ABSTRACT

The dissertation examines Vietnamese literary representations of what is known in the West as the Vietnam War. Analysis of prewar literature (1858-1945) shows that the early resistance literature, kindled by the French conquest in the late nineteenth century, reaffirmed the lý (broadly speaking, logic) of nationalism, while the changes of the 1925-1945 period highlighted the significance of tinh (emotions of the heart) among members of the Việt Minh, the revolutionary organization which successfully staged the national uprising in 1945 and later defeated the French at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954. On the Vietnam War, the dissertation first looks at non-fiction. Memoirs by National Liberation Front (NLF) leaders Nguyễn Thị Định and Trương Như Tăng are compared and contrasted with those by Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Trần Văn Đơn, leaders of the opposing Republic of [South] Vietnam (RVN), for their positions and reflections on the contested concepts of nationalism, communism, freedom, and democracy, which define the cause and form of the war. For fiction, the study summarizes the literary trends and philosophies that governed the different strands of Vietnamese literature during 1954-1975. Subsequently, representative fictional works by RVN and NLF writers are analyzed to explore the various stances and levels of commitment supporters of the opposing factions demonstrate toward their respective “imagined communities.” It is found that differing images of the Vietnamese woman accurately reflect the different natures of the warring factions. The RVN woman is represented in the fiction of RVN writers (e.g. Võ Phién, Nhã Ca, Mai Thảo, Nguyễn Thị Thụy Vũ and Nguyễn Đình Toàn) as a passive victim of circumstances outside her control and understanding. By contrast, the NLF woman is described by NLF writers (particularly by Anh Đức in Hòn Đáy and Phan Tú in Mään and I) as embodying both lý and tinh, the combination of which underlies the nationalists’ strength and commitment to their cause of national independence and prosperity. The study concludes with a brief look at Vietnamese postwar fiction in the context of the postwar complexities, and suggests directions for future research on Vietnamese literature and the Vietnam War.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................. ii

Table of contents ....................................................... iii

Acknowledgements ...................................................... iv

CHAPTER I: So That the Lesson Learned Will Not Be Unlearned ........ 1

CHAPTER II: Hearts and Minds ....................................... 26

CHAPTER III: The Just Cause—The Hearts and Minds of Leaders...... 86

CHAPTER IV: People’s War and People’s Will in Literature ............ 159

CHAPTER V: The Aftermath ........................................... 286

Notes ................................................................. 317

Works Cited ........................................................... 343
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I was born in the midst of escalating war in Vietnam and spent my teenage years in the difficult postwar period, when food was scarce and beliefs shaken. Coming to the University of British Columbia (Canada) in 2001 with plans to expand my knowledge on canonical twentieth-century American writers, I eventually realized that I could make literary contributions to the academic discussion of the Vietnam War in the West, considering my familiarity with Vietnamese literature and my first-hand experience of life during and after the conflict between Vietnamese and Americans. Hence this dissertation on twentieth-century Vietnamese war literature, which I hope will illuminate not only certain wartime concerns, but also lingering issues regarding the Vietnam War that are still being debated in Vietnam and in the West.

My research has greatly benefited from the advice and supervision of Dr. Michael Zeitlin, Dr. Sandra Tome, and Prof. Alexander Woodside, who have worked tirelessly to add insight to this dissertation, and to whom I owe my deepest gratitude. I would also like to thank my family and those dear friends whose encouragement and faith in my work have sustained me all these years. Lastly, this work would not have been possible if not for the countless heroes and heroines of Vietnam, whose amazing sacrifices and selfless dedication to their country have inspired the literature examined in this dissertation, and whose memories I hope my study will help keep alive.
INTRODUCTION: *SO THAT THE LESSONS LEARNED SHALL NOT BE UNLEARNED*

This dissertation examines the Vietnamese literature which concerns Vietnam's reactions to French and American presence and intervention in the twentieth century, and which arguably illustrates the Vietnamese viewpoints on the wars that ensued. Almost ironically, however, I feel that a great way to introduce my study is to look at the representation of the character Phượng in *The Quiet American*, Graham Greene's classic novel about the Vietnam War written in the early 1950s. My goal being to provide an intimation of the complexity and irony of what later turned into a thirty-year-long war for the Vietnamese, I shall not attempt a comprehensive discussion of all of the novel's multi-layered subtleties, or engage the existing substantial criticism on this over-analyzed text, but merely review the dilemmas confronting Phượng and her country that will be relevant to my later analysis of twentieth-century Vietnamese war literature.

*The Quiet American* and *Vietnam in the Eyes of the West*

For many readers, *The Quiet American* is a political allegory of Vietnam’s fate at the end of French colonial rule. In this allegory, the two main characters and Phượng form a triangle in the political arena of Vietnam when France was being driven out and America was about to step in to replace it.

The novel is told from the point of view of the I-narrator, Fowler, an experienced British journalist working in Vietnam. Fowler’s foil is Pyle, the quiet American of the title, who is portrayed as exuberantly eager in his crusade to export American-style democracy to Vietnam and the rest of the world. Absorbed “in the dilemmas of Democracy and the responsibilities of the West” and “determined [. . .] to do good, not to
any individual person but to a country, a continent, a world” (10), Pyle opts for direct intervention in Vietnamese political affairs, and tries to whip up a “Third Force” out of General Thé, a Cao Đài bandit. Intent on changing the world to fit his idea of what it should be, and not overly scrupulous about the means to get his ends, Pyle engages in political intrigues that eventually lead to the death of at least fifty innocent civilians by the time of his own death. In Fowler’s eyes, and arguably in Greene’s as well, Pyle is a satire of the American national character and of its questionable idealism in the 1950s.

Although he repeatedly positions and critiques Pyle as a man of ironies (but without ambiguity), Fowler himself is not above contradictions. Maintaining that he is just a reporter and does not “take sides” (102), Fowler nevertheless belongs, together with the French, in the club of “old colonial peoples” (175). He enjoys a tacit comradeship with Captain Trouin and Vigot of the Sureté in Saigon, and admits his sympathy toward old-style imperialism: “I’d rather be an exploiter who fights for what he exploits, and dies with it” (101). The non-involved standpoint adopted by Fowler and his nation, as Trouin is quick to point out, is but self-denial and hypocrisy: “We are fighting all of your wars, but you leave us the guilt” (169). Moreover, Fowler realizes that, as a British citizen, he is positioned to be “an eternal brother” (27) to the Americans in their common imperial status in Southeast Asia. For all his persistent effort to establish difference between himself and Pyle, Fowler is nonetheless aware of the similarity in their colonial empowerment. He tells Pyle point-blank that the Vietnamese “don’t want our white skins around telling them what they want, [. . .] they don’t like our smell, the smell of Europeans. And remember—from [their] point of view you are European too” (100). The crux of the story exposes Fowler’s biggest contradiction yet. While publicly
and privately denying involvement in any form, Fowler believes that Pyle’s naïve and
unscrupulous earnestness will only bring harm and destruction to Vietnam, and therefore
persuades himself to connive in Pyle’s death. The apparent reason Fowler gives for his
involvement is that Pyle’s endorsement of terrorist activities endangers the civilian
population, although readers might wonder if Fowler’s decision is not at all swayed by a
selfish desire to conveniently eliminate his love rival in the process.

Given Fowler’s many contradictions, his relationship with Phượng, the
Vietnamese woman Pyle is also interested in, is anything but simple. To many readers,
Phượng is a symbol of Vietnam (one of the directors of the 2002 movie remake of the
novel, for example, explained at length their search for a Vietnamese actress for the role
of Phượng, stressing that she had to fit the image of her country). In the novel, we are
told early on that she is “[le] pays qui te ressemble” (5). What kind of symbol she is
supposed to present is of relevance at this point. Compared to the complex characters of
Fowler and Pyle, Greene’s characterization of Phượng is curiously underdeveloped.
Fowler may be aware of the Vietnamese effort to gain national autonomy, an effort he
eventually assists. But the woman that Fowler projects his desire onto, the dubious
personification of the Vietnamese nation, is described as a typically exotic Oriental
woman: childlike, passive, dependent, and literally unable to speak for herself.

To Fowler, a non-believer in “mental concepts” (98) who insists on construing his
environment in material terms, Phượng is alternately a habit or an exotic addiction. She is
“the hiss of steam, the clink of a cup, [. . .] a certain hour of the night and the promise of
rest” (2). She is linked with opium: “I thought that if I smelt her skin it would have the
faintest fragrance of opium, and her colour was that of the small flame” (5). She is
described as “a bird” (3), or “a dog on a crusader’s tomb” (131) lying at his feet. But Fowler’s most characteristic thought of her is that of “the soft hairless skin” (15) between her legs where he puts his hand every night. As Zakia Pathak, Saswati Senupta, and Sharmila Purkayastha duly note, Phương is “without a history; there is a noticeable absence of cultural markers of class, religion, education, which suggests that these are invisible for Fowler” (205).

In the novel, Phương speaks no English, and her French is not good enough to appreciate linguistic subtleties. Conversely, the fact that Fowler, the narrator, speaks no Vietnamese, and therefore cannot relate or even make out what Phương says or thinks in her native language, turns her into a mentally superficial woman who hardly has anything to say, except in inconsequential bits. Early in his relationship with her, Fowler tries to fathom her mind, and fails: “I remembered that first tormenting year when I had tried so passionately to understand her, when I had begged her to tell me what she thought and had scared her with my unreasoning anger at her silences” (149). In the end, he gives up, concluding that “one never knows another human being; for all I could tell, she was as scared as the rest of us: she didn’t have the gift of expression, that was all” (149)—meaning, in actual fact, that she does not express her feeling and thought in a language he understands. Fowler’s inability to get past Phương’s surface due to language and cultural barriers renders her inscrutable in his eyes, though he seems to eventually credit this incomprehension to her psychological superficiality rather than to inadequacy on his part.

