

FROM CLASS TO CULTURE: RECONFIGURATIONS OF VIETNAMESE COMMUNISM (1925-2015)

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I. Resist

Contemporary Vietnamese historians trace their country's loss of sovereignty to the reign of Tự Đức (1847-1883). He was the fourth of thirteen Nguyễn kings who ruled, actually and then only nominally, from 1802 to the August Revolution of 1945. Representatives of Tự Đức's court signed the first of several treaties that resulted in territorial and political concessions to France. After decades of brutality, which colonists characterized as 'pacification', French Indochina was complete. It consisted of five principal pieces: the colony of Cochinchina (southern Vietnam) and four protectorates: Annam (central Vietnam), Tonkin (northern Vietnam), Cambodia, and Laos.¹ By the late nineteenth century, French advocates of empire were no longer as committed to Catholic evangelism as their predecessors. Instead, they advanced a new ideal – the Civilizing Mission – and emphasized the unique ability of France to 'tutor' colonial subjects, to lead them out of 'darkness' and into the 'light'.²

¹ Pham Diem discusses the legal framework of French Indochina in more detail in "The State Structure in French-ruled Vietnam (1858-1945)", *Vietnam Law & Legal Forum* (24 February 2011), <http://vietnamlawmagazine.vn/the-state-structure-in-french-ruled-vietnam-1858-1945-4404.html>, last accessed 2 May 2019.

² Like many of his compatriots, Paul Monet accepted the principle of the *mission civilisatrice*; but he was appalled by the manner in which it was carried out. See Paul Monet, *Les Jauniers* [The Slave Drivers],

The French occupation of Vietnam (1862-1954) was complex and multifaceted. Apologists stress its accomplishments. They maintain that colonists improved the country's infrastructure – by creating ‘broad, well-cut boulevards,’ building railways, and developing ports.³ They built hospitals and clinics and conducted path-breaking medical research. They built elegant residential districts; they built cathedrals; they built centers for the performing arts. In fact, inspired by the Opéra Garnier in Paris, colonists built the Opera House in Hà Nội. (Here, in March 1946, in what was for French imperialists the most iconic spot, Vietnamese revolutionaries convened the Democratic Republic's first National Assembly.⁴) The colonial building spree thoroughly reshaped urban and rural space. The colonial occupation transformed the world of scholarship as well. Experts in history and literature and folklore; linguistics and anthropology; agricultural science; Buddhist sculpture and Buddhist texts; and archaeology, architecture, and art scrutinized, measured, analyzed, and assessed and, over time, produced impressive works of great erudition. Critics, including many Vietnamese who loathed communists more than the colonists, point out that the French occupation also caused a great deal of suffering. It required an extensive police force, a startling array of prisons and penitentiaries, at least one guillotine, an expansive regimen of taxes, and unprecedented levels of uncompensated labor.⁵ Colonial officials created a massively bureaucratic State by superimposing their own administrative system on top of the one that Nguyễn rulers had put into place. Weaving them together resulted in a dense web of ministries and institutes; agencies, offices, and councils; departments and tribunals. Anti-colonial activists, including communists, railed against these tendencies, but rather than abandon the bureaucratic patterns of the Nguyễn court and colonial administrators, the Democratic Republic (beginning in 1945) added to them; the Socialist Republic (beginning in 1976) devised still more intrusive norms.

Narratives of the Vietnamese Communist Party's descent, meaning its lineage, and its ascent to power pay homage to the anticolonial activists who, from the beginning, waged war against France. Stories of this genre venerate Trương Công Định, a Nguyễn commander who refused to disband his militia even when he was ordered by the court to do so.⁶

4th ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1930).

³ Albert de Pouvourville, quoted in Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 161.

⁴ “Kỳ họp đầu tiên của Quốc hội khóa I năm 1946” [The first meeting of the National Assembly in 1946], <http://thegioidisan.vn/vi/ky-hop-dau-tien-cua-quoc-hoi-khoa-i-nam-1946.html>, last accessed 2 May 2019.

⁵ Trương Bửu Lâm includes extensive excerpts from key sources in *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism, 1900-1931* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

⁶ “Bài 1: Khái lược Lịch sử Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam” [Lesson 1: Summary History of the Vietnamese Communist Party], <http://dukdn.laichau.gov.vn/Files/dukcdn/users/130/2017/Thang8/BAI-1-DOI->

These chronicles also honor Nguyễn Tri Phương, another Nguyễn commander who died battling against French forces. They express respect for the scholar Thủ Khoa Huân, executed by French officials in 1875. They celebrate the ‘Save the King’ Movement (Cần Vương) that erupted in 1885 after colonists deposed the reigning monarch Hàm Nghi. Rather than submit to French power, he fled with some officials into the hills. Far from the capital, they turned to local, non-Việt peoples, and in this way converted what began as a burst of loyalist activism into a multi-faceted stance against the occupation. In many ways this episode, always idealized, provides the template for the August Revolution and the nine-year war of resistance against France (1946-1954). Conventional accounts of the Vietnamese Communist Party esteem the Scholar Movement (Văn thân), which succeeded ‘Save the King’ and lasted into the mid-1890s. In official renditions of the past, these individuals and these movements are clearly deserving of praise. Unlike the communist revolutionaries who succeeded them, however, early activists lacked critical skills: they didn’t know how to mobilize the people (*động viên nhân dân*). Therefore, invariably, their efforts to defeat the colonists failed.

Narratives of resistance and overcoming shift their focus from the first generation of anticolonial activists to luminous figures such as Lương Văn Can (1854-1927), Phan Bội Châu (1867-1940), and Phan Chu Trinh (1872-1926).⁷ These men were trained in Chinese literature and history; they prepared for the Confucian exams; all of them earned degrees. For a time Phan Chu Trinh even served in the Nguyễn Dynasty’s Ministry of Rites.⁸ Like their contemporaries, they looked with alarm at what was happening in their country. Unavoidably, they criticized the French imperial project and the military and civilian officials who carried it out.⁹ But they also denounced educated Vietnamese who were complicit and people from non-scholarly backgrounds who submitted to corrupt authorities and demonstrated respect for archaic norms. In other words, besides criticizing the poisonous effects of the French conquest and occupation, these activists looked internally as well, at themselves and other Vietnamese, and developed a more complex picture of what had gone awry.

