have insufficient knowledge of our glorious history under the leadership of Uncle Hồ and the ideological guidance of Marxism-Leninism. Your history is upside-down and completely wrong.

Let us look at history the right way up. Let us look at it objectively. After World War II the French imperialists returned, and with the help of the Americans invaded the country causing the deaths of millions of our people. In the war of resistance against the French, it was the Việt Minh who fought the invaders, struggling for independence, sacrificing themselves right up until the great victory at Điện Biên Phủ when the French were brought to their knees. With the colonists unsuccessful in their irredentist bid for Việt Nam, the Americans took on the neo-imperialist mantle. But for all their B52 bombings and Agent Orange, for all the billions of dollars that they poured into corrupt dictators like Diệm, Khánh and Thiệu, they could not defeat the courageous and resilient NLF in the South and the People's Army of Việt Nam (PAVN) in the North.

I ask you now to see clearly and to think objectively. On what side did the true champions of Vietnamese independence fight? What side was for justice and the building of socialism for the sake of the Vietnamese? Was it the side of the invaders, the foreigners, the imperialists? No! There is only one answer, and that is the side of Hồ Chí Minh, the side of the Party, the side of Marxism-Leninism. There are just wars and unjust wars. The Party has fought a just war in the name of self-determination and development; the imperialists have fought an unjust war in the name of tyranny and exploitation. This is a self-evident historical fact.

I know what some of you are thinking. You are thinking that the communists did great harm to the country and committed violence upon the people. You are

thinking perhaps that Marxism-Leninism is a foreign ideology that has no place in our land. Such thoughts are reactionary nonsense! All loyal Vietnamese and conscientious people in the world recognise the great accomplishments of the Party in the last thirty years as an adherent to these two great bodies of thought. The Party has no interest beyond the interest of the people. It is committed to freedom, independence, prosperity, happiness, and a just and civilised society. So too Marxism-Leninism is committed to these goals. By opposing the teachings of the Party, Marx and Lenin are you saying then that there is no place for independence, prosperity and happiness in Việt Nam? Are these things foreign to our land? Of course not! No-one can say that! On the contrary, nothing has been more real to our people than the exploitation of the masses by the feudal and capitalist classes. Nothing has been more real than the tyranny of colonialism. It was Marx and Lenin who profoundly analysed these dialectics of history. They illustrated to us the common predicament of workers all over the globe. They allowed us to see through the lies of feudalism, capitalism and colonialism. And they gave us the knowledge and power to turn back these sweeping oppressive tides. Therefore, Marxism emerged from reality and Marxism *is* reality. Leninism emerged from reality and Leninism *is* reality. On these facts we must all agree. They are the truth.”

Thiệt was instantly reminded of the secret night-time Việt Minh rallies that he had attended with such relish in the community house of his home village, Bồ Bản. He could not help but marvel at the oratory stamina of the communists who sold their ideas with the alacrity of conmen peddling their magic elixirs. But something was different about them too. Or perhaps it was just Thiệt being obstinate? He could never again forget that the communists *were* murderers and terrorists, that they had killed his father and brother. But as each hour passed under the blazing sun, Thiệt suspected that there was something more to it. Unlike the Việt Minh speeches that he remembered from the 1940s, the re-education sermon was not designed to resonate in the hearts of the people. On the contrary, it was aimed at bludgeoning their minds into capitulation. Moreover, this time around, the communists were not adapting their program to the history and yearnings of the people; rather, the people were being programmed to adapt their history and yearnings to the communists. The style of speech had also

changed. The cadre of the new Việt Nam spoke steadily and scientifically, demonstrating no desire or ability to inspire rousing responses and thunderous chanting from the crowd. There were no upbeat songs and witty plays. It was as if he was reading from a manual on how to fix a flat tire, or possibly using an autocue. Without even a stutter to suggest a modicum of humanity, Thiêt could have sworn that the words and pace had been meticulously designed in advance and robotically controlled from elsewhere. The diatribe continued...

“We know that some of you, indeed many of you, are still not willing to reform your Western bourgeois ways and modes of thinking. We know that there are those of you who listen illegally to the reactionary foreign radio broadcasts: the BBC and VOA. We know what they are saying about the new Việt Nam and what you are thinking. We are not concerned, as logic and righteousness are on our side. And very soon, all of you will be on our side too.

On those subversive radio stations you may have heard people say that we are undemocratic because we do not have multiple parties. I ask you, would we have any more democracy if we had more parties? Would we have more democracy if we were constantly vying for power and profits? Of course not! What you must understand is that the Party is the party of the proletariat, of the workers, peasants and all true compatriots. The Party fights for the freedom and wealth of all. And unlike the landlord and feudal classes, the proletariat rightfully claims to be a universal class because it is the only class that aspires to abolish itself. That’s right! From a Marxist perspective the proletariat aims to eradicate the class system all together, constructing an ultimate communist stage of historical development in which everyone is equal and no longer alienated from their labour, each other and themselves.

And still there are those who say we are undemocratic. Well, let them hear me now as I say without prevarication, ‘We are undemocratic! We are totalitarian!’ We are not and never will be democratic when it comes to those who invade our country and pillage our resources, but we are and always will be democratic when it comes to our own people. We are totalitarian to those who betray our

nation, but treat with respect anyone who truly honours Vietnamese independence.