Because “[he] wanted to read her thoughts, but they were hidden away in a language [he] couldn’t speak” (155), and yet he must find a way to classify her somehow, Fowler insists on “inventing a character” (149) for Phương. Ironically, while trying to
shatter what he sees as Pyle’s illusions about Phượng, he resorts to stereotyping her as a fixed form of difference, at once other and entirely knowable (Bhabha 164):

Do you know the kind of polish that doesn’t take scratches? That’s Phuong. She can survive a dozen of us. She’ll get old, that’s all. She’ll suffer from childbirth and hunger and cold and rheumatism, but she’ll never suffer like we do from thoughts, obsessions—she won’t scratch, she’ll only decay. (148-9)

When Pyle chides Fowler: “I don’t think you quite understand Phuong,” Fowler counters, “Are you sure there’s anything much to understand?” (62). Even the desire that is attributed to her—to have stability and security with a husband who can provide for her—must be voiced by either her sister or her two Occidental suitors. “One always spoke of her [ . . . ] in the third person as though she were not there. Sometimes she seemed invisible like peace” (42).

Phượng’s invisibility is manifest not only in her dependence on her Occidental suitors, but also in her incapacity to form any worthy judgement about the world around her. While the political upheavals of the 1950s were affecting the fate of every citizen in the country, Phượng seems to be blissfully unaware of, and uninterested in, the national turmoil. She prefers instead to browse through Paris Match, looking at photographs of the British royal family. At one point, Fowler marvels what his American rival and ex-lover talk about between themselves. For, while Pyle is “very earnest” about American-style “Democracy,” Phượng was wonderfully ignorant; if Hitler had come into the conversation she would have interrupted to ask who he was. The explanation would be all the more difficult because she had never met a German or a Pole and had only the vaguest
knowledge of European geography, though about Princess Margaret of course she knew more than I. (3)

Throughout the novel, Phương does nothing except the most mundane of everyday tasks. She does not act; she simply is.

Her passivity, her lack of imagination and philosophical ideas, and her ignorance of the world at large and of one’s place in it, together with a simple-minded focus on the practical concerns of everyday life, are at times extrapolated to all Vietnamese people, despite the book’s allusions to an underground resistance movement. Holed up in an outpost with two Vietnamese guards, Fowler and Pyle debate about what the West should do with Vietnam. Fowler’s opinion is that “mental concepts” like Democracy are simply not in the people’s regimen:

They want enough rice[. . .]. They don’t want to be shot at. They want one day to be much the same as another. [. . .] In five hundred years there may be no New York or London, but they’ll be growing paddy in these fields, they’ll be carrying their produce to market on long poles wearing their pointed hats. The small boys will be sitting on the buffaloes. (99-100)

Vietnamese people, as poor “peasants,” are not capable of thinking the way Westerners are: “Thought’s a luxury. Do you think the peasant sits and thinks of God and Democracy when he gets inside his mud hut at night?” (100)

This “underdeveloped” state of the Vietnamese makes it seem logical, even natural, that the “superior” West should assume the task of managing their lives for them. And this is precisely what Fowler and Pyle vie to do to Phương, the female embodiment of Vietnam. However, the bitter competition as to who can provide Phương with a better
life materialistically (without even once consulting her as to what she wants) is in fact not really about Phượng herself. Rather, it testifies to Said's assertion that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (20). Where there is more than one Western power involved, as in the case of both The Quiet American and Vietnam in the 1950s, it may turn into a contest in which Western forces flex their muscles to show who is better endowed—and "the best man wins" (81). The belief that Phượng simply wants to be associated with whoever shows the most strength and power explains the workings of Fowler's mind when he puts together the "favourable exchange rate" (61) and "infinite riches" (59) of America that Pyle epitomizes, and Phượng's realism "not to minimise the importance of money and not to make any great and binding declarations of love" (132).

Thus, Greene's characterization of Phượng mirrors and satirizes the contemporary Western view of Vietnam and the Vietnamese. Her image as an Oriental woman with inferior capacities (mental and otherwise) makes her completely alien, and at the same time, seemingly conquerable to the Western man. Bhabha theorizes that

the construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse demand an articulation of forms of difference—racial and sexual. Such an articulation becomes crucial if it is held that the body is always simultaneously inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination and power. (150)

In The Quiet American, Fowler, a representative of Western imperialism, literally wields his phallus—the symbol of Western superiority—in an attempt to subjugate his Vietnamese mistress: "Even my desire had been a weapon, as though when one plunged
one’s sword towards the victim’s womb, she would lose control and speak” (149). And throughout the tale, the metaphorical incarnation of Vietnam appears as a simple-minded, helpless mistress, not much more than “a comfortable lay” (148) bandied about between two Western powers despite their professed sympathy and infatuation.

This preliminary discussion of Greene’s subtle and complex novel, however cursory, highlights a topic of vital relevance to my current study of Vietnamese literature: the importance of finding the voice of Phượng and her country if we are to look past our own misconceptions, especially as we define and view those subsumed under the category of the “other.” In The Quiet American, both Pyle, whose understanding of Vietnam comes from the books he reads at Harvard, and Fowler, who prides himself on an intimate, hands-on knowledge of the country, are precluded by their Western perspectives from truly understanding Vietnamese wishes and expressions. In real life, misconceptions of both their goals and their foes led American politicians to intervention in Vietnamese affairs. The war that occurred as a result was to devastate the country and grievously upset the lives of generations of Vietnamese for years to come.

The War—Effects and Lessons

Often talked about as the longest war in American history, the Vietnam War also concluded the longest armed resistance against foreign powers in Vietnam’s history. Even though the fighting is often officially dated back to 1945, Vietnamese revolutionaries had been at war ever since French naval forces fired on and eventually seized the port of Đà Nẵng in 1858, starting almost a century of French colonial occupation of Vietnam.
The impact of the Vietnam War on the United States is evident to all Americans revisiting the period between 1954 and 1975. The war drove two American presidents out of office, destroyed U.S. foreign policy consensus, and shattered a generation’s perspective on America’s role in the world and the public’s earlier innocent faith in their government. Furthermore, it caused an economic depression and a rift in the population between those who supported the war and those who did not. The war cost the United States an estimated $150 billion dollars in direct expenses, with indirect expenses probably totalling at least that, while still other costs—such as payments to veterans, or interest on debt incurred—have made it even harder to put a final number on the loss.²

The damage to Vietnam and the Vietnamese has been, by all accounts, far more staggering than it was to the United States. Yet it was, and still is, much less known to the majority of Americans. The country was devastated by thirty years of full-blown, continuous war, following a century of French colonial exploitation. The war left horrendous consequences, both short-term and long-term, for generations of Vietnamese, from those who experienced firsthand the fierce fighting and bombings to those who grew up in destitution during the postwar economic embargo imposed on Vietnam by the United States. Ironically, not even the Vietnamese themselves understand fully the extent of the damage the war wrought on their country. Those who are trying to rebuild the country have had their work cut out for them. Those who, for different reasons, oppose the winner of the war and the present government of Vietnam generally have no reasons to look past the real and perceived foibles of the united Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). Many have been simply too tired to even contemplate the damage to their own lives and properties.
The war pitted the U.S. expeditionary forces and its Republic of Vietnam (RVN) ally against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the North, and the elusive, tenacious National Liberation Front (NLF) in the South, whose members operated from bases deep in the jungles and among the general population of South Vietnam, especially among the peasantry in the countryside. In order to deprive the guerrillas of their base, U.S. commanders were committed to removing the peasantry from the countryside and destroying the jungles. A variety of strategies were employed by the U.S., including shelling and bombing, and deforestation by Agent Orange, napalm, and the Rome plows.

During the war, the United States dropped more than 15 million tons of explosives on Vietnam, almost three times the amount dropped in all theaters of World War II by all sides, or the equivalent of the power of 400 Hiroshima-sized atomic bombs, over a country about the size of New Mexico. It is estimated that 100,000 hectares of Vietnam's forest lands were completely obliterated, and a further 5 million hectares, or 40% of the total forest area, were damaged. The 30 million craters these explosives created throughout the country rendered large areas of land infertile due to the lack of topsoil and to disease-bearing organisms the water carried. In addition, chemicals (such as Agent Orange) used extensively in South Vietnam to exfoliate jungles are known to have caused cancer and mental disorders in infected people, as well as birth defects in their offspring. About 72 million litres of herbicides were sprayed on South Vietnam, affecting 43% of the cultivated area, and 44% of the total area. Seventy percent of the south’s coconut groves and 60% of its rubber plantations were destroyed, together with enough crops to feed 2 million people.
The destruction to the environment and disruptions in human labor caused by the war turned South Vietnam from an exporter of rice in the 1930s into an importer by 1970. The billions of dollars injected into the South Vietnamese economy during the American presence ironically left it exceedingly artificial, vulnerable and unable to stand on its own. Furthermore, the war deprived Vietnam, including the South, of the chance and resources to industrialize the way other Southeast Asian countries like Taiwan or South Korea did, making way for longer term devastation. Economic problems were further exacerbated by the RVN’s many disastrous economic policies. After the war, the economy of North Vietnam, damaged by bombing and exhausted by wartime consumption, could barely carry on with the South Vietnamese burdens added while aid dried up. To make matters worse, the U.S.-led economic embargo that lasted until 1994 was meant to see to it that Vietnam would struggle for decades economically.

As catastrophic as the damage to the environment and the economy was, the human consequences of the war were even more grievous, if not readily or fully apparent to observers. Naturally, the massive use of explosives in a war of attrition depleted not only the resisting guerrillas, America’s enemy, but also the general population of Vietnamese no matter what political leaning they might have entertained. The war caused an exodus of refugees from areas of heavy fighting and bombing to the relatively safer cities, uprooting 50% of the population in South Vietnam, and 30% in North Vietnam, disrupting the labor essential in an overwhelmingly agricultural economy. The unplanned and uncontrollable expansion of the cities in the South generated problems typical of burgeoning urbanization for the RVN during the war, and continued to be a major social and economic predicament for Vietnam long after unification. A decade of
Americanization of the country left a challenging legacy of prostitution, drug abuse, and homelessness. Many of the best and brightest of Vietnamese, who could have helped Vietnam become “ten times more beautiful” according to Hồ Chí Minh’s wish, instead numbered among the millions dead. The hundreds of thousands of maimed civilians and veterans have continued to be taxing on Vietnamese society physically, economically, and psychologically.

