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Surviving War, Surviving Memory: An Oral History of the South
Vietnamese Civilian Experience in the Vietnam War

by

Leann A. Do

Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of Senior Independent Study

Supervised by
Dr. Madonna Hettinger
Department of History

Spring 2012

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgements | ii |
| List of Figures | iv |
| Timeline | v |
| Maps | vii |
| Chapter One: Introduction The Two Vietnams | 1 |
| Chapter Two: Historiography of the Vietnam War in American Scholarship | 5 |
| Chapter Three: Theory and Methodology of Oral History | 15 |
| Chapter Four: “I’m an Ordinary Person” A Husband and Wife’s Construction of Normality | 30 |
| Chapter Five: “There Was No Time to Think” Adolescence, Manhood, and Choice | 50 |
| Chapter Six: <i>Anh Em</i> , Brother and Sister, You and Me Growing Up and Living with the Vietnam War | 64 |
| Chapter Seven: Conclusion Individual Choice in the Vietnam War | 79 |
| Appendices | 87 |
| Annotated Bibliography | 139 |

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Spent a week in a dusty library, waiting for some words to jump at me...”

- “French Navy,” Camera Obscura

The moment I stepped foot on The College of Wooster campus back in August of 2008 during Freshman Orientation, I wanted a carrel to call my own. This may sound silly, but I never wanted to study at a carrel before senior year. I could be patient, and all the intellectual exercise would be even more special, I told myself. Besides, it was too much effort to scope out an empty, unused carrel or find out which senior worked on I.S. only in the comforts of their room while munching on crunchy snacks with immunity from the exasperated stares of their carrel neighbors. And what if the senior suddenly appeared while you were ~~on Facebook~~ writing a paper? No thanks. So it probably comes as no surprise that I first and foremost want to thank one of the most important inanimate objects of my life: Carrel 330 on Gault 3. Through my frustrations at Microsoft Word, questions about citations, the seemingly never-ending translations, and the many, many late nights, you’ve been my steady anchor in the turbulent, tempestuous sea of I.S. We’ve had a great year together, you’ve been my rock, my safe harbor, my sanctuary, and now that I.S. is finished, I never want to see you again.

I want to express my extreme gratitude to my advisor Dr. Madonna Hettinger for her wisdom, support, and understanding. I would have never had the courage to step a little outside the box to pursue an oral history if it hadn’t been for her encouragement and support during the entire process. She has taught me many important lessons, some that have nothing to do with I.S., and for that I am wholeheartedly grateful.

Nguyen Thien Phu helped tremendously whenever I had questions about Vietnamese translations and I would like to thank him for his patience while I struggled with some difficult words. I'd also like to thank Dr. Jeff Roche who once told me that every story is unique and deserves to be told; therefore allowing me to overcome my concerns that writing a history about one's family was too "cliché." Thank you to the entire History Department who always asked after my I.S and never let me forget about it whenever I was working in the copy room.

This Senior Independent Study would not have been possible without the generous grant from the Copeland Fund that permitted me to travel to Vietnam in August of 2011. Thank you to the former President Henry J. Copeland and current committee members for this valuable and enhancing support that you provide to students.

I want to thank the South Vietnamese men and women who I met and talked to for this project. They could not have been more accommodating and welcoming to a curious college student who doubted whether her project was even possible. Thank you to Hồng Duy Cường, Hồng Thị Ninh, Lê Gia, Trần Minh Mẫn, Trần Ti Phú, Trần Văn Đạt for your honesty, your courage, and your stories that have taught me to be grateful for every day in one's lifetime.

Thank you to all of my friends who supported me with laughter, tears, jokes, venting sessions, walks around the academic quad, and lots and lots of coffee.

Finally, thank you to my Mom and Dad and Peter for your love, advice, and unfailing support. This is for you.

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|---|------|
| 0-1 Map of Vietnam partitioned at the 17 th parallel, 1954 | vii |
| 0-2 Map of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, modern day | viii |
| 4-1 Trần Minh Mẫn in front of his family home in Da Lat, Vietnam. | 37 |

TIMELINE¹

| | |
|------------|---|
| 111 B.C.E. | Nam Viet conquered by the Chinese Han Dynasty |
| 43 | Beginning of direct Chinese rule |
| 1802-1945 | Nguyen Dynasty |
| 1858 | The French land at Da Nang |
| 1859-1861 | The French defeat Nguyen forces |
| 1862 | Treaty of Saigon establish colonial rule in the South |
| 1874-1884 | Further treaties open Red River to French trade and protectorates over central and northern Vietnam |
| 1884-1887 | Sino-French War fought over the controlling influence in Vietnam |
| 1887 | France defeats China. French Indochina established |
| 1911 | Ho Chi Minh leaves for Europe where he encounters communist ideals and develops organizational tactics |
| 1927 | Vietnam Nationalist Party founded |
| 1930 | Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) founded |
| 1939 | World War II begins in European nations |
| 1940 | Japan occupies Vietnam. Franco-Japan Treaty signed to allow continuing French administration in Vietnam and Japanese use of Vietnam's resources |
| 1941 | Viet Minh founded in response to Japanese occupation |
| 1945 | Japan surrenders. Viet Minh seizes power in August Revolution and creates the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) |

¹ Most dates and events are common knowledge; others have been taken from various sources. Most significant sources are Mark W. McLeod's and Nguyen Thi Dieu's *Culture and Customs of Vietnam* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), Anthony James Joes' *The War for South Viet Nam* (New York: Praeger, 1989), and John H. Willbanks' *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 1946-1954 | First Indochina War fought between the Viet Minh and French forces over independence |
| 1949 | People's Republic of China created. France places Bao Dai as the figurehead ruler of the Associated State of Vietnam. |
| 1951 | Vietnam Workers' Party founded, replacing the ICP |
| 1954 | French forces captured by the Viet Minh inside the Dien Bien Phu fortress. The French surrender and exit Vietnam. Geneva Conference partition Vietnam at the 17 th parallel and mandate elections to reunify within two years. Bao Dai appoints Ngo Dinh Diem as prime minister. |
| 1955 | The United States begins directly aiding Diem's government. The Republic of Vietnam (RVN) is created, with Diem appointed president. |
| 1960 | National Liberation Front (NLF), known as the Viet Cong, founded |
| 1963 | Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu assassinated in U.S-backed military coup |
| 1964 | U.S Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorizes sending American forces to Vietnam |
| 1965 | The U.S military Assistance Command for Vietnam established. First U.S troops land in Da Nang. |
| 1968 | Tet Offensive by the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and NLF. Vietnamization policy implemented as a response to Tet. |
| 1971 | Operation Lam Son 719 first independent mission of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) |
| 1972 | Easter Offensive by the PAVN |
| 1973 | Paris Peace Accords signed. US troops withdraw from Vietnam |
| 1975 | Final offensive of the PAVN and NLF. The RVN defeated |
| 1976 | The Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) created. The Vietnam Workers' Party is renamed as the Vietnam Communist Party. |
| 1977 | The SRV is admitted into the United Nation |



Courtesy U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

0-1 Vietnam partitioned at the 17th parallel, 1954. Source: Ellen Hammer, "A Death in November," (New York: NY: E.P. Dutton, 1987).



0-2 Socialist Republic of Vietnam, modern day.

Source: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/maps/maptemplate_vm.html.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THE TWO VIETNAMS

Mất nước has two meanings in Vietnamese. One is to “lose water.” The other is to “lose country.” The Vietnamese view their language as consisting of manifold meanings, much in the same way as they perceive their country. Northern, central, and southern dialects share the same words, but behind them are different nuances that a native and foreigner alike must navigate. Vietnam is a country of contrasts. Its history has two identities, two narratives that compete to be told and absorbed. From the Vietnamese perspective, the story of the Vietnam War is either a nationalistic tale of an oppressed, but united people triumphing over outside forces or a series of struggles and eventual failure against a harsh, unwanted communist agenda.

It is not only in recent history that dual Vietnamese narratives have emerged. The theme of duality existed from the beginning at Vietnam’s creation myth. The story goes like this: a long, long time ago, a dragon prince from the sea and a fairy maiden from the mountains fell in love. They married, gave birth to one hundred children, but did not live happily ever after – at least not together. The maiden longed for her beloved mountains and the dragon prince was obliged to return to his oceanic kingdom. Thus, the couple divided their children between their two realms. This was how Vietnam was created and how it remains, a country of two peoples living harmoniously among the mountains and the seas.

The story, of course, is a fiction. The reality is much more violent, disruptive, and unhappy than the peaceful vision imagined by Vietnam’s origin myth. There are numerous and interrelated characters in Vietnam’s story, actors with their own

motivations, countries with their own schemes for power and influence, and individuals with their own stories that remain silent. The Vietnam War is only a brief chapter in Vietnam's history of more than two millennia. This Senior Independent Study examines how South Vietnamese civilians, living in the center of conflict and peril, constructed individual lives apart from the dominant Cold War political rhetoric. This thesis investigates how the South Vietnamese consciously defined a personal sense of normality that they used for everyday survival and eventually claimed as their identity.

American historians are still digesting America's involvement in the Vietnam War. Thirty-seven years after its conclusion, debate among American scholars continues to take place underneath the leading narrative of Cold War political ideologies. The Cold War dichotomies of East and West, Hawk and Dove, and Tyranny and Democracy were firmly in place at the time of the Vietnam conflict. The dominant Cold War narrative of the latter half of the twentieth century has affected how historians studied the Vietnam War. The discussion of whether the United States was justified in entering the conflict has been brought up so many times that Dennis Showalter in his foreword address in *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (2010) claims that "It is beyond cliché to say that the Vietnam War is unique in the American experience."¹ When it comes to the Vietnam War, the only consensus that historians can arrive at is that there is no consensus.

Where are the histories that investigate how the Vietnamese people experienced the war? Professor of History at the University of Melbourne, Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, is among a small number of historians attempting to uncover the experiences of

¹ Dennis Showalter, *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (New York: Routledge, 2010), ix.

ordinary Vietnamese people during the war. Nguyen's recent book *Memory is Another Country* (2009) is an important work in which she conducts an oral history of South Vietnamese women and their experiences before, during, and after the war.² Within these stories is a sense of urgency to tell them before they disappear from the written and oral record. Memory, after all, is fluid, unreliable, and imperfect. Personal narratives are constructed, subjective, and when paired with far distant memories, cannot simply be taken at surface value.

The purpose of an oral history project is to dig deeper and excavate meaning from stories. An oral historian must interpret individual narratives as a means to find greater subtext and meaning within the historical framework and achieve an open-ended conclusion that delivers us closer to the truth. For Vietnam, this means an added layer to the national story's motif of finding inner and outer harmony in spite of a forced separation, a necessary dualism.

It is often said that history is written by the victors. In the case of the defeated South Vietnamese people, their silence is a missed opportunity to tell a richer and more complete story of Vietnam and the Vietnam War. This thesis addresses the internalized lives of South Vietnamese civilians living in a warzone and "how they organized reality in their minds and expressed it in their behavior."³ Influenced by the works of cultural historians Robert Darnton and Natalie Zemon Davis, I attempt to excavate deeper levels of meaning in oral history interviews to uncover the "cosmology," or worldview, of an

² Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *Memory is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2009).

³ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1984), p. 3. It may seem strange that Robert Darnton and Natalie Zemon Davis, historians of 18th century French culture and medieval Europe, influenced this thesis. I draw from Darnton and Zemon's "deep reading" approach to analyzing their source materials by treating each interview as a relevant and historical primary source. Their methods of finding layered subtexts in the text by reading the symbols and language used to express a particular meaning has shaped the readings of my interviews.

average South Vietnamese civilian. Chapters 2 and 3 provide the foundation to the historiography of the Vietnam War and the theories and methodologies of practicing oral history. Chapter 4 explores the interviews conducted with Trần Ti Phú and Trần Minh Mẫn, a married couple in Da Lat who normalized war for the sake of their family. Chapter 5 investigates how the Vietnam War affected the boundaries between adolescence and adulthood in two men Lê Gia and Trần Văn Đạt. Last, Chapter 6 explores how living with the Vietnam War shaped both passive and survivalist identities for siblings Hồng Duy Cường and Hồng Thị Ninh.

The Vietnamese language, ridden with complex tonal distinctions and double meanings, is nearly incomprehensible to outsiders – even for a Vietnamese-born and American-raised daughter. But the stories of the South Vietnamese are not the only ones that remain untold and unheard. The Vietnam War marks one of many instances in which people’s voices are overwhelmed by the dominant political rhetoric. Oral history projects are even more significant because they give history back to the people in their own words.⁴ It is with great care and purpose that I examine the personal narratives of how the Vietnamese people in southern Vietnam survived the war and lived to tell a tale of survival, identity, and hope in the face of violence, chaos, and helplessness.

⁴ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 265.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE VIETNAM WAR IN AMERICAN SCHOLARSHIP

In the short story “How to Tell a True War Story,” Tim O’Brien writes that “In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it’s safe to say that in a war story nothing is ever very true.”¹ War stories rely on the memory and suffering of those who possess them. War stories are indefinite and imperfect; they cannot provide moral lessons in neat, tidy packages. Perhaps this is why the debate over the Vietnam War in American historical inquiry is still as contentious today as it was in 1965 when David Halberstam published *The Making of a Quagmire*, one of the first mainstream nonfiction accounts of the Vietnam War.

The debate among historians of the Vietnam War has divided into two camps of analysis. The dominant view is the orthodox tradition which asserts that the United States intervened in Vietnam with misguided motivations. Orthodox historians claim that the fall of Saigon was inevitable and that America’s involvement was “predestined to fail.”² Revisionist historians challenge the position that America’s involvement was detrimental and perceive the U.S.’s role in Vietnam as a necessary, yet flawed effort in which factors outside of governmental and military policies contributed to its failure.

The intellectual debate surrounding Vietnam began long before the first U.S. Marine set foot on Da Nang in 1965.³ War correspondents and journalists were already reporting in Vietnam for several years before America entered the conflict. In the novel,

¹ Tim O’Brien, “How to Tell a True War Story,” in *The Things They Carried* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2009) p. 78.

² Andrew Wiest, “Introduction,” in *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War*, ed. Michael Doidge and Andrew Wiest (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 8.

³ Wiest, “Introduction,” p. 5.

The Quiet American (1955), Graham Greene drew from his experience as a British war correspondent in French Indochina and presents the anti-war story of a British journalist caught between the forces of imperial American and nationalist Vietnamese interests.⁴

The Quiet American was a popular fiction that opened the intellectual discussion among both academic communities and the public about America's naïve and questionable goals in Vietnam.⁵ Among the first publications about Vietnam is also the well-received *Street Without Joy* (1961) by the French-born war reporter Bernard B. Fall.⁶ The nonfiction account relates the French military's failure to reclaim colonial authority in Vietnam during the First Indochinese War against the nationalist Viet Minh. Its message was regarded as a warning to the U.S's efforts in the Second Indochinese War, otherwise known as the Vietnam War.

Among the works published during the U.S involvement in the Vietnam War, American journalist David Halberstam's widely-read *The Making of a Quagmire* (1965) is arguably one of the most influential contributions to the orthodox view.⁷ *The Making of a Quagmire* stages the initial conflict between the uncompromising but effective Vietnamese Communist Party leader, Ho Chi Minh, and the virtuous but alienating President of the Republic of Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem. Bias towards the Vietnamese Communist Party's strong mission of nationalism is apparent in reports of how the American and the South Vietnamese military failed to subdue the insurgency tactics of the National Liberation Front, also known as the Viet Cong. Halberstam observed that the American mission in Vietnam was destined to fail because "the legacy of mistakes was

⁴ Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1956).

⁵ Wiest, "Introduction," in *Triumph Revisited*, p. 5.

⁶ Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1972).

⁷ David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (London, UK: The Bodley Press, 1964).

too large, because the die had been cast long, long ago.”⁸ Halberstam’s message in 1965 was clear: America’s involvement in Vietnam was doomed from the beginning.

Frances Fitzgerald’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Fire in the Lake* (1972) conveys a similar message of the U.S.’s inability to secure a victory in Vietnam.⁹ The book’s universal appeal and publication date is no coincidence. At a time when the American public’s support for the war was dwindling, FitzGerald’s audience readily responded to her message of unwarranted American intrusion upon a peace-loving Vietnam. Similar to Halberstam’s vision of a nationalist and united Vietnam, FitzGerald adopts an optimistic tone when speculating on the forthcoming reunification of the North and South: “For the Vietnamese, domestic peace implies not merely the cessation of hostilities, but the victory of a single political system and way of life.”¹⁰ In regards to the Vietnamization policy, a plan implemented under President Richard Nixon’s administration to gradually withdraw American troops by encouraging the South Vietnamese military to carry out independent operations, FitzGerald promotes the narrative of the Vietnamese people as helpless victims of American ethnocentrism. FitzGerald argues that Vietnamization was “like so many American policies in Vietnam, a solution to an American rather than to a Vietnamese problem.”¹¹ Released in the closing stages of the war and amidst the Watergate scandal, *Fire in the Lake* reflects the nation’s distrust in the government and the public’s eagerness to move on from the war.

Michael Maclear’s *The Ten Thousand Day War* (1981) continues the orthodox view that the U.S.’s conduct in Vietnam was bungled and mismanaged. Maclear argues

⁸ Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, p. 320.

⁹ Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1972).

¹⁰ FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, p. 441.

¹¹ FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, p. 414.

that the Vietnamization policy was poorly planned and executed too late in the war to yield positive outcomes. Maclear supports FitzGerald's claim that the Vietnamese people were victims of American interventionism by contending that the Nixon administration's Vietnamization policy was "one of expedient escape, not conviction."¹² *The Ten Thousand Day War* was published at the tail-end of the seventies, a decade wrought with a major "credibility gap" in which the Pentagon Papers and Watergate scandals diminished Americans' faith in their leaders.¹³ It is in this environment that Maclear concludes that, although the U.S was able to extract itself from an unpopular war, the American public's psyche has never truly recovered from Vietnam.

Although revisionist histories remain in the minority, scholarly discussions against the grain of the traditional narrative emerged at the same time as the orthodox school. Orthodox histories continue to enjoy wide publication, such as Fredrik Logevall's *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (1999).¹⁴ In Logevall's preface, he states "That the American decision for war was the wrong decision is today taken as *axiomatic* by a large majority of lay observers and scholars, myself included, who see the U.S. intervention as, at best, a failure and a mistake, at worst a crime"¹⁵ (italics added). However, during the early years of the conflict, Marguerite Higgins, the first female war correspondent to win a Pulitzer Prize for her work in the Korean War, reported inconsistencies with David Halberstam's articles, particularly with his negatively biased portrayal of Ngo Dinh Diem.¹⁶

¹² Michael Maclear, *The Ten Thousand Day War* (New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), p. 300.

¹³ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. viii.

¹⁴ Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. xiii.

¹⁶ Mark Moyar, "Vietnam: Historians at War," *National Association of Scholars*, March 24, 2008, Accessed November 15, 2011, http://www.nas.org/polArticles.cfm?Doc_Id=103.

Shortly after the war's conclusion, Guenter Lewy published *America in Vietnam* (1978) which is regarded as one of the first revisionist histories on the Vietnam War. Lewy indeed states that the U.S failed to understand the political and social threads of a revolutionary war in Vietnam.¹⁷ However, Lewy challenges the symptoms of “ideological fervor” which has characterized American scholars’ writings on the Vietnam War.¹⁸ While historians criticized the Department of Defense (DoD) and rejected their Cold War politics and militarization policies, they used the DoD-produced Pentagon Papers to advance their arguments.¹⁹ Lewy argues that the influential Pentagon Papers have caused historians to generally accept the DoD’s history of the war instead of question it. He claims that Americans’ guilt created in the aftermath of the war has affected their reflection and is “not warranted and that the charges of *officially condoned* illegal and grossly immoral conduct are without substance.”²⁰

Henry Summers’ *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (1982) is a revisionist examination of the U.S’s military tactics. Summers argues that “The purpose of this analysis was not to find fault or to identify villains” but to draw from lessons of the past and prepare the military for future engagements of similar natures.²¹ Michael Lind’s *Vietnam: The Necessary War* (1999) presents new evidence for the geopolitical implications of the U.S’s involvement in Vietnam, particularly arguing that America was justified in protecting Vietnam from its communist neighbors.²² Contrary to the orthodox claim that the U.S escalated war in Vietnam under the misguided conviction of the

¹⁷ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, p. vi.

¹⁸ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, p. viii.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, p. vii.

²¹ Henry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Persidio Press, 1982), p. xiii.

²² Michael Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America’s Most Disastrous Conflict* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), p. xiv.

Domino Theory, Lind's argument challenges that it was necessary for the U.S to intensify its war efforts and defend its credibility as a Cold War-era superpower.²³

The most recent revisionist history is Mark Moyer's *Triumph Forsaken* (2006)²⁴ which has generated so much debate among academic communities that an anthology, *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (2010) was published in response to Moyer's arguments.²⁵ Moyer claims that both the Vietnamese and the American public were given false reports by American journalists, particularly David Halberstam and Stanley Karnow, who used questionable sources and operated under a heavy bias against President Ngo Dinh Diem's administration. Evidence suggests that President Lyndon B. Johnson had several options for South Vietnam to carry out the war independently from U.S troops' ground support. Instead of allowing Diem to carry out his policies in South Vietnam, Moyer claims that the U.S made a great mistake in supporting the coup against Diem and his brother and chief adviser Ngo Dinh Nhu.²⁶ By arguing that biased journalism and false sources compounded incorrect reports from American advisors to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, Moyer presents a picture of how America's efforts could have succeeded, but collapsed under the pressure of obstacles and consequences to certain policies.

The discussion of Vietnam War historical inquiry has thus far focused on American perspectives. If revisionist histories are considered misfits among Vietnam War scholarship, then the handful of accessible histories written by Vietnamese academics are anomalies. In the introduction of *Coming to Terms* (1991), a collection of

²³ Lind, *Vietnam, the Necessary War*, p. xv.

²⁴ Mark Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²⁵ Andrew Wiest and Michael J. Doidge, ed., *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

²⁶ Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. xvii.

essays about the Indochinese experience during and after the war, editors Douglas Allen and Ngo Vinh Long claim that most scholars feel the need to prove whether the U.S's policies and actions were justified.²⁷ American historians of the Vietnam War, orthodox and revisionist alike, have been affected by "Vietnam Syndrome," the desire to overcome their ambiguity and culpability in the aftermath of the U.S leaving Vietnam. In his essay "Vietnam: The Real Enemy," Ngo Vinh Long, Professor of History at the University of Maine, contends that the holistic study of Vietnam is often overlooked to focus on the Vietnamese Communist Party and therefore misconceive North Vietnam as the only adversary in the Vietnam War.²⁸

Kim N. B. Ninh's *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam* (2002) examines the evolution of cultural politics under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party.²⁹ Ninh observes that the first generation of post-Vietnam War scholars in the U.S sought to restore a history to Vietnam that counters the patronizing assumptions embedded in America's involvement.³⁰ In essence, scholars in the aftermath of the war needed to address America's accountability in Vietnam. These attempts, however, presented a homogenous and traditional Vietnam that downplayed the complexities and historical significance of major transformations in the years preceding the war. Ninh challenges the continuity thesis that "distorts our understanding of the construction of the socialist state in the north and blinds us to the other political and intellectual discourses not sanctioned in the state."³¹ Similar to Long's examination of a

²⁷ Douglas Allen and Ngo Vinh Long, ed. *Coming to Terms* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), p. 5.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Kim B. Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 1.

³⁰ Ninh, *A World Transformed*, pp. 2-3.

³¹ Ninh, *A World Transformed*, p. 5.

more complex Vietnamese history, Ninh challenges the perception that Vietnamese politics is an exclusive discussion about communism.

Historical questions about the Vietnamese perspective have emerged in recent years. Mark Philip Bradley in *Imagining Vietnam and America* (2000) departs from the Cold War theme of American exceptionalism and the treatment of Vietnam as political non-agents.³² In *Abandoning Vietnam* (2004), James H. Willbanks examines how the U.S.'s Vietnamization policy contributed to the fall of South Vietnam.³³ Willbanks explores whether the final collapse was inevitable or if the U.S and Republic of Vietnam could have taken different measures to prevent the fall.³⁴ Andrew Wiest's *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (2008) is a story of "two men at war": Pham Van Dinh, a noted hero of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), and Tran Ngoc Hue, who defected from the ARVN to join the North Vietnamese Army (NVA).³⁵ Wiest examines the strength of the ARVN and the South Vietnamese government through archived sources and also extensive interviews with Dinh and Pham. Although *Vietnam's Forgotten Army* is not narrowly tailored through the lens of oral history, Wiest's research demonstrates the importance of Vietnamese voices that have been previously absent in the American scholarship.

Natalie Huynh Chau Nguyen in *Memory is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora* (2009) enhances the need for Vietnamese narratives.³⁶ Nguyen

³² Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 7.

³³ James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost its War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

³⁴ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 1.

³⁵ Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: NYU Press, 2008), p. 8.

³⁶ Natalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2009).

investigates interviews with expatriate South Vietnamese women whose experiences in the Vietnam War were traumatic, somber, and ultimately astute in revealing the human spirit to survive during and after wartime. Concentrating on memory and the individual's ability to reshape their story, and thus their identity, Nguyen examines how the loss of one's home country affects the construction of personal narratives. This Senior Independent Study approaches similar questions about memory and identity. While Nguyen conducted interviews with South Vietnamese women who settled in Australia after the war, this thesis is limited to oral narratives taken from South Vietnamese men and women who did not leave Vietnam. The element of remaining in one's home country and witnessing its transformation in the aftermath of war creates another layer in the South Vietnamese story.

Recent works conducted by American and Vietnamese historians have made it possible to raise historical questions that investigate Vietnamese perspectives through an oral history approach. The intellectual debate over Vietnamese history has shifted since the 1960's from warnings by Bernard B. Fall and Graham Greene against U.S interventionism, to revisionist theories about the necessity of American involvement. The orthodox view of the U.S inevitable failure in Vietnam due to a fatal misreading of Vietnamese culture and politics was predominant in the years immediately following the Vietnam War. As a temporal distance is placed between the high emotions experienced by an entire generation of Americans and the present scholarship, historical inquiry of Vietnam is currently coming to a greater awareness of the Vietnamese experience. New historical questions such as Andrew Wiest's micro-history of the ARVN and Natalie

Huynh Chau Nguyen's analysis of war and memory allow for deeper reflection upon the Vietnamese story.

This Senior Independent Study explores and excavates the deeper layers of meaning of war experiences under the methods of oral history. Before we can fully understand what happened in Vietnam, we must clarify its myths that, as Anthony James Joes argues, “threaten to become engraved, mainly through repetition, in the American mind.”³⁷ The historian must avoid the perpetuation of myths and challenge the arguments that previous histories of the Vietnam War present to an American audience more interested in extricating themselves from their tumultuous past than understanding the meaning of their experience. Oral historian Michael Frisch stated in 1990 that Vietnam as remembered by Americans “is a Vietnam without those insights into change and history that extraordinary intensity had forced to the surface, and it was once hoped, left permanently deposited for needed reflection.”³⁸ Through an oral history approach which allows for voice and agency to emerge out of story-telling, this Senior Independent Study attempts to contribute to the reflection of a holistic Vietnamese story told by those who experienced it.

³⁷ Joes, *The War for South Viet Nam*, p. x.

³⁸ Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 18.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY OF ORAL HISTORY

“In other cases you can’t even tell a true war story. Sometimes it’s just beyond telling.”

- “How to Tell a True War Story,” Tim O’Brien

“Don’t ask me,” Trần Văn Đạt responds after I inquire about his awareness of communism as a child growing up in South Vietnam in the 1950’s.¹ Trần Văn Đạt’s request to stop talking about a certain subject is the first of its kind I encountered during my experience as an interviewer in the process of recording oral history. A simple command verbalized quietly speaks volumes about Trần Văn Đạt’s experience during the Vietnam War. It is the task of the interviewer and historian to interpret a narrator’s words as part of the analytical text. As a relative newcomer to the practice of evidence-gathering, oral history has emerged and developed in the twentieth century as a valid research practice in historical inquiry. Oral history evolved as the study of history took a “cultural turn” in the second half of the twentieth century when social movements like civil rights and women’s rights gave agency back to the individual experience.² This chapter discusses the advancement and practices of oral history, the advantages and disadvantages of using interviews as valid evidence, and the methodologies of oral history applied in this Senior Independent Study.

Oral history is, simply put, a collection of “memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews.”³ From its origins, oral history’s

¹ Trần Văn Đạt, interview by author, Vũng Tàu, Vietnam, August 11, 2011.

² Terrence J. McDonald, introduction to McDonald, ed., *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 5 as cited in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Avery Hunt, “Introduction,” ed. Bonnell and Avery (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 2.

³ Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), p. 1.

primary purposes were to record the accounts of people's lived experiences and preserve their testimonies for future historians to understand and interpret.⁴ However, oral histories accomplish more than merely collect personal narratives for storage and potential use. Willa Baum, the late oral historian whose pioneering work at the University of California-Berkeley advanced the use and understanding of oral history, contends that "establishing the identity of individuals and groups is a purpose of history, to that degree oral history can contribute immediately, while in the process."⁵ Personal narratives and stories can instantaneously affect the narrator's self-awareness and identity during the interview session. To achieve this deeper level of reflection, however, requires the execution of certain methods that raise ethical questions. Rather than diminish the legitimacy of oral history, its dilemmas increase the layers of meaning in an interview.