Let me speak frankly to those of you who say that Vietnamese are not free. First we must ask, 'What is freedom?' Everything in the universe, every object, animal and individual can behave freely. However, nothing exists in a vacuum and thus for freedom to have any meaning it must be defined within certain limits, inter-dependencies and regulations. Freedom is not anarchy. It cannot be. Look in the night sky, even the planets travel within defined orbits and exert gravitational forces on each other. They do not circulate freely. If this were the case, the universe would collapse. Similarly, in human society freedom is not the right to always act as one pleases. What we must do, then, is construct a correct freedom, a freedom that everyone can enjoy. So let me ask you, do you want the freedom that the American invaders brought with them? Do you want the freedom to be homeless, the freedom to be unemployed, the freedom to be terrorised by gangsters, and the freedom for your children to become prostitutes and drug addicts? Or do you want freedom from degradation, freedom to work and share in the profits of your labour, and the freedom of an ordered society?

It is only logical that we all want the latter freedom; the freedom that provides real prosperity and independence. But nothing worthwhile is easy. To construct this freedom we must be vigilant and not deviate from the direction that we have chosen. We must explain to those who are ignorant and misguided why our path is the straight, bright and righteous one. If anyone speaks untruths or acts in counter-revolutionary ways, then we must re-educate them at once. We have to unite and always be on the offensive. In the words of our great founder Hồ Chí Minh after whom this city will forever be known, 'Solidarity, solidarity, great solidarity; success, success, great success.'"

The sun was well into the sky and Thiét could feel his eyelids growing heavy. He tried to yawn without opening his mouth agape. Thiét was fed-up with the laborious communist jargon. He knew that there was an attractive internal coherence about Marxism-Leninism. But in the universe that he lived in, communism was utterly absurd and despicably duplicitous. It did not negate the

allure of power, he believed, but rather masked it in such a way that linked collective mastery to democratic centralism to Stalinism and tyranny. Thiết's impression was that, except for the self-pitying poor (of which there was no shortage), many others in the crowd shared his scepticism and dissatisfaction. They too were not/no longer children or unworldly peasants. In fact, according to hearsay, it was the communists who were ignorant and oafish; many of them had entered Sài Gòn from the countryside and, overwhelmed by the alien urban milieu, kept fish in toilets and burnt fires indoors. At an earlier electricity authority meeting, a cadre from the North proclaimed that her comrades had killed countless Americans with sticks and their bare hands. One of Thiết's colleagues audaciously asked the cadre if she could confirm a rumour that he had "heard." "Apparently the Northerners shot down American helicopters with slingshots!" Much to everyone's silent amusement, the cadre promptly and earnestly confirmed the story without realising the speaker's subversive intent. Remembering this event, Thiết giggled to himself before realising where he was and the imprudence of such a lapse. He straightened his back and stared forward, looking like he was both concentrating and enthralled. It was almost lunch time, half a day down, two and a half days more to go...and a lifetime after that.

The Communists March On

As infuriating as re-education was for Thiết, he and Vân were experienced enough to evade its sickening allure and soul-sucking force. They could put on a face, convince their captors that they had come to accept and even embrace their post-1975 captivity, while in their hearts they loathed every second. Vân and Thiết's greatest concern was not for themselves, but for Thạch and Kim. Like so many modern day Swooshing Mac-advertisers, Party propagandists knew that they could effectively concentrate their propaganda on young people who were unsullied by the past, pliable to their ideas, and potentially loyal for a lifetime. Invariably, thought Vân and Thiết, their sons would be immersed in a distorted and dangerous reality. After the fall of Sài Gòn, schools were closed for two months to allow time for ideologically sound teachers to be trained in the South or rushed down from the North along with new text books. Moreover, from

kindergarten children had to join the Red Scarf Youth Brigade where, from what Thiét had heard, they were instructed on how to be effective, vigilant and obedient communists through songs, not unlike those he had once adored in the jungle of Central Việt Nam. High school and university students were invited to participate in accelerated cadre training programs. And there were even whispers circulating that brigade leaders were encouraging and training children to spy on their reactionary parents.

In the middle of 1978, the young mother and father's concern for their children turned to terror at one of the many parades that the family attended in order to "exhibit" their patriotism and commitment to the new regime (there was the Reunification celebrations from 30 April into May, the May Day festival on the first, Hồ Chí Minh's birthday celebration on 19 May, the anniversary of the founding of People's Revolutionary Party on 6 June...). At this particular parade, no different to any other, a seemingly endless procession of sanctioned heroes marched in time to the same monotonous music along what was once Unification Avenue (now named after Party Secretary Lê Duẩn) as the maestros of the new society looked down from above. The leaders sat in strict order so that, from the right angle, it was as if their rank actually determined their physical stature, as if the largest and most pompous communist could swallow up all the others like Russian dolls. Among the masses below Thiét and his wife waved their blood red flags with the heaviest of hearts. In private they had at times wondered who exactly these dreadful events were performed for. There was no foreign media or dignitaries to impress and they, like everyone else in the crowd, had seen the same parade many times over. Surely, even the communists on their elevated viewing platform had had enough of such strained pageantry. Surely, they had calculated the financial costs of running these events and weighed them against the measly benefits? And then the young parents saw the reason behind all the madness and the ceremony. In that instant, Vân and Thiét's focus was drawn away from the plodding procession before them and captured by the horrifying image of their three year old boy, Thạch, who was thoroughly enjoying the spectacle and cheering the communists to march on.