But perhaps the most severe consequence of all is the divisiveness among the Vietnamese population that bred deep suspicions and bitter hostilities among those who, either by choice or necessity, fought on opposite sides of the conflict. This lack of trust among the Vietnamese people living both inside and outside of the country, which has been discussed in part by Lê Lý Hayslip and Trương Như Tăng, posed the biggest hurdle for reconstruction and contributed to some detrimental, arguably unavoidable, measures the unified Vietnamese government adopted in the postwar chaos. Add to that the problems of post-traumatic stress disorder, postwar exhaustion and disorientation, and the depletion of generations of men, leaving women without potential partners, and the long list of human consequences the war brought on the Vietnamese people continues on. Difficult as it has been to rebuild the country from the ashes of war, these long-term psychological effects have left open wounds among the Vietnamese as a people ever since the Geneva Convention partitioned the country into North and South in 1954.

It was not clear to the majority of Americans at the time how and why the United States became entangled in Vietnam; in fact, not everyone is fully aware of the cause and nature of the Vietnam War even today. Some of the interrelated factors that propelled the United States into war in Vietnam were induced by the American sense of self in the
1950s: the residual frontier spirit that fathered America as a nation, arrogance in its achievements, a desire to showcase its power in the world political arena, and a Cold War mentality. These factors were, moreover, accompanied by an insensitivity to and ignorance of Vietnamese history, culture, and people, which Graham Greene so deftly reflects in *The Quiet American*. Twenty years after the Vietnam war ended, Robert McNamara, U.S. Secretary of Defense under American presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson (1961-1968), revealed a belated sense of guilt and regret in his 1995 memoir *In Retrospect: the Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, in which he admitted: “Our misjudgement of friends and foes alike reflected our profound ignorance of the history, culture and politics of the people in the area” (322). This ignorance, among other reasons, caused the United States to support an unpopular regime in South Vietnam, creating a conflict that cost 59,000 American and more than 2 million Vietnamese lives and inflicted heavy wounds on both peoples.

The understanding of America’s old enemy that McNamara again stresses as important in the 2004 Oscar-winning documentary *The Fog of War* should, in my opinion, benefit from a broader look into the twentieth-century Vietnamese war literature than what has been so far accomplished. Vietnam has produced a substantial amount of literary writing about its war experiences. These war experiences and the literature about them have significantly shaped the Vietnamese national identity, philosophy, and way of life. It is imperative that this literature be examined if it is held that understanding of Vietnamese thoughts and perspectives would afford Americans better self-awareness and insight. Conversely, such an examination should further clarify some of the most contentious issues pertaining to the war, which in turn could help Americans avoid
possible repetitions of what is considered one of the greatest tragedies for America in the twentieth century.

The painful conjectures over the life and thoughts of his Vietnamese enemy that obsess Tim O'Brien in "The Man I Killed" require answers. The concern that American scholar and Vietnam veteran Milton Bates voices is also that of many of his compatriots:

If we Americans lost the war because we failed to recognize and adapt to the otherness of the enemy, [...] we are in danger of losing it a second time by losing its lessons, unless we try to see the war as others—particularly the people of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—saw it. (7)

At the same time, American scholars such as George Herring, Jim Neilson, and Susan Jeffords note a recent revisionist trend in American cultural representations and interpretations of the Vietnam War, which has struck some responsive chord in American politics and popular culture from the 1980s onwards. Going one step further, in his book *Warring Fictions: Cultural Politics and the Vietnam War Narrative*, Neilson questions if this conservative rewriting of history is wholly coincidental and might not be responsible for the push among some American politicians for aggression in the current war in Iraq. Whatever the answer, it seems that the study of Vietnamese perspectives on the Vietnam War will retain its importance to Americans as long as the question of how we define and understand, or fail utterly to understand, those we call enemies remains pertinent.

**The Research Project—Theses and Methods**

In the past decade or so, in response to the call on Americans to try to "understand the ‘different wars’ fought by the people of Vietnam" (Bates 7), a small but growing
number of scholars in the West have directed their research to the Vietnamese experience. However, most choose as their subjects of analysis literary works written either prior to 1945 or post 1980—that is, excluding wartime works altogether. In addition, most of the critical reviews deal with, at best, a handful of texts by one or two authors. To illustrate the currently narrow scope of the study of Vietnamese literature in the West, as far as I know, the number of critical studies conducted to date on twentieth-century Vietnamese literature is limited to two books (Renny Christopher’s *The Vietnam War/The American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives*, and Neil Jamieson’s *Understanding Vietnam*) and eleven short articles by William Searle, Charles Horner, Peter Zinoman, Huệ Tâm Hồ Tài, Greg Lockhart, Dana Sachs, David Hunt, and Wayne Karlin. Among the articles, four are appended as introductions (Zinoman’s “Vũ Trọng Phụng’s *Dumb Luck* and the Nature of Vietnamese Modernism,” Lockhart’s “First-Person Narratives from the 1930s,” Hunt’s on Lê Lựu, and Karlin’s on Lê Minh Khuê), and one as afterword (Karlin’s “On Nguyễn Khai”) to the small number of translations of Vietnamese literature published in the West so far. Of all the works produced by Vietnamese writers of fiction during the Vietnam War, with the exception of some wartime RVN poetry included in Jamieson’s *Understanding Vietnam*, only two Vietnamese short stories written during the war—RVN writer Nhã Ca’s “A Story for Lovers” and DRV writer Lê Minh Khuê’s “The Distant Stars”—are briefly discussed in three literary reviews (Searle’s “Women, Vietnamese, Other: The Depiction of Women in Vietnamese Short Fiction,” Sachs’ “Small Tragedies and Distant Stars: Le Minh Khue’s Language of Lost Ideals,” and Karlin’s introduction to Lê Minh Khuê’s collection of short stories, *The Stars, the Earth, the River*).
As Jamieson’s *Understanding Vietnam* is the only study so far that presents a number of Vietnamese literary texts written during the Vietnam War, and as I will engage this study in Chapter Three, a summary of the book is appropriate at this point. The book is a cultural study of the Vietnam War illustrated through Vietnamese literature. Its principal argument rests on the cultural framework of *yin* and *yang*, with the two elements working together in an action-reaction pattern. Jamieson believes that this *yin-yang* system governs Vietnamese values and institutions, and that its balance is crucial to the governing of the country. Vietnamese culture and government, Jamieson proposes, were *yang* in nature at the time of the French conquest. The rise of romanticism as a modernist literary school in Vietnam between 1932 and 1939 is regarded as signalling the emergence of *yin*, which challenged the predominantly *yang* tradition. The decline of romanticism in the late 1930s, according to Jamieson, gave rise to the “new *yang* of the resistance” against French colonialism led by the Việt Minh under Hồ Chí Minh. Between 1955 and 1975, North Vietnam and South Vietnam societies became “inverted images” of, respectively, *yang* (in other words, totalitarianism) and *yin* tendencies. Jamieson concludes that the RVN in South Vietnam was in the end defeated by its own *yin* forces, manifested as the literature of protest and antiwar sentiments on the one hand, and the family-centric, often materialistic demands South Vietnamese women presented as wives, mothers, mistresses, daughters, and sisters to administrators and soldiers of the RVN on the other.

There are serious flaws in Jamieson’s argument, all of them the result of his subscription to the communist versus anti-communist mindset, and the underlying assumption that the anti-communist stance made the RVN’s a just cause to the South
Vietnamese people. Firstly, Jamieson is unable to explain what caused the rise of yin in the South and not in the North, especially considering his description of both governments as similarly aggressive, dictatorial and oppressive, and hence, yang in nature. Secondly, Jamieson’s view of the Vietnam War as a conflict between “competing models” of local forces divided into North and South fails utterly to account for the fact that the so-called Việt Cộng, whose members came primarily from the South Vietnamese population, and many of whom lived under the same RVN administration that non-Việt Cộng members of the RVN did, were not affected by the supposedly disastrous influence of the yin element. Thirdly, to say, as Jamieson does, that the failures and final collapse of the U.S.-backed RVN were attributable to the selfish (as opposed to patriotic) motives and demands among South Vietnamese women is in fact, according to his yin-yang paradigm, to blame the defeat of the masculine, rational logic of the U.S. model on the corrupting influence of the manipulative female Oriental. As Susan Jeffords argues in *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, this line of thought (albeit with American women as the culprits) is not only common among American revisionists of the Vietnam War since the 1980s, but self-delusional and dangerous. I will return to Jamieson’s flawed argument in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

Twentieth-century Vietnamese war literature has thus hardly been explored, as we can deduct from the scant number and limited scope of the existing studies. In addition, the narrow circle of Vietnamese authors American scholars examine does not represent the rich treasures of Vietnamese literature before, during, or after the war. Even the most extensive of the studies, Jamieson’s *Understanding Vietnam*, contains only a small
number of RVN wartime productions of literary fiction, all of which, except one, are songs or poems.

This dissertation will offer a selection of, in my judgement, some of the most influential works of Vietnamese literature produced during what Vietnamese refer to as the French-American war. At the same time, my analysis of the Vietnamese literary representations of the war shall be situated in the socio-political context of a conflict that spanned three-quarters of the twentieth century for the Vietnamese people. As we will see, issues of colonialism/imperialism occupied Vietnamese thought for most of the twentieth century, and in various degrees affected the lives of most Vietnamese. It is, moreover, impossible to confine to specific dates the Vietnamese resistance against French and American domination, for this resistance had in fact been brewing long before the war officially started in 1945. For these reasons, I am including some prewar and postwar literature in this study, even though this literature was not penned during the “official” war period (1945-1975), nor does all of it deal directly with war. This study will also respond to the call from supporters of the now-defunct RVN, such as Văn Nguyễn Marshall’s, for a presentation of the RVN viewpoints in the debate. The project will therefore bring together texts produced by the warring sides from both the North and the South, and both inside and outside of Vietnam.

My analysis of Vietnamese twentieth-century literature is realized in five chapters.

