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# A MAN OF THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS: THE WORKS OF NGUYỄN NGỌC ẮN

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## Abstract

This is a paper on the artistic works of artist Nguyễn Ngọc Ắn. He was born and has been living in Kon Tum, a city of the central highlands of Vietnam. The Kon Tum province has two borders with the neighboring countries of Cambodia and Laos. The northern part of the province has higher mountains and Kon Tum city is 525 meters from sea level. The city of Kon Tum was established by the French missionaries, *Missions Etrangères de Paris* in the mid-19th century (Hickey, 1982a, pp. 190-197). An old wooden church and a mission built between 1913 and 1918 are still in use. The main followers of the Catholic Church in Kon Tum are people of the Bana ethnic group. Nguyễn Ngọc Ắn is a member of the Art Association of Vietnam (*Hội Mỹ thuật Việt Nam*) and an owner of a well-known garden café called Eva Café in Kon Tum, where he installs his art works. He also organizes special trips for tourists to get to know the society of the Bana ethnic minority. This paper is an endeavor to understand Ắn's identity as "a man of the Highlands" which is reflected in his art works.

*Keywords: art in Vietnam, central highlands of Vietnam, regional identity, Vietnam War, ethnic minority people*

## The Central Highlands

The central highlands can be seen as the least integrated region of Vietnam. It has been historically treated differently from other regions. Under the Nguyễn dynasty, the Nguyễn court did not have full control over the areas. Traditionally the majority Kinh (Viet majority) people considered non-Kinh mountain inhabitants as inferior and called them "savage". In order to avoid "inferior" non-Kinh culture polluting "superior" Kinh culture, the Nguyễn court tried to maintain a distinct boundary between Kinh and highland ethnic minority groups by issuing

various regulations to keep the two populations separate (Woodside, 1971, pp. 242-243).

During the French Colonial period, highland people received different treatment by the colonial administration. The Catholic missionaries were the first to enter the minority communities in the central highlands around the mid-19th century. The French became interested in the central highlands primarily for reasons of border-security. In 1895, the highlands came under the authority of the French colonial administration. Under French control, the ethnic minority people in the highlands were taxed while males aged between 16 and 60 were subjected to corvee labor for road construction and other public works, or occasionally for the privately-owned French plantations (Hickey, 1892a, pp. 199-224).

In 1913, Leopold Sabatier became the head of the autonomous district of Darlac, and during his term (1913-1926) the political and strategic colonial administration was established. Sabatier was fascinated with Rhade (Ede) culture, and gained profound knowledge of highland traditions. He established the Franc-Rhade school, an indigenous law court and medical facilities. Under his administration the rights to the land among the ethnic minority people who practiced shifting cultivation were protected. In order to protect the highland ethnic groups, Sabatier kept out the Kinh and Chinese traders as well as French missionaries and businessmen from entering the highlands. He organized the highland military called the *Garde Indigene Moi* (Hickey, 1982a, pp. 297-308).

During the first Indochina War (1945-1954), the highlands became a strategic asset for the French. In 1950, the highlands became Emperor Bảo Đại's domain, Crown domain of the Southern Highlander Country (*Domaine de la Couronne du Pays*), which is generally referred to as *Pays Montagnard du Sud*. This put the central highlands directly under the authority of Bảo Đại, but actually continued to be administered by the French (Hickey, 1982a, p. 406; Saleminck, 1991, p. 264). Although the ethnic minority people were exploited by the French under direct colonial administration, they were always kept separate from the rest of the Vietnamese population. Consequently, those conditions allowed a certain degree of autonomy in the highlands (Volk, 1979; Hickey, 1982a).

After the Geneva Agreements in 1954, the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) was established in 1955. The central highland population was put under the direct administration of the Southern Vietnamese regime. President Ngô Đình Diệm adopted an assimilation policy and the highland ethnic minority people were forced to take Vietnamese names and forbidden to wear their traditional clothes. Their highland law courts were abolished and only the Vietnamese language was allowed in the schools (Jackson, 1969; Mạc Đu'ông, 1969; Volk, 1979; Hickey, 1982a, pp. 47-60). Massive numbers of Vietnamese were also brought into the highlands to modernize the highlands and also to solve the problem of the vast influx of refugees from the north after the Geneva Agreements (Volk, 1979; Hickey,

1982a). By 1960, over 60,000 mostly Kinh settlers had resettled in the highlands and by 1963, nearly 40% of the total population of the highland provinces were estimated to be Kinh people. The large migration of Kinh people into the highlands caused land-grabbing and land-loss among the highland minority peoples (Hickey, 1982a, p. 62).