Revolutions, Propulsion and Revulsion

It was early in the evening when the family of four arrived home from that gruelling bicycle ride in the spring of 1979. Vân and Thiét dragged themselves up the two flights of stairs to their apartment carrying their weary children. After the boys had been tucked into bed, Vân brought her husband a glass of water. Thiét was lying exhausted in the middle of the living room floor. He gulped down half of the cool cleansing liquid and poured the rest over his face. The young father was gasping and gagging, but not from the water. In fact, whereas previously he had been mortified by the thought of water—of that endless blue expanse—now the prospect of confronting the Great Eastern Ocean seemed so inviting. At the very least, it could do his family no more harm than their current predicament in which his sons would grow up without ever knowing freedom or security, in which they would be smothered by poverty and oppression and possibly even deceived into becoming Party members. And there was the possibility—perhaps even a probability—that on the other side of that water lay salvation, a place where he could finally quench his thirst. All Thiét needed to do was to find a boat, a vessel to save them from drowning in a sea of despotism and despair. In that historical instant, Thiét decided to take control of his family's destiny and find a way for them to escape from Việt Nam.

CONCLUSION:

Reflects upon what international relations can gain from Vân and Thiết's stories.

Within this dissertation one finds a series of real-life exceptions, refutations and alternatives to three major grand theories of twentieth century Việt Nam: the French civilising mission, American liberal-capitalism and Vietnamese Marxism-Leninism. By their own standards, drawn from an intense (Newtonian) physics envy, even one exception to a grand theory's equation for progress and emancipation renders the entire theory void. But such lofty standards are not adopted in this dissertation. Therefore, it is not asserted that these three grand theories were/are wholly ineffectual or that universal salvation lies in a different one. Rather, an answer to what all this means for international relations and beyond can be ascertained from some concluding contemplations of the central characters (Thiết, Vân and Hương) before relating them to one another and to the other two omnipotent protagonist-authors (the researcher and the reader).

Thiết's story is one of individual endeavour overcoming suffering and oppression. His family's terrifying everyday ordeals during the First Indochina War counter claims that the French civilising mission was being carried out in the interest of Vietnamese emancipation. And yet there is also a sense that the French had imported a dazzling vision of the future which Thiết first made

contact with on that seemingly predestined and electrifying visit to the city. This vision was captured and fulfilled during Thiết's childhood by the Việt Minh who skilfully linked a proud Vietnamese past with the promise of (communist) liberation from colonial shame, fear and exploitation. The empowerment that Thiết gained at Việt Minh School, however, was superficial and short-lived. It was based on the dichotomising and dehumanisation of those who did not fully subscribe to the Việt Minh's rigid revolutionary blueprint, including Thiết's family. And it was this factor, along with the end of the First Indochina War that allowed Thiết to slip away from the Vietnamese Marxist-Leninist fold. Just as important in this defection was the fact that at the forefront of Thiết's consciousness during his young adulthood was the scientific study of electricity, an undertaking that left little time for conscious politico-philosophical reflection. It also relied upon an ultra-positivist conception of the world and an intense desire for control that led to an arrogant can-doism not unlike that which afflicted American proponents and practitioners of the Second Indochina War. Importantly, Thiết's Cold War change of allegiances was underpinned by epistemological stagnation.

The victorious communist revolutionaries failed to recognise or pay significant regard to the fundamental similarities that they shared with those who they had comprehensively defeated on 30 April 1975. Nor did they recognise that Thiết, like many other defeated Vietnamese, was tired of war and anxious to build a peaceful and prosperous future for his children under any regime. Instead, fresh from defeating the most powerful nation on earth, the leaders of the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam were certain that science, history and ideology were on

their side. They possessed the ultimate truth and as such any recognition of or compromise with other truths were irrational and unnecessary. From this doctrinaire mindset sprouted brutal programs for re-education, confiscation and forced migration. The new Việt Nam thus faced a crisis of modernity as, for all the talk of progress and emancipation, the nation remained crippled by division, conflict and poverty. Indicative of this crisis were people like Thiết who felt alienated and resentful, seeing the ubiquitous banners and slogans for reconciliation, reconstruction and freedom as thin veils over vengeance and greed. Thiết's story is one of inspirational courage and single-minded determination, but also serves as a powerful warning to grand theorists against a life and politics that is intricately analysed but ultimately left unexamined.

Vân's story represents an attempt to deconstruct (by destabilising, inverting and subverting) predominant political and epistemological dichotomies between low politics and high politics, modernity and tradition, subject and object, private and public, and female and male. More so than Thiết's story, it effectively de-centres international relations to the personal level and asserts the existence of multiple valid modernities. Vân was by no means a passive rider in her journey into and through the late twentieth century; on the contrary, she reinterpreted, revised, dissected and fused ideas to suit her particular circumstances such that at varying times she was a champion of both tradition and modernity. In this sense, Vân's narrative is more complex and rich than Thiết's. It undulates, spirals, doubles-back and hop-scotches through time and space; it does everything but run continuously along one straight path. Indeed, Vietnamese histories at both the macro and micro level suggest that anyone who has tried to force such uni-linear

coherence has been met with great resistance. This biographical-literature essay, then, refutes those grand theories that in Việt Nam and elsewhere have fallen so short of their rhetorical promises. How could the French *mission civilisatrice*, American liberal-capitalism or Vietnamese Marxism-Leninism ever provide for the liberation of an entire nation when they cannot even explain or cater for the everyday aspirations of one Vietnamese woman?