The practice of oral history has a long and established past. Indeed, civilizations have always been interested in recording their origins and most significant events. Greek historian Thucydides questioned soldiers and participants of the Peloponnesian War in 400 B.C.⁶ Court historians of the Chinese Zhou dynasty recorded life stories of ordinary citizens in the empire.⁷ Some African nations practice *griot* by handing down spoken-word histories through generations.⁸ Despite the traditional use of oral history across cultures and civilizations, its practice in the discipline of history did not develop until the twentieth century.

⁴ Willa Baum, "The Other Uses of Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 34 (2007): 15.

⁵ Willa Baum, "The Other Uses of History," p. 20.

⁶ Rebecca Sharpless, "The History of Oral History," in *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*, ed. Thomas L. Charlton et al (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), p. 9.

⁷ Sharpless, "The History of Oral History," p. 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*

In the nineteenth century, German historian Leopold von Ranke formulated the model of critically using documents for historical research and writing.⁹ Von Ranke is considered “the father of historical science” and originator of the empiricist theory of history that emphasizes an objective understanding of history.¹⁰ In a manuscript titled “On the Relations of History and Philosophy” (circa 1830s), von Ranke claims that historical science at its best draws the “investigation and contemplation of the particular to a general view of events and to the recognition of their objectively existing relatedness.”¹¹ Using the language of scientific data collection and analysis, von Ranke contends that the primary task of history is to “observe this life.”¹² Von Ranke asserts that the German word *Geschichte*, the noun for “what happened,” designates the discipline of history.¹³ Influenced by von Ranke, historical inquiry in the nineteenth century was grounded in this objective and formal analysis of facts to show “what happened.” However, this empirical approach left a limited space for historians to interact with the text of their sources and disregarded the problem of narrative between the historian and his facts.¹⁴

Solutions to the dilemma that historians face navigating between factual evidence and historical narrative emerged in the twentieth century. Allan Nevins, an American historian with a background in journalism from Columbia University, is credited for founding oral history in the United States after conducting the first organized oral history

⁹ Georg G. Iggers, “Introduction,” in *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. Georg G. Iggers, trans. Wilma A. Iggers (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. xi.

¹⁰ Herbert B. Adams, “New Methods of Study in History,” *John Hopkins University Studies in History and Political Science*, vol. II, 1884, p. 65, quoted in Iggers, “Introduction,” p. xi.

¹¹ Leopold von Ranke, “On the Relations of History and Philosophy,” in *Theory and Practice of History*, p. 6.

¹² Von Ranke, “On the Relations of History and Philosophy,” in *Theory and Practice of History*, p. 7.

¹³ Von Ranke, “The Pitfalls of a Philosophy of History,” in *Theory and Practice of History*, p. 19.

¹⁴ E.H. Carr, *What Is History?* (New York, NY: Random House, 1961), p. 23-29.

project of white male elites in 1948.¹⁵ Nevins expressed the need to establish organizations that recorded diplomatic, elitist histories in *The Gateway to History* (1938): “We have agencies aplenty to seek out the papers of men long dead. But we have only the most scattered and haphazard agencies for obtaining a little of the immense mass of information about the more recent American past – the past of the last half century – which might come fresh and direct from men once prominent in politics, in business, in the professions, and in other fields.”¹⁶ Initially, oral history’s objectives were to record and preserve the memories of famous personalities and influential leaders, the “movers and shakers” of history. These collections of personal narratives were just that: collections.

While Nevins and his contemporaries organized anthologies of the memories of prominent Americans, the British oral history movement emerged in the 1960s and 1970s to present a “radical alternative” to the traditional historical study of male elites.¹⁷ In the past fifty years, the majority of oral history in the United Kingdom has been preoccupied with “community history” and discovering the unheard voices of the working class.¹⁸ British oral historian Paul Thompson, founder of the Oral History Society and its journal *Oral History* in 1971, is recognized for establishing oral history’s connection to documenting the stories of marginalized demographics in the U.K.¹⁹ In the influential *Voice of the Past* (1978), Thompson seeks to restore balance away from the “top down”

¹⁵ Louis Starr, “Oral History,” in *Oral History; An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. David Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, 3-26 (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History), pp. 10-12, quoted in Valerie Raleigh Yow, “Introduction to the In-Depth Interview,” in *Recording Oral History* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), p. 3.

¹⁶ Allan Nevins, *The Gateway to History* (Boston: D.C Heath & Co., 1938), p. iv.

¹⁷ Rob Perks, “The Roots of Oral History: Exploring Contrasting Attitudes to Elite, Corporate, and Business Oral History in Britain and the U.S,” *The Oral History Review* 37 (2010): 220.

¹⁸ Perks, “The Roots of Oral History,” p. 219.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

approach to history²⁰ and advocate the social purposes of history.²¹ The History Workshop, an organization founded in the 1960s at the Ruskin College, Oxford, also advanced the trend towards social history in the U.K. Its journal's first editorial expressed the organization's mission to "have a strong grounding in working-class experience" and "speak from the start to the internationality of class experience."²²

In the U.K., history's political focus documented the struggles of states' power and disregarded the lives of ordinary people.²³ The emergence of oral history remedied this imbalance. By no means does Thompson argue for the exclusive use of oral history in all history projects. Rather, historians can juxtapose official documents and other traditional primary sources with narratives of personal experience.²⁴ This, according to Thompson, "should make for a more realistic reconstruction of the past. Reality is complex and many-sided; and it is the primary merit of oral history that to a much greater extent than most sources it allows the original multiplicity of standpoints to be recreated."²⁵ From its origins, oral history in the U.K was a means of giving back agency to the individual.

Two developments in the twentieth century transformed the practice of oral history in America from the elitist model to a popular focus. First, the advancement of recording technology permitted the preservation of many voices. The limitations of recording technology in the early twentieth century claim some responsibility for the diplomatic approach to oral history in the United States. Reel-to-reel recording machines at the time were expensive, bulky, and involved a great deal of production.²⁶ Lighter and

²⁰ Perks, "The Roots of Oral History," p. 219.

²¹ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 2.

²² Sally Alexander et al, "Editorial," *The History Workshop* 1 (1976): 1.

²³ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, pp. 2-3.

²⁴ Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p. 5.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Yow, "Introduction to an In-Depth Interview," in *Recording Oral History*, p. 3.

transportable machines were soon invented and the tape recorder became the standard equipment for oral history by the 1960s.²⁷ As sound recording's technology and production increased, its greater accessibility made capturing a multiplicity of voices possible.

Second, movements for equal rights in the second half of the twentieth century generated a greater interest in the social and cultural histories of ordinary people.²⁸ Movements such as Civil Rights and Second Wave feminism raised the awareness of class, gender, and racial issues in a post-war environment that empowered marginalized demographics of American society to voice their grievances. Oral historians were also affected by these paradigm shifts in the United States. The social changes of the 1960s and 1970s shifted oral history's elitist focus on leaders and well-known personalities to more popular interests of the average citizen.

As a result of the bottom-up approach to oral history that developed in second half of the twentieth century, the interviewer's role shifted from passive collector to active interpreter before, during, and after the interview session.²⁹ Lawrence Goodwyn of the Duke University Oral History Program was among one of the oral historians who rejected Allan Nevins' model of a neutral questioner. Instead, Goodwyn and other oral historians acknowledged the inherent, unavoidable subjectivity of the interviewer in the interviewing process.³⁰ The historian using interviews as evidence applies them as any other legitimate source of historical text. However, the recognition of an interviewer's bias warrants concerns about the validity of oral testimonies.

²⁷ Yow, "Introduction to an In-Depth Interview," in *Recording Oral History*, p. 3.

²⁸ Sharpless, "The History of Oral History," p. 17.

²⁹ Baum, "The Other Uses of Oral History," p. 15.

³⁰ Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, p. 8.

Memory and its malleable, impressionable nature is one of the dilemmas of oral history. What happened according to factual documentation and what one remembers happening occasionally contradict each other. As Donald Ritchie points out, “memories start with the initial perception.”³¹ The oral historian does not often encounter short-term memories when they are fresh and more precise in an individual’s mind. Rather, oral historians explore distant recollections that may have been reconstructed and affected by personal bias and experience. Michael Frisch in his influential work, *A Shared Authority* (1990), states that “contemporary pressures and sensitivities encourage people to screen their memories in a selective, protective, and above all didactic fashion.”³² Although there are no simple means available to historians to confirm the accuracy of human memory, there are certain criteria when doing oral history to determine its validity.³³

Given that memory is selective, two assessments determine its legitimacy as a piece of historical evidence. First, the reliability of a memory considers the degree to which the narrator tends to tell the same story on separate occasions.³⁴ For example, if an individual narrates a story in their initial interview and recalls the same account during subsequent sessions in the following weeks and months, his or her memory is a more reliable source of information. Thus, the consistency of a narrator’s story is more dependable. Second, the validity of a narrator’s story measures the degree to which the given account is corroborated by other available sources such as published materials and

³¹ Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, p. 13.

³² Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 12.

³³ Yow, *Recording Oral History*, p. 22.

³⁴ Alice M. Hoffman and Howard S. Hoffman, “Memory Theory: Personal and Social,” in *Thinking About Oral History: Theories and Applications*, ed. Thomas L. Charlton et al (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008) p. 36.

legal documents that are related to the described event.³⁵ These two factors of reliability and validity determine the accuracy of a narrator's "memory claim."³⁶ The two determinations are not necessarily mutual; memory can simultaneously be reliable and invalid. An individual may recount a particular story with consistency throughout several interview sessions, and even over a span of years, but the story could have discrepancies with documented facts.

There are various reasons why an individual continues to remember an event differently from the recorded and validated accounts. Oral historians acknowledge that "the process of remembering does not exist in a vacuum."³⁷ If a narrator does not remember the exact date or location of an event, Alessandro Portelli states that even the "'wrong' statements are still psychologically 'true,' and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable sources."³⁸ In cases where the narrator struggles to remember a name or date, the interviewer may confirm dates and facts, but should not actively fill in the blanks of memory for the narrator.³⁹ By acknowledging the errors and uncertainties, the mutual effort between narrator and listener to arrive at a clearer account of history lends a greater authenticity to the interview.⁴⁰ Valerie Raleigh Yow argues that although the "peripheral details" of one's memory may have faded, the core of the memory – the gist of the event – still exists.⁴¹ Memory, therefore, is a credible source despite its unpredictable nature. Perhaps Alessandro Portelli said it best when he argued

³⁵Hoffman and Hoffman, "Memory Theory: Social and Personal," p. 36.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Lorraine Sitzia, "A Shared Authority: An Impossible Goal?" *The Oral History Review* 30:1 (2003): 94

³⁸Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 51.

³⁹Neal R. Norrick, "Talking About Remembering and Forgetfulness in Oral History Interviews," *The Oral History Review* 32:2 (2005): 11.

⁴⁰Norrick, "Talking About Remembering and Forgetfulness," p. 13.

⁴¹Yow, *Recording Oral History*, p. 51.

in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli* (1991) that “The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge” to create a more complete understanding of not just the social implications of an event, but also its “psychological costs.”⁴²

The “psychological costs” of South Vietnamese civilians during and in the aftermath of the Vietnam War is what this Senior Independent Study seeks to explore. Three guiding principles shaped this project’s examination of stories and memories from six South Vietnamese civilians. First, the Deep Listening model encouraged a multi-layered excavation of meaning and subtext within the interview. Second, awareness of phenomenology reduces bias in the interview session in order to create a more valid historical document. Finally, the methodology of examining not only *what* was said, but *how* it was said through gestures and tone of voice produce another layer of meaning to the individual’s experience.

An oral testimony reveals more than just the facts of a historical event. Rather, a narrator’s memory uncovers “less about *events* than about their *meaning*.”⁴³ One method of accessing the meaning of an oral account is through Deep Listening as suggested by Anna Sheftel (St. Paul University) and Stacey Zembrzycki (Concordia University).⁴⁴ Sheftel and Zembrzycki reflected on the importance of “deep listening” after conducting an oral history project recording the life stories of Holocaust survivors living in Montreal, Canada. In dealing with memories of oppression under the Nazi regime and surviving concentration camps, Sheftel and Zembrzycki pose an explanation for why narrators have

⁴² Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, pp. 50-51.

⁴³ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 50.

⁴⁴ Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, “Only Human: A Reflection on the Challenges of Working with ‘Difficult Stories,’” *The Oral History Review* 37:2 (2010): 199.

constructed and changed certain memories. Difficult and nonlinear memories are almost impossible to communicate effectively, and thus survivors of traumatic experiences create their own versions of events.⁴⁵ Stories are constructed because survivors want to make sense of their experiences.⁴⁶ Individuals rearrange difficult memories that they do not wish to fully confront in order to accept what happened. This conscious undertaking of memory reconstruction creates a greater claim in one's identity and within the larger community's narrative.⁴⁷

Deep Listening draws from the Shared Authority model suggested by Michael Frisch in *A Shared Authority* (1990). Through oral history, Frisch seeks to develop a bridge between the scholars who practice history and the individuals who lived it.⁴⁸ In the process of Shared Authority, the interviewer and interviewee share authorship of the produced historical text. Both participants are engaged in a dialogue in which the interviewer's questions and narrator's responses mutually affect each other. Because of this reciprocal exchange, Frisch argues that the authority of knowledge and information cannot belong exclusively to the oral historian or the individual narrator. This equal authority is central to an historical investigation's ability to provide "a meaningful engagement with history – to what should be not only a distribution of knowledge from those who have it to those who do not, but a more profound sharing of knowledges, an implicit and sometimes explicit dialogue from very different vantages about the shape, meaning, and implications of history."⁴⁹ The development of an equal partnership between interviewer and interviewee demands time and sensitivity. While Shared

⁴⁵ Sheftel and Zembrzycki, "Only Human," p. 201.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Frisch, *A Shared Authority*, pp. xxi-xxii.

⁴⁹ Frisch, *A Shared Authority*, p. xxii.

Authority is difficult to cultivate, this Senior Independent Study follows the model's principle of encouraging narrators to reflect on their experiences rather than regurgitate events.

In order to “dig deeper” past the guarded layers of one's memory, interviewers must ask questions that give narrators the confidence and safe space to reflect on events rather than repeat them.⁵⁰ Instead of seeking particular details or facts from the narrator to use as evidence, an interview should be as “free flowing” as possible in the sense that its main purpose is to listen to the subjective record of how an individual perceives and expresses his or her experiences.⁵¹ However, the “completely free” interview does not and cannot exist.⁵² The individual claims their identity through reconstructing and telling personal memories.⁵³ Therefore, narrators have much at stake when they are asked to relinquish control of their stories and reflect on the deeper meanings of their experience and why they decided to tell their stories in a particular manner or version.

Not every individual is able to transgress their fixed interpretations of past events; some perceive “going deeper” as an admittance of weakness, a flawed personality trait, or bad behavior.⁵⁴ To achieve a certain degree of reflection, interviewers must provide space within the interview for the narrator to openly tell their stories. Despite the care and sensitivity required of interviewers, one cannot assume that there is always something deeper to excavate from a narrator's memories.⁵⁵ There is a chance that the individual is

⁵⁰ Sheftel and Zembrzycki, “Only Human,” pp. 199-201.

⁵¹ Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 199.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Sheftel and Zembrzycki, “Only Human,” p. 201.

⁵⁴ Sheftel and Zembrzycki, “Only Human,” p. 202.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Sheftel and Zembrzycki, “Only Human,” p. 202.

incapable of going beyond their preset interpretations, or they simply do not have anything deeper to reveal.

Whereas interviewers use Deep Listening to encourage narrators to shed their preconceived notions, the method of phenomenology deals with the prejudices of the interviewer. Phenomenology requires oral historians to “bracket” and suspend their presumptions before entering an interview in order to engender a “more accurate view of self and world.”⁵⁶ Oral historian R. Kenneth Kirby argues that each individual has conscious assumptions about the world and themselves. Therefore, historians should not set out to prove their thesis before entering the interview session. For instance, conducting an interview with a strict agenda to confirm or challenge a theory by asking leading questions will push narrators to give answers tailored to what they think the interviewer wants to hear, not what the narrator thinks is important to address.⁵⁷ Interviewers must suppress these personal beliefs before conducting an interview in order to “truly see and know” the narrator’s experience and how they fit in the greater historical experience.⁵⁸

Oral historians must also interpret not just what the interviewee said, but how they said it. Rhonda Y. Williams, professor of history at Case Western Reserve University, states that “not everything has to be vocalized in order to be voiced to relay meaning.”⁵⁹ A person’s Voice consists of much more than verbal communication.⁶⁰ Indeed, nonverbal forms of communication such as hand gestures, facial expressions, a head shake or nod

⁵⁶ R. Kenneth Kirby, “Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History,” *The Oral History Review* 35:1 (2008): 22-23.

⁵⁷ Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 202.

⁵⁸ Kirby, “Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History,” p. 23.

⁵⁹ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, pp. 84-87, quoted in Rhonda Y. Williams, “‘I’m a Keeper of Information’: History-Telling and Voice,” *The Oral History Review* 28:1 (2001): 43.

⁶⁰ Williams, “‘I’m a Keeper of Information,’” p. 43.

are a part of the meaning in an interview. Long silences or pauses before answering a question or taking time to recall a difficult memory also conveys a deeper meaning about the narrator and their stories. Therefore, silences, pauses, body language, and facial expressions can become part of the interpreted text.⁶¹

Despite the efforts to create an open dialogue, oral history interviews are not like normal conversations.⁶² One of the interviewer's most essential tasks is to promote a constructive exchange and not to merely extract information from the narrator. Although oral historians sensitively and properly attempt to create a safe space for narrators to share and reflect, "interviews are partly performance" in the end.⁶³ Williams corroborates this observation by contending that the individual's Voice is represented through how their spoken words are performed.⁶⁴ French historian Jacques Le Goff states that automatic gestures and spontaneous "slips of the tongue" which seem to lack origin and are the results of improvisation and reflex in fact "possess deep roots in the long reverberations of systems of thought."⁶⁵ By paying attention to nonverbal communication as well as the spoken word, oral historians can better understand and interpret the meaning behind an individual's story.

Although they are certainly not the only methods to practice oral history, Deep Listening, awareness of phenomenology, and attention to nonverbal communication formulate the core of this Senior Independent Study's approach to conducting and analyzing interviews. The two women and four men, ages 63 to 79, interviewed for this project reside in cities across South Vietnam from Ho Chi Minh City, Da Lat, and Vũng

⁶¹ Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p. 199

⁶² Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p. 57.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Williams, "I'm a Keeper of Information," p. 44.

⁶⁵ Yow, *Recording Oral History*, p. 22.

Tàu. All six South Vietnamese civilians were raised with working class, modest means in an urban environment. The men and women were interviewed once separately; one interview was conducted with Trần Văn Đạt in a group setting. Because time and other restrictions did not allow me to interview each individual more than once, these limited sessions could not develop the sort of reflective and open discussion desired by most oral historians. However, each interview nevertheless provided a space and opportunity for the South Vietnamese civilians to share and communicate their experiences.

Valerie Raleigh Yow states that history, after all, “does not exist outside human consciousness.”⁶⁶ Facts and dates are significant only after the human beings who lived it give meaning to them.⁶⁷ Oral history provides the means for the individual who experienced history and the historian who wishes to understand it to simultaneously construct a more complete picture of the human experience. Oral history, according to Paul Thompson, “gives history back to the people in their own words.”⁶⁸ Indeed, the act of giving oral testimony empowers the individual to tell their story and claim their personal mark.

Each South Vietnamese civilian interviewed for this project is unique. Although they come from similar lower-class, urbanite backgrounds, their experiences as a civilian in the Vietnam War were shaped by their family, age, and gender. Whereas some older South Vietnamese civilians had to consciously construct a sense of normality during a time of war and upheaval, the younger South Vietnamese grew up anticipating war and therefore more easily transitioned into arranging their thoughts in a chaotic and difficult environment. The stories and how they were expressed within each interview

⁶⁶ Yow, *Recording Oral History*, p. 22.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p. 265.

demonstrate how South Vietnamese civilians defined what was “normal” during wartime. Through their interviews, the six South Vietnamese civilians make claims on an individual identity committed to preserving domestic and social stability, ensuring their family’s economic security, and ultimately, surviving the Vietnam War.

CHAPTER FOUR

“I’M AN ORDINARY PERSON”¹: A HUSBAND AND WIFE’S CONSTRUCTION OF NORMALITY

A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep
Sustains the bed on which we lie, my dear:
Although I love you, you will have to leap;
Our dream of safety has to disappear.

- W .H. Auden, “Leap Before You Look”

In the early morning light of November 2, 1963, President Ngo Dinh Diem of the Republic of Vietnam and his younger brother and adviser Ngo Dinh Nhu emerged from a Catholic church in Cholon, the Chinese quarter of Saigon, to be arrested. The brothers had fled during the night from Gia Long Palace in Saigon, the President’s residence, when Colonel Nguyen Van Thieu commanded his 5th Infantry Division to open fire at 3:30 A.M.² The attack was over by 6:45 A.M. when the defeated Presidential Guard laid down their arms and the *coup d’état* led by General Dương Văn Minh and backed by the United States was one step closer to successfully overthrowing Diem’s administration.³ The only remaining business was to arrest and detain the president and his brother. Concealed by loyal friends for most of the night, the brothers were tracked down by General Minh who sent a convoy for them. Upon seeing the personnel carrier, Nhu protested that it was improper for the President to ride in such a vehicle.⁴ In the end, the type of transportation was immaterial. Despite guarantees from coup leaders that Diem

¹ Trần Minh Mẫn, interview by author, Da Lat, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

² Ellen Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987), p. 292.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hammer, *A Death in November*, p. 298.

and Nhu would be given safe passage out of the country, they were shot and killed on the road back to the Joint General Staff headquarters at the Tan Son Nhut Air Base.⁵

The assassination of Diem, the first president of the newly created and fragile Republic of Vietnam, sent South Vietnam headlong into a period of political instability and social unrest. America's support of this event was, according to Mark Moyar, "by far the worst American mistake of the Vietnam War."⁶ After Diem's fall, General Minh and his junta government favored a "neutralist" solution that would negotiate a peace with the Viet Cong.⁷ But the "political consequences of Diem's overthrow and the new possibilities this opened up were interpreted quite differently in Washington and Saigon."⁸ The Johnson administration feared that South Vietnam would capitulate to the anti-war sentiments growing within the country and seriously consider a compromise with North Vietnam.⁹

The war escalated when American troops arrived in Da Nang in 1965 and began ground troop operations. As the war progressed, the United States military and Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) struggled for decisive victories against the guerilla warfare tactics of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and National Liberation Front (NLF). The warfare claimed over 58,000 American casualties from 1965 to 1998, including those declared dead from a missing in action or captured status.¹⁰ In the period of 1965-1974, the RVNAF suffered up to 220,000 casualties, but it was the Viet Cong

⁵ Hammer, *A Death in November*, p. 298.

⁶ Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. xvii

⁷ Tom Wicker, *JFK and LBJ: The Influence of Personality Upon Politics* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969 and 1970), p. 188, quoted in George McT. Kahin, "Political Polarization in South Vietnam: U.S. Policy in the Post-Diem Period," *Pacific Affairs* 52 (1979-1980): 647.

⁸ Kahin, "Political Polarization," p. 648.

⁹ Kahin, "Political Polarization," p. 656.

¹⁰ "Statistical information about casualties of the Vietnam War," *The National Archives*, last modified February 2007, accessed March 14, 2012, <http://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html>.

and PAVN who paid the largest toll of military deaths of 1.3 million.¹¹ The focus of U.S bombings in the North and indiscriminate use of the toxic herbicide Agent Orange over rural areas to root out the hidden insurgents leveled cities, polluted the environment, and were large factors behind Vietnamese civilian casualties estimated between 1.1 to 1.4 million in 1965-1974.¹²

What of the survivors? This chapter explores how a husband and wife in the former French resort city of Da Lat in South Vietnam experienced an overwhelming, national conflict by consciously assembling their internal thoughts to define normality during wartime and constructing their behavior around their definitions. Trần Ti Phú, seventy-one years old, and Trần Minh Mẫn, eighty years old, met in 1956 in Da Lat when they were both at work in separate jobs. As Trần Minh Mẫn describes it in a way only someone who has been married for over fifty years can: “See, I was working at this place and she was also there helping someone. And...two people loved each other and got married.”¹³ Their filial loyalty, work ethic, and sense of duty defined them as individuals and brought them together as a couple surviving the Vietnam War. The pair confronted the national conflict encroaching into the private spheres of their lives with an adamant desire for the stability and economic security that employment provided. Despite the war disrupting and upending their daily lives, Trần Ti Phú and Trần Minh Mẫn sought and maintained a particular status quo through their individual labors.

¹¹ Estimates taken from the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense (Comptroller), SEA Statistical Summary, Table 860B, February 18, 1976; Table 865, April 15, 1976, quoted in as quoted in Guenter Lewy, “Appendix I: Civilian Casualties,” *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 451.

¹² Estimates taken from USAID/Public Health; U.S Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee to Investigate Problems Connected with Refugees and Escapees, *Humanitarian Problems in South Vietnam and Cambodia: Two Years After the Cease-Fire*, A Study Mission Report, 94th Congress, 1st session, January 27, 1975, quoted in Lewy, “Appendix I,” p. 445.

¹³ Trần Minh Mẫn, interview by author, Da Lat, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

At the time of their interviews, Trần Ti Phú and Trần Minh Mẫn were the oldest woman and man interviewed for this Senior Independent Study at the ages of seventy-one and eighty, respectively. Both spouses were born into the French colonial rule of former Indochina, observed the French administration leave and the Japanese replace them in World War II, saw the French return and fail to reestablish authority, and finally witnessed Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh defeat the French at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Trần Ti Phú and Trần Minh Mẫn could have remarked on these significant moments in history, but they did not. Husband and wife, in separate interviews, were soft-spoken, quiet, and contemplative when giving their answers. They instead chose to comment on their various jobs, their children, and home life. While war, destruction, and chaos ensued in the nearby mountains outside of Da Lat, Trần Ti Phú and Trần Minh Mẫn created a reality in which small-scale everyday functions overruled the greater concerns of politicians and military tacticians.

Trần Minh Mẫn was born in the Hai Hung province of the Red River Delta in 1932, but does not call it home. Orphaned early in life and hesitant to provide further details about his parents' death, Trần Minh Mẫn seamlessly transitions from the loss of his parents to his travels to Saigon to work for an elderly man.

Your parents died when you were...

Very young.

Do you remember the year or how old you were?

I don't remember...I know I worked as an aide for another person. The man, he died in Saigon. He, his name is Nhai, he died in Saigon.

Your father died in Saigon...

No, that's not it. The man who I followed and worked for. He took care of me after...

When your parents died, he took you in?

That's right.

Who was he? What did he do?

He was a scribe and maintenance keeper for the temples. I would help him around the house, cook meals, clean up, things like that.

And you followed him to Saigon...

Yes, I went with him to Saigon, and he died in Binh Duong, near Saigon, outside of the city.

So you never lived in Saigon? You were about to, but you never...

Ah, after that, I went to Binh Hoa where I was an aide for a man who sold pho. And after that, I came here.

You were alone since childhood? You didn't have any siblings?

No.

And you had to follow anyone who...

Well, yes, like the old man to Saigon – who died before reaching it – and who transcribed at temples.

With all this traveling, did you get an education?

No, just worked in the house. I did anything that they asked, did laundry, that's all.

But when you were young, did you go to school?

No. I studied very little.

What grade did you stop going to school?

It was...well, it was the grade when I didn't need to keep going to school anymore. I dropped out and worked full time. Where would I find the money to be able to go to school? I was working as a house aide to people, there was no time for school. I studied very little. Enough to know how to read and write.

In Asian cultures, adult children traditionally provide the financial support and caretaking of their ageing parents, which is typically done usually through co-residence.¹⁴

Elders in Confucius Asian societies such as Vietnam, Korea, and Taiwan prefer to live with a married son and perceive having a son as crucial for their well-being and expect

¹⁴ John Knodel, Jed Friedman, Truong Si Anh, and Bui The Cuong, "Intergenerational exchanges in Vietnam: Family size, sex composition, and the location of children," *Population Studies* 54 (2000): 89.



4-1 Trần Minh Mẫn in front of his family home in Da Lat, Vietnam. Photo taken by author.

him to materially support them later in life.¹⁵ When an elder person does not have children to assist them, however, the questions of how childless elders fend for themselves have few empirical studies or answers.¹⁶ One solution could have been what Trần Minh Mẫn was hired to do at a young age: perform the role of an unpaid domestic servant and caretaker for a childless elderly man.

This is the best way to describe Trần Minh Mẫn's childhood in which he was

thrust into the employment of single elderly men with no family of their own to provide support. Even at the age of eighty and considered a distinguished elder himself, Trần Minh Mẫn speaks of his former employers in respectful tones. Trần Minh Mẫn does not resent his employers or blame his orphan status as the reason why he could not finish school, but accepts that economic security was more important than pursuing an education. An orphaned child with no siblings, Trần Minh Mẫn demonstrates his self-identification with finding steady employment and accepting authority from superiors. As

¹⁵ Arland Thornton and Hui-Sheng Lin, *Social Change and the Family in Taiwan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) and Ik Ki Kim, Jersey Liang, Ka-Oak Rhee, and Cheong-Seok Kim, "Population aging in Korea: changes since the 1960s," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 11 (1996): 369-388, quoted in Knodel et al., "Intergenerational exchanges," p. 90.