Seeking a way out of the miasma, Lương Văn Can, Phan Bội Châu, and Phan Chu Trinh began to explore what was for them an entirely new intellectual tradition: western studies (*tây học*), a body of texts they gained access to not through French colonial scholars or officials but East Asian intermediaries. The Japanese iconoclast Fukuzawa Yukichi

TUONG-DANG.PDF, last accessed 5 October 2019.

⁷ “Bài 1: Khái lược Lịch sử Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam”.

⁸ Nguyễn Q. Thắng and Nguyễn Bá Thế, *Từ điển Nhân vật Lịch sử Việt Nam* [Dictionary of Vietnamese Historical Figures], 2nd ed. (Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh: NXB Văn Hóa, 1993), 420, 772, 775.

⁹ The literature on this topic is extensive. See, for example, two of the books by David Marr: *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) and *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

(1835-1901), founder of Keio University in Tokyo (1858), and the Chinese reformers Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and Liang Qichao (1873-1929) were especially influential. Inspired by Japanese and Chinese exemplars, these men promoted the idea that ordinary people and not only the male children of elites should have access to education. They also became attuned to the possibility of broad, socially inclusive expressions of dissent. Sensing the transformational potential of mass literacy, they promoted *chữ quốc ngữ*, the Romanized script that Catholic missionaries and Vietnamese converts had devised in the mid-seventeenth century to promote catechetical training.¹⁰ This revolution in learning manifested itself in innumerable ways and culminated in the Tonkin Free School, which opened in Hà Nội in March 1907. Like movements that came before it, such as Go East (Đông Du), as well as those that followed, including Reform (Duy Tân), the Tonkin Free School was initially, briefly, a tremendous success. But in December, only months after it opened, French authorities forced it to close!¹¹ They also arrested some of the key figures, Lương Văn Can, for one, and sentenced others to hard labor.¹²

In these examples of anticolonial activism, scholars played the principal roles. Increasingly, though, people from non-scholarly backgrounds also organized to resist the occupation. In 1907, for instance, to protest the mistreatment they suffered, railway workers in northern Vietnam went on a rampage, torched the encampment where they were based, then fled before the contractors could strike back.¹³ In 1908 villagers (*dân xã*) in the central province of Quảng Nam complained to a Vietnamese official (in the district of Đại Lộc) about the increased demand for uncompensated labour.¹⁴ They were not satisfied with his response. Because they understood the rapport between subalterns and superiors, around one hundred villagers headed next to the office of the French resident. At this point the original dispute metamorphosed into something much larger. Thousands of people came to protest against corvée labour – the subject of the original confrontation – and also against the burden of taxes. World War I sharpened tensions further, in part because tens of thousands of Vietnamese soldiers and labourers (*lính thợ*) served on behalf of France.

¹⁰ Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998).

¹¹ Trương Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục. Dương Kinh Quốc, *Việt Nam: Những sự kiện Lịch sử (1858-1918)* [Vietnam: Historical Events, 1858-1918], 2nd ed. (Hà Nội: NXB Giáo Dục, 2002), 306-307.

¹² Lương Văn Can received a life sentence but was released after three years. Nguyễn Q. Thắng and Nguyễn Bá Thế, *Từ điển*, 623.

¹³ They were working on a segment of track that linked Lào Cai and Vân Nam. Dương Kinh Quốc, *Việt Nam: Những sự kiện*, 309.

¹⁴ Phan Chu Trinh, *Trung Kỳ Dân biến Thị mật ký* [An Account of the Commotion in Central Vietnam], trans. Lê Ấm and Nguyễn Q. Thắng (Sài Gòn: Phủ Quốc Vụ Khanh Đặc Trách Văn Hóa XB, 1973): 26-96. Reflecting his traditional background, Phan Chu Trinh originally wrote in Chinese; but because he had partially adjusted to new norms, he translated the Chinese version into *quốc ngữ*.

Of these, more than three thousand died.¹⁵ Then, in 1917, hundreds of people in Thái Nguyên, including criminals, political dissidents, and prison guards, seized control of the prison and occupied administrative posts as well.¹⁶

Relatively safe while outside of Vietnam, anticolonial activists began experimenting with party politics in Hong Kong (a British colony since 1842), southern China, the Soviet Union, and France.¹⁷ In 1927, swayed by the example of Chinese who had founded the Guomindang, Vũ Hồng Khanh (1898-1993), Nguyễn Thái Học (1902-1930), and Nhất Linh (1906-1963) established the Vietnamese Nationalist Party.¹⁸ It is likely that, given a chance to develop and mature, the nationalists would have attracted a wide following. In February 1930, however, in Yên Bái (northern Vietnam), they launched a bold and terribly botched operation. French forces responded with a devastating blow from which the nationalists never recovered. Meanwhile, in February 1930 in Hong Kong, an electrifying speaker, a Comintern agent known then by the name of Nguyễn Ái Quốc, urged representatives of several small communist groups, leagues, and parties to disband in order to form the Vietnamese Communist Party.¹⁹ Today the VCP traces its origins to this moment precisely and to the charismatic figure at the center of these events – the man who, after casting off dozens of aliases, took the name Hồ Chí Minh.