The prescriptive element of Vân's story promotes an understanding of modernity and civilisation as being created through fluctuating inter-relationships rather than one-way paths to progress or oppression. Vân's world was not simply created by the expansion of Western male ideas or the fervent maintenance of idealised feminine traditions. On the contrary, it was forged out of complicated and shifting interactions of liberation, appropriation and resistance. To view modernity with a focus on socio-economic inter-relationships rather than expansion from core to periphery, is to discover that one cannot understand the Other, the East or the feminine without looking reflexively at the self, the West and the masculine. Accepting such an interactive view does not mean wholly rejecting modernisation, progress and civilisation. Such missions remain both arduous and worthwhile; however, they become joint ventures offering increased opportunities for mutual enlightenment and liberation. Importantly, this can be achieved with a commitment to adaptability, eclecticism and humility. These crucial but common ingredients are evident in Vân's socio-literary-induced capacity for self-sacrifice which arguably originated with Vân's birth into a household and society that desperately wanted her to be a boy, and which helped her provide for her family through Việt Minh terrorism, Diệmist tyranny, the

1968 Tết Offensive, the totalitarianism of her old-fashioned mother-in-law, and the darkness of post-1975 Việt Nam.

Many years later, Vân offered a masterful metaphor to illustrate the potential for deriving political virtues and progressive values from the common life. At that time Vân was approaching the age of sixty and, for reasons of fitness and fancy, was running four kilometres every morning to feed a flock of ducks before returning home. When asked why exactly she undertook this gruelling task, she responded by expressing a deep appreciation of those humble feathered creatures. The ducks paddled around the pond revealing an everyday calm on the surface which belied their frantic and tireless work beneath. They were not graceful like swans (which Vân also likes) or as dashing as eagles, and had failed to evolve specialised traits like wide spoon-shaped bills or extra long legs that gave them a distinct advantage over other birds. Nonetheless, as Vân reflected and admired, “Their coats are resistant to the heaviest downpour. Ducks can float on the water, swim in the sea, walk on the land and fly in the sky. They are adaptors, incapable of doing any one thing magnificently, but able to manage just about everything and thereby flourish.”

Hương’s story shows us the potential of everyday resistance to both overcome hardship and, like any exercise of power, corrupt those who become entranced and indoctrinated by it. When she was youthful and relatively powerless, Hương used her tactical aptitude to overcome indigence and war. Tenaciously, she existed and resisted from the shadows, selling everything from banana leaves to gun oil. But gradually after moving to Sài Gòn, something changed or perhaps

something should have changed? As Hương was gaining capital of both the economic and social variety, she became capable of not only making do for herself but also making a difference, for good or for worse, to the lives of others. Sadly, however, she did not step out of her murky comfort zone. Hương continued, and would continue for the rest of her life, to rely on cunning perception and diabolical deception as if she were locked into a hidden transcript and incapable of basking in the light of an honest, open and public stage. She was constantly resisting *against* something without ever being *for* a greater cause that transcended her own immediate subsistence. Unlike Vân and Thiết, who found salvation in their children from their repressive milieus, Hương turned inwards and took revenge upon herself. Horrendously deformed, poisoned to the core and utterly alone, she is an example of how even the tactics of everyday resistance can be overextended with the most grand and grotesque consequences.

Finally, for those undertaking the study and practice of international relations, this dissertation reasons that we must resist the allure of simple universal understandings of ourselves and others. Just as there is no complete exterior perception, however, there are also no pure interior insights. While we can and should try to put ourselves in the footprints of other people and cultures, we must also acknowledge that the fit is never perfect for any one impression let alone all of them (each being subjected to constantly varying winds and waves). The aim of our inquiries and practices in international relations and elsewhere, then, should not be to wholly “know” others, but rather, illuminate their enigmatic and fluctuating otherness. Notably, even after twenty-six years of living with Vân and Thiết and four years of studying them professionally and intensely, they

remain at times unpredictable and mysterious to the author. This is not grounds for giving up one's research and simply accepting immutable difference and irresolvable disagreement. On the contrary, it suggests that by both acknowledging the ever-shaky ground on which one toils and also maintaining an intellectual-ethical foundation of self-doubt, humility and openness, one can cultivate enduring creativity and civility.

This represents more than a repetition of Gramsci's promotion of the "pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will" which has so often provided mild solace to disillusioned critical theorists. By acknowledging the ability of people to "make do" and at times celebrating those "annoying little narratives" which resist being subsumed or universalised, this dissertation dismantles Gramsci's consoling bipolarisations and offers hope to even the most pessimistic intellect. Specifically, Vân and Thiét's story demonstrates that the domination of grand theories is never complete. This can be seen in the pranks, songs and inlets of reprieve that supposedly defeated and degraded people like my parents constructed for themselves and also the (extra)ordinary courage and endurance that they displayed almost every day. Accordingly, it seems both rational and empowering to partake in those sniggering conspiracies and search for hidden instances of subversion and subsistence from within that are often ignored out of compliance and despondency. Perhaps an appreciation of this human ability to "make do" would provide a starting point for the fostering of respect, empathy and understanding in international relations. At the very least, such an appreciation would make it possible to see more commonalities and accept a

broader range of differences in our ideological foes, economic competitors,
sociological underlings, and perhaps even our loved ones.