¹⁶ Robert Rubenstein, "Childless elderly: theoretical perspectives and practical concerns," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 2 (1987): 1-14 and Siriwan Siriboon and John Knodel, "Thai elderly who do not coreside with their children," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 9 (1994): 21-28, quoted in Knodel et al., "Intergenerational exchanges," p. 99.

the interview progresses, Trần Minh Mẫn's remarks regarding his occupation during the war indicate how his identity revolves around employment and its availability. One job in particular defined Trần Minh Mẫn's experience throughout the Vietnam War. For almost twenty years, from 1956 to the end of the war in 1975, Trần Minh Mẫn was employed by the South Vietnamese military's postal service at a station on the edge of the city. As one of a handful of postal workers stationed at the military barracks in the city, Trần Minh Mẫn found job security in a modest position as a mail sorter and packager. He describes his job with humility. There was not much to it; his days involved sorting and organizing the mail in a small office. The analysis of Trần Minh Mẫn's career choices in adulthood is contextualized within his childhood of self-reliance. The Vietnam War provided Trần Minh Mẫn a steady job and income which consequently defined his purpose and identity throughout the years of the conflict.

So you went into the military, but you didn't get sent to the frontlines.

No, I only worked in the post office, just sorting mail. I would go out to the airport, get the shipment of mail, sort it, and the mailmen would pick it up and deliver the mail to the officers.

How many years did you work there?

Let's see...it was 1956 to...the end of the war.

In 1975?

Yes, it was 1975.

Wow. So that was close to 20 years. Do you know how much you made a day?

No, but I think it was something similar to what one would make today. Around 3,000,000d a month.

So did you consider yourself well-off?

Well we were paid only once a month. And it was 3,000,000d...

Was that enough to take care of your family?

Huh? Well, no, at that time I was still single!

When did you get married and start a family? You said that you worked there for 20 years and during that time you must have had children?

I met my wife in 1956 and we have been together since.

And were you able to stay in your house during your employment?

No, I didn't have to go out into the jungle to fight. I stayed in Da Lat the entire time. I wasn't part of the military that went out to fight.

So every morning, you would get up and go to work, and after work, you would come home for dinner?

I didn't have to go into the jungle to fight, no. Just remained in the city and worked at the post office.

And why didn't you join that part of the military that required combat fighting?

It was still the military, just in the city.

Was it your choice to stay in the city or were you assigned your post?

I chose it, of course.

The examination of this passage necessitates three questions that oral historian Michael Frisch asserts requires raising. The first question is what sort of person is speaking? The second, what sort of thing are they saying? Third, what sort of statements are they making about it?¹⁷ With the exception of the wealthy elites and notable leaders or organizers, the spectrum of public and private lives parallels the spectrum of individual power and position in society.¹⁸ Frisch makes the case for examining the who, what, and how of an interview in the context of the individual's place in society. Trần Minh Mẫn and Trần Ti Phú repeatedly claim positions of modest, working class people within the social structure. The question is why they choose to perceive themselves as such and what it means in the context of telling war stories.

Trần Minh Mẫn's narrative does not indicate any shame for being absent from the fighting. There is no guilt behind the statement that he "chose" the task of a military

¹⁷ Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority* (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), p. 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

postal service worker instead of a fighter stationed at the front. Consider Trần Minh Mẫn's comment that he "didn't have to go into the jungle to fight, no. Just remained in the city and worked at the post office."¹⁹ He insists that his occupation was within the realm of military importance, even if it was just "in the city."²⁰ The mention his participation in the military in which he helped the South Vietnamese cause – but only to a limited extent – demonstrates Trần Minh Mẫn's position within a collective wartime experience. He was neither a coward because of his exemption from combat duties nor was he an ineffectual contributor to the war effort. Indeed, Trần Minh Mẫn provided an invaluable service to the military as a mailman while simultaneously tending to his responsibilities as a husband and father. In war, the primary objective for civilian and combatant alike is to survive. At a time when choices were swept away from men conscripted into war, Trần Minh Mẫn's decision to maintain a modest, stable job is an understandably preferable alternative.

In response to two consecutive questions about how he balanced the demands of work and the duties of family, Trần Minh Mẫn made clear that he did not have to engage in any physical combat. Shying away from descriptions of his home life, Trần Minh Mẫn replaces details of intimate family life with assertions about his job security.

When did you get married and start a family? You said that you worked there for 20 years and during that time you must have had children?

I met my wife in 1956 and we have been together since.

And were you able to stay in your house during your employment?

No, I didn't have to go out into the jungle to fight. I stayed in Da Lat the entire time. I wasn't part of the military that went out to fight.

¹⁹ Trần Minh Mẫn, interview by author, Da Lat, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

²⁰ Ibid.

So every morning, you would get up and go to work, and after work, you would come home for dinner?

I didn't have to go into the jungle to fight, no. Just remained in the city and worked at the post office.

These details delivered in short answers are mere facts about Trần Minh Mẫn's life, not a deeper reflection of his feelings or thoughts on being away from his family. I articulated family-related questions with the purpose of encouraging him to discuss his home life. Despite this, Trần Minh Mẫn affixed himself to answers which portray him as a responsible military employee who remained out of harm's way for the sake of his family.

One of the goals of an oral history interview is to encourage the narrator to reflect and not to simply tell. There is a keen difference between an individual repeating facts about the past and critically reviewing how they experienced it. Perfect memory from interviewees is not the primary goal of oral historians. Rather, it is the subtle, yet telling process of remembering and reflecting that oral historians, through different questions and approaches, encourage narrators to experience within the interview. There is no proper name or designation for this "reflective" style of interviews; however, it is an objective that Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki suggest in the method of Deep Listening.²¹ Michael Frisch's model of Shared Authority also emphasizes reflection over the simple debriefing technique that earlier oral historians such as Allan Nevins practiced.²² The trust that the narrator places in his or her interviewer determines whether they are more likely to reflect on their experience rather than regurgitate facts.²³ It is

²¹ Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, "Only Human: A Reflection on the Challenges of Working with 'Difficult Stories,'" *The Oral History Review* 37:2 (2010): 199.

²² Frisch, *A Shared Authority*, p. 8.

²³ Frisch, *A Shared Authority*, p. 12.

ultimately the cultivation of trust between interviewer and interviewee that engenders a truly open interview.

Who was I, a twenty-one year old American college student, to develop trust with distinguished elders of their family and community? Single interviews with Trần Minh Mẫn and Trần Ti Phú hardly grant enough time to build a level of confidence among interviewer and narrators; the process of trust-building is not something that can be rushed.²⁴ The time limitations of this oral history project, in which I stayed in Da Lat for a brief four days, affected the number of interviews I could conduct with Trần Minh Mẫn and Trần Ti Phú. As the passage above demonstrates, although Trần Minh Mẫn speaks approvingly of his choice to remain in relative safety inside city limits during the war, he does not reflect on how the decision affected him and his family. For an individual to seriously contemplate their past actions is a demanding request from interviewers. After all, any reflection could result in an altered conclusion that strays from the narrator's fixed judgments and, more importantly, their carefully constructed identity. Deep listening and reflection necessitates time and trust, two things this oral history project could not definitively accomplish.

Time limitations do not necessarily result in unsuccessful attempts at uncovering meaning from Trần Minh Mẫn and Trần Ti Phú's stories. In a separate interview with Trần Ti Phú, she demonstrates how the domestic concerns of taking care of her children and the family's small vending business centrally featured in memories of her wartime experience.

²⁴ Linda Shopes, "Sharing Authority," *Oral History Review* 30 (2003): 103, quoted in Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, "Only Human: A Reflection on the Ethical and Methodological Challenges of Working with 'Difficult' Stories," *Oral History Review* 37 (2010): 195.

And during the war, you sold groceries as usual...were any of your children in school? How many?

There were seven children in the household who went to school. And the eldest son, he died young. He was very sick and died. So the rest of the children, there were eight, they went to school.

Eight children?

Eight...

Wow. So at the time, you were busy working and taking care of the children.

That's right, I sold groceries at our vendor stand out front. And then I raise the children inside the house.

All this time, were you getting any help?

No, my husband was occupied with working for the American military. And when I say American military, I don't mean that he was out there fighting.

Was he able to help out by sending home his wages?

His salary was...at that time, the salary was very low. My husband definitely sent money home, but it was too little, not enough to eat on. So I would take on more work. I had to do an extra job. Go out to the streets and sell items, do whatever. Whenever we needed more money, more for a living and food.

And when your children grew up and older, did any of them help you out?

Well, now that my children are grown and have finished school, then yes, we are a connected family. Each family...takes care of themselves and each other.

Trần Minh Mẫn did not live with his family when he served in the military. For the greater part of twenty years, Trần Minh Mẫn was not a permanent resident at his family home. Like her husband, Trần Ti Phú mentions that Trần Minh Mẫn was never sent into a real combat scenario. This recurring detail expressed by both spouses suggests their perceptions on how Trần Minh Mẫn's absence affected the family organization.

Confucian traditions prescribe that a woman's sphere is "domestically oriented."²⁵

A woman's role is that of nurturer and caretaker, but she is also a patient companion waiting for her husband or male relatives to return home from the battlefield. War is

²⁵ Bussarawan Teerawichitchainan, John Knodel, Vu Man Loi, and Vu Tuan Huy, "The Gender Division of Household Labor in Vietnam: Cohorts Trends and Regional Variations," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 41 (2010): 61.

oftentimes fought under the banner of protection of the women and children.²⁶ For nineteen years while her husband worked for the military post office and lived at the Da Lat military station, Trần Ti Phú waited for Trần Minh Mẫn. The account of their lives during the Vietnam War, however, is not a love story about a couple who pine for each other every day they are separated by war. This is a survival story of husband and wife working to keep their family together.

Trần Ti Phú's insistence that her husband never fought in real battle indicates an inverted family values system. Instead of her husband, the traditional patriarch in Vietnamese society, she was the head of the household when Trần Minh Mẫn lived outside of the family home. His living conditions meant that Trần Minh Mẫn could not actively perform the role of husband and father during the war. However, because he worked in the city, there was little concern and doubt over whether he would safely return. This distinction may explain why both spouses recollect this detail of Trần Minh Mẫn's exemption from combat. In wartime, Trần Minh Mẫn and Trần Ti Phú disregarded the conventional patriarchal family organization in favor of maintaining a sense of stability through Trần Ti Phú's ascension of the leadership role. They remark on Trần Minh Mẫn's lack of battle experience as a means to express relief that the patriarch did not risk his life and would resume his position after the war.

With only one interview conducted with both spouses, the reason for mentioning Trần Minh Mẫn's military responsibility and lack of combat duty remains ambiguous. However, Trần Ti Phú was undoubtedly an authority figure at home. Trần Ti Phú was and continues to be a shrewd business woman who knew how to make a dollar stretch and understood the value of labor. Women in Southeast Asia are traditionally known for

²⁶ Nira Yuval-Davis, "Nationalist Projects and Gender Relations," *Nar unjet* 40 (2003): 9.

being economically active, especially in the petty trading and vending that Trần Ti Phú describes engaging in throughout the war.²⁷ Power differences between husband and wife determine the division of labor within a household and the spouses developed a routine during wartime in which they divided responsibilities.²⁸ While Trần Minh Mẫn sent his steady income home to support his family, Trần Ti Phú, who received day-to-day profits as a petty trader and vendor, was more focused on maintaining order in the household. The Vietnam War forced a separation between the married couple and consequently lessened Trần Minh Mẫn's authority as the traditional male figurehead. By raising the children, conducting household chores, and economically supporting the family with her husband, Trần Ti Phú assumed the authoritative role while Trần Minh Mẫn was absent from home.

However, Trần Ti Phú's comments about the family's finances do not reflect this apparent power shift. Financial decisions were still made with input from both spouses. When she recalls how she fixed up the plot of land that she and Trần Minh Mẫn bought at lowered property rates, she speaks with pride and excitement in her voice. Trần Ti Phú recounts how she saved her money and made plans for spending it:

I didn't have to make house payments. When we first moved here, we bought the land for only 2,000d! Yes, it was only 2,000d then. And there were some fruit trees and plants on the land which I cleared. And we cleared it all and decided that this was where we will build our house. And our home was small at first. In front was where we sold groceries and things during the day. Any money we saved went towards adding more to the house.

Although Trần Ti Phú worked outside of the home and received an income independent from her husband, she refers to their finances in joint terms. Statements such as "we bought the land" and "any money we saved..." imply the couple's shared property

²⁷ Teerawichitchainan et al, "The Gender Division of Household Labor in Vietnam," p. 59.

²⁸ Teerawichitchainan et al, "The Gender Division of Household Labor in Vietnam," p. 60.

ownership and collaboration.²⁹ The physical absence of her husband did not diminish the appearance of marital partnership. As the mother of eight children and wife of a husband who was rarely home, but assuredly safe, Trần Ti Phú's emphasis on filial duty constructed a sense of normality that translated through her everyday chores and work.

Indeed, the demands and distractions of work and family took precedent in the thoughts of Trần Ti Phú and Man Minh Tan. Opinions about politicians' actions or certain political affiliations were replaced with concerns over food prices, raising the children, and maintaining the household. When Man Minh Tan first heard of the end of the Vietnam War when the PAVN and Viet Cong infiltrated Saigon on April 30, 1975, he expressed concerns that things under the new government would not return to "normal" as he perceived it.

And when the war was officially over, what other occupation did you find?

I helped sell groceries and items in front of the house, that's all. We sold vegetables and things, nothing really. I've done it before, and it was really my wife who did it, but I helped her.

So when you heard that the South had lost, you said you were afraid, but were you sad at all?

I was just afraid at first because I didn't know if things would be the same with the communist leaders. But then I realized that it wasn't going to be that bad or that much different, and I was only away for seven days. The others, the higher ranked soldiers, they had more to be afraid of. They went to reeducation camp for three, five years. But even at three, five years, the country still would have let them come home.

If there was never a war in Vietnam, do you think your life could have been different?

No, I don't think so. I would still be an average citizen and if I were to continue working as a domestic aide, I would have eventually had to break off and find my own means of living. I'm an ordinary person, so how could I oppose anything?

Trần Minh Mẫn's memories of his childhood in which he repeatedly used the word "follow" to describe his service to older men in positions of power manifests in his risk analysis of living under a new communist order. His childhood laid the foundation for his

²⁹ Trần Ti Phú, interview by author, Da Lat, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

ability to accept authority and desire peace and stability. Furthermore, his position as a low-ranking military auxiliary employee who never directly fought the communist forces assured his short-lived penance of seven days at *trại học tập cải tạo*, otherwise known as the feared reeducation camps.

Cải tạo detention centers were established by the reunified government, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, in 1975 in which thousands of former members of the armed forces and administration of the Republic of Vietnam were detained without formal charges.³⁰ The ostensible objective of reeducation camps was to teach the South Vietnamese people, almost exclusively men, to assimilate and reconcile with the new communist government. Reeducation camps were meant to last only a week and to take place relatively near the homes of the South Vietnamese detainees. However, the sentences turned into extended imprisonment lasting up to several years and were oftentimes located in the remote areas of North Vietnam. Even though Trần Minh Mẫn served the Republic of Vietnam, he was never at risk of a prolonged detention because of his status as low-ranking employee. Nothing about his position suggested that he possessed political motivations or ideologies during the Vietnam War. Indeed, he states that he was just an ordinary person who could not oppose anything, including forced detention without due process.³¹

Similarly, Trần Ti Phú expressed no interests in competing political ideologies. As a young child growing up in the countryside, the Vietnam War claimed her older brother who died fighting for the Viet Minh early in the war.

³⁰ “Report of an Amnesty International Mission to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam,” *Amnesty International*, June 1, 1981, Accessed March 14, 2012, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA41/005/1981/en>.

³¹ Trần Minh Mẫn, interview by author, Da Lat, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

Did your father fight in the war?

My father, no. My father at that time stayed at home to work.

And your brothers?

My brothers...one went to fight with the Americans, the other joined the communists. In the countryside at that time, men were being called to fight and then they had to follow. The communists were there, the Americans were there.

What did you and your parents think of one brother fighting with the North and the other fighting for the South?

With that, I didn't understand very much. It's just in the countryside, there were more communists and so you went into the military with the communists.

So your brother simply followed...

Yes, he had to go along. It's like the American military, if you lived near the American military, then you join the American military.

Which brother joined the communists? Was it your older brother?

It was my older brother, but he's dead now.

Your brother was the eldest? You were the second child.

And now there's only my younger brother, the one who went into the American military. Now he lives in Dien Binh Phu. And the brother who fought with the communists, he dead, lost now.

How old was he when he joined the communists?

He was...twenty, twenty something years old.

Twenty seven years old?

That was...that...no, not twenty seven. Then, he was twenty four or twenty two. I can't remember definitely.

What about the brother who went into the American military? How old was he?

Back then, he was...twenty something years old. I can't really remember.

And during the war, was your family worried that your brothers were fighting on opposite sides? That they could potentially face each other?

Of course we were worried. But my brother who joined the other side, he died early; he wasn't in the war for very long.

Your brother on which side?

My brother on the, well you would call them the Viet Minh. He went and he died, died early, still young.

Do you remember the year?

The year...no, I can't remember.

In your family were two brothers who fought on opposite sides, but did you ever hope in your mind for which side to win and which side to lose? Having both brothers in the war, did you ever have these thoughts?

When I think about it...I was just afraid, afraid of fighting each other and dying. But my brother, he died early.

Trần Ti Phú's family had two sons: the youngest who put on a South Vietnamese uniform and survived, the eldest who walked into the jungle with the Viet Cong and perished. Despite the brothers' allegiances to polarizing sides of the conflict, it did not divide their family. Trần Ti Phú's explanation for why her elder brother enlisted with the Viet Cong was simply that "there were more communists and so you went into the military with the communists" in the countryside where they resided.³² As Trần Ti Phú observes, conditions dictate which side a South Vietnamese citizen follows. The determining factor, according to Trần Ti Phú, behind her brothers joining the North and South militaries was not due to any deliberated political ideology. Rather, it is the time and place of an individual's circumstances that influence their decisions.

Trần Ti Phú repeats the fact that her brother was killed early in the war, mentioning it five times throughout the above passage. Why this repetition? Why does she find it necessary to emphasize her brother's early departure from the war? It is difficult, and perhaps presumptuous, to speculate that Trần Ti Phú felt the need to compensate for her older brother joining the "wrong side" of the war by restating that he died before having any more involvement with the war. Regardless of the political motivations behind Trần Ti Phú's brother joining the Viet Cong or why she chose to portray his participation in the war as short-lived, Trần Ti Phú's repeated comments

³² Trần Ti Phú, interview by author, Da Lat, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

reflect her eagerness to discuss another topic. Her short answers often concluded with the restatement of her brother's death, implying that she desired to end the conversation.

Encouraging a reflective assessment of her brother's death and what it meant to her family, I attempted to address the topic with different approaches. The first tactic was to inquire whether she worried about her brothers potentially facing each other in combat. Trần Ti Phú resolved the issue with the fact that her older brother "died early" and that "he wasn't in the war for very long."³³ Another approach attempted to open discussion on whether Trần Ti Phú was conflicted over which side to support due to her brothers' opposing allegiances. Her response, once again, came easily: "When I think about it...I was just afraid, afraid of fighting each other and dying. But my brother, he died early."³⁴ The questioning about her brother had concluded; it was time to move onto another topic. As the only interviewee I encountered in Vietnam who declined to be filmed on camera, it is not surprising that Trần Ti Phú closely guarded her responses about such an intimate topic when talking to a relative stranger.

Trần Minh Mẫn and Trần Ti Phú's childhood experiences determined their perceived position as ordinary and average citizens. The couple declared on more than one occasion that they were part of the "average" public and therefore had no thoughts on the political situation surrounding them. What did they think of President Ngo Dinh Diem's assassination in 1963 and how it may have impacted their lives in South Vietnam? Neither spouse mentioned him or any other political figures in their interviews. The couple's acceptance of their "ordinary" and "average" status allowed them to undertake immediate problems such as their finances and home life rather than worry

³³ Trần Ti Phú, interview by author, Da Lat, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

³⁴ Ibid.

about decisions that were beyond their control. They were never burdened with the overwhelming and broad questions of Vietnamese nationalism or American interventionism – or so they say within their interview sessions.

It is unclear whether Trần Minh Mẫn and Trần Ti Phú, who have had over three decades since the final stages of the Vietnam War to arrange their political opinions towards the many agents in war, were completely open about their thoughts on communism and the American involvement. I was to them an American youth and relative stranger whose political allegiances were unknown. The couple's insistence of their status as average citizens who were swept up in the war like everyone else indicates their desire for normality even after the war. To a certain extent, Trần Minh Mẫn and Trần Ti Phú blocked out the war that surrounded them in order to preserve themselves and their family. It was in this concentration of work and family that two people created balance in a period of chaos and claimed individual agency in times of great vulnerability.

CHAPTER FIVE

“THERE WAS NO TIME TO THINK”¹: ADOLESCENCE, MANHOOD, AND CHOICE

To what extent did growing up with the knowledge and anticipation of conscription into the Vietnam War affect the mentalities and behaviors of young men in South Vietnam? Separate interviews with Trần Văn Đạt and Lê Gia, two men who were conscripted into the Vietnam War at age eighteen and served as auxiliary personnel and administrative workers for the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF), reveal how they perceived their participation in the war as an inevitable, preordained future. The opinions and views expressed by Trần Văn Đạt and Lê Gia demonstrate a careful normalizing of their situation that raises contradictory experiences of masculine assertiveness and adolescent helplessness in the Vietnam War.

Political rhetoric from the Western world maintains that the Americans and South Vietnamese fought in collaborative efforts against Ho Chi Minh’s forces and the communist ideology he represented. However, South Vietnamese men and women joined forces against the North Vietnamese military for personal and individual reasons that did not originate from the overarching Cold War narrative. In the case of Trần Văn Đạt and Lê Gia, the two men enlisted into the military because it was expected of them; it was “all very normal” as Trần Văn Đạt remarked.² The South Vietnamese story of the Vietnam War is only partially a tale of outside forces imposing their will upon a small and newly independent nation. This is an age-old story about boys and men going to war because it came to them.

¹ Trần Văn Đạt, interview by author, Vũng Tàu, Vietnam, August 11, 2011.

² Ibid.

On March 8, 1965, Marine Battalion 3/9 arrived on the beach shores of Da Nang, a major port city on the southern coast of Vietnam.³ Their air team counterparts Marine Battalion 1/3 had arrived earlier that day.⁴ The first American ground troops totaling up to 3,500 men had arrived in Vietnam.⁵ The decision was made by General William C. Westmoreland, the Commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV) and whose Big Unit war strategy made him one of the most controversial figures in the Vietnam War. Westmoreland developed three stages of war comprising of (1) U.S buildup of troops; (2) use of massive power advantage and tactical mobility provided by helicopter; (3) a gradual reduction of U.S military engagements as a result of successful negotiations.⁶ While Westmoreland acknowledged that America's role in Vietnam was strategically defensive, he also advocated the conventional style of Big Unit warfare in which large numbers of American troops were needed to respond to counterinsurgency tactics. Westmoreland writes in his memoir *A Soldier Reports* published in 1976, one year after the Vietnam War officially ended:

When an insurgency rather than conventional invasion developed, many observers condemned the United States Army for having created an army in its own image. I disagree. What was the alternative – small mobile units not unlike guerrilla units? That would be to ignore the fact that in combating an insurgency, the government's forces are of necessity on the strategic defensive... Except for some special units, government forces, unlike guerillas, cannot be elusive.⁷

Counterinsurgency warfare tactics of the Viet Cong were anything but traditional.⁸

Westmoreland's conventional war strategy was, as experience demonstrated,

³ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 42.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, p. 65.

⁷ William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1976), p. 57-58.

⁸ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, p. 46.

unsuccessful in securing definitive victories against the insurgents whose presence in populated areas were ineffectively challenged.⁹

In 1966, the year Trần Văn Đật turned eighteen, the U.S military under the command of Westmoreland was continuing its offensive strategy of “search and destroy” operations in which troops were dropped into villages by helicopter to root out the Viet Cong influence. In this militaristic scheme, the Vietnam War quickly became America’s war in which the efforts of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) were considered only secondary to Westmoreland’s war of attrition.¹⁰ Despite the ARVN’s diminishing effectiveness, its divisions still needed enlisted men to join their ranks, and Trần Văn Đật was among them.

For South Vietnamese young men like Trần Văn Đật and Lê Gia in the 1960’s, the prospect of entering the military and going to war was a normal and unchallenged expectation. College entrance examinations determined whether high school graduates immediately entered into military service or advanced into higher education and pursue a professional degree. In their interviews, Trần Văn Đật and Lê Gia expressed that although they would have liked to pursue a university education, it was an unlikely prospect due to the challenging entrance exams. With parents who worked as manual labors and street vendors, both men come from lower-income families whose class positions within Vietnamese society did not create many possibilities for social mobility through education.

Therefore, Trần Văn Đật and Lê Gia were conscripted into the army immediately out of high school. Both men’s answers to questions of *why* they joined the military

⁹ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, p. 53.

¹⁰ Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam’s Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: NYU Press, 2008), p. 67.

demonstrate how they treated their predestined future of military participation as inevitable. For Trần Văn Đạt, it was a “just a given”:

What do you think was the main reason why you joined the military?

What reason? You have to go when you come of age. When you're a certain age, you go. If you scored high in the exams, you can defer for a year. But me, I couldn't do it so it was immediate entry for me! So if you didn't enter into one particular military branch, then you were conscripted into another. That is just a given. It's like your father who studied well enough and scored high, and he was allowed to continue his education. While *bac* [translation: an elder male; use: reference to himself] couldn't get high test scores, so he was conscripted right away.

Lê Gia expresses similar thoughts. However, Lê Gia is more vocal and specific about the absence of individual choice in his conscription into the military.

What year did you enter the military?

'63. And in the spring of '72, I fought the Viet Cong. [Acts out shooting]

In '63, how old were you?

About 18 or 19.

Were you out of high school then? Did you have to go into the military?

After finishing school, usually, you go into higher education. But with the war, you had to halt schooling. You were at that age – it's called the age of *dong vien* [the age of encouragement], you were forced to go into the military. They trained us for only six months.

Only six months...

They didn't teach us about politics. They didn't teach us about ideology. They didn't teach us our national identity. They didn't teach us about *máu chảy ruột mềm* [translation: when you bleed, your organs soften; when part of the country is hurt, the rest is affected]. They only taught us to shoot at enemies when we saw them. I was heartbroken. And so once I saw a soldier do a task wrong, wrong, wrong and he was beat many times by his superior. I witnessed it and knew that was not right. In the end, we all wore the badge of officers, we should have talked to one another first or settled it respectfully. And since then, I didn't like it. I didn't.

To compare and contrast the extraordinarily different interview sessions I conducted with Trần Văn Đạt and Lê Gia, an analysis of their narratives requires an honest self-positioning. Vietnam is a country of contrasts, and its observance of dualities was represented in two separate interviews with Trần Văn Đạt and Lê Gia. Trần Văn Đạt is an old friend of my father who, an ocean away from his home in Beaverton, Oregon,

facilitated the opportunity to interview his friend through several e-mails with informally organized veterans' networks in South Vietnam. I was introduced to Lê Gia by his neighbor, my cousin-in-law in Da Lat, Vietnam. I met Lê Gia in his home office before immediately starting the interview. In both instances, I entered the interview space with approval given by older and respected authorities. Trần Văn Đạt and Lê Gia were told beforehand that I was an American college student conducting research while in Vietnam. Although this indeed created preconceived biases from the narrators, this foretold knowledge of my purposes for visiting Vietnam may have worked in my favor. Vietnam, among other Southeast Asian societies influenced by Confucius philosophies, highly praises educational pursuits. After all, as a Confucius proverb states, "a scholar is a blessing for every family."

The narrators and I both came into the interview sessions with our own assumptions about how we would interact with each other and how the interview would flow. R. Kenneth Kirby's method of Phenomenology endorses the "bracketing" of the interviewer's predetermined opinions on a certain topic or situation.¹¹ Taking the lessons gained from previous experiences interviewing South Vietnamese-American veterans for my Junior Independent Study, I have since learned never to enter any interview space with fixed ideas about a person's political or individual motivations in wartime. Although I did not expect to receive answers that would confirm a particular argument or theory, I certainly anticipated encountering obstacles with Lê Gia, a relative stranger. With Trần Văn Đạt, I had hoped to carry on a natural conversation due to his friendship with my father.

¹¹ R. Kenneth Kirby, "Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 35:1 (2008): 22-23.