Vietnamese communists speak respectfully about those who resisted the occupation via traditional means. To a far greater degree they revere their own instrumentality, their search for new forms of knowledge, and their ability to localize paradigm-shifting ideals. Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, communists learned that it no longer sufficed to make social distinctions merely on the basis of place: rural people (*dân xã*) versus urbanites (*dân thành phố*). Identities that stemmed from one's patrilineal clan (*họ*) or from one's occupation (*nghề nghiệp*) were similarly insufficient. Instead, communists had to master a new vocabulary, starting with class (*giai cấp*) and class struggle (*cuộc đấu tranh giai cấp*) and an implausible array of 'isms': feudalism (*chủ nghĩa phong kiến*), capitalism (*chủ nghĩa tư bản*), socialism (*chủ nghĩa xã hội*), and communism (*chủ nghĩa cộng sản*). Communists had to reimagine the past in terms of developmental stages instead of traditional cycles of dynas-

¹⁵ "Vietnamiens dans la Grande Guerre – Entretien avec Mireille Le Van Ho", <https://indomemoires.hypotheses.org/category/billets/entretiens/page/2>, last accessed 2 May 2019.

¹⁶ Peter Zinoman, "Colonial Prisons and the Anti-Colonial Resistance in French Indochina: The Thai Nguyen Rebellion, 1917", *Modern Asian Studies*, 34, 1 (2000): 57-98.

¹⁷ Historians often identify the Indochinese Constitutionalist Party (Đảng Lập hiến Đông Dương), founded in 1917 by the naturalized French citizen Bùi Quang Chiêu, as the first political party in Vietnam. Because of its limited membership of not more than a few dozen members, it may be more reasonable to view it as a private club.

¹⁸ Việt Nam Quốc dân Đảng [VNQDDĐ].

¹⁹ Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam.

tic rise and decline. They had to wrestle with enigmatic allusions to the ‘Asiatic Mode of Production.’ In a purely impressionistic sense, the distance between Vietnamese social realities and Marxist theoretical models was enormous. Quantitative data further clarifies the gap. For one, the Marxist definition of working class (*giai cấp công nhân*) excluded farmers – the group whose labour was essential to all and, not incidentally, the second most critical class (after scholars) according to Confucian models. More perplexing still, in 1929, on the eve of the VCP’s founding, the working class – as it was defined by Marx – constituted less than 1% of the population.²⁰

Of thirty million people, perhaps 250,000 worked on railways, mined coal (Tonkin) or nickel (New Caledonia), or tapped rubber trees (Cochinchina, Cambodia, and Laos). Because of these incongruities, Vietnamese communists recognized the importance of Marx but they regarded Lenin as the more crucial figure because, through the ‘vanguard party’, he solved the problem of the ‘missing’ proletariat. Moreover, class struggle as Marx envisioned it seemed to signal the inevitability of violence among Vietnamese, not only against the occupying power. Lenin, however, theorized that colonies functioned as the ‘working class’ of imperial powers. In this way, he suggested a way of defining class conflict as a struggle against those who abetted French domination. Perhaps it is for this reason that, more than thirty years after the VCP introduced ‘market socialism’, the megalithic statue of Lenin still stands in the park in Hà Nội that bears his name.

From the beginning, well before the founding of the VCP in 1930, communists recognized the importance of propaganda and teaching (*tuyên giáo*) and for this reason they published on an impressive scale. Between 1925 and 1930, in fact, they produced dozens of newspapers and journals, including *Thanh Niên* [Youth], which was initially (1925) written by hand, and *Búa liềm* [Hammer and Sickle].²¹ In August 1930, however, the ‘historical mission’ (*nhiệm vụ lịch sử*) of these sources ended when the VCP began publishing *Tranh đấu* [Struggle].²² To naturalize new ways of thinking and behaving, the Party also created the Propaganda Committee, which laid the foundation for scores of subsequent initiatives.²³

²⁰ Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Vietnam: A Long History* (Hà Nội: NXB Thế Giới, 2009), 272.

²¹ ‘Báo chí cách mạng Việt Nam trước năm 1945 dưới sự lãnh đạo của Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam’ [Vietnamese revolutionary newspapers and journals before 1945 under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party], <http://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/Home/PrintStory.aspx?distribution=36020&print=true>, last accessed 2 May 2019.

²² “Tranh đấu: tờ báo đầu tiên của Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam” [Struggle: the first newspaper of the Vietnamese Communist Party], <http://m.vov.vn/chinh-tri/tranh-dau-to-bao-dau-tien-cua-dang-cong-san-viet-nam-380486.vov>, last accessed 2 May 2019.

²³ Ban Cố động và Tuyên truyền. “Kỷ niệm ngày truyền thống Ngành Tuyên giáo của Đảng” [Commemorating the establishment of the Party’s propaganda branch], <http://thvl.vn/?p=535829>, last accessed 2 May 2019. By the late 1940s, many provinces were equipped with an information service (*ty thông tin*) that served this purpose. Among the many committees (*ban*): Ban Giáo dục Trung ương [Education], Ban Tư

From the beginning, communists recognized the importance of organization and structure. Initially they organized five overlapping and interlocking layers: cells (*chi bộ*), districts (*huyện bộ*), towns (*thị bộ*) or zones (*khâu bộ*), provinces (*tỉnh bộ*), and urban units (*thành bộ*) or special units (*đặc biệt bộ*). An executive committee monitored conditions within each of these five administrative layers.²⁴ When the VCP became the Indochinese Communist Party in October 1930, it introduced five new overarching spheres of authority to correspond to each of the four protectorates (Tonkin, Annam, Cambodia, and Laos) and the colony of Cochinchina.²⁵ It also inserted a new layer of administrators into cantons (*tổng*), the level above cells and below districts.²⁶

Today the Vietnamese Communist Party monopolizes political power – at least officially, if not in actual practice. Visually it is ubiquitous; and it has mastered the art of grand spectacle. Nevertheless, in the beginning the Party was not the awesome and imposing power that it has become. Speaking of the early years, Trần Trọng Thơ emphasizes its fragility. In September 1930, after absorbing members of the small regional parties, the VCP had only 800-900 members.²⁷ By April 1931 the number approximately tripled (to 2400).²⁸ Having more or less wiped out the nationalists, colonial police agents aimed in a more concentrated way at the communists. Trần Trọng Thơ traces the damage wrought by the colonialists' campaign. For instance, during the fifteen-year period 1930-1945, he points out, there were eleven central committees. Besides listing each member by his actual and assumed names, the author adds brief biographical details. Of the nearly fifty men who served, French security agents arrested more than fifteen, some of them multiple times.²⁹ They also put four of them to

tưởng Văn hóa Trung ương [Ideology and Culture], Ban Tuyên giáo Trung ương [Propaganda and Training], Ban Tuyên huấn Trung ương [Propaganda and Training], Ban Tuyên truyền Trung ương [Propaganda], Ban Văn hóa Văn nghệ Trung ương [Culture, Literature, and Arts].