The current chapter, “So That the Lessons Learned Shall Not Be Unlearned,” establishes the need for better understanding of the Vietnamese perspectives in a war that has been written and re-written by Americans/Westerners for Euro-American audiences.
Chapter Two, “Hearts and Minds,” examines twentieth-century Vietnamese literature prior to 1945. This body of Vietnamese literature, often referred to as tiên chiến (prewar) literature, elucidates the workings of the Vietnamese collective mind and the convergence of historical and cultural aspects which lend substance to the cause of independence and sovereignty led by the Việt Minh, and which, in my opinion, ultimately account for the success and failures of the political factions involved in the war. Specifically, the chapter will show that Vietnam’s long tradition of resistance to foreign domination had, by the time of the French conquest, been indelibly established as lý (roughly speaking, universal rules of logic) in the Vietnamese mind. On the other hand, the literature examined reveals that colonialism and modernism had, by 1940, left a yearning for tinh (emotion or affection, which extends to all social relationships), which the Việt Minh and its successor the NLF would attempt to fulfil by characterizing their organizations in a familial manner.

Chapter Three, “The Just Cause: the Hearts and Minds of Political Leaders,” looks at memoirs by leaders of the two warring factions in South Vietnam: the RVN and the NLF. The chapter examines the leaders’ arguments on the basis of four often-used, but also much contested terms in relation to the Vietnam War: nationalism, communism, freedom and democracy. It is believed that analysis of the leaders’ own accounts of their concerns and positions regarding the above four topics will illuminate the nature of the leadership of competing Vietnamese forces in the French and American wars. Alternatively, the chapter also considers how satisfactorily the leaders address the lý and tinh dimensions which Chapter Two has concluded to be not only deep-rooted, but compelling among the (South) Vietnamese. It is argued that, in this battle for the hearts
and minds of the people, the leaders' success or failure in addressing these popular thoughts and sentiments would effect the participation and zeal, or lack thereof, of their respective supporters, and ultimately, the prevalence of their respective causes.

Chapter Four, "People's War and People Will in Literature," follows the previous chapter to examine available Vietnamese fiction by supporters of the RVN and NLF. The start of the chapter briefly summarizes the trends and philosophies eminent in what had become by 1959 three sources of Vietnamese literature—from the DRV, RVN, and NLF. The chapter next analyzes representative fictional works by RVN and NLF writers to determine the extent to which supporters of the two warring factions identified with and believed in their respective causes. Arguing that the essence of the respective regimes transpires most clearly and accurately in the literary representation of their traditionally weakest member—the Vietnamese woman, the chapter illustrates through textual analysis that RVN women are portrayed as passive, helpless victims of forces outside of their control, similar to what their political leaders inadvertently reveal themselves to be in their memoirs. In contrast, NLF texts extol the revolutionary woman as embodying both lý and tinh in the nationalist cause. Moreover, analysis of two major NLF novels—Hòn Đất by Anh Đức and Mến and I by Phan Tú—shows the advance of revolutionary women from primarily feminine, though active and heroic, supporters of the revolution to feministic, active agents of their own fate as well as leaders of the revolutionary cause to determine the destiny of their nation.

Finally, Chapter Five, "The Aftermath," wraps up the dissertation with a discussion of some postwar Vietnamese literature and its relevance to the understanding of Vietnamese current thoughts and values. In particular, the chapter will put into
perspective the "literature of protest," (so called because of its tone of disillusionment or dissent) which has been over-represented in the West. The conclusion will also suggest directions for further research in the study of Vietnamese literature about the war that impacted so deeply the course of history for both Vietnam and the United States.

The project will make use of Vietnamese texts available in English in the West, whether published in English in the original, or translated from Vietnamese. I will also attempt to introduce canonical writings which have boasted large audiences and which are believed to have left an enduring influence on the Vietnamese reading public during the war, but which the politics of translation and publication in the West have excluded from Western attention.

**Literature, History, and Politics—Genres and Interpretation**

The inclusion of both fiction and non-fiction in the present study, which, moreover, has to do with Vietnamese politico-history, demands acknowledgement at the outset of questions concerning the problematics of representation and interpretation among different literary genres. On the other hand, the relevance of literature to the study of history and politics will also need to be addressed.

The relationship among history, politics and literature has always been somewhat controversial in the West. First off, there have been arguments against the interweaving of politics into works of imaginative art, as it is believed that political agendas usually come at the sacrifice of aesthetic quality. Moreover, politically engaged literature has often been discounted on the basis of a supposed conflict of interest. An assumption quite popular among Western critics is that art has the power to unify people, and that literature
is “disinterested,” while, in contrast, politics is partisan and divisive. Thus, political bias and propaganda may have been the grounds on which literature produced by DRV and NLF nationalists on the Vietnam War has been consistently overlooked in the West, at least until recently. Such views of the relationship between literature and politics should prove to be counter-productive in examining the literature of Vietnam, where, as Chapter Two will show, literature was traditionally produced by scholars who were at the same time performing their duties as administrators of the country. Furthermore, it would be not only unwise, but impossible to hedge out political concerns in the study of twentieth-century Vietnamese war literature. The popular resistance against foreign domination consumed Vietnamese life and thought for most of the twentieth century to such an extent that any socially conscious writing produced in Vietnam during that time must be political to some degree. If literature were looked at only as an aesthetic concern, much of this only viable body of literature in wartime Vietnam would be unduly excluded.

A second, related question is how useful, then, are imaginative modes of art to the understanding of political issues. On this question, Catherine Zuckert argues that novels restore the human focus abstracted away by political and social theorists: “The concrete or particular form of characterization in the novel makes it an especially apt means of critically examining political and other generalizations about the way people do and should live” (688). Lee Sigelman goes further to contend that fiction is not simply a mirror which “reflects—in a one-to-one correspondence” history and politics, but a prism which “transforms whatever passes through it into something new and different” (155). He maintains that
The most fundamental influences on the way we live are often so deeply embedded in our collective and individual consciousness that they pass wholly unobserved. By portraying imagined alternatives in which some of these influences are inoperative, writers of fiction perform invaluable mind experiments [. . .] that open up whole new ways of thinking about various aspects of human existence. (157)

At the same time, Joel Kassiola contends that literature is "the enhancement of our understanding of human values—in particular, political values—through its ability to provide 'virtual experience' in a vivid manner" (53). Maureen Whitebrook sums up the debate by stating that "art deals not (just) with facts, but with our sense of fact. Imaginative expressions of the political do not substitute for the 'facts' of social science or 'real' politics, but extend the understanding possible from facts," thus allowing for the fullest representation of "reality" by way of a "different kind of evidence and [. . .] offering a different, fuller, realism" (5).

A further note should be made about the inclusion in my present research of both fiction (prose and poetry) and non-fiction (memoirs). My argument for this inclusion is that these two categories are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually supportive. As George Egerton points out, (political) memoir is in fact a "polygenre"—an amalgam of political, historical, autobiographical, and literary elements. Discussing the interpenetration of autobiography and history in modern Indonesia, Susan Rodgers also maintains that "telling a life unavoidably [. . .] involves telling history in terms of passages through ages of time and transitions between levels of consciousness and social awareness," and that both historical memory and personal memory are "animated by
certain closely related key scenarios and social images.” She goes on to conclude that “art animates the telling of history at both the public and personal levels in unusually thoroughgoing ways” (3). Similarly, Whitebrook’s assertion that fiction is a mode of apprehension, of “facts fitted into a larger vision of the human condition,” may very well apply to non-fictional genres such as memoir and autobiography. Moreover, while some autobiographers’ conceptions of truth invite comparisons to fiction, as Stephen Ambrose suggests Nixon’s memoir to do, memoirs can also be appraised under the categories of poetics and fiction as “metaphors of self and novels of self-exploration” (Egerton 347). Finally, insofar as both forms “enable us to gain an understanding of issues, problems, and points of view as they matter to the other,” so that we may then come to “understand the motives and behavior of others as they understand them” (Egerton 5, italics in the original), the decision to embrace both categories in a study like this proves to be of unquestionable validity indeed.

Lastly, in the case of the Vietnam War, fiction and non-fiction appear to intersect on several levels and in very interesting and complex ways. The Vietnam War with its delusions and deceptions invoked serious doubt and self-doubt in those who experienced it first-hand, resulting in a peculiar blurring of fact and fiction. A well-known example of this inseparability of fact and fiction in the American Vietnam War literature is Michael Herr’s Dispatches. Composed of intensely individual and artful recollections of a journalist who has “been there,” the work is often treated as a novel for its strange, mosaic admixture of military moves and 1960s pop culture, with all the accompanying absurdity. In Peter McInerney’s words, it is “the finest example of facts about the American experience in Vietnam rendered into fiction” (190). On the other hand,
veterans of the war such as Wayne Karlin, Tim O’Brien, Bảo Ninh, Lê Minh Khuê and several others have produced fiction distinguished by a strong fusion of both autobiographical and imaginative elements.

One of the Vietnamese discussed in this project, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, prime minister, then vice president of the former RVN, recently returned to Vietnam for the first time after the 1975 collapse of his government. His pleas for reconciliation are, I believe, long overdue. But true reconciliation is only possible when there is acceptance of certain aspects of the war, and when both sides are committed to making Vietnam a better place. It is my hope that examination of the literature about the war from the Vietnamese perspectives will help facilitate this understanding for both Vietnamese and Americans.
CHAPTER 2: HEARTS AND MINDS

The Vietnam War was not a conventional war with clear military fronts and targets. When Americans argued that the People’s Army of [North] Vietnam (PAVN) and the People’s Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF—the military arm of the NLF) had never won a decisive battle against American forces during the ten years of U.S. direct combat in the country, Vietnamese military leader and strategist General Võ Nguyên Giáp answered, “That may be so. But it is also irrelevant.” Giáp’s reply shows that Vietnamese revolutionaries had understood what the American administration and military command were but dimly aware of throughout the length of the war, that failure and success were not measurable by the area of territories occupied, battles won, or even the number of enemy soldiers killed and captured. Instead, victories depended on a much more intangible criterion: the ability to capture the “hearts and minds” of the general population, both inside and outside of Vietnam.