I was proven wrong on both counts. Given the connection I had with Trần Văn Đạt through my father, I approached the interview space with the presumption of his openness and readiness to engage in the Deep Listening reflective interview style. He was not. Lê Gia, a stranger to me before I walked into his home office, eagerly performed descriptive story-telling with little to no initiation from my questions. “I will sell you my book,” Lê Gia said at the beginning of the interview. “My book and stories are open to you.”¹² While Lê Gia’s statement may seem like the best sort of gift to oral historians, it is still necessary to examine both interviews under the methodologies of Deep Listening, Phenomenology, and Voice. The different levels of engagement partaken by the two men created unique interview experiences that necessitate analysis in order to reveal their meaning.

Trần Văn Đạt’s and Lê Gia’s responses to the question of why they enlisted into the military establish their different approaches to their interviews. Where one was guarded, the other was open. Trần Văn Đạt’s matter-of-fact explanation of military exemptions and the “given” alternative option of entering the military demonstrate his willingness to accept the inevitable outcome of his childhood.¹³ Lê Gia, however, claims that when one became of age, “you were *forced* to go into the military” (italics added).¹⁴ The use of second person point-of-view implies that Lê Gia identified with other men his age who experienced the same dilemma. The word “force” also demonstrates that Lê Gia felt that he had little agency and choice in his participation with the war.

Unprompted by a specific question about his training experience with the RVNAF, Lê Gia’s self-initiated story of his dissatisfying, anxiety-inducing six months of

¹² Lê Gia, interviewed by author, Da Lat, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

¹³ Trần Văn Đạt, interview by author, Vũng Tàu, Vietnam, August 11, 2011.

¹⁴ Lê Gia, interviewed by author, Da Lat, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

training draws an ambiguous line between true reflection and rehearsed story. Again, the key questions of an oral history interview are raised.¹⁵ Who is speaking? What are they saying? How are they saying it? A former math teacher, the now retired Lê Gia enjoys tutoring his grandchildren. Speaking to a young American student about his position in a highly politicized and contested war, it is possible that Lê Gia perceived the interview as a chance to state his opinions and to also educate. However, doubt about Lê Gia's truthfulness is certainly unwarranted. He did not bend or make up facts about the Vietnam War to present himself advantageously within the interview.

When Voice, the method of analyzing nonverbal communication and interpreting the interview as equal parts conversation and performance, is applied to Lê Gia's interview, it is apparent that he is a natural story-teller.¹⁶ Lê Gia engaged in several techniques to enhance the meaning of his stories: making hand gestures and facial expressions, using nearby objects as props, and switching points of view to signify when another person's opinions were being expressed. Lê Gia's oratory talents raise the question of whether he reflected, to an extent, on his experiences or used the interview to impart his fixed opinions. It is unclear whether Lê Gia elaborated and "performed" certain stories through the use of Voice or if this is just his natural way of speaking. The ambiguous nature of Lê Gia's narrative nonetheless exposes layers of meaning of his experience during the Vietnam War and how he chooses to remember it almost four decades after its conclusion. If a person can manage to block memories of an event even while its reminders are fresh and contemporarily present, then it is hardly fair to expect

¹⁵ Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority* (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), p. 10.

¹⁶ Rhonda Y. Williams, "'I'm a Keeper of Information': History-Telling and Voice," *The Oral History Review* 28:1 (2001): 41-63.

narrators like Lê Gia and Trần Văn Đạt to relate to a more complex and distant past.¹⁷ Memory is selective and imperfect, but it is the act of remembering and telling one's memories, regardless of its spontaneous or affected nature, that produce subtext and meaning in a personal narrative.

Lê Gia was born in 1944 near Hue, the tempestuous central city of broiling hot days and torrential monsoons that symbolically connects North and South. The city's location in the center made it an ideal place for the seat of government and it was the nation's capital from the 19th century under the Nguyen Dynasty to 1945 when Bao Dai, Vietnam's last emperor, abdicated. Lê Gia's parents were working class laborers; his father maintained and landscaped the home of a French colonist, his mother tended to the household and made treats to sell for a small profit.¹⁸ After World War II, Lê Gia's family relocated to Da Lat where he was raised. While growing up in Da Lat, Lê Gia recalls his first awareness of communism at the impressionable age of eight.

In your childhood, when were you first aware of the communists?

Thank you for the interesting question, Child. When I was about...eight, nine, ten years old, there was a young man named Thanh Nim who was maybe twenty-two years old. Almost out of the blue, he disappeared and I had no idea where he went until four or five years later. Suddenly he returns. He wore a uniform of green slacks, sandals, a t-shirt with insignia on it, his hair was high-cut, his face youthful. He was very...handsome, impressive! And later he assembled all the children of the neighborhood and he would practice songs, he would tell stories, and finally, some children would ask, "This fellow in the past lived in our neighborhood! He didn't know *anything*! How is it that he's so remarkable! He can tell any story so well!" And so, we finally asked him what happened and he said, "I am That Li!"

What does that mean –

He said "I am That Li. I left the South and went to the North. I follow the Cộng sản. And that was the first time that I met a communist – that I knew what one was. A person from our neighborhood leaves for five or six years and returns. He returns and he is drastically different from his former self. He became so elevated from before. In the past, he was just average, a nice person, but very ordinary. And when he came back, he was so impressive, so intelligent.

¹⁷ Frisch, *A Shared Authority*, p. 17.

¹⁸ Lê Gia, interview by author, Da Lat, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

War is considered a rite of passage into manhood; it marks the end of childhood. The disciplined, elusive, and effectual National Liberation Front, better known as the Viet Cong, offered young men the opportunity to transform into their ideal heroes, warriors, and patriots. The Viet Cong and its insurgency tactics were established when ten thousand communist agents secretly remained in South Vietnam after the 1954 partition.¹⁹ Unlike the spontaneous nature of popular insurgencies, creating the Viet Cong was a deliberate decision made by Hanoi, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).²⁰ With the formation of the Viet Cong, the political goals of the DRV shifted from a popular uprising to an armed struggle.²¹ The Viet Cong engaged in “systematic terror” tactics such as infiltrating rural South Vietnamese villages, assuming authority in local governments, and assassinating local leaders and middle-class intelligentsia such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers.²²

Why did one join the Viet Cong? One reason was that the South Vietnamese government certainly did not endear itself to rural village communities. When the Viet Cong recruited a village inhabitant, arrested or executed a townsman, they unfailingly gave a rationale, however unfair, for their actions. South Vietnamese government officials, on the other hand, punished villagers and conscripted men with little or no justification. Thus, actions by the Viet Cong could be forgiven because they were always explained while government officials created needless resentment by remaining silent and domineering.²³ Appealing to the Vietnamese sense of patriotism and nationalism was another recruitment method used by the Viet Cong. While the South Vietnamese

¹⁹ Anthony James Joes, *The War for South Vietnam*, p. 46.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Joes, *The War for South Vietnam*, pp. 47-49.

government conscripted men into the RVNAF, the Viet Cong promised better alternatives: shortened enlistment periods and assignments nearer home.²⁴ Collaborating with the Viet Cong could also lead to higher education, professional advancement, and promotions in the Viet Cong military or politics.²⁵ “Going into the jungle,” a term used by some Vietnamese like Trần Ti Phú to indicate joining Viet Cong forces,²⁶ “meant an escape from the drudgery of peasant life and a real chance to step up in the world.”²⁷

Why didn’t Lê Gia join the Viet Cong when his older neighbor That Li suddenly returned home, transformed from an “average,” “ordinary” young man into the manifestation of masculinity? With descriptions of That Li’s proper dress, high-cut hair, and intelligence, Lê Gia considered these traits as evidence of manhood. Through That Li’s conversion, Lê Gia witnessed first-hand how joining the military, a fraternity that necessitates physical strength and mental toughness, and necessarily advocates death and violence, could turn boys into men. Images of valor, courage, endurance, and maturity are intimately related to the male role in social and military affairs.²⁸ The image of an immaculately dressed and well-groomed soldier inspired feelings of admiration and respect in the adolescent, easily influenced Lê Gia. But the young Lê Gia was not impressed enough to go into the jungle himself. In fact, Lê Gia expresses his dislike of war in general.

Did you think that the Americans came into Vietnam to help the South or did you think their presence was hurtful?

If the Americans came into Vietnam to help us because another country had attacked us, then that is absolutely justified – one hundred percent. If we were fighting an outside enemy and the

²⁴ Joes, *The War for South Vietnam*, p. 50.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Trần Ti Phú, interview by author, Da Lat, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

²⁷ Joes, *The War for South Vietnam*, p. 50.

²⁸ Ali A. Mazrui, “The Warrior Tradition and the Masculinity of War,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 12 (1977): 69.

Americans came to our aide to help us gain independence, then that is completely warranted. That is when I raise both my arms and welcome them. But in this case, we had the North and the South, two sides divided, two brothers fighting each other, and brother America comes in to fight one brother and kick around another – what for, in the end? One side gets attacked by the Americans, the other gets pushed. Do you see? That’s not right. If the Americans wanted to help, then it should have been through advice, money, aide. Then that would be right. But to go in and point guns and shoot the Vietnamese...even if it had been the...if it was the Philippines or Thailand we were fighting...but this was the North and South fighting each other...in the end, who is dying? Our brothers died. Brothers from one house putting on masks [idiom] to fight; brothers from one family putting on masks [idiom] to fight, and outsiders coming in to fan the flames [idiom] while the two brothers knock heads and the outside world laughs at them. Dreadful, very dreadful. And if, once the Americans entered the war, the North had stopped fighting and the South had stopped fighting, and if they had said, “No, we will work this out ourselves,” then that would have been smart. That would have been the best thing to do for Vietnam. Did you know Child, that for some thirty years of war...*how many* millions of people died...among them were civilians, youth and elders...you could say that it didn’t matter young, old, men, women, everyone dies when the bombs hit. War does not spare anyone. Spares no one. So I look back on the thirty so years of war in Vietnam and I get sad, I don’t agree. So, Child, you see Germany? They no longer fight. And Korea...South Korea and North Korea, they settled things. They sometimes get into small conflicts, but they don’t fight. That’s because they are one people. And we are awful at it, we’ve failed at it.

But you entered the military?

Of course! The Vietnamese military! For the South.

In 1956, then Senator John F. Kennedy spoke at the Conference of “America’s Stake in Vietnam” sponsored by the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV), President Diem’s lobby group for South Vietnamese interests in Washington D.C. Committed to the Domino Theory, the foreign policy developed in President Dwight Eisenhower’s administration which speculated that communism in any country will cross borders and infect its neighbors, Kennedy speaks of America’s responsibility to protect South Vietnam from the threat of communism.²⁹ The speech articulated Kennedy’s belief that the ultimate danger to South Vietnam’s newly founded democracy was their Northern brothers’ communist vision. Therefore, it was America’s responsibility to prevent South Vietnam’s submission to communism at all costs. Kennedy makes paternalistic and patronizing claims that “Vietnam represents a test of American responsibility and

²⁹ John F. Kennedy, “America’s Stake in Vietnam,” Speech presented at the Conference of “America’s Stake in Vietnam” by the American Friends of Vietnam, Washington D.C., June 1, 1956.

determination in Asia.”³⁰ In front of the AFV lobby, a predominately Catholic organization, Kennedy uses family-oriented imagery to justify America’s importance in Vietnam: “If we are not the parents of little Vietnam, then surely we are the godparents. We presided at its birth, we gave assistance to its life, we have helped to shape its future... This is our offspring – we cannot abandon it.”³¹

While Kennedy invoked feelings of filial loyalty and duty to warrant America’s involvement in Vietnam, Lê Gia – also a proud Catholic – uses a similar family narrative to protest America’s interventionist attitudes. The Marines landing in Da Nang, Westmoreland’s first stage of troop buildup, and the inevitable failures of the conventional Big Unit offensive warfare were events Lê Gia would consider as American meddling, not real assistance that helped North and South Vietnam resolve their issues. Kennedy perceived America as the protector of “little Vietnam.”³² Lê Gia saw America as an interloping outsider who unrightfully interfered with a private family dispute between “brothers from one house.”³³

However, Lê Gia does not hold the United States entirely responsible for the failures of the Vietnam War. He criticizes both North and South’s inability to reconcile peacefully in a timely manner: “And if, once the Americans entered the war, the North had stopped fighting and the South had stopped fighting, and if they had said, ‘No, we will work this out ourselves,’ then that would have been smart. That would have been the best thing to do for Vietnam.”³⁴ Ultimately, the reason why Lê Gia describes his military conscription as coerced and his training as disappointing is because he felt that North and

³⁰ Kennedy, “America’s Stake in Vietnam,” p. 4.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Lê Gia, interview by author, Da Lat, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

³⁴ Ibid.

South, as brothers from one family, should not have gone to war in the first place. Even so, when asked, rather rhetorically, whether Lê Gia joined the military, he responds with an immediate and telling “Of course! The Vietnamese military! For the South.”³⁵

Why did Lê Gia enter the military when he felt that the Vietnam War was unwarranted and being mismanaged by both the Americans and the South Vietnamese? Why does anyone join a war? “You have to go when you come of age. When you’re a certain age, you go,” according to Trần Văn Đạt.³⁶ For male youths like Trần Văn Đạt and Lê Gia in South Vietnam, eighteen was the legal age of adulthood and therefore the age when boys entered the military and became men. Conscription was the social norm and expected future for lower-class male youths with few opportunities to pursue a university education and its exemption from the military. Therefore, when Lê Gia was asked about his military service, his answer came immediately and naturally.

Trần Văn Đạt articulates the same feelings in regards to his participation in the war at the end of his interview. He concludes with a monologue, the only instance in the interview in he which he speaks for the most free-flowing stretch of time. To signify the end of his interview and therefore the limits of how much he is willing to talk about his war experience, Trần Văn Đạt shrugs and shakes his head after his monologue to convey the indifference he feels towards his military service.

Do you think, if there was no war, that you could have done something else? That if you didn't have to go into the military, that you could do things differently?

Honestly, at my age back then, you weren't given the chance to think about it. You only knew that when you came of age, you joined the military, and if you didn't, you stayed home and earned your way through school. That's all. There wasn't time to think, no one thought about what else they could do, we were all just students. Your father was like that too. Each student would finish and leave school, and it's not like any kid had a profession or idea about it. There wasn't enough time to think about those things. It's not like you children today when you can choose to continue

³⁵ Lê Gia, interview by author, Da Lat, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

³⁶ Trần Văn Đạt, interview by author, Vũng Tàu, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

your studies. These days, the choices are if you don't have enough money to pay for school, then you get a job. But back then, if you can't make it, it's the military! If you can't make it, it's the military! [Chuckles]

Trần Văn Đạt grew up in a community that treated military participation as a matter of fact. The prospect of war with North Vietnam was present since the partition of Vietnam in 1954, when Trần Văn Đạt was eight years old. Thus, as Trần Văn Đạt states, he never had a chance to think about a future that did not include the Vietnam War.³⁷

While an older married couple like Trần Minh Mẫn and Trần Ti Phú had to actively and consciously normalize the war in their minds, Trần Văn Đạt and Lê Gia as young men growing up in South Vietnam naturally concluded that war and the military was a natural standard. Military service meant a coming-of-age, a transition from boyhood adolescence into masculine maturity. But Trần Văn Đạt and Lê Gia were drafted into the military; they did not voluntarily enlist. Service in the Vietnam War promised a masculine ideal, but the assertive and individualist characteristics of masculinity are undermined by the lack of alternative choices presented to South Vietnamese young men like Trần Văn Đạt and Lê Gia. The young men might not have desired war with North Vietnam or even particularly cared about its political implications and ideologies. Nonetheless, the war came to them, and so they walked into their fates.

³⁷ Trần Văn Đạt, interview by author, Vũng Tàu, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

CHAPTER SIX

ANH EM, BROTHER AND SISTER, YOU AND ME: GROWING UP AND LIVING WITH THE VIETNAM WAR

“I think that Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods,” American journalist Michael Herr writes in *Dispatches*, a collection of reports from the Vietnam War.¹ Herr writes from an American perspective in which he refers to the young American men drafted into service and the friends and family who remained home to watch their fight on television. For Americans who experienced the Vietnam War through television reports and newspaper publications, the war was a seemingly unending and frustrating conflict taking place in an unknown, faraway country. For siblings Hồng Duy Cường and Hồng Thị Ninh living in Saigon, the Vietnam War was a lived and local reality. It is important to note that Hồng Duy Cường and Hồng Thị Ninh are my uncle and aunt on my mother’s side. The interpretations within and outside of an oral history interview ought to be objectively observed. However, the close relationship with my family members and their awareness of me as more than just a curious college student influenced the nature of both interviews. This chapter explores the intergenerational relations among members of the same family and how they experienced the Vietnam War under different perceptions and expectations.

A closer examination of Hồng Duy Cường and Hồng Thị Ninh’s separate interviews requires a brief background of my mother’s family. The Hồng family was among the millions of Northerners who fled to South Vietnam after the Geneva Accords divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel in 1954. They moved into a two-story residence at 288 Công Lý, Neighborhood 4, a tiny, narrow house that raised nine children and

¹ Michael Herr, “Colleagues,” in *Dispatches* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf: 1978), p. 244.

countless grandchildren. Hoa, the seventh Hồng child, still resides in the family home with her husband and daughter. The head of the house, my maternal grandfather, worked at the post office while my grandmother, the strong-willed and resourceful matriarch, maintained the household.

The siblings are ten years apart with five brothers and sisters between them. Hồng Duy Cường was a high school student throughout the Vietnam War and missed the draft when the war ended in 1975, the year he turned seventeen. Conversely, Hồng Thị Ninh was a young single woman in her twenties who worked at the post office and attended night school to study English and French. Hồng Thị Ninh was born in Hanoi in 1948 before the Hồngs fled to Saigon. Hồng Duy Cường was born in 1958 in Saigon, making him the youngest in a family of nine children. In the wartime relationship between Hồng Thị Ninh and Hồng Duy Cường, big sister Hồng Thị Ninh was the experienced, responsible professional whereas Hồng Duy Cường looked to his parents and eight older siblings for guidance.

While other young men in Hồng Duy Cường's generation fulfilled their expectations of military enlistment upon their eighteenth birthday, he was one year shy from conscription when the Vietnam War ended. Hồng Duy Cường does not remark on whether he felt lucky or disappointed that he eluded military service. Regardless, Hồng Duy Cường would not have wanted to join the Vietnam War in its last stages. Three years after U.S Marines landed in Da Nang under the direction of General Westmoreland, the American military's Big Unit offensive warfare struggled and oftentimes failed against the guerilla warfare tactics of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and Viet Cong. High casualties from American and South Vietnamese soldiers, and the injured and killed

civilians caught in the cross-fires, increased the Vietnam War's intense unpopularity in Vietnam, America, and internationally. But no event other than the Tet Offensive in 1968 would do more to shift and shape the American public's attitude towards the Vietnam War and the American government's policies towards ending the conflict.

Tet is one of the most important spiritual and family holidays in the Vietnamese calendar. Usually taking place in late January to early February, Tet marks the new Lunar year. A national day of rest and reflection, one celebrates with family and friends to honor ancestors who have passed and look towards a brighter future. In previous years of the war, the sacred holiday was unofficially reserved as a day of truce. But 1968 was the year of the monkey, the symbol for cleverness and deception in the Zodiac calendar. As early as the spring of 1967, Hanoi had set plans into motion to carry out sweeping attacks in cities, provincial capitals, and district towns across the breadth and depth of South Vietnam.² The Viet Cong and PAVN had two objectives in the Tet attacks. First and foremost, the Communist forces wanted to crush the ARVN units surrounding the cities and paralyze the South Vietnamese military's capabilities and morale.³ Second, the Viet Cong anticipated capturing South Vietnamese cities that would then rise against the South Vietnamese government.⁴

In the early hours of January 30, 1968, the Tet Offensive exploded in South Vietnam like "a series of volcanoes."⁵ Communist forces conducted surprise mortar and shelling attacks in populated cities and towns across South Vietnam. In Saigon alone, which had not seen a major battle in the war since 1941, the Viet Cong and PAVN

² Joes, *The War for South Vietnam*, p. 90 and Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 5.

³ Joes, *The War for South Vietnam*, p. 90.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Joes, *The War for South Vietnam*, p. 91.

targeted the Independence Palace, General Staff Headquarters, national broadcasting system, Ton Son Nhut Airport, and the American embassy.⁶ The nationally symbolic and ancient imperial city of Hue was under siege for more than a week. The Viet Cong came close to capturing the city in the Battle of Hue, but were ultimately driven out by ARVN forces in one of the deadliest and hard-fought battles of the Tet Offensive. The US and South Vietnamese promptly responded to the attacks and decisively regained control in Southern cities within a few days. Only in Saigon and Hue did the fighting exceed a week.⁷ Relying on the Tet Offensive to cause a popular uprising in the Southern cities, the Viet Cong miscalculated the level of political animosity and resistance among the mostly pro-government or indifferent urban dwellers.⁸ Hanoi achieved neither of its objectives. The Viet Cong suffered great casualties estimating from 32,000 to 58,000.⁹ Ultimately, the Tet Offensive was an “unmitigated military disaster” for the PAVN and Viet Cong.

The ARVN and U.S.’s swift response against the infiltrating Communist forces demonstrated, by that time, some of the few decisive victories in the Vietnam War. However, the damage in the American press had already been done. The Viet Cong’s element of surprise was televised to the American public and promptly cast doubt among the public and politicians about the U.S military’s effectiveness and the level of security in South Vietnam. In Walter Cronkite’s “We Are Mired in Stalemate,” an editorial on the CBS Evening News that aired on February 27, 1968, the most respected and watched news anchor in America reported that the end of the Vietnam War was nowhere in sight

⁶ Joes, *The War for South Vietnam*, pp. 90-91.

⁷ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 5.

⁸ Joes, *The War for South Vietnam*, p. 92.

⁹ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 5.

and provided arresting video images of the Tet Offensive battles to demonstrate this anxiety.¹⁰ Cronkite reflects the American public's doubt and frustration towards the government's mishandling of the war: "We have been too often disappointed by the optimism of the American leaders, both in Vietnam and Washington, to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds."¹¹

The Tet Offensive and its subsequent media reports succeeded in enhancing the American and international audience's disapproval of the Vietnam War. Despite heavy losses and setbacks on the Communist side, the Tet Offensive was a "psychological victory" in causing the American public, military, and politicians to seriously question the country's objectives in Vietnam.¹² The military successes of the ARVN and resiliency of the South Vietnamese people went unnoticed by the media.¹³ Rather, the Tet Offensive foreshadowed a "profound change" in the American public's opinion of the war and the official U.S strategy.¹⁴

On the day of Tet, Hồng Thị Ninh was participating in a socializing ritual that most Vietnamese urbanites are known for: getting midday refreshments with a friend.

The Tet Offensive was her first real encounter with the Vietnam War.

When was the first time that you heard, maybe in school, from your parents, your teachers, grown ups, about communism? When were you first aware about communists?

I didn't hear anyone in my family talk about it. But the first time...when I was starting to work – I worked at the post office. That year was... '68. I had only been working for...only four or five months. And everyone got the day off for Tet, to celebrate Tet. And beginning at 11 or 12, that was when the war was...was real. That was when I understood that the Cộng sản was fighting, fighting to enter the city. The year was '68. I was working and...at that time they wouldn't let us

¹⁰ "We Are Mired in a Stalemate," video clip, aired February 27, 1968, uploaded March 22, 2010, accessed February 28, 2012, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nn4w-ud-TyE>.

¹¹ Walter Cronkite, "We Are Mired in a Stalemate," in *CBS Evening News Broadcast*, February 27, 1968, Pacifica Radio/UC Berkeley Social Activism Sound Recording Project, last modified March 28, 2008, accessed February 28, 2012, <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificaviet/cronkitevietnam.html>.

¹² Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 5.

¹³ Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, pp. 95-96.

¹⁴ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 5.

go to work, we had to stay indoors. Because *everywhere* it was...everything was closed. It was...almost as if you weren't allowed to go out into the streets. And about one or two months later, or a few months later when things started to operate as usual again and I went back to continue working at the post office. That's when I knew that there were Communists. That's how I understood it. Because at home we rarely talked it.

On the day of Tet in 1968 when you said was the day you really knew the communists, where were you at the time?

I was eating *che* at night at the Ton Dinh store. I was with a girlfriend, we were sitting there eating *che* and while we were eating, we heard the sounds of fireworks...or at least we thought it was fireworks because in Vietnam for Tet there are fireworks. We thought it was fireworks, but in reality it was the sounds of gunfire. And there were a lot of people in Saigon who knew, who were returning to their homes. They were saying "They're fighting in Saigon." And then...there was panic and everyone went home, everyone ran back to their homes. Ran back home...And then it was the next morning that the *Cộng sản* entered the city and the first thing they did was attack the American embassy. And they went into the neighborhoods, but it didn't get serious or heavy.

The war finally became "real" to Hồng Thị Ninh when the Viet Cong attacked and infiltrated the city of Saigon. Hồng Thị Ninh did not have to be a soldier at the frontlines to experience war because it eventually confronted her. Before fully realizing that the Viet Cong had begun their attack, Hồng Thị Ninh mentions everyday mundane details before associating them with one of the most frenzied and violent episodes of the Vietnam War. So occupied was Hồng Thị Ninh in chatting with a work friend and eating a traditional celebratory Tet food that she did not initially comprehend that the sounds of fireworks were, in reality, artillery and shelling.

When examining Hồng Thị Ninh's Voice, or nonverbal communication, her story-telling demonstrates her ability to seamlessly shift from a normal, everyday narrative to depictions of warfare. "And beginning at 11 or 12, that was when the war was [a short pause] was real," she states.¹⁵ Hồng Thị Ninh's short pause raises the question of what she means by "real." The short-lived moment of hesitation in which Hồng Thị Ninh pauses before continuing to describe the moment when the Vietnam War became a firsthand reality is significant. Silences, whether planned or unconsciously done, convey

¹⁵ Hồng Thị Ninh, interview by author, Ho Chi Minh City, Saigon,

the interviewee's internal process of simultaneously recalling memories and deciding how much they want to reveal. Outside of the details required to maintain a chronological order of her experience during the Tet Offensive, Hồng Thị Ninh provides few other details of what it was like to run away from the Viet Cong, to feel fear, or how she perceived the realness of war. Regardless of the absence of her deeper, reflective thoughts on Tet, Hồng Thị Ninh indeed experienced a sudden shift from quaint socializing with a girlfriend to the blunt, unsuspected confrontation with artillery attacks.

Instead of relaying her reflections about Tet, Hồng Thị Ninh describes her employment at the post office during the war. Hồng Thị Ninh's decision to impart greater information about a safe topic such as her job demonstrates her self-identification as a single, ambitious career girl who found independence by working outside of the home. However, once the war finally intruded upon her carefully arranged worldview and constructed identity as a gainfully employed woman, Hồng Thị Ninh attaches herself to the sanctuary of home as the Tet Offensive brought the fighting to the front doors of Saigon's inhabitants. Home represented safety and protection from the war, but it was also where the war was "rarely talked about it" and not considered a proper topic of discussion.¹⁶ In contrast to her mother who worked within the domestic sphere and her younger siblings whose responsibilities remained close to the home, Hồng Thị Ninh's position at the post office allowed her to have firsthand experiences with the Vietnam War.

Younger brother Hồng Duy Cường experienced the same event passively. He learned what little information the media and public had about the Tet attacks through his father.

¹⁶ Hồng Thị Ninh, interview by author, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, August 14, 2011.

In 1968 on Tet, you were ten years old. Do you remember that day?

I remember the evening of New Year's Eve, the evening of the 30th, we prepared fruits, *ngũ quả* [translation: tray of five fruits], one chicken, spirits, sticky rice to welcome our ancestors to celebrate Tet. And that day...my father prepared the dishes and the chicken, put the altar, the fruit tray, and incense at the front door. And when my father finished performing the ritual, there were fireworks. Fireworks to celebrate the first day of the year, the new year. In the neighborhood there was a soldier who had a leave of absence, he was visiting his family, and he shot his gun into the air to celebrate instead of fireworks. I didn't know if he had permission, he just shot into the sky. We just went ahead and lit the fireworks. I didn't know at the time that the war would take place in Saigon and at that point that the North would attack the city. The entire house was celebrating and happy. I didn't think at the time that that day...that the North would attack on that day. And *much* later, if I'm not wrong, on the sixth or seventh day of the new year, the fighting stopped. The Northern soldiers were fighting outside the city in the suburbs, they also fought in the center district of the city, and the city's airport. The people who were on duty during Tet were ordered to be on guard for twenty-four hours throughout the day. The important offices sent people out to guard. Small bursts of fighting happened around the city, but it didn't reach my neighborhood, so I didn't...later on in the newspaper I read that the Viet Cong lost the battle, the Northerners lost.

That day –

Tet Mau Than [translation: What Tet of 1968 is known as in Vietnam]

That day, you didn't see or hear about Tet? You didn't know that the Viet Cong entered the city?

I heard on the radio, that's how I knew. But on the first I didn't know. After, after on the second, my father, every morning my father turned on the radio to hear the news. Now newspapers were rarely bought. My father, if there was something he liked or anything important then he would buy it. But usually, we listened to the radio. So on the second we heard about it. But on the day of Tet, the first, it was a holiday, people rested. That's an important holiday, so people stayed in. Only a handful of people, people who were very poor and were vendors, who sold things like fresh fruits and vegetables, a couple of them were outside selling. But most people, no, they rested. I...on the second, I heard on the radio and I found out.