In 1959, in order to prevent Communist penetration into the highland ethnic minority population, the South Vietnam government promoted a policy of settling them in fortified villages. At least 65% of highland villages had been relocated since 1945 (Hickey, 1982b, p. 228). The projects were generally ill-prepared and badly carried out. The highland minority people suffered from inadequate housing, lack of sufficient water resources and delayed food rations in their new settlements. Considerable numbers of ethnic minority people in the highlands died in their new settlements from malaria, dysentery and salmonella (Osno, 1971; Volk, 1979, p. 80; Hickey, 1982b, p. 166).

The strong assimilation policies and drastic changes of their livelihood provoked various ethnic movements to resist government control and to politically separate the highlands from South Vietnam: the Bajaraka movement called the Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées (FULRO: the United Front of the Oppressed Races) (Hickey, 1982b, pp. 47-62).

After the reunification of the North and the South, the central highlands were recognized as an integral part of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. However, after reunification the Vietnamese government did not pay as much attention to the ethnic minority people and their regions as before when they were important for mobilizing during the war effort. Ethnic minority people living in the mountainous areas were considered to be obstacles for socio-economic development and were left behind. Meanwhile the central highlands became the Vietnamese people's new frontier. After the adaptation of new economic policies, *đổi mới* or renovation a large number of migration of Kinh and other ethnic minority people from the North and other parts of Vietnam flooded into the central highlands to seek new economic opportunities.

I visited Buon Ma Thuot, the city of the central highland for the first time in 1993. I stayed in one of a few government run hotels in the city center. In the room I stayed, there were thin curtains too small for the size of windows that could not block the strong afternoon sun. From the window, I could see a big armoured tank installed as a victory monument at the city center. The city did not have many large and tall buildings and the streets were quiet. Most of the streets other than the city center were not paved. I revisited Buon Ma Thuot in 2011 and was astonished by its transformation to an urban city. I could not find anything which reminded me of the dusty small town that I visited in 1993. The city is now filled with people and large buildings including many modern shopping

complexes. Paved wide streets are occupied by many motorcycles, cars, trucks and buses.

In 1976, the population of Dak Lak province, where Buon Ma Thuot is located, was approximately 360,000 but by 2007, the population had increased to nearly 2 million (Asano, 2007, p. 42). In 2001 the Vietnamese government was stunned by the ethnic minority people uprisings in the central highlands. There have been small conflicts and confrontations between highland ethnic minority people and Kinh migrants since 1998. In 2001 large scale demonstrations across major cities of the highlands such as Plaiku, Ban Ma Thuot and Kon Tum were organized. The uprisings were said to be due to the failure of substituting shifting cultivation, loss of land and the crash of coffee prices (Shin-ne, 2007, p. 100). There was another uprising in 2004. It resulted from the Government's mismanagement of the central highland economic development and negligence of understanding highland ethnic minority people's socio-economic problems (Ito, 2009, p. 33-41). The central highlands continues to be a sensitive region for the Vietnamese government.

### **Background of the artist, Nguyễn Ngọc Ân**

The family of Nguyễn Ngọc Ân originally came from Quy Nho'n, a coastal city on the south-central coast of Vietnam. His maternal uncle followed the French missionaries and became a Catholic priest in Kon Tum. He had invited his younger sister to help him take care of his daily life. She met Ân's father in Kon Tum and married there. Ân was born in 1959 as the first son of a Catholic family. The Catholic religion can be thought of as a marker of Kinh migrants' background in Kon Tum. The majority of the older migrant families who had been living in the central highlands prior to 1975 are Catholic while many of the recent migrant families are Buddhists.

Nguyễn Ngọc Ân's maternal uncle, a Catholic priest who was fluent in a few highland ethnic minority languages had the intention of bringing up Ân to be a priest. At the age of 13, after completing form 6 of his elementary education, he was sent to the seminary. However as a young boy, Ân could not bear the regimented seminary lifestyle and went back to a formal education. He remembers his childhood as spending lots of time in rivers and fields with his friends who were mostly ethnic Bana children. Because he had close interaction with Bana people since he was young, he grew up speaking the Bana language fluently and had profound knowledge of their society and culture.