To understand where the Vietnamese “hearts and minds” rested, let us return to the socio-political context at the beginning of the thirty-year long war. A close look at the literature from the onset of colonialism to the official outbreak of the resistance war against the French (1862-1945) shows a gradual evolution toward what was to become by 1945 the twin desire for national independence and a new organized community. In the twentieth-century revolution to resist both foreign domination and the breakdown of Vietnamese society, national sovereignty was to represent lý (broadly speaking, “the mind”), while the emotional bond and security of a mutually supportive and caring community was to underwrite tinh (broadly speaking, “the heart”) for supporters of the Vietnamese Revolution as a whole.
Ly and tinh are classical Confucian concepts deeply rooted in the Vietnamese consciousness. Given their importance to the understanding of the success or failure of the political factions involved in the war and of the literature penned by supporters of those factions, these concepts merit a careful explanation at this stage.

Both lý and tinh have multiple meanings, for which there are no exact equivalents in English. Essentially, lý refers to the ultimate rules of the universe, and encompasses not only the "rational" or "logical," but the moral as well. Thus, Neo-Confucians in China in as far back as the eleventh century, and notable Vietnamese scholars (such as Lê Quý Đôn in the 1700s) called themselves members of the lý hoc, or "School of Principles," and exalted lý as transcendental principles that sustained human ethics. This blending of the moral with the rational in the concept of lý is further demonstrated in two of its related terms: its immediate etymological derivative, chán lý (truth), and the much older dao lý (morality). Similarly to lý, tinh is originally a very broad-based omnibus term about which whole books have been written in Chinese studies. It can mean both the general emotions of the heart and the more specific face-based ties of reciprocal obligations and friendship. In modern Vietnamese, tinh is most often used to mean "care and affection;" in close relationships, it is the equivalent of "love." From these two broad concepts came five important Confucian virtues for the governing of individual behavior, as defined by Dong Zhongshu, a very influential philosopher of the Western Han dynasty: nhân (benevolence), lề (duty), nghĩa (propriety), tri (conscience), tín (faithfulness). Rounding out the moral virtues are trung, which originally meant loyalty to the king, but was later to be understood more broadly as loyalty to the nation, and hiếu, essentially the filial piety to one's parents, or more broadly, piety to one's family. It
should be noted here that, to the Vietnamese, morality, judging by its component virtues, reflects proper behavior in one’s relationships with other people, in which the self is held amenable to the cultivation of the relationships. Lý, tinh, and the moral virtues are indelible in the Vietnamese consciousness. They work on both conscious and subconscious levels to explain to the Vietnamese what is considered good, proper and just. Together, they lend foundation to công lý (justice, or justness), present when conflicts are resolved in such a way that satisfies all of the above aspects—“có lý, có tinh,” as the Vietnamese would say. In traditional Vietnamese studies, students were taught these concepts and virtues just as children in the West learned the Ten Commandments. Thus, for thousands of years, these concepts and virtues defined to the Vietnamese, as they still do, the ideals of good human behavior. This paradigm of lý-tinh, and its satellite terms of chân lý, dao lý, and công lý, will form the background of my analysis of Vietnamese literature in this study.

For better or for worse, by the time Westerners began to arrive en masse on Vietnamese shores, Vietnam had spent many years fending off foreign aggressors. This shared history had honed a remarkable spirit of resistance against external influences that was deeply embedded in the national psyche and constituted a lý to those who considered themselves Vietnamese. Besides generating a sense of national cohesion (identity based on a shared language, culture, and geographical homeland), this resistance has also been a major source of pride for all Vietnamese—and not without good reason. Vietnamese history by the nineteenth century had claimed repeated victories not only over the chauvinistic Chinese, but also over the Mongols, who once possessed an army formidable enough to threaten the world.
Before embarking on military campaigns, leaders of Vietnamese troops often made speeches to justify the need for fighting and to boost their soldiers’ morale. These military announcements (called *hích*) were (somewhat ironically) inked in Chinese, which was the official written language of Vietnam before the Vietnamese version, *chữ nôm*, overtook it. They were also often in verse form, not only because military generals were well trained in poetic tradition and convention, but because they wanted their soldiers to take to heart the political message, and verse could be easily remembered and recited by the common soldiers. Two of the most famous *hích*, which have been widely taught in schools to generations of Vietnamese then as now, were composed by Generals Lý Thường Kiệt and Trần Quốc Tuấn, who went on to join the long list of national heroes for leading Vietnam to victory over the Chinese in 1076 and the Mongols in 1285 respectively. I, for one, still remember these *hích* by heart.

Considered Vietnam’s first Declaration of Independence, read to the troops in 1076, Lý Thường Kiệt’s short but forceful poem sums up Vietnam’s nationalistic will and pride in four lines, following the 7/4 (*thất ngôn tứ tuyệt*) convention:

* Nam quốc sơn hà Nam đế cu;  
 Tuyệt nhiên định phân tài thiên thu.  
 Như hù nghịch lỡ lai xâm phạm;  
 Như dằng hành khan thủ bại hu.

(The Southern emperor rules the Southern land.⁶  
That is the sacred Destiny writ in Heaven’s Book.  
How dare you bandits trespass on our soil?  
You shall meet your undoing at our hands!) (3:110)
The poem invokes, for the first time in what we know of Vietnamese literary history, the lý of sovereignty as the foundation for the belief that the invaders will certainly be defeated. As I will demonstrate, this reasoning was to be followed in many later nationalistic writings. The fact that Vietnam prevailed over China in that same year would prove to the Vietnamese people the “truth” of Lý Thường Kiệt’s assertion, as would Vietnamese history of resistance and triumph over militarily superior invaders time and time again confirm the power of the will.

“Hịch Tướng Sĩ” was likewise penned to encourage all members of the Vietnamese army to set aside their personal interests for the fight against the coming Mongols. In this symmetrical speech, composed of perfectly parallel sentences, Trần Quốc Tuấn invokes loyal patriots in history and asks his generals and soldiers alike to prove that they are men worthy of respect by devoting themselves wholly to the national cause. Declaring that “Chết vinh hơn sống nhục” (to die in honor is far better than to live in shame), Trần Quốc Tuấn expresses his heartfelt concern for the nation and his determination to crush the invaders in the following forceful words, which have been memorized by generations of Vietnamese:

Ta từng tối băng quên ăn, nửa đêm vô gối, nước mắt đầm đắm, ruột đau như cắt, chỉ gián không được ăn thì, nằm đa, nuốt gan, uống máu Quân thù, dầu trăm thân ta phối ngoài nói cò, nghin xác ta gởi trong da ngựa, cùng nguyên cam lòng. (I have been foregoing food at mealtimes, tossing and turning at night, my eyes wet with tears, my insides hurting with anger. If only I could get my teeth at the enemy’s flesh, tear off their skin, eat their liver, drink their blood! Even if my
body were a hundred times exposed on the battlefield, even if my corpse were a thousand times buried in horse skin, I would still be satisfied.)

The mid-1800s abruptly mobilized this tradition of resistance against a modern French army and its Western culture and philosophies. Between 1858 and 1954, French colonialism was to rip apart the very fabric of Vietnamese traditional society.

**Vietnamese Literature and French Colonialism (1858-1925)**

From the 1860s to 1890s, at the same time that other European colonizers were eradicating indigenous peoples in North America, French colonial rulers in Vietnam set in motion the beginning of a gradual, but relentless demise of this thousands-year-old civilization. The construction of French Indochina, based on France's administrative divisions of Vietnam into Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina, with Cambodia and Laos added in 1873 and 1893, constituted an amalgam that had no historical, cultural, or geographical justification whatsoever. Vietnam's foreign relations and civil administration were controlled by Paris. Vietnamese military forces were disbanded and replaced by a French legionnaire army. As French colonialists sought to impose their own cultural and institutional models on the colonized Vietnamese, they also exploited existing social structures as a means of control. The puppet Nguyễn dynasty was preserved and Vietnamese mandarins became the low level bureaucrats of the French colonial administration. The impact of colonialism was felt first and most acutely by the scholar-gentry, who traditionally wielded far greater influence than any other group could with regards to Vietnamese thinking, ways of behavior, and politics through their unique role in Vietnamese society—but who had now lost all of their political power.
The influence of this scholar-gentry class, as political activists and leaders of resistance movements and as creators of the literature I am going to discuss, is incalculable. As a matter of fact, its influence may explain in part the large following the Việt Minh easily acquired in the beginning, given that its leadership came primarily from the scholar-gentry. In traditional Vietnamese society, the scholars constituted a small corps; yet they enjoyed an eminence unequalled by any other social group. They served as a connection—arguably the only, if largely informal, connection—between the administration and the rural community. Scholars who won one or more of the academic degrees in the court examinations became civil servants (quán—scholar officials), who administered districts, prefectures, and provinces. The top scholar in the third-degree examination could even fill the equivalent of the modern-day prime ministership. In times of revolution, scholars were especially appreciated as strategists. Every successful military leader in Vietnamese history was accompanied by a well-versed scholar, if he/she was not one him/herself. A most notable example of the scholar-strategist is Nguyễn Trãi, who helped Lê Lợi to success in military as well as administrative matters in the fifteenth century, and who bequeathed several speeches and documents attesting to his strategizing genius. The two Vietnamese scholar-strategists best known to the West, however, are General Võ Nguyên Giáp and Hồ Chí Minh (Giáp started out as a history teacher at Hanoi’s prestigious Bùi Nhật Highschool, and Hồ Chí Minh taught at the renowned Quốc Học Highschool, Huế, before his first international journey). When scholars were not involved in administration, they contributed to society as teachers, whose very words were revered and adhered to by generations of students. Vietnamese teachers received, as they still do, a level of respect unequalled by any other profession. Children were taught
to put their teachers on the same level as their parents, to be honored, obeyed, and paid
moral debt to for the rest of their lives. According to a moral lesson to children, “Một chữ
cụng là thầy; nửa chữ cũng là thầy” (He who teaches you a word, or only half a word, is
still your teacher [to be respected]). Good teachers acquired large followings of students,
who automatically entered something like an informal, life-long “student/alumni
association” around the teacher. Finally, these scholars were also writers who produced
most of the high literature in a society observed by historians to be one of the most
intensely literary civilizations on earth (Woodside, Community 2). The influence of the
scholar-gentry class is evident in an old Vietnamese adage, “Quốc gia hung vong thát
phu hát trách” (scholars are responsible for the country’s rise and fall), which holds the
scholars accountable for the destiny of their nation.