²⁴ Trần Trọng Thơ lays out the framework in *Xây dựng Cơ quan Lãnh đạo cấp Trung ương, Xứ ủy của Đảng Thời kỳ 1930-1945* [Building the Organs of Leadership in the Party's Central Committee and Regional Committees in the Period 1930-1945] (Hà Nội: NXB Chính trị quốc gia-Sự thật, 2014), 16.

²⁵ Đông Dương Đảng Cộng sản.

²⁶ Trần Trọng Thơ, *Xây dựng*, 18-19.

²⁷ Trần Trọng Thơ specifically mentions the Indochinese Communist League (Đông Dương Cộng sản Liên đoàn), Indochinese Communist Party (Đông Dương Cộng sản Đảng), Annamese Communist Party (An Nam Cộng sản Đảng), Tân Việt Communist League (Tân Việt Cộng sản Liên đoàn), and a segment (*phan bộ*) of the Chinese Communist Party of Indochina (Đảng Cộng sản Trung Quốc ở Đông Dương). *Xây dựng*, 320-321.

²⁸ Trần Trọng Thơ, *Xây dựng*, 321.

²⁹ Among those who were arrested: Hạ Bá Cang and Nguyễn Hối (May 1930); Phạm Hữu Lầu (July 1930); Ngô Đức Trì, Nguyễn Trọng Nhà, Trần Phú, and Trần Văn Lan (April 1931); Nguyễn Phong Sắc (May 1931); Nguyễn Văn Dật and an unnamed 'southern comrade' (April 1935); Phan Đình Hy (May 1935); Phạm Văn Xô (June 1935); and Võ Nguyên Hiến (July 1935). Bichzhan (identified as an 'ethnic minority from the north') was arrested in mid-1935. Also arrested: Ngô Tuấn (August 1935) and Đinh Thanh (September 1935).

death.³⁰ These details make the peril involved in taking on the colonial regime more palpable and explain why, in 1935, after five years of recruiting, the Party had fewer members than it did at the beginning.³¹

In fall 1940 Japanese imperial soldiers occupied Vietnam. At this point, communists began to promote the idea of ‘saving the country’ (*cứu quốc*) and emphasized that the ability to do so required the unity of all the people, regardless of class, against France and Japan. In the early months of 1941, after an absence of thirty years, Hồ Chí Minh walked across the border separating Vietnam and China. In May, in the mountains of Cao Bằng, in the tiny village of Pác Bó, he and other anti-colonialists formed the Việt Minh Front.³² Its survival depended on ethnic minorities, particularly Dao, Mông, Nùng, and Tày peoples in the midlands and mountains of northern and north-central Vietnam. Some sources identify General Võ Nguyên Giáp’s ‘right-hand man’ as Nông Văn Lạc, who was Tày and came from the critical province of Cao Bằng. Writing under various aliases, Hồ Chí Minh contributed hundreds of pieces to *Cứu Quốc*, the Việt Minh newspaper launched in 1942. In an attempt to recruit more support from minorities, the Việt Minh established the Vietnamese Liberation Army Propaganda Team (Đội Việt Nam Tuyên truyền Giải phóng quân) in 1944. Recently, to dispel the sense that this gesture attracted only a few dozen people, one journalist identified more than one hundred members.³³ In March 1945 Japanese abruptly terminated their war-time cooperation with the French and organized an ‘independent’ Vietnamese State within the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Communists regarded this gesture as a sham. Allied Powers, principally the US, pummeled Japan with incendiary devices and then dropped two atomic bombs, one on Hiroshima (6 August), another on Nagasaki (9 August). On 15 August Japan surrendered.

On 19 August, when the Party had around 1300 members, anticolonialists in Hà Nội staged the August Revolution. On 2 September, Hồ Chí Minh recited the Declaration of Independence, which brought the Democratic Republic of Vietnam [DRV] to life.³⁴ To those who claim that these events stemmed merely from opportunism – from the

For the year beginning September 1935, the central committee was inactive. Trần Đăng Ninh was arrested at the end of 1941. Trần Trọng Thơ, *Xây dựng*, 309-319.

³⁰ According to Trần Trọng Thơ, French authorities executed Lê Mao, Nguyễn Phong Sắc, and Trần Phú (in 1931); Đinh Thanh (1935), Phùng Chí Kiên (1942), and Hoàng Văn Thụ (1944). *Xây dựng*, 311-317.

³¹ At this point there were 552 members. Trần Trọng Thơ, *Xây dựng*, 322.

³² Ngọc Châu, “Bác Hồ thời gian ở Pác Bó” [Uncle Hồ in the time of Pác Bó], <http://tinhdoannghean.vn/?x=148/theo-dau-chan-bac/bac-ho-thoi-gian-o-pac-bo>, last accessed 2 May 2019.

³³ Ngọc Tước, “Đội Việt Nam tuyên truyền giải phóng quân chỉ có 34 người?” [Did the Vietnamese Liberation Army Propaganda Team have only 34 people?], <http://giadinh.net.vn/xa-hoi/doi-viet-nam-tuyen-truyen-giai-phong-quan-chi-co-34-nguoi-20100901093642386.htm>, last accessed 2 May 2019.