APPENDIX A:***The Huynh Family Journey (as written by Thiết in January 1980 and translated by the author in January 2004)***

While visiting one of my wife's cousins during the New Year festival in the Year of the Horse (1979), I was surprised to discover that she had relatives who were organising a boat to make an escape. I decided to pay the money and join them. During that time of anxious waiting before we left, there were many nights when I did not sleep a wink. I cannot express how much my heart fretted over the following questions:

- Would we be caught? If so we would lose our life savings (33 bars of gold) and be financially ruined.
- If the communists caught me then they would put me in jail and my wife and two young children would be alone.
- Who knows how many violent storms were out there? Who knows if our boat would be sound and steady?
- Who knows if we would survive the thieving and murderous pirates of the Eastern Ocean?

But the risk of dying during the journey did not compare to living in fear with the communists for the rest of our lives.

So it was with resolve that on 18 April 1979, I went to my mother's house in preparation for our departure the following day. We left at midday on the 19th and I have only a vague recollection of this day even though it was only a year

ago. I do not know whether it was sunny, cloudy or raining. I was only thinking of whether we would make it, whether we would survive. I left on my scooter with my son Thạch and my nephew Tâm for a bus station where we would be transferred to the coastal town of Rạch Giá and our awaiting boat. My wife followed me in a *cyclo* with my other son Kim. My mother placed Thạch on the scooter and dared not cry because the communists were everywhere and if they saw her weeping then they would know what we were up to. She loved Thạch more than anything in the world. After we left she did not eat fish for months in the belief that it would bring us good fortune. She is very superstitious. I left my scooter for my sister at the bus station and at 2pm we departed for Rạch Giá (which is about 250km from Sài Gòn). It was a very slow trip (we stopped many times to pick up more passengers) and at 9pm in the evening when we were 50km from Rạch Giá the communists captured our bus and put us all in Thốt Nốt prison for the night, taking all of our cash and jewellery. I didn't know what they were going to do with us and was sure that we had lost everything. At 2pm on the following day, the communists let us go and we continued on our journey to Rạch Giá.

The boat was not ready and we were in Rạch Giá for a week. During this time Kim suffered badly from diarrhoea. It was not until five days later, on the afternoon of 25 April 1979, that our boat was ready to depart and our journey of escape began. The boat was 20m long and 4m wide but held 508 people. My family was able to go because we had taken on fake Chinese identities. After one night and one day, we collided with another boat. It was about 11 o'clock at night on 26 April just outside of Vietnamese waters. There was a hole in the hull of our boat and water was coming in and I thought that we were all going to die, but we managed to get to a small island where the boat was fixed. So on 28 April our journey continued. Just as we left Vietnamese waters the wind and rain picked up again. The waves were very strong but somehow we managed to go on. The people were all horribly crowded into the boat...Sorry; I should say that while we were on the island, Kim suffered terribly from dysentery. My wife and I were sure that he would not be able to continue so I tried to persuade a local on the island to take Kim back to his grandmother, but he flatly refused. Finally, I had to risk taking Kim with us. After leaving the island at around midday on 28

April we ran into Thai pirates and on each of the three days after that we were boarded by other Thai pirates. They stole everything but did not kill or rape anybody. The final time however, they took our compass and the motor battery. If this had happened earlier we would have surely died, but thank heavens we were approaching Malaysia and were able to somehow keep the engine going. If it had stopped then we would not have been able to start it again and we would have died in the ocean. At midday on 30 April (exactly four years after the communists took over) we saw an island take shape in the distance and, guessing that it was off the east coast of Malaysia, headed towards it. Upon approaching the small island we were met by Malaysian soldiers and after some negotiations were allowed to land. At this point every one of us hoped that our communist nightmare was over.

Because there was not sufficient food or water on the journey, Kim became weaker by the day. Thach also contracted dysentery and suffered from diarrhoea. While living on this small island we were in need of everything and hygiene was non-existent so that my children were near death and my wife and I wondered if they were going to make it. We wondered whether we had done the right thing, whether we should have put our children in such a danger, and we felt terrible because we had caused them so much pain.

After staying on that small island for a week, we were transferred to a refugee camp named Bidong. The refugees called this the "Island of Death", which I think is a very appropriate name. The camp was less than one square kilometre in area but almost 43,000 people lived there. The people were cramped in with rats, flies and mosquitoes. There was no order or organisation to the camp, but rather a mishmash of small tents made of branches and leaves that were covered with nylon. My tent was at the base of the mountain and was made of bark and measured two by three metres. At first we did not have any rice to eat, we only ate beans that the United Nations had provided. Thach and Kim became increasingly frail. Fortunately, a French Red Cross ship named the *Lumière* arrived on which there was a hospital. Because Thach and Kim were very sick they were both admitted into the floating hospital for a month. Initially, however, even the French doctors could not cure them. Their temperatures rose and fell,