Under French colonial rule, the scholars, on whom the country’s proud history fell, were more than anyone else sensitive to nhục mặt nước (the humiliation of losing one’s country). They were also the group most upset by the new social (dis)order. By the early twentieth century, the French had created completely new social classes out of Vietnamese collaborators, such as interpreters and me Tây (Vietnamese women who consort with the French), who served as middlemen/women between the colonial regime and the ruled native population. The power these classes obtained, less from any traditionally recognized qualifications than from their assistance to the invaders, upset the traditional hierarchy. In came an era when former “losers” and French-speaking militiamen could replace cultivated scholar-officials as administrators of Vietnam. Worse still, the Vietnamese elite became inferior even to the lowest ranking French (Woodside, Community). It was a time of “nuộc chảy ngược” (water flows upward), when all ran
counter to lý. Not only was the old social order reversed, traditional morality as the scholars saw it also suffered a serious decline. Rapid Westernization caused an inevitable disintegration and erosion of traditional values. Confronted by these disruptions, scholars now either stood up and resisted, or abstained in protest and resentment. Not surprisingly, their inner turmoil was translated into an impressive body of literature which preceded the national Revolution in August 1945. Because the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contributed significantly to the political activism leading to the later resistance war, it will be the topic of discussion next.

Benedict Anderson observes that the concept of nationalism gained prominence in Europe in the eighteenth century when “the novel and the newspaper provided the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the kind of imagined community that is the nation” (25, emphasis in the original). In Vietnam, patriotic poetry had long played the role of creating the imagined community of the Vietnamese people with a legendary tradition of resistance against foreign invasion and domination. From the onset of the French invasion to the 1920s, resistance poetry surged. This poetry was produced in either Chinese or nôm (the Vietnamese adaptation of Chinese ideograms in writing, with a distinct Vietnamese vocabulary and pronunciation) by both militant and abstaining scholars/writers/teachers. The writings formed a concerted attack on the French invaders and on those Vietnamese who collaborated with the foreigners. After the revolutionary scholars’ initial attempts at armed resistance failed, there was a pervading sense of nostalgic longing for the pre-colonial past, and desperate yearning for able saviors and change.
Prominent revolutionaries of this period, such as Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh, turned out volumes of writings which, together with their political activities, inspired a whole generation of patriots and fellow revolutionaries. Young men and women (among whom the teenaged Nguyễn Sinh Cung, later known to the world as Hồ Chí Minh, and several others who were to become leaders of the DRV and NLF) listened to secret readings of these writings even as they witnessed the miseries of their nation under the French.

Born in Nghệ An (Central Vietnam), the cradle of many radical revolutionaries in Vietnamese history (including Hồ Chí Minh), Phan Bội Châu (1867-1940) ranked among the most famous mandarin revolutionaries of the “Càn Vương” (support the king) movement, so called because they aided King Hân Nghi and Prince Cường Để in their resistance against the French. A child prodigy, he was known for being able, at the age of six, to memorize the *Tam Tự Kinh* (Three Bibles) after only three days of reading. Although refusing to seek reputation and a career under foreign rule, Châu attended and won the top standing in the mandarin examination in Nghệ An province, just so he could broaden his revolutionary activities as a scholar/teacher. Besides political tracts, Châu left several poems, some under the pen name of Phan Sào Nam. His poetry reminds his fellow countrymen in many ways that determined opposition is the only moral and just way for a Vietnamese citizen living under foreign rule. Committed to armed resistance as the primary means of struggle even after the armed insurgence of the late nineteenth century had been brutally suppressed by the French, Châu also advocated change so that Vietnam could benefit from renewed strength. In 1905, he went to Japan to seek outside support for revolutionary activity and to investigate ways to modernize Vietnam. The
Dòng Du (Go East) movement was thus started, which would later produce many staunch revolutionaries for the Việt Minh.

In “Tu Hu Đê Nhờ” [To the nest-robbing cuckoo], Châu borrows the cuckoo’s habit of stealing nests to condemn the French invaders:

Hey that cuckoo, this nest is none of yours!
How come you barged in here and called it home?
My wife and I have worked so hard to build this home;
You and your kind, do not sit so brazen there.
I thought your abuse would not last beyond two or three days;
Who knew you would have overextended your stay several times by now.
How in the world can such a freak occur?
You came unasked; resisted, you will not leave!

In “Chúc Tết Thanh Niên” [New Year’s wishes for the youth], Châu urges young people to do their part in saving the country from slavery and backwardness:

Get up! Get up! Get up!
The rooster has just crowed
The birds are singing their welcome.
Arriving Spring, do you know
How ashamed I am before the rivers, how sad before the mountains, how mortified under the moon?
Twenty-something and I have experienced such sorrows.
I am lucky to be alive
But day and night, I burn with hatred for the barbarians.
Men, women, young and old,
It is time to change in this time of change.
Open your eyes to new opportunities
Give a hand to the rescue of our ancient nation.
March forth, stand upright, withstand with perseverance!
Unified, we are determined to once again create the fortune.
We shall strive to maintain fraternity
Shedding the old skin, we shall nurture our spirit.
We shall not indulge in the common pleasures of games, fashion, or gastronomy.
With hearts of iron, we will move mountains and drain seas
We will wash away the disgrace of slavery with our boiling blood.
Now that is truly new, my people!
As they say: It is a new day, once again!
In “Sông” [To Live], an inflamed Chậu rouses his less fervent countrymen to
greater social responsibility in this time of foreign domination:
Living in shame, you do not deserve to crowd this earth!
Living that kind of life, do you not feel disgraced facing the world?
If you will live in slavery, to be kicked around,
If you will live in stupidity, to be laughed at,
If you will live for your social position while the nation is lost,
If you will live with dreams of wealth, heedless of your people’s suffering,
Then you had better not live at all.
Living in shame, you do not deserve to crowd this earth!
Sentenced to death by the French, the patriot does not flinch, but instead blames himself for his failure to save the nation in “Bài Thơ Tuyết Mệnh” [Poem before death]:

Sixty years on this earth,
I have paid my dues to this life.
Where is the grand spirit I was born with?
The moon is still shining in my heart, as clouds still covering the sky.
In my life, I have failed to terminate the country’s enemies
Now about to die, I ask that the younger generations not bother to mourn.
Submitting myself to the tigers like this,
I am no better than Di Tệ, am I?
My tears are flowing for the country and its people,
I wish for talents that I do not have to save them from decline.
This body is going to die while the spirit is still frustrated
How mortified I will be, facing our ancestors!

In the same revolutionary vein, Phan Bội Châu’s most talented comrade, Phan Chu Trinh, urges his fellow-countrymen to social responsibility and action in “Ngầu Hứng” [Impromptu]:

A windstorm’s turned the country upside down
Why did Heaven above weave this noose for us?
Chew over your own duties—bitter tang
Open your bag of literature—dank mold.
Those scoundrels play and dally fighting fire—
Waifs wander, mourning fathers in distress.
High hills, vast seas—the land lies broad, immense
Climb peaks or swim the deep—do all you can.

Several other revolutionaries of the period, such as Nguyễn Hữu Huân, Huỳnh Thúc Kháng, Phan Văn Trị, and Trần Cao Văn, contributed fiery poems composed in prison—at times right before their executions. A leader of the resistance in the South, Nguyễn Hữu Huân wrote his last poem, “Carrying a cangue around the neck,” then bit his tongue and took his own life before he was to be executed by the French in 1875. A cangue is a wooden frame fastened around the neck of an offender as both a portable pillory and a symbol of infamy. Here, Huân sees it instead as a symbol of French rule, which, as a scholar, he is under the duty to resist. To Huân, the scholar’s responsibility for the nation’s welfare is both his “moral burden” and “pride.” He also declares that the penalty for those who do not resist will be “disgrace.”

Countrymen from north to south, see what I am bearing here?
It is a moral burden, not a cangue.
Beneath its weight, the scholar’s shoulders stoop
Around its neck, the hero flaunts his pride.
I shall die and go up north: my name will shine.
You live and stay down south: it is your disgrace.
One wins or loses according to Heaven’s will.
Fuck you base traitors! Don’t you dare laugh at me!

Guillotined in 1916, Trần Cao Văn announced that “It is a mere child’s play to die” for his country. In fact, he saw it as the only way he could live on in people’s memory as a man worthy of respect.
It is a mere child’s play to die—who would care to try?

To die a patriot’s death is Heaven’s grace.

I shall have my body crushed and die a man.

I shall let my head fall off and die upright.

Who dies for justice wins the world’s respect

Who dies to serve his king forever lives.

To die this way will be a sheer delight.

Hey, do you hear? I am not afraid to die!

Revolutionaries together stressed the need for all Vietnamese to cultivate social responsibility, and to stand up and fight the invaders. The scholars themselves, through their lives and deaths, set examples of self-sacrifice for the cause of national salvation. Meanwhile, abstaining patriots such as Nguyễn Khuyên, Tư Xương, Tân Đà, and Nguyễn Dinh Chiều reached out, through their writing as well as their teaching, to a large segment of the population no matter their social, political, or educational background. These poets preached and practiced non-collaboration, the only other acceptable response to unjust foreign rule. At the same time, they boycotted everything associated with the French—be it shorter hair, Western clothes, paved roads, French cultural traditions, or even Western-style soap.¹⁷

Nguyễn Khuyên (1835-1909) is a significant voice in the pre-modern Vietnamese experience.¹⁸ A uniquely accomplished scholar, Nguyễn Khuyên won top standing in all of the three court examinations he took, earning the title “Tam Nguyên Yên Đô” (three times top graduate) from Emperor Tự Đức. He served as a mandarin from 1871 to 1883, and, at the height of his career as governor of Sơn Tây province, withdrew from public
service after the Huế Court signed the Harmand Treaty, giving France dominance over the whole of Vietnam in August 1883. Both Khuyên and Tú Xương, the poet I am discussing next, are taught extensively in Vietnamese schools.