³⁴ Việt Nam Dân chủ Cộng hòa.

ability of the Việt Minh to fill the political ‘vacuum’ at the end of the war – communists respond: for more than fifteen years they had systematically prepared. They also emphasize that these events allowed the Party to attract more people: by the end of the year the Party had approximately 5000 members.³⁵ Rather than recognize that the era of empire in Asia had come to an end, French colonialists were determined to reoccupy Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Sensing the difficulty of the years to come and the necessity of widespread support, members of the VCP, which by this point had become the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), officially dissolved the Party. Nevertheless, to improve conditions for the poorest Vietnamese and gain support for the war, revolutionaries waived or reduced the rents of tenant farmers. In December 1946 the Resistance War Against French Colonialism erupted.³⁶

II. Resolve

Today dozens of shops in the Old Quarter of Hà Nội sell reproductions of propaganda posters (*tranh cổ động*). They are often exquisitely rendered and in brilliant hues. The originals, especially in the early years, were more subdued. The earliest one I’ve come across was created in 1947; it has two colors: red and black. The message, a slogan, is clear: Long Live the Successful Revolution! In the background: the flag; in the foreground: a Việt Minh soldier rests one foot on the back of a body labelled ‘Fascist’ (Phát Xít). Foreshadowing the commemorative mania that came later, the caption reads: 19 August Uprising.³⁷

That same year, students at the School of Fine Art in Hà Nội created a more complex narration that unfolds in a sequence of thirteen separate panels.³⁸ Most of the captions have precisely four lines of verse written in the six-eight form of traditional poetry. Again the palette is muted: black, green, and brown. The first frame captures rural well-being: men and women work peacefully in the field. “Thanks to the Government and Uncle Hồ”, it reads, “the crop is good and everyone is happy”. In the second frame, it is time to prepare for the summer seeding; engaging in ‘emulation’ (*sự thi đua*), villagers hoe deeply and fertilize the fields. These scenes of order and calm abruptly yield (frame three) to the picture of destruction: water rushes violently through the broken chambers of

³⁵ Trần Trọng Thơ, *Xây dựng*, 324.

³⁶ Cuộc kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp, also known also as the First Indochina War.

³⁷ Bộ Văn hóa-Thông tin, *60 năm Tranh Cổ động Việt Nam, 1945-2005* [Sixty Years of Propaganda Posters] (Hà Nội: Sự thật, 2014) 1/9. My references to this text contain two digits. The first corresponds to the number of the image; the second identifies the page.

³⁸ Trường Mỹ thuật Hà Nội, *60 năm*, 2.1-2.13/10-13.

a bridge; the enemy tries to cause starvation by bombing the dykes and destroying the crops. Faced with aggression, how should villagers respond? (Four): They have to overcome all difficulties; instead of rice, they must grow subsidiary crops. (Five): Blistering sun causes drought and makes the soil infertile. As the rivers and canals run dry, people fear losing their crops and feel hatred for the enemy. (Six): The invaders commit crimes and cause suffering; the people are determined to wipe them out. (Seven): The villagers, men, it appears, meet in the communal house to discuss the drought. Elder Lam (cụ Lam) an “emulative fighter”, suggests digging a canal to bring water from the stream. (Eight): Villagers form an organizing board (*ban tổ chức*). (Nine): Some dig while others hoe. The villagers have nearly completed the canal. (Ten): The enemy bombards it. (Eleven): The enemy forces are like rabid dogs (*chó dại*); villagers must overcome the clique of invaders. (Twelve): The canal is done; villagers again have access to water. (Thirteen): The chairman of the Provincial Committee appears. On stage with Elder Lam, “who represents all of the people”, the chairman presents him with a flag.

Such things as fertilizer, ditch-digging, and principal versus subsidiary crops are not the traditional topics either of poetry or the visual arts. In this sense the text conveys a revolution in culture. More striking still is that villagers, whose attitude toward the State is traditionally one of indifference, light up when a flag-bearer from the Provincial Committee appears. Explicitly this text illustrates how rural Vietnamese are supposed to endure even when they are under attack. Implicitly it communicates new norms: rural Vietnamese are now bound to the State by affective ties.

Other texts are similarly didactic but aim specifically at historical narration. For example, in 1948 the Ministry of Propaganda Painting produced a lengthy series (eighteen images in all). It begins with an assault launched by the French enemy (*giặc Pháp*) on 17 December 1946.³⁹ In the second frame, Chairman Hồ calls on all people to join the resistance. (Third): Confident in the Government and Chairman Hồ, everybody joins. (Fourth): French forces terrorize the Vietnamese. (Fifth): After two years of resistance, Vietnamese forces are stronger; the French have weakened. (Sixth): The people are forged in battle. (Seventh): In the South (Nam bộ), the resistance has scored glorious victories. (Eighth): Every commune (*xã*) has traditional military forces and guerillas. (The ninth frame is missing.) In the tenth, the people heed the slogan: increase production; self-sufficiency at every level. (The eleventh and twelfth frames are also missing.) (Thirteenth): In fall and winter 1947, the people of Việt Bắc triumph over colonial forces. (Fourteenth): French commanders are called back to France. (Fifteenth): Writers, artists, and intellectuals contribute powerfully to the resistance. In July 1948 the National Culture Assembly took place. To contextualize the point of the next two frames, it is worth mentioning

³⁹ Bộ tranh tuyên truyền, *60 năm*, 3.1-3.18/14-17.

that Vietnamese communists have always emphasized their connections to the wider world. Thus, the sixteenth image points out: foreigners admire the fighting spirit of the Vietnamese and follow news of the resistance. (Seventeenth): Many foreign reporters have interviewed Chairman Hồ. They respect him because he is clear sighted and fights ardently for independence and unification. The series concludes: on 19 June 1948 Chairman Hồ declared a patriotic emulation movement for all the people: “The sooner the resistance ends in victory the sooner the French enemy will leave”. In other words, at this point, early in the struggle against France, propaganda posters were fairly complex.