Unlike Hồng Thị Ninh, Hồng Duy Cường remembers and expresses the intricate details involved with the Tet celebrations. His memories of preparations for Tet are connected with the actions of his father. In Vietnam, a child is often considered a passive “textual surface” on which parents, elders, and teachers should engrave a sense of morality, traditions, and knowledge.¹⁷ Children like Hồng Duy Cường during the Vietnam War were blank canvases for parents and authority figures to paint their teachings, but most importantly, to receive information about the war from figures of authority. As a male

¹⁷ Helle Rydstrom, “‘Like a White Piece of Paper’ Embodiment and the Moral Upbringing of Vietnamese Children” *Ethnos* 66 (2001): 395.

youth, Hồng Duy Cường performed the role as a “textual surface” by indicating that his main sources of information about the Vietnam War were his father and the radio news.

Hồng Duy Cường demonstrates a passive, inexperienced understanding of the Vietnam War by beginning sentences with “I heard that...” or stating that someone else had informed him of a particular fact. Hồng Duy Cường describes his ten-year-old self discovering the unfolding events of Tet by hearing about it on the radio. In contrast, older sister Hồng Thị Ninh experienced the Tet Offensive firsthand when she was socializing on the streets with a colleague. Hồng Duy Cường also chooses to recount the detail of an ARVN soldier, who was granted leave for the Tet holidays, shooting his rifle into the air in celebration. Hồng Duy Cường claims that he didn’t know whether the ARVN officer had the authority to shoot his gun. Questioning the source of military authority suggests Hồng Duy Cường’s unfamiliarity and inexperience with the RVNAF and the Vietnam War itself.

While Hồng Duy Cường did not experience the Vietnam War in a professional or official sense due to his youth, he nonetheless had personal doubts and anxieties at stake.

At that time, when you were young and attending school at age 15 to 18, did you think about the Cộng sản or who they were, or thought about the war in general?

I did hear other people talk about the Viet Cong; that they operated in the jungles and used guerilla tactics where they would suddenly appear and disappear, they could infiltrate and disguise themselves as a common person. That they would hide in the jungle. I heard people talk about this, so I was quite worried, but at that time I didn’t understand entirely the strategy or plan of the North. People said that the Viet Cong fought very bravely, that they were skilled at guerilla fighting. In my neighborhood there was a man who...he was a soldier, he was in the special operations unit. His type of work was secretive and snuck into the communist headquarters. He went into the jungle and did business for the Cộng sản, the Viet Cong. And he got permission to go home and told us these stories...so I heard him say that...I heard some things like...that I understood what the Viet Cong were like. And I thought that they were just like me, that’s all. That they were normal Vietnamese people like me. That they grew up in the North, had a family and household, were encouraged to go into the military and most everyone volunteered to go. Anyone with higher education were promoted to higher positions. Anyone who was a good student, they could find jobs in their field. That was the way in the South. I knew that there were people who didn’t have to take up arms [idiom], that they went on to study and contribute to the national defense for the North, like it was in the South. There were newspapers that I read that said the South couldn’t fight on the same level as the North; that they weren’t as good as the North.

[Chuckles] So I...one of our relatives, I had an uncle, an uncle who lived out there...he was a Viet Cong. And at that time I...I didn't even know who he was. Because my father, he was a Northerner who fled to the South in '54. So my father did tell me that in the North, he had a brother with a family, and my cousins all joined the army, they weren't in contact with each other at all. The North and South governments prohibited any exchanges like mailing between the two sides. My father and my uncle did not contact each other at all. They were Northerner and Southerner, and so two sides didn't know anything of each other. They just knew that...out there there's someone. If I...if I had carried a gun out there and *anh em* [translation: older brother and younger brother; use: the general people] shot at each other, we wouldn't know. Two brothers could kill each other and not know. I was afraid of that. But luckily, in 1975, the year when I was of age, if nothing had happened, then I would have had to go into the military, trained, and then fought in the war. But in April, Giải phóng took place [translation: Reunification Day]. Older cousins and uncles came by to visit, friends of my father visited, and they told all their war stories about fighting the Viet Cong, the hardships of the Northern soldiers. That's when I realized that...the South and the North, they were *anh em* fighting each other! And people...outsiders incited us, incited us and it didn't change anything! [Chuckles] I didn't understand clearly.

Even more than the previous passage, Hồng Duy Cường in this uninterrupted statement mentions how he only “heard about” news and events in the Vietnam War. Like Lê Gia, Hồng Duy Cường adheres to the brotherhood narrative that asserts the storyline of an internal Vietnamese disagreement and private family matter. Hồng Duy Cường's uncle, his father's estranged brother, remained in the North after 1954. Afraid that he could possibly confront and shoot his distant relatives without realizing it, Hồng Duy Cường was anxious about his military conscription and perceives the blind shooting of *anh em* (two brothers) as the worst possible outcome of joining the Vietnam War.

Vietnam narratives from an American male perspective such as Michael Herr's *Dispatches* tend to depict the loss of youth and a sense of self-division from society.¹⁸ American veterans' accounts of their experience in the Vietnam War are rarely political in purpose, though they may be didactic in nature.¹⁹ The South Vietnamese male narratives from Hồng Duy Cường, Trần Văn Đạt, and Lê Gia similarly reflect the motifs of premature ageing and lost innocence. However, whereas American veterans returned to an America that was intent on relegating their national experience in Vietnam to the

¹⁸ Jeff Loeb, “Childhood's End: Self-Recovery in the Autobiography of the Vietnam War,” *American Studies* 37:1 (1996): 96.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

past, South Vietnamese men were raised in an environment that regarded war as an accepted fact. War was not an abrupt interruption for South Vietnamese men, but an unavoidable future.

Hồng Duy Cường's narrative reveals the extent to which he experienced a childhood among the expectations of his wartime service. At the end of the Vietnam War, seventeen year old Hồng Duy Cường straddled the worlds of adolescence and maturity, and has never completely extricated himself from this intersection after almost forty years. Even in adulthood, Hồng Duy Cường frequently references other people's statements and experiences of the Vietnam War instead of claiming his own authority. Rather than implying his sense of uselessness due to his age, Hồng Duy Cường's self-positioning as an inexperienced youth during wartime demonstrates a childhood experience that was constantly at risk of disappearing.

While Hồng Duy Cường attempted to understand the war through his father's eyes as young man, Hồng Thị Ninh used work and friends as a distraction from the war.

Bac Ninh, the question I asked before was about the years 1968 to 1975. Did you see that the war in these years got heavier, escalated? Were you afraid, worried?

From 1968 to 1975?

Yes, yes...

We lived among the soldiers and military. South Vietnam was very...very occupied. The war...at that time the war was in action. The American military and...and the South Vietnamese operated outside of the city though. But right in Saigon, you could still see soldiers. But if you saw them, you couldn't immediately imagine that there was a war. Because I, at that time I was still young. I couldn't conclude that...that people were dying...the T.V....the T.V. showed very little, very little footage of what was going on in...in the countryside or Tinh. Minh Trung or...[English] North Vietnam! – the Northerners – I would think that they were scared. But I was far away, so I couldn't imagine a heavy war going on.

Did your family ever receive USAID?

Um...

Did you ever have to...buy groceries but couldn't? Needed to buy gas, but couldn't?

What time period is this? In '68?

'68 to...

'68 to '75?

Yeah, '68 to '75, did your family ever need aid –

– No! At all times, I had enough to eat. At that time...everything was very low-priced. Gas was cheap too!

Do you think that if there never was a war...

If there was never any war, then my life would have been...normal. I think that...at that time period, if a war had never happened, that my life would have been happier.

Because...you were worried every day?

After the war, I worried. But at the time, I didn't think about it at all. I just worried about having enough money to go out with my friends, make enough money to support my family as much as possible.

But you didn't have brothers that didn't go into the military, you didn't have to worry about that?

Didn't worry about that...Back then...yes, there was a war going on, but the Americans helped us out a lot...we didn't worry too much because we always had enough to eat and drink.

Again, the examination of Hồng Thị Ninh's Voice reveals a layer of meaning to her descriptions of receiving provisions and supplies from USAID, an American humanitarian relief organization. The question of whether Hồng Thị Ninh's family needed outside support carries with it the implication of poverty, hardships, and vulnerability. My first attempt at asking this particularly sensitive question was met with an "Um," a filler word and verbal pause for when an individual has yet to formulate what they want to say – and how much they want to reveal. Rather than provide an answer, Hồng Thị Ninh asks for clarification about the time period when her family might have received USAID. In response to my third and more narrowly tailored question, Hồng Thị Ninh's interrupts with a firm denial. She states, "No! At all times, I had enough to eat. At that time...everything was low-priced. Gas was cheap too!" After her initial denial, Hồng Thị Ninh provides further evidence to support her claim such as stating that she always

had enough to eat due to low prices. Hồng Thị Ninh's adamant "No!" suggests a constructed barrier to guard herself, and possibly her young nieces who were present in the room, from unpleasant memories of the Hồng family's economic struggles during the Vietnam War. Whatever the reason behind Hồng Thị Ninh's interruption, it demonstrates that she felt it significant to assert her family's state of economic stability in the last, and most difficult, years of the war.

In the years 1968 to 1975, President Richard Nixon implemented the Vietnamization Policy which prepared to withdraw the U.S military and turn the war over to the ARVN.²⁰ Vietnamization emerged out of the frustrations from the drawn-out, inconclusive war and the U.S's desire to pull ground troops out of Vietnam while leaving resources for the ARVN to carry out their own operations. However, the late timing of the Vietnamization Policy failed to effectively prepare the ARVN to conduct independent missions.²¹ If the U.S military had trained South Vietnamese forces in the early stages of the conflict and treated them as equal contributors, the ARVN might have been more prepared and skilled to fight as an independent force. Furthermore, the ARVN were not trained to combat guerilla warfare. Instead of creating smaller, mobile units designed for rooting out guerilla forces, the U.S military shaped the ARVN into the "mirror image" of themselves to continue the failed war of attrition and pacification that General Westmoreland generated.²² While the U.S successfully formulated an exit strategy for American ground troops, South Vietnam was left unprepared to face their more disciplined, skilled, and organized Northern counterparts.

²⁰ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 1.

²¹ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 278.

²² Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 1.

Operation Lam Son 719 was the first independent mission conducted by South Vietnam from January 1, 1971 to April 6, 1971. Without the support of American ground troops, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam pushed the PAVN outside the Vietnam border and into Laos. With heavy casualties on both sides and the ARVN left in an exposed position, South Vietnamese generals decided to withdraw forces.²³ On April 6, the ARVN reentered the Vietnamese border. South Vietnam's first solo mission since Vietnamization indicated that they still relied on U.S air fire. The success of Operation Lam Son 719 is considered a turning point in the war for the South Vietnamese. However, the minor victory was merely a promising catalyst that never extended to an overall triumph for South Vietnam.

The Paris Peace Accords, which began between National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and North and South Vietnamese representatives in 1969, concluded in 1973.²⁴ Signed on January 27, 1973, the Paris Peace Accords' terms mandated that the U.S first terminate all military activity with the exception of noncombatant military advisors. Second, the Viet Cong and PAVN must institute a ceasefire and release U.S prisoners of war. Third, and perhaps most detrimental to the survival of the Republic of Vietnam, a number of North Vietnamese soldiers were allowed to remain in South Vietnam after the ceasefire. Fourth, North and South Vietnam continued to be separate countries. And finally, South Vietnam was split up into two governments, one led by President Thieu of the RVN and the other controlled by the Viet Cong, with pending reunification plans.

During Vietnamization, the war escalated throughout South Vietnam as the ARVN desperately fought to maintain its posts after the U.S decreased its ground troop

²³ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 110.

²⁴ "Paris Peace Accords," excerpted text, *The Wars for Viet Nam: 1945-1976*, Vassar College, [n.d], accessed February 28, 2012, <http://vietnam.vassar.edu/overview/doc16.html>.

presence. Hồng Thị Ninh could not “imagine” a war taking place in the countryside where most of the heaviest and intensive fighting took place. But once again, the war came to Hồng Thị Ninh and Hồng Duy Cường when the Viet Cong entered Saigon on April 29, 1975 a final time before the sibling’s home was renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION: INDIVIDUAL CHOICE IN THE VIETNAM WAR

On April 30, 1975 at 10:20 AM, Saigon time, President Duong Van “Big” Minh broadcasted an order to the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) to surrender unconditionally.¹ After the last American ground troops left Vietnam in 1973, the terms of a general cease fire were almost immediately violated by the PAVN and Viet Cong who made their final offensive towards capturing South Vietnam. In March of 1975, critical cities such as Quang Tri City, Tam Ky, Hue, and Da Nang fell to North Vietnam. The city of Xuan Loc, some forty miles outside of Saigon, was defeated after two weeks of resistance on April 22, indicating the North’s gathering forces towards Saigon. On April 29, the military airbase Ton Son Nhut was shelled and overtaken. President Gerald Ford, now the sixth American president dealing with the Vietnam War, ordered helicopter evacuations of the remaining American advisors and officials in the U.S Embassy on April 30th. On the morning of April 30, 1975, North Vietnamese forces entered Saigon with little resistance from locals and military defenders. With the presidential palace overtaken, Saigon, the mighty capital of South Vietnam, had fallen. The Republic of Vietnam ceased to exist. The Vietnam War officially ended.

What of the remaining civilians? When asked about her first thoughts when hearing of Saigon’s surrender, Trần Ti Phú stated, “To be honest with you, I didn’t think about anything. I was so busy with worry about my family and doing day-to-day things and working that I didn’t think about it. I don’t remember if I thought about it.”² Like

¹ Anthony James Joes, *The War for South Viet Nam 1954-1975* (New York, New York: Praeger, 1989), p. 137.

² Trần Ti Phú, interview by author, Da Lat, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

Trần Ti Phú, Hồng Thị Ninh was immediately concerned about practical matters such as whether the new Northern currency would affect her family's savings and ability to afford necessities:

You didn't...you weren't angry? Scared? Sad?

By then, it wasn't...we still didn't have an idea what the new government would be like, so we didn't know to be afraid or not. I was still young at the time, not yet 30 years old, didn't have my own family yet, and so when the currency changed, *then* I was very afraid.

Change in currency?

Currency change! Because the two sides had different currencies! Because then, we were using the old government's currency, the money of Om Thieu's government. We were still using that money, but the new government, they entered and didn't accept this type of money. So they had to change it. And then we had money [raises hand] and then we didn't have money [lowers hand]. Because they gave us a poor exchange. And therefore, that was when I was very afraid.

Some tried to escape, but could not leave their homes and families. Lê Gia and his family packed their belongings and rode towards Vũng Tàu, the southern coastal city where boats promised to help refugees leave the country:

Where were you at this time...

Here. And at that time, some of my friends said that...the war is lost, Da Lat we are about to lose, Saigon has almost fallen. Now, we have to run farther south towards Saigon, to the south to get on the boats and flee to America. I drove my wife and four children on a Honda [colloquial for motor scooter], this one [points to scooter in the room]. On it there we had...one bin of gas, one bin of water, one bin of rice, one bin of bread, some...Coca [colloquial use of Coca-Cola] and...canned sardines, Sumaco, and we drove on this scooter [points] down to Phuong Rai, all the way to Phuong Rai – not close to Nha Trang yet – when the Viet Cong from outside were fighting their way into Nha Trang, fighting into Phuong Rai. So at that time, I said to myself, “*Thoi* [translation: that's it; the end], we've already lost. The South has lost.” In my mind, my first thought was sadness. Sadness. It seemed sad.

He and his family never made it to the boats. “Thoi,” Lê Gia says. *Thoi*, sometimes stated *Thoi roi*, means an ending, a conclusion, and implies resignation to the termination of something. In this case, it was one's country. Trần Văn Đạt lived in Vũng Tàu and had easy access to the refugee boats. But like Lê Gia, he believed that the war was definitively over.

Hồng Thị Ninh was persuaded to flee the country, but could not overcome the anxiety of an uncertain future in a distant country:

My family didn't run, but we all ducked under the tables. Because we were afraid of the gunfire. If it caught anything on fire or exploded we would...we would have died. So yes, we were afraid, of that. But...run to where? From the North, we had already ran down here, so where else would we run? But there were a lot...a lot of people persuading us to go. A lot of people telling us to go. We could take the roads down to *Vũng Tàu* and get on the boats. But we didn't know anyone who would do it!

People were telling you to go, but why didn't your family do it?

Because at that time...because I had a family: Grandpa and Grandma and all my younger siblings back home. Up until then, I had never gone anywhere by myself. So I was so scared to do it. I didn't...I didn't know if I went that...if anything...could have come out of it or not.

There was no possibility of regaining the Republic of Vietnam's sovereignty.

Therefore, the Vietnamese people had to accept the new communist government. Trần Minh Mẫn reflects this opinion that in order to survive, one must adapt.

So when you heard that the South had lost, you said you were afraid, but were you sad at all?

I was just afraid at first because I didn't know if things would be the same with the communist leaders. But then I realized that it wasn't going to be that bad or that much different, and I was only away for seven days. The others, the higher ranked soldiers, they had more to be afraid of. They went to reeducation camp for three, five years. But even at three, five years, the country still would have let them come home.

"I was only away for seven days," Trần Minh Mẫn repeats to mitigate the reputed horrors and indoctrination of *cải tạo*, reeducation camps conducted by the North after the war to train and teach those involved in the Vietnam War to become an integrated communist citizen. Even as both Trần Minh Mẫn and Lê Gia underwent *cải tạo*'s humiliating lessons and poor living conditions, both men are quick to express their satisfaction that they were not detained for more than a week.

Hồng Duy Cường, as the youngest narrator at the time of Saigon's surrender, was free of major responsibilities and could afford to remember details without the heavy anxiety that mother of eight Trần Ti Phú or family man Trần Văn Đạt undoubtedly

weighed in their minds. Hồng Duy Cường maintains detailed memories of the last days of

Saigon:

The day...the 29th of April, I saw...I saw very clearly airplanes and the sounds of guns, the sounds of bombs. The days leading up to that, before then...I don't remember quite well...maybe the 26th or the 27th of April, the twenty-something of April, a Viet Cong from the North...he...he flew over and dropped bombs on the capital. It was in the middle of the day, around 10 or 11, he dropped bombs on the capital and I heard the sounds of impact. At that time, I was in school near Si Thu. I heard it very clearly, about three explosions. And the school reported that all the students on the second and third floors had to descend immediately. I was scared, hearing all my friends say, "*Thoi roi* [translation: the end, no more], it looks like the Viet Cong has entered the city." Hearing all that, I was afraid. Everyone, the teachers and students, everyone stopped what they were doing and went underground. And the school reported that none of the students could try to go home, we shouldn't panic, that we must remain calm, and we couldn't leave for home. The Viet Cong were attacking and the entire school shut down. Our teachers too were waiting, waiting to hear more, they didn't know anything. So afterwards, the school told us that it was time to leave, we could go home. And the day afterwards, we heard on the news that we had a day off, a day off from school for one day. The day after, we would return to school. But the day after that on the 29th, the end, the end of the war...I...in the afternoon I saw in the air, in the sky, heard sounds like *boom boom*. And my father drove his car out into a field and stood there and watched in the sky...I saw two airplanes, they flew high, *really* high, I couldn't tell what kinds of airplanes they were, but I saw them shooting and shooting. And so there. I clearly saw it was war!

"Thoi roi," Hồng Duy Cường remembers someone saying. The first reaction of Lê Gia and one of Hồng Duy Cường's classmates was to admit defeat. Why?

Historian Hue-tam Ho Tai is concerned that "public memory in present-day Vietnam is characterized as much by confusion as profusion."³ The Vietnamese, those who remained after 1975 and those who emigrated to every possible corner of the world, digest and remember the Vietnam War in their own unique ways. Perhaps the question to ask is not why Southern Vietnamese civilians immediately started preparing for life under communist rule, but what led them to accept this conclusion for their country and how they arranged their thoughts accordingly.

For a civilian living in the center of a violent, drawn-out conflict such as the Vietnam War, the only thought is survival. An individual who survived the war

³ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, ed., *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), p. 2.

unharméd never truly cease the personal defense mechanisms and thought processes that were used during the war. Survival continues long after war is officially declared over.

This is demonstrated in Trần Minh Mẫn's conclusion of our interview. Near the end, Trần Minh Mẫn shows signs of reflecting upon his memories by discussing an unprompted, spontaneous event.

My last question is if you wanted to discuss anything about your experience that I haven't brought up. Anything that you may have remembered.

Right now, I just hope for a healthy and peaceful nation. I don't long for war. I just wish for peace, nothing more.

Thank you, Sir, for speaking to me today. For telling me stories that people need to hear. Because this war was so big in scale, but not a lot of people know...

The War was huge, and so many people died. That's no small matter. It was horrifying. The time when there was fighting in Quoc Mang and in front of Huoc Gai, they fought each other...the deaths were staggering, I'm not kidding. Anywhere you went there was death; you could see it everywhere, undoubtedly. If you fight each other with guns, of course there will be death.

Did you know about this because you heard it or saw it?

There were times when their bodies would be brought back into the city. It was awful. Death was normal. [Looks at his watch] The cousins have probably all left by now. Let's get some coffee.

Trần Minh Mẫn limits his war memories with a simple glance at his watch. It demonstrates the interview's conclusion and Trần Minh Mẫn makes a clear request to go out for coffee in a different location, to talk about different things. This is a survival method used to compartmentalize unpleasant and sometimes traumatic memories. Trần Minh Mẫn might never verbalize to anyone what was so "horrifying" about this unspecified event; at least not to an American college student he had just met. The nonverbal communication of peeking at his watch indicates how Trần Minh Mẫn feels that he has talked enough about the war for one day. Too much or not enough amount of time has passed between this "horrifying" memory and Trần Minh Mẫn's present for him

to revisit it. To survive the war and the difficult memories it leaves behind, one must prepare to close the door on certain recollections.

In contrast, Hồng Thị Ninh concludes by means of a bookmark, forgoing a definitive ending. She hopes for a better Vietnam that encourages children to study and learn for the sake of knowledge, not to merely advance in school so that they may graduate with well-positioned jobs and high salaries.

Thank you very much for talking to me today. Do you have anything else you would like to say? About the war or...just anything?

[Pause] Me, right now, I don't know what to say. Between us talking as family members, I just hope that life...that life has to have *tương lai* [translation: future].

Tương lai ...

Yes, you have to have *tương lai*. The education system today, children want to learn to advance and find employment to pay for material things, almost like to show off. They don't want to learn for the sake of learning.

For a woman who sounded so involved with her career as a post-office worker during the Vietnam War, she nonetheless ends her interview with a wish for children to experience a more open and engaging education rather than one that emphasized the importance of employment. But this sentiment is not so surprising. Hồng Thị Ninh, among many others of her generation, did not experience a childhood with open possibilities and a seemingly limitless future. Her worldview was filled with war and national conflict. It was the reason why the Hồng family relocated to Saigon from Hanoi and it has, to a certain extent, shaped her identity.

None of the South Vietnamese people interviewed for this Senior Independent Study chose war on their own. As part of the urban working class in South Vietnam, they did not have the agency to affect decisions made by Presidents, Commanders, or Generals. They did not choose war, yet they lived it. In the process of surviving, the

South Vietnamese people developed a range of personal strategies for constructing and defining “normal” identities in abnormal circumstances. Some consciously created a sense of normality for themselves and their families; some simply grew up with the Vietnam War and accepted whatever inevitabilities their lives encountered.

The South Vietnamese civilian story of survival through wartime is unique, but it is not the only one. The twenty-first century opened with a watershed moment of the tragic and needless loss of lives on September 11, 2001 that started a long decade of American military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. What of their voices? What do we know and understand of their experience so unlike our own, safe from stray bullets, roadside bombs, and insurgent threats? This Senior Independent Study is only part of a larger narrative of civilians who live through war not of their own making or choosing. South Vietnam’s story deserves to be voiced among American scholarship that continues to focus on the Vietnam War through an American perspective. It is necessary to explore this particular episode of Vietnamese history through an oral history in order to preserve voices before they are lost, and to also understand the past as it translates into how we approach future efforts to excavate stories that lend a fuller and more complete understanding of the Vietnamese experience. And yet, this is not a story that belongs exclusively to Vietnam, or to anyone.

In a poem titled “Afghanistan,” Polish poet Tomasz Jastrun writes of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.⁴

On the soldiers' shoulders
Ride the white doves of peace
With their eyes poked out

⁴ Tomasz Jastrun, “Afghanistan,” in *On the Crossroads of Asia and Europe*, trans. Daniel Bourne (Anchorage, AK: Salmon Rush Press, 1999), p. 5.

As long as the Afghan people
Are in need of help
The soldiers will remain
And remain and remain

We cry out
Butterflies and crickets in bondage
But who will understand
The language of butterflies and crickets

Those breathing freedom
Have a different set of problems
A shorter memory
They slip off to sleep untroubled
One day to wake up
In Afghanistan

The Vietnamese people, with a language riddled with dual meanings and symbolism, are among the “butterflies and crickets.” They are perceived as small, overlooked, and fragile. However, each story heard and collected from the South Vietnamese men and women I interviewed for the Senior Independent Study indicates the opposite. They experienced love, sacrifice, grief, honor, and most important of all, the strength and will to survive. They lived to tell the tale. Most importantly, they regained their agency by voicing their stories.

APPENDIX A

Interview with Trần Văn Đạt (M)

Interviewed by Leann Do on August 11, 2011 in Vũng Tàu, Vietnam

b. 1947 in Cambodia, raised in Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City

Occupation during war: Office worker stationed in cities in South Vietnam, last assignment was in Vũng Tàu where he settled

Leann Do

Trần Văn Đạt

A family member

What year were you born?

I was born in 1947.

Where were you born and raised?

I was born in Cambodia and when I was school-aged, my family moved to Saigon.

How old were you when you moved to Saigon?

Oh, I moved to Saigon when I was about seven or eight years old. I moved to Saigon and entered the third grade. The third grade is when you're –

Eight years old.

Yes, the third grade is generally seven and eight years old.

Were you sent to school in Saigon by yourself or did your family go with you --

My entire family. When I was a child, my parents worked in Cambodia and when I was school-aged, my parents lost their jobs. And back then, Cambodian schools didn't teach in Vietnamese, so my parents moved us to Saigon.

So your parents are Vietnamese who lived in Cambodia?

Yes, they are Vietnamese. They only worked in Cambodia. Back then, travel between countries for work was easy and open. The two nations had open relations with each other. But then the Cambodia government decided not to teach in Vietnamese in its schools. Of course, my parents did not agree with that, so we all moved down to Saigon.

When you were a young child –

[Correcting] Younger

Younger. Do you remember how old you were when you first heard about the Communists? Did you hear about it from your teachers or parents?

There wasn't much talk about it. I lived in Saigon and only went to school, that's all. It seems that back then no one really discussed it much.

How old were you the first time when you were aware of the Communists?

Oh, I don't remember, how could I remember? Don't ask me.

But when you entered the military –

Yes, when I was older!

You entered the military when you were –

I was eighteen.

What year was that when you entered the military?

That was...1966.

You went into the [English] Marines like my father?

No, no, I entered the *linh* [translation: military], your father was in the *si quan* [translation: officers corps]. He entered a few years after me, he still had to do his training. And me, back then, I went into the Binh Giã military. I served in what they would call transcription. I trained at Binh Giã with the *si quan* and after that, well, I traveled all over, but I only worked in offices.

So you worked at a desk?

No, I didn't fight –

He didn't fight –

I just transcribed and recorded. I just did *thip dieu* [logistics], that's all I did was *thip dieu*. Um...what would you...

It's logistics.

Right.

You mean [English] strategy for the war? Did you meet any Americans? Any American advisors?

Very little, very little. When I was in Pleiku, I remember seeing some American advisors there, but...that was it.

Ah. So what sort of feelings do you remember having towards the Communists? Were you afraid of them? Hated them? Did you think anything at all?

Well...it was all very *bình thường* [translation: normal]. When you turned the age to enter the military, then you enter the military. But the thing is, I just worked in an office. I didn't know anything. I wasn't out and about in the city. I didn't really explore beyond the city. I stayed close to my place of work. So I didn't know...

Did you read any newspapers or books, watch on the T.V. or hear on the radio about the Americans sending troops into Vietnam and fighting the Com Sang?

Well, that...that business I didn't know much about either, in regards to the fighting. But when I lived in Saigon, I knew about the American presence, but that's all. I was just going to school at that time. And yes, there was an American presence, but...I never encountered a Com Sang, all that time.

You never met a communist?

From then until now, I've never met one! [Chuckles]

So you weren't scared, you didn't hate them, you didn't have any feelings at all...

That's right, I just didn't think about them at all. When I went into the military, I just focused on my work. From the morning until the time it was to leave, I just went to work.

For your time spent in the office, was it –

It was in Vũng Tàu. The last place where I was stationed was in Vũng Tàu. At first, I was placed in Saigon. And then I was pulled out and went to Pleiku, then Puoy Ngung. And finally, I arrived here.

Did you live in a [English] military base? A sort of...a place for all the men to live?

No, he was in...a [English] hospital.

Oh, I see.

Yes, my business was usually in the hospital. But I didn't do anything medical, I just took care of the paperwork and record keeping, only working in an office.