One of Nguyễn Khuyên’s best known poems is entitled “Hội Tày” [French National Holiday]. In this poem, the usually mild, polished poet lashes out at the crowd who join in the French-staged festivities on Bastille Day.

Look! The Amnesty festival is here! Firecrackers snap
Hosts of flags are hoisted, hosts of lanterns hung.
Big dames, legs exposed, watch the boat race
Small boys, hunched up, sneak a peek of the folk opera.
Boasting their strength, damsels wigway on the swing
Chasing after money, bumpkins climb greased poles.
Hats off to those who have staged this merriest of shows!
The merrier, the more humiliating it is!

In only eight lines, the poem delivers a number of messages. First, the poet bemoans the decline of moral standards: high-ranking mandarins’ wives forgo respectability by revealing their legs for all to see; mercenary people embarrass themselves for money; and the celebration of brawn over inner strength. Erosion of traditional morality is clearly attributed to the French corrupting influence. As organizers of this “merriest of shows,” the French stand to be blamed for encouraging the above condemned traits. But more importantly, the main message of the poem rests on one word: “nhục” (shame, humiliation), which, due to the tones of the surrounding words, receives the most emphasis in the last line. The title of the poem, “French National
Holiday,” reveals the cause of this shame. Historically, French colonialists attempted, as part of their mission civilisatrice, cultural assimilation—the Gallicizing of Vietnamese culture and institutions. More than anybody else, scholars like the poet himself, who grew up believing in the inherent superiority of their culture, felt the humiliation of having to celebrate a foreign holiday. The last line therefore reveals both anger at the scholar/poet’s own impotence and fierce anti-French sentiments. It is at the same time self-reproach and a verdict against those Vietnamese who are ignorant or mercenary enough to join in the merriment, thereby celebrating their own humiliation.

Although not nearly as successful as Nguyễn Khuyên in his academic career, Tú Xương (1870-1907), another Northern poet, attained comparable prominence in Vietnamese literature with his exquisite, biting attacks on the French and their Vietnamese underlings. In poems such as “Gieũ Nguời Thi Đỗ” [Mock the graduates], Tú Xương castigates those Vietnamese scholars who subject themselves to French rule rather than resist or withdraw. The poem is cited in Vietnamese here to facilitate my analysis of the poet’s diction.

*Một đàn tháng hóng đúng mà trống*

*Nó độ khoe này có suồng không!*

*Trên ghế, bà đầm ngồi dịu vít,*

*Duối sàn, ông cự ngang đâu ròng.*

(A flock of failed candidates stand by to watch; The graduates of this examination, aren’t they jubilant! Upon a high chair, the French dame hoists her duck-like rump; Down in the courtyard, the graduates lift their dragon heads.)
The sardonic humor, expressed in perfect parallel lines, has made this poem a lasting favorite for all Vietnamese readers, literature critics and textbook compilers. The poem was composed in 1897, the first year the court exam was presided over by the French. The occasion was marked by the presence of the newly arrived Governor-General of Indochina, Paul Doumer, and his wife at the ceremony where successful candidates received their titles. Here, the court candidates are no longer accorded the esteem traditionally given to scholars; they are instead decimated in a number of ways. The first two lines refer to them as a “flock” of “thông” and “nô” (two contemptuous words for inferior, less-than-men juniors). The presence of Doumer’s wife on a high platform at a most solemn place where no woman was allowed before not only exposes the French rulers’ disdain for native customs and tradition, but emphasizes the humiliation of those who submit to it. The failed candidates (with the poet among them) are pathetic as envious lookers-on, but they are nowhere as pathetic as the jubilant graduates, whose “dragon heads” (the dragon-shaped caps being the insignia of intellectual nobility) aspire toward a French woman’s ample derriere. The connotation-loaded “dit vịt” (duck rump, or the dirtiest part of a lowly and dirty animal) and “đầu rồng” (dragon heads, or the highest part of a sacred animal that also happens to be the Vietnamese people’s legendary ancestor), and the deliberate pairing of “duck rump” with “trên” (up high, superior) and “bà” (madam) in line 3, which at the same time contrasts with “dragon heads,” “duôi” (down, underling) and “ông” (mister) in line 4, exploit at once the contemporary racism and sexism to deliver in one swift stroke the mortification of a whole nation under foreign domination. Having been called in the diminutive in the first two lines, Vietnamese (male) scholars (Tú Xương himself included) are dealt a
double slap in the face in the last two lines. Whether they have failed or succeeded in this particular exam, Vietnamese scholars, as guardians of the nation, have all failed when they can do nothing but helplessly watch the country sink under foreigners.

Yet another poet to underscore the duty of the scholar/poet to help his/her country is Nguyễn Khắc Hiệu (1889-1939), who took his pen name from the mountain Tấn and the river Đà of his native village in Sơn Tây—“non nước” (mountains and rivers) being a set expression for “the country, homeland, and nation.” His anguish as a patriot, seeing the Vietnamese nation divided and trampled upon, is expressed in “The Tattered Map.”

On the surface, the poem seems to be about the sorry state of a physical map, but the double entendres reveal the poet’s concerns for Vietnam now in the hands of invaders.

Stand there and have a look at the poor map—
Its rivers and mountains are being turned into sorry jokes.
Do you know how long it took to draw the map?
Why is it now tattered and torn?
Our fathers have acquired and bequeathed it to us—
How dare their children make a toy of it?
But now, rather than blaming the juveniles,
Let us do all we can to mend the map.

In the South, Nguyễn Đình Chiếu (1822-1888), a widely respected blind teacher informally called Cụ Đô Chiếu (“teacher Chiếu”), exhorted his students and children to spurn everything French. In a poem entitled “Thả Đui” [I’d sooner be blind], Đô Chiếu compares the physically blind favorably to those who blindly serve the invaders. If his
Northern contemporaries leaned heavily on allegory, irony, double entendres, and parallelism, Nguyễn Đình Chiêu’s attacks are often characteristic of Southern bluntness:

Better to have both eyes obscured by mists
Than to sit here and see the kingdom’s foes.
Better to curse the void before your eyes
Than to sit here and watch the people’s hell.
Better to have for your eyes a desert
Than foreign conquest and defeat.
Better to have both eyes in pitch-dark night
Than warfare drowning this dear land in blood.
Sooner be blind and honor your home cult
Than see the loss of ancestor worship.
Sooner be blind and keep from foul repute
Than have both eyes and feed on putrid meat.
Sooner be blind and to yourself stay true
Than keep both eyes and tamper with your hair.\(^{22}\)
Why see and ape those creatures garbed in wool\(^{23}\)
And swagger, bowing to no lord above?
Why see and, stirred by gold and flesh,
Unleash all lusts, inviting Heaven’s scourge?
Why see and race against the madding throng?
Today’s reward will be tomorrow’s shame.
Why see and throw all ethics to the wind,
Spurning old virtues, flouting Heaven’s laws?

Seeing what has happened to the world outside,

Inside I will preserve my heart and soul.

Feeling impotent against the French onslaught on the Vietnamese and their culture, many scholars abstained from the public world. But they all expressed a strong wish for an able leader and propitious time to come and avenge the nation’s shame.

In “Ngóng Gió Đồng” [Waiting for the east wind], Nguyễn Đình Chiểu likens colonial rule to the harsh winter that fetters life. The people of Vietnam, like its flora, are desperately yearning for a wise, strong leader to restore the country and cleanse it of all foreign influence.

The flora is desperately yearning for the east wind

O Lord of Spring, where are you, do you know?

Still no sign of geese through the cloud-hung northern passes

Swallows hush their cries in twilight southern mountains.

To foreigners our ancient territory has been parceled out—

We now have to share the same sky with them day and night.

When will our holy sovereign’s grace shine through,

And a shower of rain cleanse our streams and hills?

Nguyễn Đình Chiểu’s forlorn hope for national independence is echoed in Nguyễn Khuyên’s “Quốc Kêu Cảm Hứng” [On hearing the rail cry]:

Your grief-laden cry lingers in the air—

Like the soulful wail of Shu, who died long ago.

Blood flows through the hours of quiet summer nights;
Souls roam every minute the moonlight fades.
Are you bemoaning the spring, now past and gone?
Or is it the water you are missing?
Who are you crying for, all through the night,
Making a wanderer brood within his heart?

The patriot’s tumult is expertly expressed through a variety of double entendres in this poem. Playing on the double meaning of “quốc” as both the rail and the nation, the title can thus be read as “On hearing the rail cry,” or “Listening to the call of the nation.” The reference to the king of Shu, who according to Chinese legends died in exile and became a rail after losing his kingdom, reveals the poet’s sorrow for his own country (nuốc can mean either “water” or “country”). Much “blood” has been shed and many patriots have been executed, leaving behind their “souls” when resistance after resistance is crushed by the French. “Khách giang họ” (“wanderers,” or “knight-gentlemen”), like the poet himself, are left to toss and turn over the plight of the nation.

Tú Xương makes a similar call for revolutionary action by directing the criticism at himself—at what he calls his own selfishness—in “Dại Hạn” [“drought,” also “catastrophe”]:

These days the sun is melting gold and stone.
People are frantically praying for rain.
In happier times, carefree, they ate and slept
Now, waterless, they tremble for their land.
Buffaloes are glad the fields are parched beyond plowing
Fearful for their lives, fish have all fled dry ponds.
Everybody is now trying to save only themselves—

My palm-leaf fan I am fluttering alone.

Again, the double meaning of “nuôc” plays in this political allegory. The fourth line can thus be read as “Now, having lost the country, people worry about the fate of their nation.” A sign of nature’s malevolence, the drought represents the evil of foreign dominion that tests people’s loyalty (“gold and stone”). Inaction or abstention, the poet suggests, is not unlike the act of selfishly and futilely fluttering a palm-leaf fan for one’s own good when calamity is breaking loose outside. It is the act of a coward.