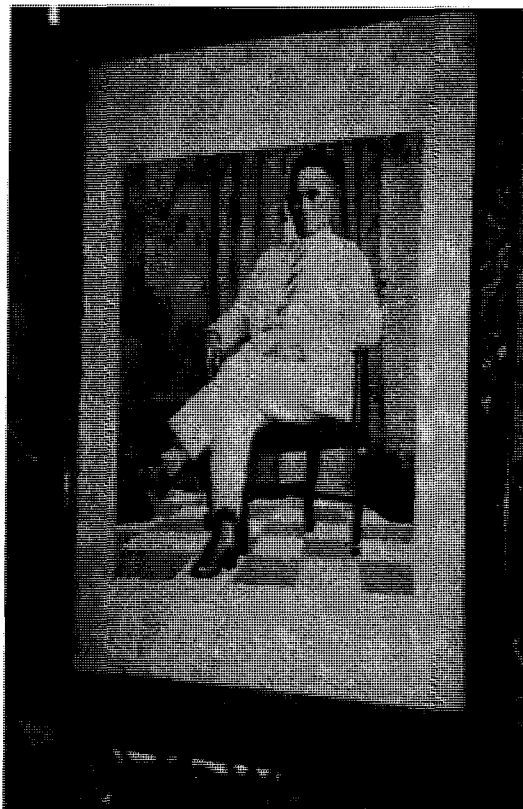
and they had to rely on a drip to survive. But somehow after one month in hospital my two children began to recover and we went back to the island on 21 June 1979. Thank heavens for the *Lumière!* The nightmare gradually faded and the food aid from the United Nations improved, at least in terms of quantity. We ate so many cans of sardines and while I was grateful for anything; to this day, I have no desire to eat sardines.

Two months later in August, my family were interviewed by an Australian delegation and were accepted to go to Australia. Before that we had applied to go to several places including Turkey. We waited anxiously to leave the island. Usually, those who were accepted waited one and a half months before leaving. I waited one month, then two months, and then three months and still there was no news. Then on 25 October 1979 we heard our names called over the loudspeaker and my family left Bidong, the island of death.

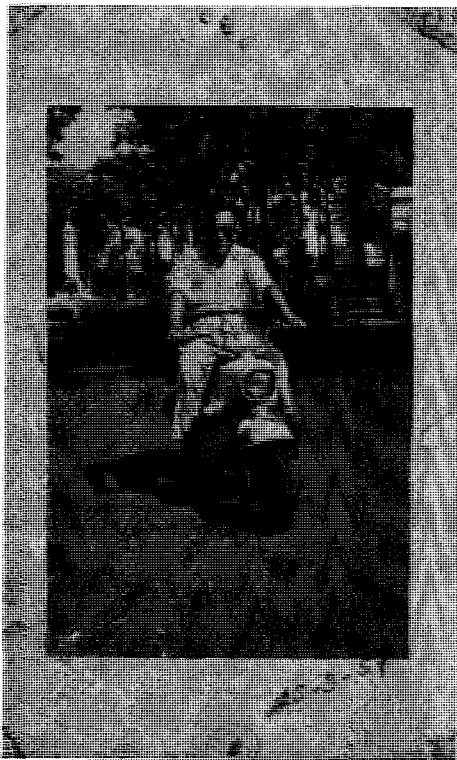
Back-tracking, I should say that my nephew Tâm was accepted to go to Belgium in September where his father had relatives.

We were then transferred to a transitional camp in Kuala Lumpur. This camp was far more comfortable than Bidong and the food was better. We stayed there for more than a month until 20 December 1979 when our names were once again called out. As my wife, two children and I left for Australia we felt as though we were setting out on a new road. We were starting our lives over.

APPENDIX B: Photographs



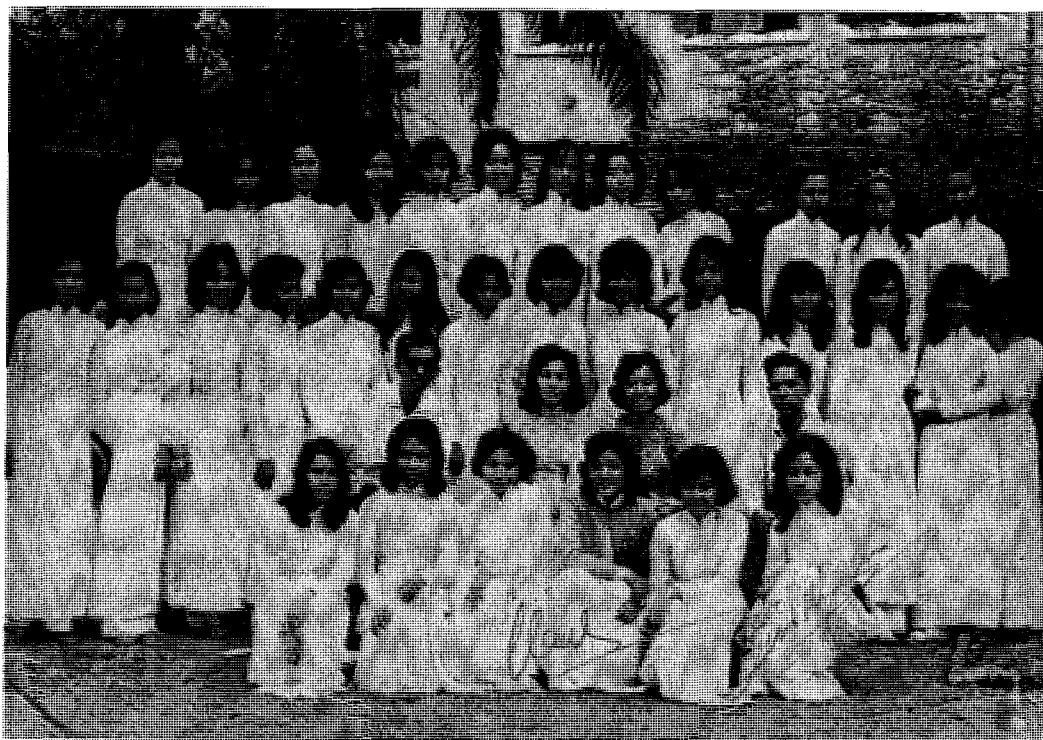
Top: Loan and Vân (with a boy's haircut) in Bình Dương circa 1949.
Bottom: The picture of Vân's grand uncle Tư (circa 1920) on the altar dedicated to him in his temple.