In 1975, Ân was 15 years old when he saw his father for the last time. He still remembers the final words of his father speaking to his mother: "Take care of our children". His father did not come back from the battlefield and his family never received any information about him after the war. During a conversation

over dinner his friend mentioned that his father may have been killed in the war, but Ân insisted on using the words “missing in action” instead. He has made efforts to find his father at least twice by consulting with psychics. The story of his missing father is a repetitively mentioned topic that seems to indicate that for Ân the Vietnam War (the 2<sup>nd</sup> Indochinese War) has not ended.

Since Ân’s father was a soldier of South Vietnam, and he is from a Catholic family, he was considered to have “a wrong family background” in the eyes of the new Communist government of Vietnam. Usually people who had such a family background were not allowed to attend higher educational institutions. However, Ân managed to enter école de beaux art de Hue (later named Hue University). His community services made him an exceptional case and enabled him to further his studies. After the war in order to help with his family’s finances, he opened a small drawing studio with two friends. Their studio received various orders for designing advertisements, drawing portraits and making decorations for the people in the community. Sometimes the local government ordered some propanganda posters from Ân’s shop. Since his shop provided services for the community, Ân was allowed to take an entrance examination for the école de beaux art de Hue where he matriculated for the following five years.

Upon completion of studies in Hue, Ân went back to Kon Tum. He wished to continue his study of art at a higher institution, but he was employed at the Department of Culture and Information in Plaiku. He does not seem to have pleasant memories of working as a bureaucrat. While working at the department, he started to practice Buddhist meditation. After working for the department for two years, Ân finally decided to give up the government job. He spent lots of his time simply meditating, especially after he left his job. He also started a business of buying and selling iron scrap. Though his relatives and friends were very skeptical about his new business, Ân collected and sold iron scrap for 10 times its original price.

At the age of 27, Ân married his wife who has a similar background to him. She is from a Catholic family in Kon Tum who lost her father who was a soldier in the South Vietnamese army during the war. With his wife’s understanding and support, he took and passed the entrance examination of Ho Chi Minh City Art University. He pursued his dream for five years of studying art in Ho Chi Minh City. While he was in Ho Chi Minh City, his wife could not continue the scrap iron business by herself. She started to sell coffee instead and this coffee shop was the origin of the garden cafe, Eva Café. Before creating Eva Café, Ân designed a park along the river for a private company in Kon Tum. After the garden was completed, the Kon Tum province intervened by saying that the park was located on the land owned by the province. The company could not argue against the local government so the park became provincial property. This

incident motivated Ân to create his own garden where he could then install his art pieces and express his own artistic ideas.

### **Eva Café and the tour of *Nous Avons Mange la Foret***

Eva Café is situated in a quiet neighborhood of Kon Tum city. As you enter the gate, you are in the world of Ân's highlands. Ân's intention is to save the "DNA" of the highlands in his garden in response to the loss of highland traditional culture. The garden is filled with trees, plants and flowers. One can see small fish in ponds and enjoy birds singing. A few bowers in the garden are in harmony with their green background which is decorated with gongs and other materials used by the ethnic minority people of the highlands. The wooden sculptures that are installed in different corners of the garden are reminiscent of those erected at the mourning house of the highland ethnic minorities and stand together with Ân's own works of scrap iron sculptures. Ân seems to create this entire garden as a work of art. The best way to understand the concept of his garden is to participate in a tour called, *Nous Avons Mange la Foret* (We Eat the Forest) which he organizes for visitors who are interested in learning about life in the highlands. The name of tour is taken from the famous 1957 ethnography on the Mnong Gar people by French anthropologist George Condominas. Ân had been visiting mountains and Bana villages for sketching and had an idea to share his experiences in the mountains with other people. He has been conducting the tour since 2009. Depending on their interests and physical strength, Ân organizes and accompanies various trips to the mountains where visitors can experience the life of Bana people. Most people who take the *Nous Avons Mange la Foret* tour are foreigners and expatriates. Their letters expressing their gratitude to Ân for organizing such wonderfully memorable trips are posted at Eva Café. Deeply impressed by the tour, some come back to make another trip with Ân not only to the central highlands but also to other parts of Vietnam.