Did you ever write letters to your family?

When I was stationed in Minh Trung, of course. But when I moved to Vũng Tàu – well, back then there were no telephones and I had to write letters. But when I moved back to Vũng Tàu, my family was here and there was no need.

Were you ever afraid of encountering the communists? Of fighting against them?

Like I said, I didn't have to be at the frontlines, so that was not a particular concern of mine. I was just in the office, working, day in and day out [idiom].

In the years 1972, 1973, 1974 when the Americans left –

Ah, when they left, huh?

Yes, those years...do you remember if there was a difference?

Of course I noticed! I was in Vũng Tàu at that time, and I knew that the Americans were leaving and leaving the war to Vietnam. But, well...there wasn't much of any difference. The Americans were pulling out in gradual stages. Wherever the Americans went was different for them.

Did you ever think that the South Vietnamese could win though?

Oh, well that I never gave much thought to. I never had opinions about the war. When there was a war, there was a war, that's all. But from a young age growing up, I never supposed anything about the war. When I was a young student, we never talked about it.

And when the Americans were pulling out, were you afraid?

What was there to be afraid of, I was still going to work every day. With the Americans leaving, the South Vietnamese military had more responsibility. Anyway, that wasn't my job, so there wasn't anything I could have done.

Did you have a family at the time?

Yes.

A wife...

Yes, yes.

And your family traveled with you...

Yes, I had children at this time, but small children, they were very young.

Did the government provide your salary then?

You mean my salary? Well, at that time, they didn't give me too much or too little. It was a decent, average sized wage.

What do you think was the main reason why you joined the military?

What reason? You have to go when you come of age. When you're a certain age, you go. If you scored high in the exams, you can defer for a year. But me, I couldn't do it so it was immediate entry for me! So if you didn't enter into one particular military branch, then you were conscripted into another. That is just a given. It's like your father who studied well enough and scored high, and he was allowed to continue his education. While *bac* [translation: an elder male; use: reference to himself] couldn't get high test scores, so he was conscripted right away.

Do you think, if there was no war, that you could have done something else? That if you didn't have to go into the military, that you could do things differently?

Honestly, at my age back then, you weren't given the chance to think about it. You only knew that when you came of age, you joined the military, and if you didn't, you stayed home and earned your way through school. That's all. There wasn't time to think, no one thought about what else they could do, we were all just students. Your father was like that too. Each student would finish and leave school, and it's not like any kid had a profession or idea about it. There wasn't enough time to think about those things. It's not like you children today when you can choose to continue your studies. These days, the choices are if you don't have enough money to pay for school, then you get a job. But back then, if you can't make it, it's the military! If you can't make it, it's the military! [Chuckles]

APPENDIX B

Interview with Hồng Thị Ninh (F)

Interviewed by Leann Do on August 14, 2011 in suburbs of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

b. 1948 in Hanoi, raised in Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City

Occupation during war: Post office worker in the city

Leann Do

Hồng Thị Ninh

First, what year were you born?

I was born in 1948.

In '48, which child were you? Were you...the first, the second, the third...

[Not understanding]

The oldest or the youngest...

Ah, which child was I?

Yes. Yes, that's it.

I was the third child of my parents.

There were two older siblings.

That's right. One sister and one brother.

One sister, one brother.

I had one sister and one brother.

How many younger siblings did you have?

Six younger siblings. Two younger brothers and four younger sisters.

What did your mother and father do for a living?

My mother and father lived in Saigon. My father worked at the post office [English] post office! My mother worked at home.

At home doing household chores and things...

At home doing chores.

You were born in Saigon too?

No, I was born in Hanoi. I was born out in Hanoi, in [pause] 23 Paper Street, Hanoi.

What was the reason for your family moving down –

To live in Saigon?

Yes.

The reason was that in 1954, Grandpa [her father] before he worked in the post office, Grandpa in Hanoi was in the French military and he heard rumors that the war would divide the country into two – North and South. So Grandpa moved to the South in '54, took his entire family with him.

That was –

I followed too.

– that was before he knew about the 17th parallel partition or [English] after? Before or...

Before! It was before the...

[English] Parallel...

Before '54, yes.

And Grandpa...

Grandpa moved here. He was able to hear about it because he was in the French military. At that time the French had left the country already. So Grandpa knew he had to flee to the South. In the South, we first lived in a place for families of military men like my father.

And how old were you?

At that time I was –

Six years old?

Mmm, yes.

How many younger siblings did you have?

At that time, there was...there was one younger sibling, your mother. The last one. Chu Hung was born here.

So there was only one sibling left born in Hanoi?

No, two siblings actually! Em [translation: a younger person; use: younger sister] Hai, Em Ha were born in Hanoi.

And once you moved to Saigon...

Once here, three younger siblings.

Chu [translation: an older male relative or friend; use: uncle] *Hung*, *Chu Cường* ...

Chu Hung, Chu Cường...no! Four siblings! Hoi, Trang, four siblings. Four siblings in Saigon.

When was the first time that you heard, maybe in school, from your parents, your teachers, grown ups, about communism? When were you first aware about communists?

I didn't hear anyone in my family talk about it. But the first time...when I was starting to work – I worked at the post office. That year was... '68. I had only been working for...only four or five months. And everyone got the day off for Tet, to celebrate Tet. And beginning at 11 or 12, that was when the war was...was real. That was when I understood that the Cộng sản was fighting, fighting to enter the city. The year was '68. I was working and...at that time they wouldn't let us go to work, we had to stay indoors. Because *everywhere* it was...everything was closed. It was...almost as if you weren't allowed to go out into the streets. And about one or two months later, or a few months later when things started to operate as usual again and I went back to continue working at the post office. That's when I knew that there were Communists. That's how I understood it. Because at home we rarely talked it.

You didn't read in the newspaper, hear on the radio, read a book about the Cộng sản?

I read a book at that time by President Diem. There was a chapter called "The Free World." That's when I understood that in Bulgaria, they, they killed people and hung them upside down, upside down, and...they took pictures for us to see. In color too! And the chapter "The Free World" showed this. This is what the Cộng sản is like. Evil. Đó [translation: there; colloquial use: there it is].

You only saw this in newspapers and books, not as an eye witness?

That's right. Just saw it in books.

In that year, '68, you were 20 years old?

That's right, eighteen...eighteen or nineteen. When you're of age is when you could be employed.

You had one older brother and two younger brothers. Did your three brothers have to go into the military?

Mmm [looks down] Not yet, they didn't go into the military yet.

Not yet?

[Nod] [Pause] Um, uh, *Bac* [translation: an elderly male relative or friend] Toan at that time didn't enter the war yet.

Didn't go yet?

Because Bac Toan was studying engineering, he wasn't called up to join the military. But close to the war, close to it that's when it started that...*everyone* had to go, *everyone* went. They went little by little, though. They were called in, taught how to hold a gun, then taken to their assignments. During the war, *everyone* was called up. It's called *dom vien*.

Were you ever worried that your older and younger brothers would be called into the military?

Of course I worried, of course I worried. Because you didn't want to study higher, then they would call you up. If you studied and failed the first year exams, you would have to go.

At that time, you were working, not going to school?

I took extra classes. At night, I went to school. I studied...I studied at the Vietnam-US School. At that time...it was called something...I don't remember it anymore...Maybe your mom and dad will know, Child ask your dad about the English translation, what that is called. And then I studied –

Can you...[English] describe...what that is? So I can maybe understand it?

Ah. The Vietnam-US School is like a school that is opened by the Americans to teach English to people. But taught by Americans! So we were lucky. It wasn't the English. We were learning English and being taught by Americans. So it was Hoi Viet My. I studied on this...this holiday, I've forgotten it – it's been too long, I've forgotten. Monday and Friday I studied there [that?]. And Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday I studied...what school was it? I studied French. Because the post office used both English and French. But it

wasn't as if there was a lot of mail going out to foreign countries. But it was necessary to sort the mail and read the address and know what country it was going to.

On the day of Tet in 1968 when you said was the day you really knew the communists, where were you at the time?

I was eating *che* at night at the Ton Dinh store. I was with a girlfriend, we were sitting there eating *che* and while we were eating, we heard the sounds of fireworks...or at least we thought it was fireworks because in Vietnam for Tet there are fireworks. We thought it was fireworks, but in reality it was the sounds of gunfire. And there were a lot of people in Saigon who knew, who were returning to their homes. They were saying "They're fighting in Saigon." And then...there was panic and everyone went home, everyone ran back to their homes. Ran back home...And then it was the next morning that the *Cộng sản* entered the city and the first thing they did was attack the American embassy. And they went into the neighborhoods, but it didn't get serious or heavy.

Did you know anyone, maybe a friend of yours or someone, who was injured or killed?

No, because at the time I was working and just knew people who were *công chức* [translation: public servants].

Công chức ...what does that mean?

Công chức as in...people who worked for *Chính phủ*.

Chính phủ is, what is that?

chính phủ is...is working for *Om Thieu*. To...to work for the state. For example, I worked at the post office and that post office belongs to the *Chính phủ* [translation: state government]. So those people didn't get hurt because they had the day off work for Tet.

So they weren't out on the streets...

Yes, they weren't out in the streets. That time it was...I couldn't know for sure...*Cộng sản*...I heard from the news that the *Cộng sản* moved around into certain sections. I still hadn't witnessed full-scale war, two sides fighting each other, there wasn't any of that. Because there was a unit stationed here, a unit stationed there. But it wasn't the kind of heavy war, they weren't shooting back and forth.

Because it was only 1968? The war hadn't escalated yet...

It wasn't heavy, not as much as 1975 when there was a lot of fighting.

At that time, you were still working in the day and going to school at night. From 1968 to 1975 was there a time when you thought that something was different, something had [English] changed?

I didn't...I didn't think about anything. I was at the post office. Before '75, I worked at the post office. After '75, they still needed me. At that time, I was still very young, I was twenty-something years old. And they...they went in and they still needed me. But with my employee position, I didn't get any benefits.

Bac Ninh, the question I asked before was about the years 1968 to 1975. Did you see that the war in these years got heavier, escalated? Were you afraid, worried?

From 1968 to 1975?

Yes, yes...

We lived among the soldiers and military. South Vietnam was very...very occupied. The war...at that time the war was in action. The American military and...and the South Vietnamese operated outside of the city though. But right in Saigon, you could still see soldiers. But if you saw them, you couldn't immediately imagine that there was a war. Because I, at that time I was still young. I couldn't conclude that...that people were dying...the T.V....the T.V. showed very little, very little footage of what was going on in...in the countryside or Tinh. Minh Trung or...[English] North Vietnam! – the Northerners – I would think that they were scared. But I was far away, so I couldn't imagine a heavy war going on.

On the 29th and 30th of April...

1975...

1975. Do you remember where you were?

I was still living in Công Lý [translation: Justice Street] in 288, District 4. I was still there. At that time, I still didn't have a family – I hadn't [English] get married yet. I was worried, afraid, didn't know what would happen then. I saw the [English] VC shoot heavy artillery into the city. My neighborhood wasn't hit, but others were. I ran out into the streets and saw people running back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. They were carrying their clothes. A person running here, a person running there, it was chaos! But at home, Grandpa and Grandma were very afraid. They were afraid first and foremost that the military would arrest us. Because at that time, the two sides were...the two, the two...at that time, the war was *clear*, front and center. It was clear that the war had come straight to us. And the government...the old government...had surrendered.

Did you –

Was I afraid or not? I was scared, very scared.

Did you run?

[Pause]

Your family, Grandma and Grandpa...

My family didn't run, but we all ducked under the tables. Because we were afraid of the gunfire. If it caught anything on fire or exploded we would...we would have died. So yes, we were afraid, of that. But...run to where? From the North, we had already ran down here, so where else would we run? But there were a lot...a lot of people persuading us to go. A lot of people telling us to go. We could take the roads down to *Vũng Tàu* and get on the boats. But we didn't know anyone who would do it!

People were telling you to go, but why didn't you family do it?

Because at that time...because I had a family: Grandpa and Grandma and all my younger siblings back home. Up until then, I had never gone anywhere by myself. So I was so scared to do it. I didn't...I didn't know if I went that...if anything...could have come out of it or not.

Did you ever think to yourself that the Americans were in South Vietnam to help?

I knew, of course I knew. Because the Americans had invested a lot of money into South Vietnam, *a lot* of money. I had a best friend from childhood who worked for USAID, from America, and moved to America to work for them.

Did your family ever receive USAID?

Um...

Did you ever have to...buy groceries but couldn't? Needed to buy gas, but couldn't?

What time period is this? In '68?

'68 to...

'68 to '75?

Yeah, '68 to '75, did your family ever need aid –

– No! At all times, I had enough to eat. At that time...everything was very low-priced. Gas was cheap too!

Do you think that if there never was a war...

If there was never any war, then my life would have been...normal. I think that...at that time period, if a war had never happened, that my life would have been happier.

Because...you were worried every day?

After the war, I worried. But at the time, I didn't think about it at all. I just worried about having enough money to go out with my friends, make enough money to support my family as much as possible.

But you didn't have brothers that didn't go into the military, you didn't have to worry about that?

Didn't worry about that...Back then...yes, there was a war going on, but the Americans helped us out a lot...we didn't worry too much because we always had enough to eat and drink.

At that time, on the 30th of April, 1975 and people were persuading you to escape Vietnam, but you didn't...those days, um...

The days after?

Yes, the days afterwards. What did you do then?

I was at home, I stayed at home. At that time, I had a job at the post office but had no idea if I would return to work. So I worried, of course. I was very anxious.

So...your entire family remained in the house?

Yes, the whole family stayed at home. All we could do was go home, stay there, and wait.

Wait?

Wait...wait for the new government. Because then, the Cộng sản government had taken over Saigon, and we were waiting for the official word, their new lifestyle, what they wanted us to do and we would have to follow them.

You didn't...you weren't angry? Scared? Sad?

By then, it wasn't...we still didn't have an idea what the new government would be like, so we didn't know to be afraid or not. I was still young at the time, not yet 30 years old, didn't have my own family yet, and so when the currency changed, *then* I was very afraid.

Change in currency?

Currency change! Because the two sides had different currencies! Because then, we were using the old government's currency, the money of Om Thieu's government. We were

still using that money, but the new government, they entered and didn't accept this type of money. So they had to change it. And then we had money [raises hand] and then we didn't have money [lowers hand]. Because they gave us a poor exchange. And therefore, that was when I was very afraid.

That was when you were afraid...

Afraid...very scared. Everyone experienced and felt this.

Did you ever think in your private thoughts about wanting a side to win? Were you ever anxious for one side to win, one side to lose, anything like that?

After living in both sides, I see that...that life could be...be unstable. So I was afraid of instability. Because the currency rates had changed. Do you understand? Every day our money was worth less and less. Maybe in the beginning, we used it at its value, but afterwards when the rates decreased, we couldn't buy the same thing with it. So that was not so secure, you know? Very uncertain. So I was worried, very afraid.

Do you remember [English] after 1975, when did you think that living with the Cộng sản, under the new government was...normal again? When you weren't afraid anymore, worried about money anymore?

I didn't know *when*. I didn't know when all of that instability was going to end. I was just hopeful that they would be *minh bach* [Chinese/Vietnamese word, translation: transparency, clear], that everything was clear and apparent, *minh bach*. So that everyone would understand. When those politicians did anything, they had to let us know, so that everyone would be familiar with it. So...when they changed our money, I was very afraid. *Dot Ngot* [translation: sudden].

Thank you very much for talking to me today. Do you have anything else you would like to say? About the war or...just anything?

[Pause] Me, right now, I don't know what to say. Between us talking as family members, I just hope that life...that life has to have *tuong lai* [translation: future].

Tuong lai ...

Yes, you have to have *tuong lai*. The education system today, children want to learn to advance and find employment to pay for material things, almost like to show off. They don't want to learn for the sake of learning.

APPENDIX C

Interview with Hồng Duy Cường (M)
Interviewed by Leann Do on August 17, 2011 in Da Lat, Vietnam
b. 1958 in Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City
Occupation during war: High school student

Leann Do
Hồng Duy Cường

When and where were you born?

I was born in 1948 in the city of Saigon, now known as Ho Chi Minh, on the 29th of April.

You lived in 288?

That's right. From childhood to adulthood I lived in 288.

Grandpa and Grandma, your mom and dad, what did they do for a living?

My parents...my father worked as a government officer, a Công chức [translation: public servant] before 1975. And afterwards, he became a merchant, he did trading. My mom was a merchant even before 1975 and continued afterwards.

Did your family follow any religion?

We were Buddhists.

Buddhists. And did you, when you were little, do you remember hearing for the first time for adults or teachers talk about communists?

When I was in elementary school, I didn't hear anything about it. When we were in school, they didn't talk about the war. In the sixth grade, we did learn history. I learned the history of Vietnam and its *lap nuoc* [translation: origins] all the way in the past centuries...I don't remember now...the mythology...up to the year 19 [pause] 70. So I learned about the Vietnam War through books, magazines, media. I learned about the battles in the cities and provinces and political, ideological struggles and tension between North and South through magazines and newspapers. They were fighting on many fronts: history, economy, even foreign policy. But to be honest, I can't remember it all very clearly. Anything I remember is in patches, because at that time I was under eighteen, and I didn't entirely understand the war.

You mentioned books and newspapers that you read about the history of Vietnam. Who wrote them? The Vietnamese or foreigners?

Ah, those books about the Vietnam War were written by news reporters and journalists. I can't remember the names of the authors very clearly. They wrote under pseudonyms, they weren't their real names. I don't remember.

*At that time, when you were young and attending school at age 15 to 18, did you think about the *Cộng sản* or who they were, or thought about the war in general?*

I did hear other people talk about the Viet Cong; that they operated in the jungles and used guerilla tactics where they would suddenly appear and disappear, they could infiltrate and disguise themselves as a common person. That they would hide in the jungle. I heard people talk about this, so I was quite worried, but at that time I didn't understand entirely the strategy or plan of the North. People said that the Viet Cong fought very bravely, that they were skilled at guerilla fighting. In my neighborhood there was a man who...he was a soldier, he was in the special operations unit. His type of work was secretive and snuck into the communist headquarters. He went into the jungle and did business for the *Cộng sản*, the Viet Cong. And he got permission to go home and told us these stories...so I heard him say that...I heard some things like...that I understood what the Viet Cong were like. And I thought that they were just like me, that's all. That they were normal Vietnamese people like me. That they grew up in the North, had a family and household, were encouraged to go into the military and most everyone volunteered to go. Anyone with higher education were promoted to higher positions. Anyone who was a good student, they could find jobs in their field. That was the way in the South. I knew that there were people who didn't have to take up arms [idiom], that they went on to study and contribute to the national defense for the North, like it was in the South. There were newspapers that I read that said the South couldn't fight on the same level as the North; that they weren't as good as the North. [Chuckles] So I...one of our relatives, I had an uncle, an uncle who lived out there...he was a Viet Cong. And at that time I...I didn't even know who he was. Because my father, he was a Northerner who fled to the South in '54. So my father did tell me that in the North, he had a brother with a family, and my cousins all joined the army, they weren't in contact with each other at all. The North and South governments prohibited any exchanges like mailing between the two sides. My father and my uncle did not contact each other at all. They were Northerner and Southerner, and so two sides didn't know anything of each other. They just knew that...out there there's someone. If I...if I had carried a gun out there and *anh em* [translation: older brother and younger brother; use: the general people] shot at each other, we wouldn't know. Two brothers could kill each other and not know. I was afraid of that. But luckily, in 1975, the year when I was of age, if nothing had happened, then I would have had to go into the military, trained, and then fought in the war. But in April, *Giải phóng* took place [translation: Reunification Day]. Older cousins and uncles came by to visit, friends of my father visited, and they told all their war stories about fighting the Viet Cong, the hardships of the Northern soldiers. That's when I realized that...the South and the North, they were *anh em* fighting each other! And people...outsiders incited us, incited us and it didn't change anything! [Chuckles] I didn't understand clearly

or fully the politics of the time, what was happening between North and South. I didn't understand very much.

You said that you were most afraid that when you were of age, eighteen, that you'd have to enter the military –

[Chuckles]

– and you could possibly attack your relatives in the North and not know it...

There was an American radio station that reported these stories about the Viet Cong. There were these letters that they posted and read, letters for families back in the North. They would post them and publish their names, posted on the radio station looking for relatives in the South as a way to find them. I heard that the Northerners...when they died...after 1975, people could look for the missing soldiers and to find out where they died, try to locate their bodies, what units they belonged in...the government helped find them and bring them back home, helped pay for the funeral.

In 1968 on Tet, you were ten years old. Do you remember that day?

I remember the evening of New Year's Eve, the evening of the 30th, we prepared fruits, *ngũ quả* [translation: tray of five fruits], one chicken, spirits, sticky rice to welcome our ancestors to celebrate Tet. And that day...my father prepared the dishes and the chicken, put the altar, the fruit tray, and incense at the front door. And when my father finished performing the ritual, there were fireworks. Fireworks to celebrate the first day of the year, the new year. In the neighborhood there was a soldier who had a leave of absence, he was visiting his family, and he shot his gun into the air to celebrate instead of fireworks. I didn't know if he had permission, he just shot into the sky. We just went ahead and lit the fireworks. I didn't know at the time that the war would take place in Saigon and at that point that the North would attack the city. The entire house was celebrating and happy. I didn't think at the time that that day...that the North would attack on that day. And *much* later, if I'm not wrong, on the sixth or seventh day of the new year, the fighting stopped. The Northern soldiers were fighting outside the city in the suburbs, they also fought in the center district of the city, and the city's airport. The people who were on duty during Tet were ordered to be on guard for twenty-four hours throughout the day. The important offices sent people out to guard. Small bursts of fighting happened around the city, but it didn't reach my neighborhood, so I didn't...later on in the newspaper I read that the Viet Cong lost the battle, the Northerners lost.

That day –

Tet Mau Than [translation: What Tet of 1968 is known as in Vietnam]

That day, you didn't see or hear about Tet? You didn't know that the Viet Cong entered the city?

I heard on the radio, that's how I knew. But on the first I didn't know. After, after on the second, my father, every morning my father turned on the radio to hear the news. Now newspapers were rarely bought. My father, if there was something he liked or anything important then he would buy it. But usually, we listened to the radio. So on the second we heard about it. But on the day of Tet, the first, it was a holiday, people rested. That's an important holiday, so people stayed in. Only a handful of people, people who were very poor and were vendors, who sold things like fresh fruits and vegetables, a couple of them were outside selling. But most people, no, they rested. I...on the second, I heard on the radio and I found out.

When you were growing up in Saigon during the war, did you ever hear the gunfire, the artillery? Did you ever hear the sounds of war?

Guns?

That's right.

The day...the 29th of April, I saw...I saw very clearly airplanes and the sounds of guns, the sounds of bombs. The days leading up to that, before then...I don't remember quite well...maybe the 26th or the 27th of April, the twenty-something of April, a Viet Cong from the North...he...he flew over and dropped bombs on the capital. It was in the middle of the day, around 10 or 11, he dropped bombs on the capital and I heard the sounds of impact. At that time, I was in school near Si Thu. I heard it very clearly, about three explosions. And the school reported that all the students on the second and third floors had to descend immediately. I was scared, hearing all my friends say, "*Thoi roi* [translation: the end, no more], it looks like the Viet Cong has entered the city." Hearing all that, I was afraid. Everyone, the teachers and students, everyone stopped what they were doing and went underground. And the school reported that none of the students could try to go home, we shouldn't panic, that we must remain calm, and we couldn't leave for home. The Viet Cong were attacking and the entire school shut down. Our teachers too were waiting, waiting to hear more, they didn't know anything. So afterwards, the school told us that it was time to leave, we could go home. And the day afterwards, we heard on the news that we had a day off, a day off from school for one day. The day after, we would return to school. But the day after that on the 29th, the end, the end of the war...I...in the afternoon I saw in the air, in the sky, heard sounds like *boom boom*. And my father drove his car out into a field and stood there and watched in the sky...I saw two airplanes, they flew high, *really* high, I couldn't tell what kinds of airplanes they were, but I saw them shooting and shooting. And so there. I clearly saw it was war! They were fighting, shooting at each other. I saw the two planes fly somewhere, where I'm not sure, but I heard the fighting...and in the neighborhood there was a metal rod. So I ran out into the playground and I heard people in the neighborhood saying "They say the Viet Cong is almost at the airport! They've almost taken the airport. And people are fighting on the streets, it's chaos!" We were ordered to stay home, I didn't go

to school. The school was shut down and everyone stayed home, we couldn't go outside. Everyone just stayed around their neighborhoods. That night, around ten o' clock, all the stores closed their doors. They were terrified. And then everything subsided that night, around nine o' clock. By subsided I mean...that people started going out on the streets. Everything had stopped until then, from the morning to night. I remember it very clearly. And the next day, we heard news that...it was close to the end. News that said...the Viet Cong was very near, that they've entered the suburbs of Saigon. Long Khanh, Buon Me Thuot, Dong Nai, all these cities had been overtaken already. As in...the Southern military had lost, that they had left the cities, left and...ran. Left as in...left as in abandoned the city, as in not fighting in the cities anymore. There were many places like that. So by the afternoon, we heard this around 11 or 12 o' clock...12 o' clock...or maybe it was 1 o' clock. We heard on the radio a voice, a Northerner voice, declaring that the city was liberated – the city of Ho Chi Minh, well at that time called Saigon. It was still called Saigon. And it was liberated. And the news said the president, the president had accepted defeat, that he had surrendered. That night, in the evening, on the news it showed images of tanks on the streets and I did run out into the streets and saw for myself. I saw soldiers in uniform marching as one on the streets. In the middle of the road was a Jeep with a person waving a flag, the flag with two...three colors, blue, red, and a yellow star in the middle. They were marching for the liberation of Vietnam. That flag waved down the streets everywhere. [Chuckles]

These people on the streets, they were Northerners? Southerners?

Northerners, the Uncle Ho soldiers, what we call Viet Cong. They walked down...as in they marched wherever to take over the different quarters of the city. They marched on the streets as a huge group; there were a lot of them. That was the very first time I saw them. The first time I saw what their uniforms were like, their uniforms, badges, guns. They were still wearing camouflage made out of leaves and sandals...sandals, AK-47 rifles, all marching down the streets. And a tank too.

When you saw this, do you remember feeling angry or worried or...

Of course I worried. At that time I didn't feel any...any happiness about it, but I also didn't feel too sad. I was just worried about whether I could return to school. At that time, I was just in the eleventh grade, just started the eleventh grade...ah, that was the year when I just finished the tenth grade. I was worried if I could go back to school or if...after the turnover, I had to go...because I was of age now...if I had to go into the military for the *other* side, not for the South. So I was worried, worried about that. But after that, I returned to school as normal. Around the month of...the month of September or October...*September*...on the very day of...usually on the first of September...I went to school and it reported that it would start the school year and what days it would restart. So then, I knew that I didn't have to worry anymore, didn't have to worry anymore about schooling and that I could continue. At that time I was just afraid that I wouldn't find a job after school.

Were you afraid about the family...that your mom and dad wouldn't make enough money or not have enough to eat, that kind of thing?

Was I concerned about my family's well-being?

Yes.

[Pause] My mom and dad at that time were poor, very poor. I was of course afraid...didn't know if my father could make a living once the North took over. He worked at the post office and I worried whether he would keep his job or not. Or if he had to go to re-education camp. I heard that anyone who worked for the military or state, for the South, that they might lose their jobs. I was anxious, anxious that if my father lost his job then he would be unemployed, have no money, not make a living. Can't make a living and have nothing to do. So I did consider dropping out of school and going to work, try to find work. Because if I continued my education, then where would we find money? My dad had retired, my mom was just a vendor. So I was very anxious. But after that, my dad read in the newspaper that there was an inquest asking about where you worked before 1975 and you had to report. So my dad went and registered himself. I heard people say that if you worked for the military or state and you still remained in Vietnam, as in you didn't escape to another country, then you had to report to this inquest. You had to report what you did, where, and when. And afterwards, those people were given assignments to go to training, to school, training in re-education camps. It was the same for the military; the soldiers returned home and had to report to re-education camps. So I heard...relatives and cousins of mine, my dad saying that it was pretty certain that they had to go to re-education camp. That they would be gone for a *long* time and I got scared. But my dad from 1954 to 1975 wasn't in the military. He just stayed home and helped with the family, his job position wasn't very high, so then he only went...he only went for ten days. He was at the office, at the very place where he worked, he didn't have to go anywhere at all. But his boss, he was gone for longer and farther away. He had to pack his clothes and stay somewhere, somewhere that they took him...he was in a group that had to learn together [idiom].

When you saw your dad go to re-education camp, did you fear that he wouldn't come back?

Of course I was afraid. I was afraid, my dad was afraid too. But my mom heard from my dad...that after a couple days when he returned – this was after liberation day – he returned home and said “I don't have to go anywhere. We don't have to worry. The days were divided up into lessons and work.” The post office just couldn't stop. People still had to communicate with each other – even more than ever! Because now both sides were open to each other for contact. So working for the post office...the post office was very important. The telephone and other methods, they were very important. In the beginning, at the start of *Giải phóng* [translation: Reunification Day], people started to contact each other before they started celebrating...celebrating the...the new order. But the post office, my dad still had to work there. Now there was mail coming from the North and it was urgent, so my dad kept his job. After that in the year 1978, my dad

decided to retire. But he didn't get to have a pension, he didn't get a pension at all. He got a one-time severance pay when he retired, but there was no monthly pension.