Later they delivered – practically shouted – simple and brief commands. In 1948 the Provincial Information Service of Tuyên Quang announced preparations to ‘smash’ the French enemy’s fall-winter assault. In 1949 the Provincial Information Service of Bắc Giang broadcast news of an emulative movement to prepare for the general counter-offensive. In 1950 the Information Branch of Inter-Zone Twelve urged all people to support the regular army and local militia. The dynamic in these images is clear: Vietnamese must fight against the ‘French enemy’. A poster from Bắc Giang, also produced in 1948, introduces a new player: traitors (*Việt gian*). To keep the French enemy and their ‘henchmen’ from coming near, villagers must protect themselves by digging tunnels.⁴⁰

In February 1951, confident that the war was turning in their favour, communists formally reconstituted the Party and brought it out of hiding into the open.⁴¹ In March, they created Liên Việt, a new front that unified the Việt Minh (formed in 1941) and the Liên Việt League (formed in 1946).⁴² In spring 1953, with the end of the resistance war in sight, the Government and Party renewed their commitment to class struggle by launching Land Reform.⁴³ Today official sources characterize this campaign as a success: it allocated more than 600,000 hectares of land to cultivators, completely abolished (*xóa bỏ*) the landlord class, and wiped out the last traces of feudalism in North Vietnam.⁴⁴ Other sources dwell more on the process. Land Reform cadres were supposed to proceed in a precisely calibrated way to distinguish those who were landless; those who had a small, but insuffi-

⁴⁰ *60 năm*, 24/25. In 1950 the Provincial Information Service of Quảng Bình issued a similar alert (5/18). The Provincial Information Services of Lạng Sơn and Tuyên Quang publicized the same warning, but the posters aren’t dated: 18/23, 34/31.

⁴¹ It was known at this time as the Vietnamese Workers’ Party (Đảng Lao động Việt Nam).

⁴² “Mặt trận Liên Việt trong cách mạng Việt Nam” [The Liên Việt Front in the Vietnamese revolution]. <http://m.baomoi.com/mat-tran-lien-viet-trong-cach-mang-viet-nam/c/5799432.epi>, last accessed 2 May 2019.

⁴³ Cải cách Ruộng đất.

⁴⁴ “Hoàn thành cải cách ruộng đất và khôi phục kinh tế quốc dân (1955-1957)” [Completing land reform and re-establishing the national economy (1955-1957)], <http://www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/chinhphu/noidungchinhachsachthanhtuu?categoryId=797&articleId=10001592>, last accessed 2 May 2019.

cient amount of land; those whose land provided enough food and a reserve of grain to seed the next crop; those who owned more land than they themselves could cultivate; and landlords who performed no agricultural labour. In the case of landlords, cadres were supposed to consider their political backgrounds. They were allowed and even encouraged to treat ‘reactionary’ landlords severely. As for ‘progressive’ landlords who had supported the revolution and resistance – they were supposed to be treated with leniency. Emphasizing the chaos and violence of Land Reform, Alex-Thai Vo writes about a wealthy landowner named Nguyễn Thị Năm. In the famine of 1944-1945, which claimed the lives of one to two million people, she provided food to people who were starving. She sheltered Việt Minh soldiers. She encouraged her own sons to register for military service. And she gave the revolutionaries large sums of money. Despite her exemplary record, Nguyễn Thị Năm was tried in 1953, convicted of being an ‘evil’ landlord, and executed.⁴⁵

Today, more than sixty years later, traces of the shock that stemmed from Land Reform are still apparent. This dynamic stems in part from the extreme turmoil that erupted in the countryside. The fact that the Government and Party continue to conceal the truth about what actually happened exacerbates tensions further and contributes to the circulation of wildly divergent accounts of what transpired. At the most basic, fundamental level: how many people died? One thousand? Two thousand? Several thousand? Hundreds of thousands?⁴⁶ The current practices of the Government and Party, such as confiscating agricultural land in order to build golf courses and luxury condos, further complicate discussions of the past. Moreover, at the first hint of criticism, authorities deem that the conversation has come to a close.⁴⁷ The intensely bureaucratic patterns of the Government and Party and their archival habits as well guarantee that there were, and are, extensive records of what happened – in intimate communal settings, in the contexts of villages, within districts, provinces, zones, inter-zones, and so forth. The prodigious energy of provincial information services, propaganda committees, and propaganda branches undoubtedly resulted in a plethora of images and instructions about how to proceed. However, I have come across only a single poster from the three years of Land Reform. It is oblique and exceedingly

⁴⁵ Alex-Thai D. Vo, “Nguyễn Thị Năm and the Land Reform in North Vietnam, 1953”, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 10, 1 (2015): 1-62.

⁴⁶ For examples of these discordant claims see: Edwin Moïse, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam: Consolidating the Revolution at the Village Level* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), his revision, <http://edmoise.sites.clemson.edu/landbook.html>, last accessed 2 May 2019, and Radio Free Asia, “50 Years On: Vietnamese Remember Land Reform Terror”, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam_landreform-20060608.html, last accessed 2 May 2019.

⁴⁷ See, for example, David Brown, “Vietnam Quickly Shuttles ‘Land Reform’ Exhibit”, *Asia Sentinel* (13 September 2014).

bland. Produced in 1953 by the Cultural Propaganda Service of Bắc Kạn province, it merely states: “Actively participate in the land policies of the Party and Government”.⁴⁸

In May 1954, in the mountain valley of Điện Biên Phủ, French forces surrendered. The Geneva Accords that followed (July 1954) established a ‘provisional military demarcation line’ and specified that the two parties should ‘regroup’ on opposite sides: forces of the People’s Army of Vietnam should assemble on the northern side; forces of the French Union should do so on the southern side.⁴⁹ At this point the US began to intrude more extensively into Vietnamese politics by extending diplomatic, military, and financial support to the Republic of Vietnam, a newly-created State in the southern part of the country. In a massive blast of propaganda known as “Operation Passage to Freedom”, the US encouraged Vietnamese from the North, particularly Catholics, to migrate to the South. The US sent naval transports to the port of Hải Phòng to retrieve them; established agricultural colonies; and provided settlers with rice, farming tools, and stipends.