I participated in the *Nous Avons Mange la Foret* tour in the summer of 2012. I spent four days at the Bana villages in the mountains. We departed from Eva Café and traveled by motor bike on the national road No. 24 to the north for about two hours and reached the Bana village called Kon brăp du. We left our motor bike at the village head's house and each of us carried our belongings and headed toward the mountains on foot. Mr. Bong, a Bana man in his early 60s, helped us carry our heavier items. Mr. Bong, who was barefoot and carrying more than 20 kg on his shoulders, hiked up the mountain quickly and I could barely keep up with his speed. After the three-hour hike, we came up to a Bana dwelling of a few families, and stayed in one of their four houses made out of wood and bamboo for the night. The next day at around 10 am, we started to walk to another Bana dwelling place and reached our destination around 2 pm. We stayed in the house

of a young couple, Mr. Trau and Ms. Nong with their three children. The following day, we went to the mountains with Mr. Trau to set up traps. He never wasted a minute, constantly on the move and in search of food while setting up the traps. I was amazed how quickly he could identify and gather various foods. After we entered the mountains, within 10 minutes, he identified edible plants and collected them. In this trip he could identify and gather five different kinds of food of which some were used to prepare our lunch. Mr. Trau also used trees and vines to build temporal pathways for us when he saw we could not climb up steep hills. All the work was carried out effortlessly. We had trapped game for our breakfast the next day and after breakfast we left the mountains to return to Kon Tum city.

There was no electricity nor running water at the Bana residences we stayed. A flushable toilet, a bath tub or hot shower were out of the question. I found very basic essential daily activities difficult to carry out in the mountains: eating, sleeping, going to toilet, bathing and washing. We ate what they grew in the fields and what they found or caught in the mountains. We bathed in streams and slept on the floor where pigs and chickens slept underneath. Although they do not seem to have a clock at home, our life in the mountains was surprisingly well regulated. Our hosts got up in the morning, prepared breakfast, attended animals, and around 10 am after finishing breakfast they all went to the fields to work. By 1 or 2 pm they returned from the fields to prepare lunch and rest after lunch. Around 4 or 5 pm, they started to prepare dinner and in the evening, they gathered in somebody's house to chat and drink by candlelight.

Ân wished before the trip that I would understand how Bana people live by "eating the forest". Through this trip I could see how Bana people live in the mountains by taking advantage of rich mountain resources. Ân emphasized that in the mountains, "we are their students" and that "we learn from the Bana people how to live in the mountains". Since he spoke the Bana language fluently we did not have any communication problems while we were in the mountains. The younger generation of the Bana people spoke Vietnamese so I could also communicate with them to a certain degree. Ân commented on the lack of language ability of Vietnamese ethnologists who came to work in the highlands. He criticized them as being obnoxious and authoritative since they spouted to the Bana people in Vietnamese and never showed an attitude of learning from them about their life.

It was obvious that the mountains could not support a large number of people's livelihoods. As the number of migrants into the area increased, their traditional ways of life in the mountains has changed. The lowland lifestyle has been coming up into the mountains. I heard sounds of motorbikes on hills and saw paper, plastic bags and bottles scattered around the Bana people's dwellings. The lowland materials from the cities found in the mountains look out of place. Even a small plastic candy wrapping on the ground looked alien in the place and I could

not help feeling that they are contaminating the mountain's environment. Ân told me of his conversation with Mr. Trau in which he suggested he go to the mountains and live along the road like other ethnic minority people so that they could get electricity and easily travel to cities and the market. Mr. Trau answered that he preferred to live in the mountains. Although living in the lowlands is convenient, at the same time there would be lots of complicated problems. It was a new realization for me to find out that the young Bana couple chose to live in the mountains.

I was a little disoriented when I came back from the *Nous Avons Mange la Foret* tour. We came back to the Eva Café in Kon Tum. Eva Café was crowded with customers when we arrived. As soon as we took off our backpacks from the motorbike, Ân started to help attending to the customers in the café. I waited for him to take me to a hotel. I did not want to talk to any lowlanders and tried to hide myself inside the Eva Café garden since the garden was closest to the highlands. I found the small replica of a kitchen with an open fire as the most suitable corner in remembrance of my mountain trip. The garden was made in a way that provokes the sentiment and feelings I had in the mountains. I felt that my understanding and appreciation of the garden deepened after I came back from the *Nous Avons Mange la Foret* tour.

While watching the fire, sitting next to a friendly little dog and smelling smoky air, I remember the mountains and then thought about my life at the university which is controlled by suffocating regulations consisting of lengthy faculty meetings, tedious administrative work, lecturing in front of sleepy students and grading their hard-to-make-sense-of papers. Thinking about my sincere effort to pass a day in the mountains, I felt my university life as something superficial and shallow. My life seemed to lack something fundamental and quintessential. It was a surprise for me to see Ân using a register and giving change to customers. I could not understand how he managed to switch back into the lowland life so easily and quickly.