Top: Vân, Loan and Hoa at Phú Thọ circa 1954.

Bottom Left: Thái in Sài Gòn 23 March 1957.

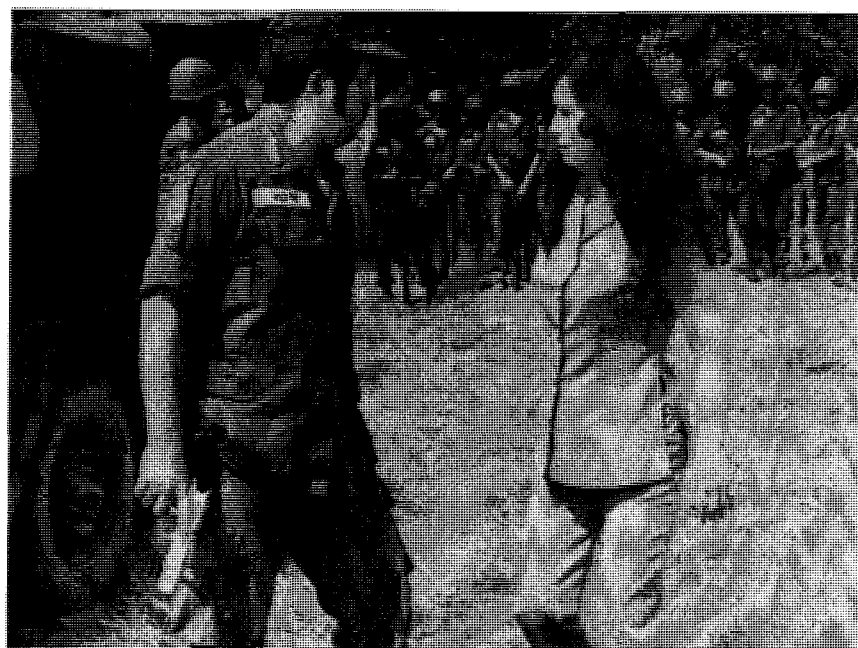
Bottom Right: Thái's funeral in Bình Dương shortly after Tết 1968.



Top: Vân (back row fourth from the right) at Gia Long High School circa 1961.
Bottom: From left to right: Sắt, Châu, Vân, Dũng (Châu's baby boy), Loan, Tâm (Châu's son) and Thọ in Sài Gòn 4 August 1963.

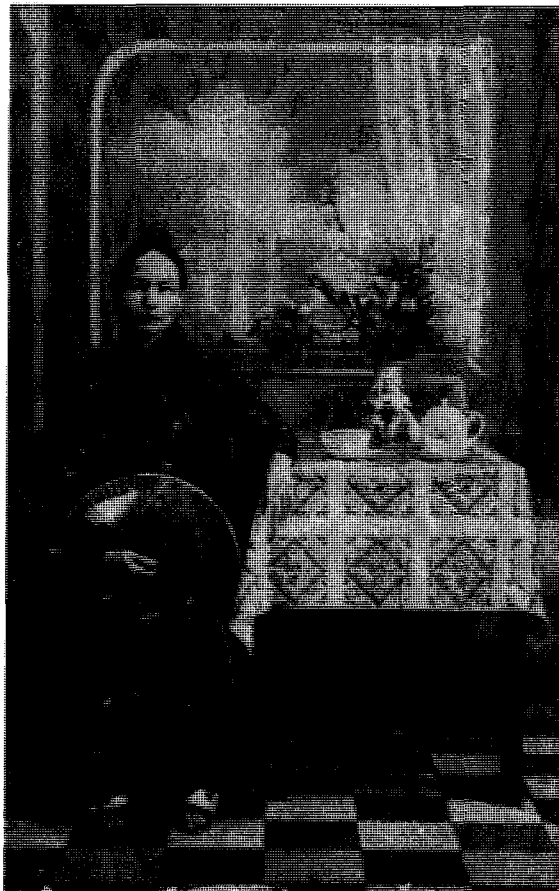


Top: From left to right Thiêt and Nho in Đà Nẵng circa 1959.
Bottom: Hương's *Transportation and Regulations* identification card 1956.



Top: Hương at the *Simone* in Sài Gòn 1961.

Bottom: Hương on the set of one of her later films *Phù Sa [Silt]* 1989.



Top: Vân and Thiết at their wedding ceremony in Bình Dương 2 January 1971.
Bottom: Thừa in Sài Gòn circa 1971.



Top: Thiết at a Taiwanese power plant 1973.

Bottom: Vân (pregnant with Kim) and Thạch at the zoo in Hồ Chí Minh City 1977.