You said that before the 29th of April, 1975, you didn't see or hear the war in Saigon, right?

Before April? In April I was already 18...17...close to 18 already. So I did hear about the war, heard it in the news and the newspapers. Before then, I didn't see it happened right in front of my eyes. I had some friends who lived in Hue who said...they applied to go to school in the city...and they said that they witnessed it all the time. That the Viet Minh and South soldiers would fight battles while they were trying to work or study. And seeing this, they would run, run to safety and get away from the fighting. And there were some friends of mine who said that out in Minh Trung, life was very difficult. "We did our work, which is already very hard, and if the war came close to us, then we had to retreat to our safe areas. Every house had one. So if we were out at work or at school like normal and the fighting approached, then we had to return home...went to our basement shelters, with a closure, and go down there and be protected. Protected from the bombs." So a lot of my friends, their families had good reason to move to Saigon and find a living. Their parents settled down, bought homes in the city and they went to the city schools. They enrolled in the city schools so that they didn't have to live in the country, they left their homes out there.

[40:40] The two sides...I think...we are still the same people and to fight each other, it's such a shame. *Anh em* in the past endured much hardship. We came to the South to find a better life. In the South, the land is more fertile. Life was better, we found more success with employment. In the North, the land is mountainous, but the way of life wasn't as good as the South.

APPENDIX D

Interview with Trần Ti Phú (F)

Interviewed by Leann Do on August 20, 2011 in Da Lat, Vietnam

b. 1940 near Hue, raised in Da Lat

Occupation during war: Small business vendor

Leann Do

Trần Ti Phú

The year of 1974 – 1975, actually, it was 1975 – that was year that we had to evacuate out of Da Lat, but closer to Conh Rang. We stayed there for ten days and came back to Da Lat on the third...the third of April; that was the day Da Lat was released. That is to say that was the day the Americans left Da Lat. That was when the Cộng sản moved in here.

When were you born?

I was born in 1939.

Did your family always live in Da Lat?

No, I was born in Ming Trung near Hue. I was fourteen when we moved to Da Lat. And this year I am 72.

What did your parents do for a living?

My parents just lived by...at home in Hue...by making and selling food, chopsticks, things like that.

Did you have any siblings?

Just a younger and older brother. But now there are only two of us. Just me and my younger brother who now lives in Dinh Bien Phu. My older brother went to war and died, indisputably, he died near Hue.

You were born in 1939, do you remember the year 1954 when Vietnam partitioned into North and South? Did your family want to move further South?

My family was living in Minh Trung near Hue and at that time there was heavy fighting in Hue. So we decided to move to Tinh, farther away. So by the time I was nine, I moved closer to Hue and lived there for five years until coming Da Lat.

You said you moved to Da Lat when you were 14 years old.

Yes, I was fourteen years old.

That would be the year 1954.

Yes, 1954, that's right.

What was your family's reason for moving?

Because we were poor in Hue, so it was necessary to move here and find better employment.

What jobs did your parents find in Da Lat?

They were just vendors.

What kinds of things did they sell?

They sold... [Laughs] They sold just about anything. Anything we could sell, we did. We mostly sold groceries. We set up in the front of the house. I would work in front of this house now – back then the space was really big. And then I...in the year 1975...we had to go somewhere else. We were selling groceries, but then went all the way to Nha Trang to get the food. It was wartime and we had to do it.

Can you speak French?

I cannot speak French, no. [Laughs]

[Laughs] But did you ever meet any Frenchmen?

Sure, when I went out to the streets I would only see them. I didn't interact with them.

Did you want the French in Vietnam?

Well, I'm an average person. I don't dare want anyone else to occupy Vietnam. They could do their own work...I just know that for ordinary people like me, we just went to work and sold groceries every day to live. That's all.

You didn't read the newspaper or listen to the radio at home to follow what the French, the Americans, the Viet Cong, or the Viet Minh were doing?

The time when the Americans left in 1973, I remember that time being a lot better financially and economically.

When the Americans entered? [My misunderstanding of the word “left” for “entered”]

Yes, when we were released, that was when things started getting better. Much better than when the Americans and French fighting in Vietnam. And it got better day by day as I saw them leaving. During the years of war by the Americans and the French, the working class people led harder lives.

Do you remember when the Viet Minh were fighting against the French?

I cannot remember much. I just remember two sides fighting against each other, everyone running to and fro, and knowing that a lot of people were dying.

Was it because you saw the two sides fighting and didn't understand why?

I didn't understand much, but I saw – I saw when I lived in the countryside that when the fighting came near, we would escape. Two sides fighting each other and we would go underground in our basement. I didn't...I didn't understand much clearly.

You were still quite young.

Yes, I was still a small child.

And you ran with your family down to safety?

Yes. We ran down to the basement, which we made, and we went there to hide.

You stayed down there for how long?

I stayed for...only a year.

[Surprised] Where?

I was in the countryside for a year.....And in the country when we heard the first sounds of fighting, everyone would run home and go straight to their basement.

And this went on for a year?

When we heard the warning signs, everyone would go to the basement.

You and your family did this...

A lot of times, yes.

And your first time you ever did it, were you scared?

Of course. If you didn't make it, you could get shot dead.

What about, you know, your fiftieth or sixtieth time? Were you still scared then?

A lot of occasions, it happened, I was always fearful. Our neighbors would warn people on the streets and we all ran home to get underground.

You and your family would listen to the...

Yes, the warning sounds and people yelling for everyone to go home. That was when it started, going underground.

When you and your family were in Da Lat, did you have to do similar things?

That [the Viet Minh and French conflict] didn't happen in Da Lat. At the time there were the Southern soldiers and the Cộng sản, two sides against each other. And again, I had a basement to go take shelter in when the fighting got too close. That was 1972 when we had to do it. They were fighting heavily and we all had to go underground, we ran into the basement, here at this house. And at night when we slept, we would take the four mattresses fortify it with whatever we could and all of us would sleep on it. We were afraid, you know, of getting attacked at night. And my husband, if he was home, he would go to the military base in Da Lat, where he worked for the Americans.

Did you know or have an idea at the time of why the Americans were fighting in Vietnam?

So...I just saw that the Americans...every one of them in Vietnam were just there and anywhere. They [the Americans] would bring them [the soldiers] anywhere, and they would fight. So many deaths; many deaths that year, a lot of casualties in the spring of 1972. Both sides were fighting so heavily in Da Lat, in the mountains and woods. They would fight far off in the mountains and two sides fighting thickly. When they died, their bodies were brought into the city, right in front of you. A lot of death.

Do you remember as a child hearing or learning about communism from your parents or teachers?

I don't remember.

In your mind, were you worried or afraid of the communists?

I was more concerned about selling groceries to find a living. As for the communists and two sides fighting each other, I knew little.

Did you ever meet a communist in Da Lat or Hue?

I'll be honest with you, when I was busy working and doing day-to-day business, I didn't have time to read anything. I didn't understand what was going on much.

The first time you realized that there was a war in Vietnam that America was involved in, did you realized that it was a war between America and communism?

When the war began, it was the Americans and the [South] Vietnamese fighting together. So yes, the Vietnamese and Americans were together.

But did you know or understand the reason, at the time, for their fighting?

In regards to that, no, I couldn't understand.

And at that time, you were still working and selling groceries.

Yes, I was busy with the business and making a living for the family. So no, I couldn't think about much else.

You said your family was poor in Hue. In Da Lat, did you find success?

When I lived in Minh Trung near Hue, I was very poor. The living was very bad, not as good as it is here. When I got to Da Lat, things got better, I made more money, life became easier.

How much would you make in a day?

Me? Oh...well, back then, I made 100,000d a day or maybe 200,000d a day. There are always days when you make a lot or a little. Not every day was the same.

Were you ever worried that you couldn't afford your home or food for your family?

I didn't have to make house payments. When we first moved here, we bought the land for only 2,000d! Yes, it was only 2,000d then. And there were some fruit trees and plants on the land which I cleared. And we cleared it all and decided that this was where we will build our house. And our home was small at first. In front was where we sold groceries and things during the day. Any money we saved went towards adding more to the house.

When the war started, did your brothers have to join the war?

What do you mean?

Were your brothers drafted into the war to fight for the South?

A lot of my relatives, cousins went into the war.

Did your father fight in the war?

My father, no. My father at that time stayed at home to work.

And your brothers?

My brothers...one went to fight in the Americans, the other joined the communists. In the countryside at that time, men were being called to fight and then they had to follow. The communists were there, the Americans were there.

What did you and your parents think of one brother fighting with the North and the other fighting for the South?

With that, I didn't understand very much. It's just in the countryside, there were more communists and so you went into the military with the communists.

So your brother simply followed...

Yes, he had to go along. It's like the American military, if you lived near the American military, then you join the American military.

Which brother joined the communists? Was it your older brother?

It was my older brother, but he's dead now.

Your brother was the eldest? You were the second child.

And now there's only my younger brother, the one who went into the American military. Now he lives in Dien Binh Phu. And the brother who fought with the communists, he dead, lost now.

How old was he when he joined the communists?

He was...twenty, twenty something years old.

Twenty seven years old?

That was...that...no, not twenty seven. Then, he was twenty four or twenty two. I can't remember definitely.

What about the brother who went into the American military? How old was he?

Back then, he was...twenty something years old. I can't really remember.

And during the war, was your family worried that your brothers were fighting on opposite sides? That they could potentially face each other?

Of course we were worried. But my brother who joined the other side, he died early; he wasn't in the war for very long.

Your brother on which side?

My brother on the, well you would call them the Viet Minh. He went and he died, died early, still young.

Do you remember the year?

The year...no, I can't remember.

In your family were two brothers who fought on opposite sides, but did you ever hope in your mind for which side to win and which side to lose? Having both brothers in the war, did you ever have these thoughts?

When I think about it...I was just afraid, afraid of fighting each other and dying. But my brother, he died early.

Did you worry about your younger brother? Did he write home to you and your family to tell you how he was doing?

He joined the American side, yes, but he stayed at base, didn't go out into the jungles. That is my younger brother, who didn't fight in the severe situations.

Were you worried while you were at home?

I was worried, of course. I was worried that the war would come near our house. But the fighting was light, not a lot of it.

In the year 1968, do you remember seeing Americans or the Viet Cong in Da Lat? Do you remember hearing gunfire or rockets or anything?

In 1968...close to here, the Viet Cong would fight near here and there were a lot of deaths. That was when the Americans were still here too.

Tet during that year, do you remember where you were? Did the Viet Cong enter Da Lat on Tet? In 1968?

1968...that year, the Viet Cong went into people's homes at night. Any house they could enter, they would.

Did they take things from your houses? What did they do?

They, well, they came but they didn't enter our house. They came to the front of our house and shot some guns and left. They found the military, the military stationed at Da Lat, you know?

You heard them fighting?

Of course I did. My eldest daughter was shot in the arm. She was sleeping with her brothers and sisters and a stray shot got her in the arm. She was injured and when I saw the blood I ordered my children to get out of the basement. So the Viet Cong were outside shooting down while we were moving up...there was so much fighting.

Were you injured?

I wasn't, but my daughter was shot in the arm.

Did you take her to...

I took her into the basement and I bandaged her arm.

Was, is she okay?

She was fine, it didn't hit her bone, only a flesh wound.

How old was your daughter?

This year, she is, she is 52 years old.

On Tet, though, how old was she?

That was the year, she was in level eight at school. That's in the teens somewhere. Now she's 52-years-old.

When you said that you went down into the basement, was it you and your entire family?

Yes, it was me and my family. If my husband was home, he would have to go back to his dorms at the station. My husband worked for the military at the time, the American military, and so he lived in the dorms.

How long were you in the basement for with your family?

We would be down there for a few hours. Once we heard the gunfire and fighting stop, we would emerge.

So then did you run to a public shelter near your house or did your house have one of its own...

This red house there [points], that was where I dug and set up the basement.

So it was entirely owned by...

It was my house, yes.

Did other houses in your neighborhood have underground shelters like your house?

No, they didn't. I was afraid of nearby fighting, so I made sure we made one.

You only know of your own family doing this...

No, no one else did it.

During this time, in 1972 when the war was at its heaviest, did you see a lot of fighting in Da Lat?

The year 1972, there was fighting, but it was in the mountains. Lots of deaths.

Did you know of this or did you see it?

I knew that there was a great amount of fighting and many deaths.

You heard people talk about their lost relatives?

That's right. The war took many lives in families. The bodies were brought back home to rest.

At that time, when your husband was in the American military, did he go to the frontlines to fight?

No, my husband remained stationed at the base. He didn't go into the fighting, he was in the office only. He sat in the office only.

So he was stationed only in Da Lat.

Yes, that's right.

So did he come home after work to see his family?

No, he didn't. He lived at the station. He stayed in Da Lat, but he didn't live at home.

Why didn't he?

Because if he did, the communists would come to the house and make him join.

Ah, I see. So how did you communicate with him?

Well at that time, there were no telephones. So we would visit early in the mornings and he would go back to the station immediately. At night, my husband couldn't sleep at home. He was never sent into battle, though. He would come to the house at around six in the morning to eat something and had to go to work afterwards. But he didn't have to go to war.

Do you remember the 29th of April in 1975? The last day of the war, when President Thieu declared a cease-fire. Do you remember your feelings on that day?

I didn't really understand anything. I just knew that...Ngo Dinh Diem...

You mean Ngo Dinh Diem who was assassinated in...

1963.

Do you remember the time when Ngo Dinh Diem and Nhu...

Nhu. Ngo Dinh Nhu.

Yes, Nhu. Do you remember hearing anything about them?

I only heard a couple of things, but I honestly didn't care or understand it.

So the day when South Vietnam surrendered, were you afraid?

I was, a little yes.

And during the war, you sold groceries as usual...were any of your children in school? How many?

There were seven children in the household who went to school. And the eldest son, he died young. He was very sick and died. So the rest of the children, there were eight, they went to school.

Eight children?

Eight...

Wow. So at the time, you were busy working and taking care of the children.

That's right, I sold groceries at our vendor stand out front. And then I raise the children inside the house.

All this time, were you getting any help?

No, my husband was occupied with working for the American military. And when I say American military, I don't mean that he was out there fighting.

Was he able to help out by sending home his wages?

His salary was...at that time, the salary was very low. My husband definitely sent money home, but it was too little, not enough to eat on. So I would take on more work. I had to do an extra job. Go out to the streets and sell items, do whatever. Whenever we needed more money, more for a living and food.

And when your children grew up and older, did any of them help you out?

Well, now that my children are grown and have finished school, then yes, we are a connected family. Each family...takes care of themselves and each other.

What was your first thought when you heard that Saigon had fallen?

To be honest with you, I didn't think about anything. I was so busy with worry about my family and doing day-to-day things and working that I didn't think about it. I don't remember if I thought about it.

Did you ever want a clear side to win?

I just knew that both sides were fighting and I was so afraid because there was a lot of death. Either side, both sides, people were dying. So I didn't consider them as "winning" sides when so many died.

If there was never a war, would you have done anything differently? Could you have done something that you couldn't do otherwise with the war?

Only that there would have been no fighting with the Viet Cong and so many deaths. That's all. I never thought about being happy if one side one and being happy if one side lost. My everyday thoughts were about work and making money to raise my family, that's all. And those two sides fighting and all those casualties...my husband who was in the military for the Americans.

APPENDIX E

Interview with Trần Minh Mẫn (M)

Interviewed by Leann Do on August 20, 2011 in Da Lat, Vietnam

b. 1932 outside of Hai Hung, traveled throughout Vietnam as a child

Occupation during war: post office worker for South Vietnamese military

Leann Do

Trần Minh Mẫn

When were you born?

I was born in 1932 in the North.

Where in the North?

Hai Hung. Outside of Hai Hung.

Can you describe it?

It was a small city, close to the size of Da Lat.

And what did your parents do for a living?

My parents died when I was very young. And I came to Da Lat in 1954.

Your parents died when you were...

Very young.

Do you remember the year or how old you were?

I don't remember...I know I worked as an aide for another person. The man, he died in Saigon. He, his name is Nhai, he died in Saigon.

Your father died in Saigon...

No, that's not it. The man who I followed and worked for. He took care of me after...

When your parents died, he took you in?

That's right.

Who was he? What did he do?

He was a scribe and maintenance keeper for the temples. I would help him around the house, cook meals, clean up, things like that.

And you followed him to Saigon...

Yes, I went with him to Saigon, and he died in Binh Duong, near Saigon, outside of the city.

So you never lived in Saigon? You were about to, but you never...

Ah, after that, I went to Binh Hoa where I was an aide for a man who sold pho. And after that, I came here.

You were alone since childhood? You didn't have any siblings?

No.

And you had to follow anyone who...

Well, yes, like the old man to Saigon – who died before reaching it – and who transcribed at temples.

With all this traveling, did you get an education?

No, just worked in the house. I did anything that they asked, did laundry, that's all.

But when you were young, did you go to school?

No. I studied very little.

What grade did you stop going to school?

It was...well, it was the grade when I didn't need to keep going to school anymore. I dropped out and worked full time. Where would I find the money to be able to go to school? I was working as a house aide to people, there was no time for school. I studied very little. Enough to know how to read and write.

And the people who you worked for as an aide, were they distant relations or family friends who knew you?

No, the old man was a stranger. When I was young, I would help around the house, go to the market to buy supplies, do laundry, and follow him when he went out. And then he died outside of Saigon, in Binh Duong.

How much did you make as a house aide when you were little?

No, no wages. I just worked for meals, that's all. I was little, I was given food. No need for money.

You said that you moved to Da Lat in 1954. For what reason?

It's a lot cooler up here. I came up here because...I've lived and worked in Saigon before with the man who sold pho. I would bring bowls of pho to customers. And then I came up here.

And what employment did you find in Da Lat?

I came here to work at the post office.

How old were you then? In 1954.

I was twenty-two years old.

You joined and worked for the military?

Yes, as a mailman.

What does that mean, exactly?

It was the postal service for the military. We received and sorted the mail, that's all.

When you were twenty-two, did you already meet your wife? Were you married then?

I met my wife in 1956.

Where?

We met here, in Da Lat.

At a café? Through her family?

No. See, I was working at this place and she was also there helping someone. And...two people loved each other and got married.

So you worked at the library – no sorry –

The postal service.

Do you remember hearing for the first time about war in Vietnam?

Of course I heard it. I heard it from far away, they of course wouldn't fight openly in the city, because they couldn't enter it.

So you would know it was happening from away, but also know that it couldn't come near the city.

Yes, sometimes I would be walking outside and in distance in the mountains, there were sounds of fighting. And the Americans working with the South, yes, you were aware of them too.

Do you remember meeting Frenchmen?

Of course, but only in the North.

Not in the South?

In the South, there were the Americans. The French had already left. They had lost, so they left. Don't know what year exactly they left.

Do you remember the time when the French were still in Vietnam? What was it like?

I knew that they were in the North. Maybe in 1950, 1952, they were fighting and about to leave...

What was it like to live under French rule?

Well, in the 1950s or so...well, in 1954, I moved to Da Lat and didn't see much of the French anymore.

But did you want them to be in Vietnam, essentially?

The French were very easy to get along with. They went along with their lives and I didn't have a problem with it. The French were okay, I couldn't find anything wrong. It's like how you keep friends who you like.

So you went into the military, but you didn't get sent to the frontlines.

No, I only worked in the post office, just sorting mail. I would go out to the airport, get the shipment of mail, sort it, and the mailmen would pick it up and deliver the mail to the officers.

How many years did you work there?

Let's see...it was 1956 to...the end of the war.

In 1975?

Yes, it was 1975.

Wow. So that was close to 20 years. Do you know how much you made a day?

No, but I think it was something similar to what one would make today. Around 3,000,000d a month.

So did you consider yourself well-off?

Well we were paid only once a month. And it was 3,000,000d...

Was that enough to take care of your family?

Huh? Well, no, at that time I was still single!

When did you get married and start a family? You said that you worked there for 20 years and during that time you must have had children?

I met my wife in 1956 and we have been together since.

And were you able to stay in your house during your employment?

No, I didn't have to go out into the jungle to fight. I stayed in Da Lat the entire time. I wasn't part of the military that went out to fight.

So every morning, you would get up and go to work, and after work, you would come home for dinner?

I didn't have to go into the jungle to fight, no. Just remained in the city and worked at the post office.

And why didn't you join that part of the military that required combat fighting?

It was still the military, just in the city.

Was it your choice to stay in the city or were you assigned your post?

I chose it, of course.

Did you work with Americans at your job? Or was it run by Vietnamese only?

I worked only with Vietnamese people.

Did you meet any Americans?

Yes, I knew of Americans. The place where I worked only employed seven or eight people.

So you knew of Americans...

Of course I saw. But I didn't talk to any of them, I didn't speak the language. There were many of them in the city.

Do you remember the first time when you were aware of a war in Vietnam between America and the communists?

In 1954, actually in 1952, they were already fighting the French. But in rural places like the countryside, not in the city. The Americans, they would just advise the Southern Vietnamese.

What did you think about the communists? Did you agree with what they were doing?

Me, I just didn't think anything about it. I just knew that there were two sides fighting each other. It was only time to time that they fought in battles, and it was always off in the distance, near the country, in the mountains.

Did you ever hear it? Even when you were in the city, you must have heard it.

Yes, but you only heard the sound of gunfire.

Were you ever scared?

Huh? Scared when they were far away out there! It wasn't near us. Whenever they started combat, I could hear it, but obviously they weren't going to spread out into the city.

Do you remember when the Viet Minh and Ho Chi Minh were successful at driving the French out of Vietnam? At Dinh Bien Phu?

Of course I remember, yes. These leaders who wanted the French gone, whatever year that was in Dinh Bien Phu, I only heard about it of course, I wasn't there. The siege went on for days, I don't remember. But they trapped the French.

When you heard about it, that the Viet Minh had defeated the French, were you happy? Or sad that the French were leaving?

Ah! Well, when you gain independence, of course you're happy. You have to be.

Do you remember in 1963 when President Ngo Dinh Diem.

Ngo Dinh Diem.

Diem [Laughs]. Do you remember when he was assassinated?

I just knew that he was dead, along with his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu.

Did you read about it in the newspaper? Hear about it on the radio?

I heard people talking about it, yes.

Were you sad? Worried?

When anyone dies, it's sad, of course.

Were you worried about the future of South Vietnam and its independence?

I wasn't scared at all. Because there were leaders to take over afterwards.

Do you remember Tet in 1968?

Tet? That was when there was lots of fighting in the city.

Where were you during Tet?

I was right here in Da Lat.

Do you remember the morning or evening when the communists entered Da Lat?

Of course I do. They didn't stay long. They only fought for a moment and left.

Were you at home when the communists entered the city?

No, I was in the military, how could I have gone home? I was at the station the entire time.

So you were on base during Tet.

Yes. And the communists didn't try to occupy Da Lat. They only came into the city for a while and then left.

Were you scared? Did you wait at the base for them to leave?

Huh?

Were you afraid while waiting?

No, I wasn't afraid at all. When we were inside the station, we were safe.

Ah. So you were married in 1956, and by 1968 you've been married for...12 years.

Yes, we got married in 1956.

In that time, have you had children?

Yes, of course.

Were you worried about your family during Tet?

I was worried all right. But my wife, she's phenomenal. She was strong for my children.

Were you afraid for your family's safety?

No, not much because the communists weren't going to occupy Da Lat.

In 1972 when the Americans began leaving South Vietnam and there was increased fighting from both sides, did you notice a marked difference? Were people worried about the future of Vietnam?

They were worried, of course.

In what way?

People worried if life would go on as normal as before, or if there were going to be changes. And as time went on, I found that there was nothing to be worried about. But at first, yes, there was apprehension.

During that time, did you root for a side to win?

At that time, either side could have won. The North were Vietnamese, the South were Vietnamese. It didn't matter to me which side won. Either would do.

So you could have lived with communists as easily as living with Southerners?

Yes, I'm part of the public and despite whoever is in charge, I still have to follow them. If the North won, then I would follow. If the South won, then I would follow. Just consider me an average person; whoever led, then I would support them. How could I resist at all? I'm just an ordinary person. A Northerner would do, a Southerner would do. I'm just a member of the populace, so anyone who ended up leading the nation, then I would follow them, I had to.

You weren't worried at all about living under communist rule? You weren't worried about harsher living conditions?

Of course I was. In the beginning when the communists took over, I was worried about it. But after a while, things settled down and seemed normal again.

Do you remember the last day of the war, on the 29th of April in 1975. When you first heard that Saigon had been taken by the communists, what was your first reaction?

I was scared, definitely, about the future. But after a while, things returned to normal. And I was called to reeducation camp, but I was only gone for seven days.

When you were called up to do reeducation camp, were you scared?

No, I wasn't. It was nearby, near where we had coffee together. And it was only seven days.

Seven days, and you slept there?

No, in the morning I would go and in the evening I went home.

What sort of things did they do there? Was it lectures or...

It was classes about how to live under communist rule and to not be worried about the new regime.

So you already considered it normal...that you went to reeducation camp by day and went home at night.

Yes, yes, very normal.

And when the war was officially over, what other occupation did you find?

I helped sell groceries and items in front of the house, that's all. We sold vegetables and things, nothing really. I've done it before, and it was really my wife who did it, but I helped her.

So when you heard that the South had lost, you said you were afraid, but were you sad at all?

I was just afraid at first because I didn't know if things would be the same with the communist leaders. But then I realized that it wasn't going to be that bad or that much different, and I was only away for seven days. The others, the higher ranked soldiers, they had more to be afraid of. They went to reeducation camp for three, five years. But even at three, five years, the country still would have let them come home.

If there was never a war in Vietnam, do you think your life could have been different?

No, I don't think so. I would still be an average citizen and if I were to continue working as a house aide, I would have eventually had to break off and find my own means of living. I'm an ordinary person, so how could I oppose anything?

My last question is if you wanted to discuss anything about your experience that I haven't brought up. Anything that you may have remembered.

Right now, I just hope for a healthy and peaceful nation. I don't long for war. I just wish for peace, nothing more.

Thank you, Sir, for speaking to me today. For telling me stories that people need to hear. Because this war was so big in scale, but not a lot of people know...

The War was huge, and so many people died. That's no small matter. It was horrifying. The time when there was fighting in Quoc Mang and in front of Huoc Gai, they fought each other...the deaths were staggering, I'm not kidding. Anywhere you went there was death; you could see it everywhere, undoubtedly. If you fight each other with guns, of course there will be death.

Did you know about this because you heard it or saw it?

There were times when their bodies would be brought back into the city. It was awful. Death was normal. [Looks at his watch] The cousins have probably all left by now. Let's get some coffee.

APPENDIX F

Interview with Lê Gia (M)

Interviewed by Leann Do on August 20, 2011 in Da Lat, Vietnam

b. 1944 near Hue, raised in Da Lat

Occupation during war: administrative worker and soldier in SVN military

Leann Do

Lê Gia

I will sell you my book [idiom]. I meant that my book and stories are open to you.

[Laughs] Thank you very much. That means you agree to me using your interview for my thesis – for my thesis only, I will not sell it to anyone or put it on the internet.

It's alright, not a problem.

First, I want to ask for your name and today's date.

My name is Lê Gia, I live at number two, Tham street, district four in Da Lat.

And today's date please?

Today is the 20th of August, 2011.

When and where were you born?

I was born in 1944 in Hue, in the center of Vietnam, Hue.

What did your parents do for a living?

Back then, my parents farmed for a living, worked the fields. After the war in 1945, my family moved to Da Lat. My father was a *công nhân* [translation: worker; factory worker] while my mother stayed at home and did housework.

What does công nhân entail?

My father did *công nhân* which meant...well, even though he worked as a *cong nhan*, it was more like...my father worked in a convent for the *Sœurs* [translation: sister nuns] and he helped maintain and clean the house, its rooms, just make it presentable.

I see. At that time...you said you were born in '42?

'44.

Oh, right, sorry. [Chuckles] In 1944...do you remember the time when the French still occupied Vietnam?

I do remember, but not very clearly. It was very long ago, it has been a long time. Back then, when I was born, there was a war between France and Japan. That was when I was still in Hue. The Japanese and French fought and Japan captured the South and occupied it for three years. After that, the French lost and returned to France. After three years, the French returned and pushed the Japanese out of Vietnam. Then the Japanese began their return to Japan.

Do you remember when the French lost at Dien Bien Phu by the Viet Minh?

That was 1954 when Vietnam, that is to say the Viet Minh, defeated France at Dien Bien Phu. That year, I was about...

Ten years old...

Ten or eleven years old, yes. And I was too young to really know what was going on. But as I got older, I did realize the significance. But then, I was very young.

When you were young, did you hear your parents, teachers, or other adults talking about Dien Bien Phu, the Viet Minh, the French? Or did you hear about it on the radio or the newspaper?

My parents did talk about Dien Bien Phu and said how the French were under siege for three months. How tunnels were dug right next to the [searching for words] last defenses of the French. The tunnels went as deep as three meters before the Viet Minh started to dig up right into the middle of a room of a Frenchman. And someone...Dai Ta...I forget the name. But he was sitting at the table doing business, like I am now, when a Viet Minh would suddenly face him.