Hearing my sentimental contemplation as an aftershock of the *Nous Avons Mange la Foret* trip, Ân started to talk about the significance of maintaining a balance in our lives: between a life in the mountains and a life in the lowlands, a life as a cafe owner and a life as an artist, a life as a husband and father and a life as a man. We have various lives in our lives and keeping a balance amongst the various roles in one's life is the most important so that we can enjoy all aspects of lives we live. How then can we keep a balance in life? Ân practices meditation to maintain the balance in his life. He has practiced meditation since the time that he worked for the Department of Culture and Information in Plaiku. During our mountain tour, I woke up every morning to find him already up and meditating. The meditation probably enabled him to engage in various aspects of his life in a



balanced manner and helps him travel between the lowlands and the highlands without any emotional troubles.

**The works of Nguyễn Ngọc Ân: *Memories of the Mountains* and *The War and Human Loss***

The first Ân painting I saw was at the Central Coast and Central Highland Regional Exhibition organized by the Artists Association of Vietnam in August 2011. Ân sent his oil painting titled *Memories of Mountains* (*Nỗi nhớ miền cao*) which he painted in 2009. The same painting was included under a different title, *The Place of Life* (*Cõi sinh*), a book introducing artists from Kon Tum and their works published by the Association of Art and Literature of Kon Tum province. It was merely one of the pretty paintings I saw before I did the *Nous Avons Mange la Foret* trip. However after the trip, I appreciated the painting differently.

In this painting, one can identify a few ethnic minority people who are engaging typical activities such as milling rice and drinking liquor out of a jar by bamboo straws with a dark blue background and star-like things that radiate warm gentle lights. The ethnic minority people do not have any individuality. Actually they are painted like ornamental shadows decorating a circular body, creating a certain rhythm. It reminded me of the time I spent in the mountains: the regulated cycle of a day, which was in tune with the natural environment, the close relationship of the family and the neighbors, concentrating on carrying out quintessential activities of life. The painting brought me back to the peaceful inward feeling I had while I was in the mountains.



Figure 1: Artist, Nguyễn Ngọc Ân and his painting “memories of mountains” at Eva café.

It also made me think that the ethnic minority people, like the shadows in the painting, represent not just ethnic minorities but humans in general who are living in the cycle of the universe and are a part of a cosmic rhythm. We all are a part of a large cosmic cycle. By painting ethnic minority people as abstract shadows, Ân transforms them out of the specially marked category of *sắc tộc*, ethnic minority people. They are no longer curious “people of other groups” who practice unfamiliar customs or wear colorful exotic costumes. Instead they are representative of us and are a part of the cycle of the universe. In this sense, the old title of the painting *The Place of Life* (*Cõi sinh*) seems to be a more suitable title than *Memories of Mountains* (*Nỗi nhớ miền cao*). Ân probably changed the title before sending this painting to the exhibition in Plaiku.

Ân used to produce souvenir-type of paintings of ethnic minority women carrying out daily activities in a village. However, he no longer produces such paintings though they were quite popular in the market. According to Ân, such souvenir paintings do not provoke any feelings and do not bear any meanings or messages. They are just pretty decorations for walls. He also argued that as life is a journey and a constant transformation, his art should not hang onto one style, but should constantly change. The medium and style of his art are changing, but his art bears an unchanging persistent message/identity: a man of the central highlands.



Figure 2: War and Human loss at the central and central highland regional exhibition of arts in 2012 in Quảng Ngãi

Ân's identity as a man of the central highlands is expressed by his relationship with the Bana ethnic group and his work is inspired by his

relationship with them and a very strong sentiment against war. Ân sent a scrap iron sculpture to the Central Coast and Central Highland Regional Exhibition of Arts in 2012. The sculpture titled *War and Human Loss* captures the moment when a person is blown away by a land mine. He put sand in a shallow square box and erected the sculpture. A real mine used during the Vietnam War was covered with a twisted cloth bag and placed at the bottom of the sculpture. Two helmets (Figure 2) are lying on both sides of the mine. A victim's blasted body is depicted by nervously waved thin iron bars. Barbed wires cling to the victim's legs (See Figure 2).

In the highlands, both the majority Kinh and the ethnic minority people suffered from being caught between two forces, the South Vietnam Government and the Communist North Vietnam. The accounts by US Army infantry Lieutenant Colonel Thomas McKenna during the war in Kon Tum in 1972, known as the Easter Offensive among the Americans, explains the frightening magnitude of the war in the highlands. It was not the attacks by the Vietnamese Communist guerillas but those by the North Vietnamese Army with heavy artillery where for the first time armoured tanks were brought into the Central Highlands. Kon Tum was surrounded by the North Vietnamese army and became an isolated island in the Highlands. The population of Kon Tum suddenly increased through an influx of refugees from the surrounding areas (McKenna, 2011)<sup>1</sup>.