Meanwhile, in the DRV, the Party and Government, with abundant assistance from Chinese advisors, continued to ‘build socialism’ by stirring up murderous struggles in the countryside, which included the dismantling of villages in order to establish cooperatives and collectives. They also seized control of factories. Authorities ushered in what is known today as the ‘subsidy period’ (*thời bao cấp*), a system based on vouchers (*tem phiếu*) rather than money and a strict rationing of basic commodities, including rice, meat, soy, sugar, and cloth. Adding to the chaos, they began to wage war against traditional customs, such as ritual demonstrations of respect for parents and grandparents on the anniversaries of their deaths. Who knows how many people were arrested? How many were detained? For what crimes were they tried and convicted? To what punishments were they forced to submit? How many people died? Paradoxically, as authorities in the DRV were stirring up violent divisions among Vietnamese, they also encouraged national unity by creating the Fatherland Front.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, the pressure on cultivators did not let up. The slogans proliferated: “Renovate farming methods to increase production”!⁵¹ In 1960, still in the midst of these upheavals, they created the National Front to Liberate South Vietnam.⁵²

⁴⁸ *60 năm*, 55/42.

⁴⁹ “Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Viet-Nam”, Chapter I (Provisional Military Demarcation Line and Demilitarized Zone), Article I, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/KH-LA-VN_540720_GenevaAgreements.pdf, last accessed 2 May 2019.

⁵⁰ Mặt trận Tổ quốc has been translated as ‘Motherland Front’ but the more common rendition is ‘Fatherland Front’, although *tổ* literally refers to ancestors.

⁵¹ *60 năm*, 261/120.

⁵² Mặt trận Dân tộc Giải phóng Miền Nam Việt Nam. In 1964 the Fatherland Front also created *Báo Giải Phóng* [Liberation Newspaper], but the Southern Department of Central Committee Propaganda and Training directed it. “Báo Giải Phóng và tin chiến thắng mỗi độ Xuân về” [Liberation Newspaper and news of

A survey of propaganda posters from this period reveals that the complicated narratives of earlier years have vanished, as have the captions in verse. Individual artists, including Dương Ảnh, Cổ Tấn Long Châu, and Phạm Lung, have taken the place of the various provincial propaganda services that were active in earlier years. The rhetoric of these posters is new. They proclaim: “Power to the people!”⁵³ Women, visible before but never the main focus, have assumed more prominent roles. At first glance, the graphics seem to speak in traditional ways: a woman holds a baby. Then the significance of familiar images becomes clear. A woman cradles a child in her arms...but the child is lifeless; blood trickles from its mouth. She embraces a child...while she protects the commune and village. She holds a child...while she promotes collectivization.⁵⁴ Some of the images are radically new. Women are armed; they are shooting down planes.⁵⁵ The posters keep a running tally: 1500 American planes, then 2000, 3500, 4000.⁵⁶ By 1965 the principal concern is clear: Vietnamese must defeat the Americans – the enemy (*giặc Mỹ, kẻ thù Mỹ*), the invader (*Mỹ xâm lược*), the enemy invader (*giặc Mỹ xâm lược*) – and those who offer support: Diệm (*Mỹ Diệm*) and the ‘puppet’ army (*Mỹ Ngụy*).⁵⁷ Speaking in the imperative, they command: “Protect the terraced fields and shoot down enemy planes!” “Save the country, oppose the Americans, plant trees!” “Advance!” “Total victory will be ours!” “Fight! Fight until the end!” “Liberate the South, protect the North, reunify the country!”⁵⁸ The question of food is critical. “Plant manioc!” “Plant potatoes; plant maize; plant wheat, beans, and barley.”⁵⁹

On 30 April 1975 the war ended. Celebrating the triumph over the US, the posters proclaim: “Vietnam achieves total victory!” “The Hồ Chí Minh campaign ends in victory!” “South Vietnam is liberated; the country is reunified!” A woman holds a baby in the air, the baby raises the flag: “Our country is completely independent, our people are completely free!”⁶⁰ In another poster celebrating the end of the war, two children wave two flags: the principal one (red with a gold star) signals the DRV; the secondary one (half blue, half red, with a gold star), symbolizes the PRG (Provisional Revolutionary Government of

victory comes every spring], <http://www.nhandan.com.vn/tphcm/chuyen-xua-chuyen-nay/item/19346002-.html>, last accessed 2 May 2019.

⁵³ *60 năm*, 69/51, 70/52, 82/56.

⁵⁴ *60 năm*, 61/49, 81/56, 122/71.

⁵⁵ *60 năm*, 88/59.

⁵⁶ *60 năm*, 132/74, 137/76, 139/77, 141/77.

⁵⁷ In Vietnamese sources: Cuộc kháng chiến chống Mỹ cứu quốc [Anti-American Resistance War to Save the Country]. *60 năm*, 60/49, 74/53, 78/54, 85/58, 89/59, 98/63, 106/66, 110/67.

⁵⁸ *60 năm*, 86/58, 93/61, 117/70, 133/75.

⁵⁹ *60 năm*, 106/66, 110/67.