They Were Boat People



Today Huyhn Van Thiet has a secure job and his children are secured a good education. Two years ago, Thiet and his family were fear of the world's millions of refugees. They had decided to take the risk of a perilous escape, not knowing what the future would hold. Danger and the threat of death dogged their way. Having spent some months in a refugee camp off the coast of Malaysia, they were accepted by the Australian Government for resettlement, sponsored by the Canberra Churches of Christ, through the Indo-China Community Resettlement Scheme.

A new country, a new language, a new way — a new hope. The Huyhn family had

not been beaten by their experiences. Learning English, filling forms, enrolling young Thach in school (Kim is still patiently waiting), the search for employment, negotiating accommodation — all these Thiet and his wife Van took in their stride. They also made many new friendships with the people of the Canberra Churches of Christ who were assisting them.

Thiet shares a deep conviction that it is God who has helped his family — first through enabling him to have courage through the ordeal of his family's journey from his homeland, and then through the support and encouragement of those who assisted in his resettlement.

Top: From left to right Kim and Thach in Canberra 1980.

Bottom: Dennis Ryle, "They Were Boat People" in *The Australian Christian* (Summer 1981). Note that "Huyhn" should be "Huỳnh" and that Thiet's conviction in God is somewhat overstated.

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Interviews

All the informants consented to being interviewed. Sometimes the interviewing was formal in the sense that it was prearranged and there was a voice recorder and a clipboard. At other times the interviews (particularly with respect to Vân and Thiết) had no clear start and finish and were conducted during everyday activities such as long walks or the washing of dishes. The advantage of the latter form of data collection is that there was often a greater sense of emotional and recollective authenticity, memories spontaneously recalled rather than brought into the harsh and artificial light of a formal interview. However, where such informal methods were relied upon, the data was recorded immediately afterwards and the informant was made aware that her/his words had been recorded. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese except for with respect to Vân and Thiết which were mostly Vietnamese with some English. Recorded interviews were transcribed by the author with some translation assistance from Vân and Thiết. The majority of the other interviews were conducted during the author’s research trip from 12 January 2002 to 10 April 2002.

Thiết's Family

Đào Thị Thừa (Thiết's mother): Interviewed by phone between January 2000 and December 2003. Interviewed in person throughout January and February 2002 in Hồ Chí Minh City, Việt Nam.

Đào Thiệt (Thiết's uncle Chín): Interviewed on 3 February 2002 in Đà Nẵng, Việt Nam.

Huỳnh Bình (Thiết's cousin): Interviewed on 23 January 2002 in Hồ Chí Minh City, Việt Nam.

Huỳnh Đình Khôi (Thiết's cousin): Interviewed on 2 February 2002 in Đà Nẵng, Việt Nam.

Huỳnh Minh Tá (Thiết's cousin's son): Interviewed on 8 March 2002 in Santa Ana, California, USA.

Huỳnh Thanh Tâm (Thiết's nephew – Hương's son): Interviewed by phone, email and in person between January 2000 and January 2004 in Sydney, Australia.

Huỳnh Thị Hương (Thiết's sister): Interviewed by phone and letters between January 2000 and December 2003. Interviewed in person throughout January and February 2002 in Hồ Chí Minh City, Việt Nam.

Huỳnh Thị Như Tuyết (Thiết's cousin): Interviewed on 2 February 2002 in Đà Nẵng, Việt Nam.

Huỳnh Thị Trương (Thiết's sister): Interviewed in person throughout January and February 2002 in Hồ Chí Minh City, Việt Nam.

Huỳnh Thị Thu Nhi (Thiết's niece – Biết's daughter): Interviewed on 26 January 2002 in Hồ Chí Minh City, Việt Nam.

Huỳnh Trúc Thanh (Thiết's cousin and childhood friend): Interviewed on 6-7 March 2002 in San Francisco, California, USA.

Nguyễn Văn Đạt (Thiết's childhood friend): Interviewed on 3 February 2002 in Đà Nẵng and 15 February 2002 in Hồ Chí Minh City, Việt Nam.

Vân's Family

Trần Thị Ngọc Anh (Vân's aunt – Tu's daughter): Interviewed on 14 January 2002 in Bình Dương, Việt Nam.

Huỳnh Thị Đào (Vân's aunt): Interviewed on 15 January 2002 in Bình Dương, Việt Nam.

Trần Thị Bửu Châu (Vân's sister): Interviewed on 15 and 16 January 2002 in Bình Dương, Việt Nam.

Trần Thị Liên Hoa (Van's sister): Interviewed by phone, letter and email between January 2000 and January 2004. Interviewed in person throughout January and February 2002 in Bình Dương, Việt Nam.

Trần Thị Bích Liên (Van's sister): Interviewed by phone, letter and email between January 2000 and January 2004. Interviewed in person throughout January and February 2002 in Bình Dương, Việt Nam.

Lê Thị Bửu Phương (Van's niece – Châu's daughter): Interviewed by phone, letter and email between January 2000 and January 2004. Interviewed in person throughout January and February 2002 in Bình Dương, Việt Nam.

Trần Khánh Thọ (Van's brother): Interviewed between January 2000 and January 2004 in Canberra, Australia.

Vân and Thiết's Friends

Cao Thị Hoà (Vân's workmate): Interviewed on 16 February 2002 in Hồ Chí Minh City, Việt Nam.

Trương Công Nghĩa and (Thiết and Vân's workmates): Interviewed on 8-13 March 2002 in Long Beach, California, USA.