Ân as a young boy witnessed people's suffering and misery during the war and experienced it himself as a victim of the war. He remembers the wars in Kon Tum in 1972 and 1975 with horrifying images that he would never be able to forget. When there was an attack, his teacher ordered the class to hide under their desk immediately. The thin desk could not be any protection in reality but he and his fellow pupils jumped under their desks. When the Communist army surged into the highlands in 1975, there was a rumor that the Saigon government would leave the highlands in the hands of the Communists. People fled from the highlands in panic. Ân's mother took her young children, fleeing from the highlands. They walked along National Road No. 19 toward a place called Phu Bon near the Ba River. Dead bodies and injured people were lying along the road and he and his family had to sleep on the road under a broken car during the night. Ân was horrified to find the people who slept close to his family on the road

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<sup>1</sup> In this book, McKenna (2011) argues that if Kon Tum and the highlands fell into the hands of the North Vietnamese Army in 1972, South Vietnam would have been divided and lost the war against the Communists. The battle of Kon Tum or the Easter Offensive in 1972 saved South Vietnam (p. 3, p. 72).

were dead the next morning. At the end, his family did not succeed in escaping the highlands because they were caught in a crossfire between the Communist and South Vietnamese armies. They had to turn around and walk on the bloody road back to Kon Tum. In this horrifying failed escape, Ân witnessed many citizens killed in the crossfire. He remembered that many of those victims were young children. During interviews, Ân repeatedly indicated his fear that Vietnamese society might lose those memories of the war. To think of people's loss and suffering during the war and the prolonged pain from which people like himself still endure, he argued that the memories of the war should not wither away: "It is my duty to continue to teach younger generations about the horror and misery of the wars".

When one enters Eva Café, one notices a tall statue of scrap iron standing at the side. It is about 2.5 metres tall and made out of a bombshell used during the war. Ân cut the bomb shell in half and used one half of the bombshell to make a soldier's body, indicating that he is always missing half of himself: The half he left with his family and loved ones back in their country. Three iron rings around the soldier's body indicate various laws and regulations that he has to follow. The soldier's upper body has a hole in the shape of heart. In front of the hole an anti-war mark is dangling like pendant (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Soldier's sculpture in Eva Café:

The heart-shaped hole is the soldier's heart and the anti-war mark expresses the soldier's true, suppressed feelings. Since the bombshell used for this sculpture was American-made, the sculptural figure seems to be a US soldier. When war is the theme of Ân's art work, he does not blame anybody or any side. He tries to express the sorrow and suffering of the people who experience war regardless of their backgrounds.

## **Conclusion**

In his art, Ân treats ethnic minorities and soldiers as fellow humans. Through this generalization, he expresses the universal themes of life and death. The undercurrent of his artwork is his strong identity as a man of the central highlands. His art is rooted in his empathy and proximity to the highland ethnic minority people and the war victims such as the soldiers and himself. Such empathy and proximity have been developed through his life in the highlands as he has identified himself with this special region. His identity as a man of the central highlands is also reflected in the distance that he has kept from the Department of Culture and Information, the Communist party, and the Central Government as the central highlands is registered outside of its control.

Asserting one's identity with a particular region in Vietnam is a recurring phenomenon that I have noticed in the past several years. When I visit Vietnam, I often go out with my friends working at the Southern Institute of Sustainable Development, formally known as the Southern Institute of Social Sciences. At one of our dinner gatherings, my friends and fellow researchers discussed a book written by an Australian scholar Philip Taylor who has done extensive field research in the Mekong Delta and southern Vietnam. They praised his book by saying that Taylor really understood the South. In his book, Taylor argues that southern Vietnam is different from the north because of its different historical development and its culture. They further mentioned that the reunification of Vietnam has been weathering a unique southern culture. This type of discourse was not heard when I was living in Ho Chi Minh City in the mid-1990s. The phrase I often heard was that "the north has culture, the south has money". It was to my surprise to hear their assertion of a southern identity based on cultural difference and made me realize a widening space of asserting various identities rather than a unified Vietnamese one.

Ân's identity as a man of the central highlands, not a northerner or southerner reflects tolerance of diversification of people's identity in Vietnam. Ân's art work is fortelling a heterogeneity of views, perspectives and identities in Vietnam under one party domination.

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