⁶⁰ *60 năm*, 199/94, 215/103.

the South, which was formed in 1969). Beneath this image the caption reads: “South and North under one roof”⁶¹ The following year, at the end of the process that unified two formerly separate states – and until the present – only the principal flag, which represents the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, remains.⁶² Members of the Vietnamese Workers’ Party, returning to their roots, reclaimed their original name: Vietnamese Communist Party. For a period of ten years the Party and Government extended the socialist paradigm of the North throughout the entire country. To clarify the task – the process of converting a landscape ruined by war into something productive – the propaganda posters urged people on: “Turn bomb craters into green fields of manioc and maize!”, “Every household: a fishpond and a vegetable garden!”. They prodded: “Let’s plant white sweet potatoes!”, “Grow soy bean DH-4!”. They shouted: “Develop Uncle Hồ’s orchards!”, “Grow oranges and bananas!”. They demanded: “Produce 600,000 tons of foodstuff!”, “Produce 21 million tons!”. They instructed: “Grow tea!”, “Produce more coffee!”, “Make ceramics!”. They cajoled: “Every family: grow mulberry trees and keep silkworms!”, “Produce more latex!”, “More coconut!”, “Raise honeybees!”, “Grow bindweed in all ponds and canals!”⁶³

III. Remember

Then, abruptly, the experiment ended. At the Sixth Party Congress in December 1986, General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh introduced the policy of ‘renovation’ (*đổi mới*). The new goal: not socialism but ‘market’ socialism (*chủ nghĩa xã hội thị trường*). No more co-operatives, no more collectives, no more vouchers. To a limited degree, the messages that have proliferated in postsocialist times mirror those of an earlier era. The emphasis on productivity is as insistent as before: “Produce more meat and eggs!”, “Industrialize!”, “Drill oil!”, “Build dams!”⁶⁴ The commemorative impulse that was prominent in previous years has become more pervasive, but the material – the point of the commemorative ritual – has changed and the number of focal points has narrowed.⁶⁵ To make references to the past resonate in every way – visually, emotionally, temporally – representatives of the Party and Government plant flags and hang banners throughout cities and towns; they light

⁶¹ *60 năm*, 206/97.

⁶² *60 năm*, 204/96.

⁶³ *60 năm*, 213/103, 217/105, 218/105, 222/106, 230/109, 231/109, 232/110, 233/110, 235/111, 244/114, 245/114, 247/115, 252/117, 253/117, 254/117, 268/121, 276/124.

⁶⁴ *60 năm*, 277/124, 300/131, 303/132, 525/203.

⁶⁵ I discuss the commemorative ethos of the period 1956-1976 in “Chronotypes, Commemoration: A New Sense of Time”, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2002), 163-233.

fireworks; stage operas; write poems. The People must remember; they must not forget. Each day in the present can recall a critical moment from the past. “On 3 February 1930 the VCP was established!”⁶⁶ “On 30 April 1975 the People’s Army liberated Saigon.”⁶⁷ “On 7 May 1954 in Điện Biên Phủ French forces surrendered.”⁶⁸ “Uncle Hồ was born on 19 May 1890.”⁶⁹ “On 19 August 1945 the Revolution erupted.”⁷⁰ “On 19 August 1945 the Security Service was founded.”⁷¹ “2 September 1945–2 September 2005: Sixty Years of Independence, Freedom, and Happiness.”⁷²

Clearly dominating these commemorative events is Hồ Chí Minh. In official iconography he is benign; he is avuncular; children crowd about him, laughing and dancing. He is a writer, the author of literally hundreds of works (now consolidated in fifteen volumes). As a young man Hồ Chí Minh adroitly avoided detection; now one cannot avoid his face. It appears on all denominations of the Vietnamese *đồng*; in public places his portrait appears on the most prominent wall; in folk operas he is the star. He appears on billboards that remind passersby to emulate, to remember, to strive. A bomb crater left by an American B-52? “Uncle Hồ’s fishpond”. An enormous banyan tree in Unification Park? Uncle Hồ planted it... not just generically, but precisely: in 1960. In January. On the eleventh.⁷³

The act of commemorating a key moment from the past is always more than innocent recollection. It is also the occasion to emphasize how a particular moment should be recalled. Through skillful juxtapositions – the hammer and sickle paired with a dove, the hammer and sickle with an enormous yellow flower, the hammer and sickle combined with a lotus – the Party retains a potent symbol of the past but converts it into something more mild.⁷⁴ A stylized image of the lotus bloom has been stenciled along the perimeter wall of the Ministry of Defense – on the street in Hà Nội named for the Nguyễn commander Nguyễn Tri Phương. What is the significance of the Party today? More doves, another

⁶⁶ *60 năm*, 415/169. Multiple propaganda posters are dedicated to the commemorative occasions mentioned here. In each case I have chosen one.

⁶⁷ *60 năm*, 461-2/183.

⁶⁸ *60 năm*, 459/182.

⁶⁹ *60 năm*, 512/198.

⁷⁰ *60 năm*, 513/198.

⁷¹ *60 năm*, 513/198.

⁷² *60 năm*, 514/198.

⁷³ I saw the fish pond in 1987, the banyan tree in 2014.

⁷⁴ For depictions of these compound images – the hammer and sickle and dove, hammer and sickle and flower, hammer and sickle and lotus – see *60 năm*, 424/172, 429/174, 506/196, 508/197. Together the hammer and sickle and lotus also form the logo of Dân vận, the site dedicated to propaganda, <http://www.danvan.vn>, last accessed 2 May 2019.

hammer and sickle: It means peace, prosperity, and happiness.⁷⁵ The Party safeguards great artifacts from prehistory, such as the Đông Sơn bronze drum.⁷⁶ It is also the arbiter of culture: in the family, the village, the ward.⁷⁷ If the revolution – meaning here the fifty-year period extending from the 1930s to the 1980s – was modern, destabilising, and divisive, its consolidation is stabilising and unifying. In contemporary depictions, the revolution restored political sovereignty to the people. Meanwhile, the global Vietnamese diaspora reminds us that, in 1954 and again in 1975, more than a million people opted for the trauma of exile rather than remain in the DRV or the SRV.

⁷⁵ *60 năm*, 507/196.

⁷⁶ The home pages of various ministries incorporate images of the Đông Sơn bronze drum: Culture, Sports, and Tourism (<http://bvhttdl.gov.vn>); Public Security (<http://bocongan.gov.vn>); Science and Technology (<https://www.most.gov.vn/vn/Pages/Trangchu.aspx>); and Transportation (<http://mt.gov.vn/vn/Pages/Trangchu.aspx>), last accessed 2 May 2019.

⁷⁷ *60 năm*, 529/205.