Wow.

And he pointed his gun and the Frenchman surrendered. Then he went right ahead and raised the Viet Minh flag over Dien Bien Phu. Then that was the victory.

You heard this when you were ten years old, that Vietnam had won independence and that the French lost and were leaving, do you remember feeling happy that the French were leaving?

Thinking back, when the French and Viet Minh conflict concluded, life was very hard. Many people talked about how after the war, life would get very difficult. Problems with

money, not enough to eat, houses destroyed because of gunfire and nearby fighting, there was a lot of worry and a lot of concern. However, despite all of this talk [idiom], when the people got independence, it was...very liberating. The reasoning was that if the French stayed, then there would be a higher standard of living. They brought in money, they brought in supplies, they brought in oil. So an individual working for a Frenchman could make a living. As for transportation, back then the French traveled by *cyclo* [French-Vietnamese word; translation: pedicab] and someone could drive a cyclo and be paid by the French and make a living that way. And so one French person could employ about six or seven Vietnamese: a chauffer, a housekeeper, a cook, people to make their lives comfortable. And so with the French, life was a little better. But after Dien Bien Phu and the French left, then life was difficult, but still liberating! Liberating because we had gained independence. So then I realize that our country was under occupation for a thousand years by the Chinese, a hundred years by the French, three years by the Japanese...our lives have been difficult. So after independence, we felt autonomous, very relaxed. Some people say that with independence, salt still tastes sweet.

In your childhood, when were you first aware of the communists?

Thank you for the interesting question, Child. When I was about...eight, nine, ten years old, there was a young man named Tanh Nim who was maybe twenty-two years old. Almost out of the blue, he disappeared and I had no idea where he went until four or five years later. Suddenly he returns. He wore a uniform of green slacks, sandals, a t-shirt with insignia on it, his hair was high-cut, his face youthful. He was very...handsome, impressive! And later he assembled all the children of the neighborhood and he would practice songs, he would tell stories, and finally, some children would ask, "This fellow in the past lived in our neighborhood! He didn't know *anything*! How is it that he's so remarkable! He can tell any story so well!" And so, we finally asked him what happened and he said, "I am That Li!"

What does that mean –

He said "I am That Li. I left the South and went to the North. I follow the *Cộng sản*. And that was the first time that I met a communist – that I knew what one was. A person from our neighborhood leaves for five or six years and returns. He returns and he is drastically different from his former self. He became so elevated from before. In the past, he was just average, a nice person, but very ordinary. And when he came back, he was so impressive, so intelligent.

Did you think that the Americans came into Vietnam to help the South or did you think their presence was hurtful?

If the Americans came into Vietnam to help us because another country had attacked us, then that is absolutely justified – one hundred percent. If we were fighting an outside enemy and the Americans came to our aide to help us gain independence, then that is

completely warranted. That is when I raise both my arms and welcome them. But in this case, we had the North and the South, two sides divided, two brothers fighting each other, and brother America comes in to fight one brother and kick around another – what for, in the end? One side gets attacked by the Americans, the other gets pushed. Do you see? That's not right. If the Americans wanted to help, then it should have been through advice, money, aide. Then that would be right. But to go in and point guns and shoot the Vietnamese...even if it had been the...if it was the Philippines or Thailand we were fighting...but this was the North and South fighting each other...in the end, who is dying? Our brothers died. Brothers from one house putting on masks [idiom] to fight; brothers from one family putting on masks [idiom] to fight, and outsiders coming in to fan the flames [idiom] while the two brothers knock heads and the outside world laughs at them. Dreadful, very dreadful. And if, once the Americans entered the war, the North had stopped fighting and the South had stopped fighting, and if they had said, "No, we will work this out ourselves," then that would have been smart. That would have been the best thing to do for Vietnam. Did you know Child, that for some thirty years of war...*how many* millions of people died...among them were civilians, youth and elders...you could say that it didn't matter young, old, men, women, everyone dies when the bombs hit. War does not spare anyone. Spares no one. So I look back on the thirty so years of war in Vietnam and I get sad, I don't agree. So, Child, you see Germany? They no longer fight. And Korea...South Korea and North Korea, they settled things. They sometimes get into small conflicts, but they don't fight. That's because they are one people. And we are awful at it, we've failed at it.

But you entered the military?

Of course! The Vietnamese military! For the South.

What year did you enter the military?

'63. And in the spring of '72, I fought the Viet Cong. [Acts out shooting]

In '63, how old were you?

About 18 or 19.

Were you out of high school then? Did you have to go into the military?

After finishing school, usually, you go into higher education. But with the war, you had to halt schooling. You were at that age – it's called the age of *dong vien* [the age of encouragement], you were forced to go into the military. They trained us for only six months.

Only six months...

They didn't teach us about politics. They didn't teach us about ideology. They didn't teach us our national identity. They didn't teach us about *máu chảy ruột mềm* [translation: when you bleed, your organs soften; when part of the country is hurt, the rest is affected]. They only taught us to shoot at enemies when we saw them. I was heartbroken. And so once I saw a soldier do a task wrong, wrong, wrong and he was beat many times by his superior. I witnessed it and knew that was not right. In the end, we all wore the badge of officers, we should have talked to one another first or settled it respectfully. And since then, I didn't like it. I didn't.

You were in the military for how long?

Eleven years! Eleven years in the military. I worked in the inspection office. I inspected the uniforms, equipment, weapons, ammunitions, the forts.

Did you go into the [English] Army? The ARVN? The Army of the Republic of the Vietnam? The Air Force, Marines?

Ah. Well there were divisions for sea, air, and land...I was in the land division.

So it was still the [English] Army?

Yes, yes.

Can you describe what a day was like in the military? What you did?

Well the day would start at eight o' clock and we worked in the office. Men came in with complaints or accusations about another soldier. I would record them down and process them. We would request that they appear before us to give them a warning and educate them. But if the soldier's superior was known to be brutal, then our office would tell the superior to be more lenient. Because my office was the mediator, we made things more presentable.

You just worked in the office, you didn't fight at the frontlines?

Whenever the fighting was very heavy, then at night, the unit had to move to camp and provide support. Once when the Viet Cong encroached into the cities, they moved from city to city, I engaged in the fighting at night. I fought from the night of the 30th to the 16th. There were Viet Cong deaths, we lost a lot of men as well. My friend was killed right on my right shoulder [pats his right shoulder], on my right shoulder, his head fell on it and I didn't realize he was dead. I felt my side getting wet and I looked down to see him fall, and I knew he was dead. And on my other side about five meters away, another of my friends died. It was dreadful. War has no reason, no reason at all. Ultimately, whoever wins can write their own story. They can write their story. But during the war, you just see no reason. Both sides are dying!

And during that time, during Tet in '68, were you in South Vietnam? Where were you?

That day...usually it's a day of big celebration. Like *Quốc khánh* [National Day] on the 11th of November, and now it's on the second of September. That day, the unit was camping to defend against the advancing Viet Cong. During Tet Mau Than, The Viet Cong took initiative to attack us first. In reality, the Southern soldiers were pacifists; they were called *linh kieng* [translation: exhibition soldiers; soldiers with only the appearance of soldiers]. Firstly, they don't have ideology. Secondly, they were not trained in fundamental political thinking. Thirdly, they joined the army just for the salary. Therefore their fighting morale was very weak. At home, you have a beautiful wife, smart children, and when the father goes into the military, half of the time he is thinking of the fight, and the other half of the time he is missing his wife and children. He is torn between the two and his focus is off.

At that time, did you have a wife and children?

At that time, yes, yes I was married. And during the fighting, there were fifteen to twenty minute periods when my entire attention was on fighting. But when it stopped, my mind went back to my wife. I didn't know if my wife was alright, there was so much fighting, I couldn't know if anything had happened to my wife or children. And so my peace of mind was low, very low.

Where did your wife and children live?

In Da Lat, right here! In this very house! And so thinking back on it...it wasn't right. Not right. If we were fighting an outside force, that would have been fine, we could have fought with all of our will. But this was between brothers. It's as if you, Child, were attacking me and I attacked you back. It's not right.

But what was the reason for staying in the military and fighting the North when you thought it was fighting against your brothers?

One follows their side, the other follows their own. I was a Southerner and I followed the South, went into the Southern military. If not, I would be caught, be put in jail. As for the North, they were in the same situation that I was in. They had to go into the military, they were put into the military and so they went, and that is war. But during war when the two sides fought each other, ultimately in war, if I don't shoot *anh* [translation: brother], then *anh* will shoot me. And so if I see *anh* first, then I shoot him first. If he sees me first, then he shoots me first. You see? But after the fighting, when two sides meet each other, we realize that that was our brother. That's when we realize that this man who is dead is our father. Because our blood is red and our skin is yellow and we're of one country. Very dreadful.

In the year 1972 when the Americans began pulling out and the fighting in Vietnam got even heavier, do you remember a change? Did you ever think that South Vietnam could not win?

From 1972 to 1975, there was a lot of heavy fighting; the war was escalating and reaching its climax. There was a phrase, “*Dai lo kinh hoang*” [translation: the highway of terror] in central Vietnam. Cars would run over bodies, piles of bodies, both military and civilian, it was horrendous. And at the end of ’72, ’73, ’74, the war escalated even more. And that’s when the Americans thought...it’s not worth it, so they began to return home. The last day, they left on boats and went home. They left for the South a situation that was so confusing and the outcome so undecided. That’s when Southerners, that is to say the Southern military, had more responsibility. In 197—in ’74, America stopped sending monetary support. People in the military weren’t getting paid anymore. Some laid their guns down, went home. So in the end [pause] us Southerners [pause] had no money, had no soldiers – that is, they went home – and so, we curled into our shells [idiom], like a snail takes shelter. The Northerners, they knew that they were going to win. First, because they knew in their minds that their mission was good. Second, because they saw the South as being taken over by America and wanted to free it. Third, to be honest, the North at this time...their lives were very difficult and so it was necessary to reunite Vietnam, so that the two sides were unified again. Or else the other side would be hungry too. And so they fought harder. Ultimately, for the South...when Thieu died, when the morale was gone and the mentalities were low, that’s when the military started to get low spirits, sad thoughts. First, because when the Americans left, we began to be afraid. Second, because the government in Saigon, when the Americans left, began to worry too. And all the higher officers were concerned too. And the Northerners with their will, it was easy for them. They were victorious in a lot of places. Down in Ming Trung, they were there and fought and won. Anywhere they went, they won. And the South, we held out for three or four days until we ran out of supplies and had to retreat, retreat all the way to the coast, and by then, well, you got on a boat and fled to America.

You remember the 29th of April in 1975, the last day of the war when the Cộng sản invaded Saigon. Do you remember where you were when you first heard about this? What did you think at first?

Thank you for this final question. On the 28th, 29th, the Viet Cong entered Saigon from both directions. At around...11 o’ clock...11:30...it’s called “the liberation of Saigon,” the people’s independence. There was a notice...a notice about the liberation [or surrender?] of the South from the President...he raised his hand in surrender [idiom]. At that time, I was following a group of students, students who were running back to Nga Trang.

Where were you at this time...

Here. And at that time, some of my friends said that...the war is lost, Da Lat we are about to lose, Saigon has almost fallen. Now, we have to run farther south towards Saigon, to the south to get on the boats and flee to America. I drove my wife and four children on a

Honda [colloquial for motor scooter], this one [points to scooter]. On it there we had...one bin of gas, one bin of water, one bin of rice, one bin of bread, some...Coca [colloquial use of Coca-Cola] and...canned sardines, Sumaco, and we drove on this scooter [points] down to Phuong Rai, all the way to Phuong Rai – not close to Nga Trang yet – when the Viet Cong from outside were fighting their way into Nga Trang, fighting into Phuong Rai. So at that time, I said to myself, “*Thoi* [translation: that’s it; the end], we’ve already lost. The South has lost.” In my mind, my first thought was sadness. Sadness. It seemed sad. Second, I was afraid. Before, they told us that the Viet Cong would enter the South, the Viet Cong would occupy the South and pull off our fingernails. They took wrenches and pried off fingernails. And the men they would take and put in jail or they would execute them. So much devastation; I was afraid, very afraid. We were in Nga Trang for two days and one night, and the Viet Cong were fighting their way in, and by that time they had captured Saigon already. Then there was a car from Nga Trang that drove up, they said “Everyone, everything has been lost, and right now in Da Lat things are very quiet, very quiet. And further, there are people killing each other – the military, the military was fighting.” And there were people who...like bandits...they see you on the streets and shoot you and take your money. *Stealing*, it’s called stealing. And that night when I slept, they went around and around. And I had in my pockets a lot of money, money and jewelry, and if they knew, they could have taken it and shot me. So the next morning, there was a car that drove up that reported that Da Lat was very peaceful and down here was too risky, so I and a lot of other people went back to Da Lat. And when we returned home and stood at the front of our house right here [points], my wife cried. And I shed tears too. And I thought, sides have changed and now we will live under the Viet Cong. We didn’t know where else to go. And so the first thing to do is open the house, go inside, and I hid for a week inside this wardrobe [knocks on the wardrobe behind him]. I was scared.

You were afraid...

Of the Viet Cong.

Afraid that you would be captured...

Because I heard all of these things and I was scared. And I didn’t even know what or who the Viet Cong were. I didn’t know what they looked like, what they wore, if they would swear at me, anything, I didn’t know. So I hid in the house. At night, I would come out; I’d open the door and eat dinner. By morning, I would go back and stand in the wardrobe and hide.

That very wardrobe?

[Nods] It was very tiring, very tiring. A week had passed, there was a man. He knocked on the front door, knocked for *how many* minutes [idiom] [pause] and I couldn’t stand it. He called out my name. So finally my wife came and said, “There’s someone calling your name, he’s been there for a while.” And I thought, no, it’s too dangerous, don’t open the door. But he kept calling. And finally, he was there for so long that my wife came

back to the wardrobe and I thought, “I have to accept it. If we don’t answer the door today, then we’ll have to the next day and the next. So fine, let’s answer.” And the man, he wore a helmet, a helmet...do you know what I’m talking about?

Is it something like...

Let me show you. [Goes off-screen to get hat. Comes back wearing the hat.]

Oh! Wow, how did you get that?

This hat belongs to one of my friends. He joined the Viet Cong and returned and gave it to me as a souvenir. And so that man wore a hat like this, had a gun on his hip, had a satchel, wore sandals made out of rubber...Oh goodness, I was shaking, my wife was shaking. Finally he said, “I knew you’ve returned home, come out and meet me!” That’s what the Viet Cong said to me. So if I didn’t come out, it wouldn’t have mattered because he already knew! So I told him, “I’m in here [knocks on the wardrobe behind him].” I knocked to let him know that I was in the wardrobe. He told my wife to open it for me to get out. [Pause] Oh, when the door opened, I was shaking so much. I took a look at him and he looked kind of familiar. He looked familiar...He said, “I...in the past I dodged the military,” the Viet Cong said to me. “And you worked in the office and you helped me so that I wouldn’t have to go into the military. And after that, I went into the jungle; I became a Viet Cong. We’ve won back Vietnam and the first thing I’m doing in Da Lat is visiting you. I’m visiting to thank you. If back then you made me go into the draft, I would be dead right now. Or I could have been injured, or in some strange place right now. You helped me so that I didn’t have to enter the military. But after that...the war was everywhere and if you didn’t choose this side, then you go to the other! In the end, I had friends on the other side” – the Viet Cong – “and followed the Viet Cong for a period of many years. And now that there’s independence, I’ve gone...the *first* thing I’ve done is come back and thank you! I wanted to know if you were in good health. And if *you* needed any help from me!” The Viet Cong said that. “Do you need anything that I can do for you?” [Expels a breath] At that moment, I was relieved! I was so happy. I said that I didn’t need anything at all. I just needed...the fact that we met again was enough. If later on, I had to go to jail or re-education camp, then I will ask you to help me. And when the time came that I had to go learn –

Go to re-education camp?

Re-education camp. Then he would vouch for me. He wrote a note to introduce me, saying that this man is my friend, before this, he helped me and that was very good of him. So let him have it easy, little by little only [idiom].

Little by little only?

I was only there for seven days. Because that man vouched for me. Back then, I helped him get out of the military. So now he pays me back by getting me out of going to re-education camp far away. I was at Dien Phuong. So you see, what took place repeated

itself. It was...one people of the same blood, it was easy like that. After all is done [idiom], the family must reunite, brothers and sisters must love each other, one people must come back together. The foreigners can say anything they want, it's just salt on the tongue [idiom]. They don't love us like...Child loves Man. They don't love us like I love my children.

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Willa Baum is an oral historian who co-founded the oral history program at UC Berkeley. "The Other Uses of Oral History" is a talk she gave at a conference in Anchorage, Alaska in which she discusses the state of affairs in oral history research and how it can expand in its methodologies.

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Alessandro Portelli is an Italian oral historian whose book *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* is a significant intellectual, rather than practical, guide to doing oral history. Among Portelli's influential arguments for oral history, one argument allows for the personal narrative to depart from strict facts and dates. Portelli suggests a more complex oral history in which the meaning of the interviewee's narrative is excavated deeper and their imagination and symbolism is shown.

Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History*. New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1995.

Doing Oral History by Donald A. Richie is perhaps one of the most important practical guides on how to conduct interviews. Richie provides working definitions for oral history, advice on how to draft interview questions, and addresses the ethical issues of oral history. No oral history project is truly begun or complete without consulting Richie's guide.

Rydstrom, Helle. "'Like a White Piece of Paper.' Embodiment and the Moral Upbringing of Vietnamese Children." *Ethnos* 66 (2001): 394-413.

Helle Rydstrom examines how Vietnamese educational discourse and local ideas about the body affect the social moralization of rural Vietnamese children. Studying Thinh Tri, a rural village in North Vietnam, Rydstrom finds that children are considered blank canvases on which parents, elders, and teachers inscribe their values and knowledge. In spite of the dominant political rhetoric that children ought to be socialized in schools equally, Rydstrom observes that the local ways of socializing boys and girls are significantly different.

Sharpless, Rebecca. "The History of Oral History." In *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*, edited by Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Meyers, and Rebecca Sharpless. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007.

Rebecca Sharpless presents the history of how oral history emerged in the academic scholarship. Sharpless discusses how the advancement of technology, cultural and social history, and interest in American veterans' stories after World War II has contributed to oral history in the United States.

Sheftel, Anna and Zembrzycki, Stacey. "Only Human: A Reflection on the Challenges of Working with 'Difficult Stories.'" *The Oral History Review* 37 (2010): 191-214.

Sheftel and Zembryzcki conducted an oral history project with Holocaust survivors currently living in Montreal. In this article, Sheftel and Zembryzcki reflect on their experiences and generate a main method of oral history, which is to create a "deep listening" environment within the interview session. This type of "deep listening" done by the oral historians yields greater meaning to a person's story.

Sitzia, Lorraine. "A Shared Authority: An Impossible Goal?" *The Oral History Review* 30 (2003): 87-101.

Lorraine Sitzia in this article reflects on her relationship with Arthur Thickett, a soldier, pacifist, and communist, on a professional interview/interviewee level and as a personal friend. Sitzia is influenced by Michael Frisch's theory of "shared authority" and employs these methods to her interviewing process.

Summers, Henry G. *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. Novato, CA: Persidio Press, 1982.

Military historian Henry G. Summers critically examines the counter-insurgency tactics employed by the United States military in Vietnam. Summers' purpose for analyzing military strategies in the Vietnam War is to draw lessons from it and prevent similar engagements in the future.

Teerawichitchainan, Bussarawan; Knodel, John; Vu Manh Loi; Vu Tuan Huy. "The Gender Division of Household Labor in Vietnam: Cohort Trends and Regional Variations." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 41 (2010): 57-85.

This anthropological study examines how the division of household labor in the domestic sphere reflects the persistent forms of gender inequality in Vietnam. Through surveys addressing husband and wife's work inside and outside the home, this study focuses on the extent of change in gender roles in Vietnam over the last four decades in both North and South Vietnam.

Thompson, Paul. *Voice of the Past*. Oxford, U.K: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Like Michael Frisch's *A Shared Authority*, Paul Thompson's *The Voice of the Past* is an important book for beginning oral historians. Thompson provides helpful guidelines on how to do oral histories, how to prepare for an interview session, what sort of questions to ask and how to ask them, how to interpret the contents of the discussion during and after the interview, and how to deal with the delicate nature of memory.

Von Ranke, Leopold. *The Theory and Practice of History*. Edited by Georg G. Iggers. Translated by Wilma A. Iggers. New York, NY: Routledge, 2011.

This is a collection of essays and manuscripts by the influential nineteenth century German empiricist historian Leopold von Ranke. Editor Georg G. Iggers argues that instead of being known only for demanding unambiguous, empirical facts, Von Ranke's writings demonstrate a more approach to "historical science" that raised questions of religion and ethics.

Wiest, Andrew, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN*. New York, NY: NYU Press, 2008.

Andrew Wiest takes a micro-history approach to examine how the story of two Vietnamese soldiers, one a hero of the ARVN and the other who defected to the North, reflect the strength and flaws of the ARVN. Wiest uses extensive oral narratives in his research, but his work is not a strict oral history. Its publication, however, represents a need for more Vietnamese voices in historical inquiry.

Willbanks, James H. *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost its War*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004.

James H. Willbanks claims that the US military and government were ultimately the ones as fault for not letting the RVNAF fight their own war. However, Willbanks presents a revisionist argument by claiming that the Republic of Vietnam's government and military had internal flaws that led to their collapse.

Williams, Rhonda Y. "‘I’m a Keeper of Information’: History-Telling and Voice." *The Oral History Review* 28 (2001): 41-63.

Rhonda Y. Williams is an oral historian from Case Western Reserve University. The article "‘I’m a Keeper of Information’" is part of her research in her book *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality*. Williams explores the importance of voice, tone, and nonverbal communication within the interviewing process. After the process, Williams claims that more meaning and interpretation can be gained through attention to the narrator's Voice.

Yow, Valerie Raleigh. *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005.

Valerie Raleigh Yow's *Recording Oral History* is a recent and contemporary practical guide to doing oral history. Yow expands the influential theories and methods of Portelli, Frisch, and Ritchie by crossing them with interdisciplinary approaches such as anthropology and sociology.

Yural-Davis, Nira. "Nationalist Projects and Gender Relations." *Nar. Umjet.* 40 (2003): 9-36.

Nira Yural-Davis discusses how gender relations play a crucial role in constructing femininity, masculinity, and the overall national identity in a post-war time period. Yural-Davis argues that social divisions are used to legitimize power relations between men and women and that in order to engage in open political dialogue, people must work to break the historical forces behind this partition.

Primary Sources

Cronkite, Walter. "We Are Mired in a Stalemate." In *CBS Evening News Broadcast*, February 27, 1968. Pacifica Radio/UC Berkeley Social Activism Sound Recording Project. Last modified March 28, 2008. Accessed February 28, 2012, <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificaviet/cronkitevietnam.html>.

Walter Cronkite, an American news anchor for the CBS Evening News during the 1960s, reports on the Tet Offensive of 1968, stating that Americans in the Vietnam War are at an impasse with the Viet Cong. Cronkite's report, broadcast almost a month after the Tet Offensive began, reflects the American public's doubts and frustrations over the U.S. winning the Vietnam War.

Greene, Graham. *The Quiet American*. New York, NY: Viking Press, 1956.

Graham Greene, a British journalist stationed in French Indochina during the fifties, composes a fictional account of how a British correspondent in Saigon finds himself caught between American and Vietnamese interests. Greene's novel is regarded as one of the first publications that sparked the intellectual and public debate about US involvement in Vietnam, and is seen as a warning against America's interventionist interests.

Herr, Michael. *Dispatches*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978.

Dispatches is a memoir that reads like a nonfiction novel by American war correspondent Michael Herr. Herr writes of his experience covering the Vietnam War for *Esquire* magazine from 1967-1967.

Hồng Duy Cường. Interview by author. Da Lat, Vietnam. August 17, 2011.

Hồng Duy Cường is a 53-year-old South Vietnamese man born in 1958 in Saigon, Vietnam who currently lives with his sister Hồng Thị Ninh in the suburbs of Ho Chi Minh City. He is the youngest in a family of nine children and was a young high school student during the Vietnam War.

Hồng Thị Ninh. Interview by author. Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. August 14, 2011.

Hồng Thị Ninh is a 63-year-old South Vietnamese woman who was born in 1948 in Hanoi, Vietnam and raised in Saigon, Vietnam when her family fled to the South during the partition of Vietnam at the 17th parallel in 1954. Hồng Thị Ninh currently lives in the nearby suburbs of Ho Chi Minh City. She is the older sister of Hồng Duy Cường by ten years and is the third eldest child in a family of nine children. Like her father, she was a post office worker during the Vietnam War.

Jastrun, Tomasz. "Afghanistan." In *On the Crossroads of Asia and Europe*, 5. Translated by Daniel Bourne. Anchorage, AK: Salmon Rush Press, 1999.

Tomasz Jastrun is a Polish poet who is known for his resistance against the martial law placed in Poland in the 1980s. "Afghanistan," written in 1981, is a poem about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that warns the world, and particularly the first-world countries, of neglecting Cold War conflicts taking place in periphery nations such as Afghanistan and Vietnam.

Kennedy, John F. "America's Stake in Vietnam." Speech presented at the meeting for the American Friends of Vietnam, Washington, D.C., June 1, 1956.

In 1956, then Senator John F. Kennedy gave a speech to the American Friends of Vietnam, President Ngo Dinh Diem's predominantly Catholic lobby group in Washington, D.C. Referencing the Domino Theory, Kennedy addresses America's responsibility to protect democracy in South Vietnam and uses family-oriented imagery by stating that South Vietnam is America's "offspring" (4).

Lê Gia. Interview by author. Da Lat, Vietnam. August 20, 2011.

Lê Gia is a 67-year-old South Vietnamese man who lives in Da Lat, Vietnam. He was born in 1944 near Hue, Vietnam and later moved to Da Lat where he was raised. Lê Gia worked as a military inspector during the Vietnam War.

Le, Nam. "Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice." In *The Boat*, 3-28. New York, NY: Knopf, 2008.

Australian-Vietnamese writer Nam Le's autobiographical story of his father's visit to his writing program in Iowa examines the themes of father-son relations, Vietnamese Diasporas, the "authenticity" of writing and telling an ethnic story, and the meaning of identity for first-generation children of Vietnamese refugees.

“Paris Peace Accords, 1973.” Excerpted text. *The Wars for Viet Nam: 1945-1976*, Vassar College. Accessed February 28, 2012, <http://vietnam.vassar.edu/overview/doc16.html>

The Paris Peace Accords took place in 1973 between cabinet members of North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the United States seeking to establish peace and restore order in Vietnam.

O’Brien, Tim. “How to Tell a True War Story.” In *The Things They Carried*, 64-81. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1991.

Tim O’Brien is an American veteran of the Vietnam War who has written several poignant, powerful stories and novels about his combat experience. *The Things They Carried* is a collection of short stories. In the eponymous story, O’Brien reflects on how war is remembered falsely, yet courageously, by those who survived it.

“Statistical information about casualties of the Vietnam War.” The National Archives. Last modified February 2007. Accessed March 14, 2012, <http://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html>

The National Archives has provided a detailed survey of American military and auxiliary personnel casualties beginning from 1965 to the present.

Trần Minh Mẫn. Interview by author. Da Lat, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

Trần Minh Mẫn is a 79-year-old South Vietnamese man who was born in the northern province of Hai Hung located near the Red River Delta. He settled in Da Lat in 1954 and married Trần Ti Phú two years later. Trần Minh Mẫn was employed by the South Vietnamese military post office in Da Lat in 1956 and maintained the same position throughout the Vietnam War.

Trần Ti Phú. Interview by author. Da Lat, Vietnam, August 20, 2011.

Trần Ti Phú is a 70-year-old South Vietnamese woman who was born in 1940 in a rural community near Hue, Vietnam and moved with her family to the city of Da Lat when she was a teenager. She raised the family, maintained the household, and worked as a petty vendor outside of the home while her husband was stationed at the Da Lat city limits during the Vietnam War.

Trần Văn Đạt. Interview by author. Vũng Tàu, Vietnam, August 11, 2011.

Trần Văn Đạt is a 64-year-old South Vietnamese man who was born in 1947 in Cambodia and raised in Saigon, Vietnam. He currently resides in the Southern coastal city of *Vũng Tàu*. *He worked as military auxiliary personnel during the Vietnam War.*

“We Are Mired in a Stalemate.” Broadcasted February 27, 1968. Video Clip. Uploaded March 22, 2010. Accessed February 28, 2012. YouTube.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nn4w-ud-TyE>.

“We Are Mired in a Stalemate” is a video clip of a CBS Evening News broadcast on February 27, 1968. It was a special report done by news anchor Walter Cronkite that showed arresting images of soldiers and civilians in the chaos of the Tet Offensive to a war-weary American public.

Westmoreland, William C. *A Soldier Reports*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1976.

This is a memoir of the Vietnam War by American General William C. Westmoreland, the Commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV). Published one year after the war’s official conclusion, Westmoreland defends his decision to carry out the Big Unit warfare of attrition against the Viet Cong.