The influence of this body of resistance poetry on the shaping of the Vietnamese psyche in preparation for the war that was yet to officially start is immeasurable.Copied and recopied in painstaking calligraphy, and memorized and recited by illiterate peasants and scholars alike, the multitude of patriotic, anti-French poems of this period, of which the ones cited above are but a small sample, kept alive Vietnam’s legendary spirit of resistance even as all armed insurgence had been drowned in bloodbath by the early 1900s.25

Vietnamese Literature under Change (1925-1945)

Alexander Woodside suggests in Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam that early Vietnamese resistance to Western influence was ethnocentric and based primarily on loyalty to Confucianism and xenophobia. Even if it was so, elements among the scholars/revolutionaries soon realized Vietnam could do with the advantages of modern science and technology, and were willing to explore, ultimately, new, Western philosophies and thinking as well. One of the early advocates of modernization was Phan
Boi Chau; and the model civilization he first gauged was Japan. Later, a substantial number of scholars/revolutionaries joined him, forming the Dong Du (Go East) movement. Meanwhile, starting from the 1920s, an increasing number of Vietnamese youths went to France for higher education. Upon their return to Vietnam in the late 1920s and early 1930s, they brought with them a broader view of the West and of Vietnam’s place in relation to it. At the same time, various factors combined to accelerate changes inside Vietnamese society in the first two decades of the century. First, some Western technology, a market economy, and transportation and communication facilities had been introduced to serve the colonialists. These developments combined with population increase and the rapid expansion of urban centers to create a radically different social context for people’s lives. Above all, a Western-style education system provided a powerful impetus to cultural change. By mid-1920s, a new public school system had spawned numerous Tân hoc (new education) writers as well as created an audience literate in quốc ngữ (the romanized transcription of the Vietnamese language). There also appeared an increasing number of Vietnamese writers educated in French “superior schools,” who came largely from the elite, wealthy section of the population and who became fluent in French.

The promulgation of quốc ngữ and of French by the colonialists was meant to speed up the colonialists’ progression to power through language. Unwittingly, it also aided modern Vietnamese nationalism, as it encouraged Vietnamese to look out into the Western world and learn about themselves as well as others. While this new, Western knowledge was to enthrall the more impressionable receivers of Western education, it would also empower modern Vietnamese nationalists in their efforts to free their
The literature of the 1930s and 1940s well illustrates the division and tension between these two groups, who would evolve into opposing factions in Vietnam's political arena in the mid-1940s. This literature also shows how the left-leaning revolutionaries managed to reconnect with their Vietnamese identity, thereby prevailing over the minority of Vietnamese who accepted Western influences wholesale. Finally, an analysis of the literature of the 1930s and 1940s is particularly rewarding as the writers of this period would later form the leadership of various political factions that competed with one other in Vietnam's struggle to shake off the yoke of colonialism. For these reasons, the literature of the 1930-1940 period will be discussed next.

The two decades immediately preceding the war were characterized by a blossoming of new genres and new ideas reflecting French influences. Different literary schools emerged corresponding to different artistic and aesthetic viewpoints. As a result of severe censorship and suppression by the French, the revolutionary strand of Vietnamese literature went completely underground. Much of it was in fact produced in prison and was neither published nor publicized until after 1954. The "legitimate" literature of this period monopolized the reading public, and did so through a revolution of its own. In terms of genres, this period ushered in two new forms: the prose novel/short story, and reportage/autobiography/reminiscences. Among literary schools, first romanticism, then realism, claimed the rapt attention of the new urban, educated youths who were being swept into a nation-wide social and political revolution. The evolution from romanticism to realism in the 1930s and early 1940s corresponded with the ascent and eventual triumph of leftist elements in a nationalist revolution against the colonial regime.
Romanticism and Individualistic Tendencies (1925-35)

Romanticism emerged in the Vietnamese literary scene circa 1930 and flourished for the better part of the decade. Famous romantics include the poets Nguyễn Bình, Tấn Đà, Chế Lan Viên, and Huy Cận; and prose writers Hoàng Ngọc Phách and Nguyễn Tuân. But the spokesmen of Vietnamese romanticism were arguably the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (Self-reliance literature group) writers: Nguyễn Tương Tam (pen name Nhật Linh), his brothers Nguyễn Tương Lân (Thạch Lam) and Nguyễn Tương Long (Hoàng Đạo), and Khai Hưng (Nguyễn Khánh Giữ) ignited the reading public with their prose fiction, while Thê Lữ, Lưu Trọng Lự, and Xuân Diệu were acclaimed leaders of the “new poetry” movement. Representing the “art for art’s sake” viewpoint, Vietnamese romanticism of this period was strongly individualistic and sentimental.

This individualism and sentimentalism found its most intense expression in the “new poetry,” which broke with tradition in both form and subject-matter. The “old poetry” was characteristically outward-looking. Written usually by scholar officials for particular occasions, it was primarily didactic, pragmatic, ethical and social in nature. (Exceptions are pastoral poetry, in which the poets’ personal feelings are often embedded in the description of nature, and the “aberrant” poetry of women writers such as Hồ Xuân Hương.30) Employing numerous Chinese and historical allusions, the tone of old poetry was dignified, its poetic form strictly adherent to conventional (Chinese and Vietnamese) rules of length, rhyme and rhythm.31 Romantic poetry capitalized somewhat on the undercurrent of pastoral poetry, but, under the influence of French romanticism, focused entirely on the “I” and turned inward to explore intricate emotions in verses that obeyed no conventions other than the poet’s feelings. This “I” as a whole-person individual, as
opposed to a part of a role-based community, was itself a new creation of the industrialization and expansion occurring in Vietnamese society at the time. As used by the romantics, the new “I” reflected a strong, Western-influenced self-awareness. An “art for art’s sake” philosophy imported from the West now freed the poets from producing socially and culturally “correct” reflections of themselves and of others. They could now celebrate being true only to themselves, even if it meant breaking with the social and moral expectations of the roles they were occupying in the community. For many of the urban intellectuals of the period, who were being increasingly divorced from the old culture by their Western education and a progressively Western working environment, the traditional family and village life was fast disintegrating. The “new poets” became the mouthpieces of this generation of urban intellectuals as they passionately expressed personal dreams and desires. Flaunting their idiosyncrasies and sensuality, romantics also defined as social issues the tensions between the Western-style individual and the Vietnamese tradition of community life and Confucian practices.

At first, intoxicated with their newly-found freedom, romantic poets churned out exuberant poetry that at times bordered on impressionism. French influence was obvious in the use of free verse and prosody devices such as enjambment, alliteration, and the caesura. No longer relying on classic imagery and symbolism, the new poetry employed fresh images and sounds, and voiced every private emotion from love to hate, resentment to desire.

A famed creation of a most popular romantic of the period, Xuân Diệu’s “Câm Xúc” [Feeling] is illustrative of this intensely personal poetry. No longer is the scholar/ poet held responsible for the fate of his country. The poem enthusiastically proclaims the
freedom to be but an instrument for its author’s feelings and emotions, played by the hands of beauty and love:

To be a poet is to be lulled by the wind
To dream with the moon, and drift with the clouds.
To let his soul be bound by a thousand strands
Or splinter with a hundred precious loves.

Hand on heart to trace the flow of blood and tears.
A thousand hearts are carried in one
To understand the voice of the stream or of the birds,
The sound of the sobbing rain, the cry of words roused by the sunbeam.

I am but a tiny needle,
And nature is ten thousand magnets.
If the evening dew awakes intoxicated with the full moon,
How can a poet be criticized for being sensual?

In a similar fashion, Thê Lữ, a pioneer of “New poetry,” considers himself “Cây Dân Muôn Điệu” [A harp with a thousand melodies]:

I am but a wanderer
Roaming the walks of life,
Looking for beautiful feelings in each tear or laughter,
In difficulty, in moments of happiness,
In grand aspirations or simple dreams.
I love life with all its gloom,
Pathos, horror, and gentleness,
Its moments of brilliance, lust, or violence.

You may say I’m quick to change,
No focus, without a philosophy—but who cares?
I am only a passionate lover
Of Beauty in myriads of shapes and guises.

From the Muse, I obtain a harp with a thousand melodies,
From the Muse, I obtain a brush with a thousand hues.
I want to be an artist of magic,
Taking as materials all the sounds and beauties of life.

In a culture where amorous affection and feelings between men and women were rarely, if ever, verbalized, Nguyễn Bính’s passionate “Ghen” [Jealousy] was shocking—especially so because women had always been considered men’s possessions to be taken for granted:

Oh my little sweetheart,
I want your lips to part in a smile
Only when I am near, and your eyes
Only see me when we are apart.

I don’t want you to think of anybody else,
Or kiss even a fresh petal,
Or hug a lonely pillow in your sleep,
Or swim at a beach crowded in the afternoon.

I want that the sweet scent of perfume
That you often wear will not travel far,
And enchant passers-by,
For all that they are but passing strangers.

I want that, in cold winter nights,
Dreams will not accost you.
Or if they should, I want that
You will not meet any young men there.

I want that your light breaths
Will not damp strangers’ shirts,
And that no one will ever step on
Your footprints left along the dusty road.

That means I’m so jealous,
Which means I’m so much in love.
And that means you are everything—
You are everything to me, and only me.
Unfettered individualism was to be cited by some Western-educated Vietnamese as a reason for their opposition to so-called “Communist” rule later. But for many others, writers and readers alike, the initial enthusiasm and passion for romantic individualism soon gave way to melancholy, despair, and a frightening emptiness. By around 1937, and in a manner parallel to the experience of writers in the West two decades earlier, excessive preoccupation with their internal worlds and private sensibilities had led the new poets to an exhausted dead end. The introspective inclination of romanticism eventually brought the poets face to face with their inner vulnerability and alienation, and at the same time offered no way out. A sense of decay, weariness, and desperation became prevalent in the romantic poetry of the late 1930s. Perhaps no poem illustrates these feelings more clearly than Thế Lữ’s “Truy Lạc” [Decadence]:

The spirits of passion to numb a weary soul,
Keep pouring, fill the glass, my lover!
I am listening to the wind outside—
Is it wailing out of sorrow?

Keep pouring! When I’m soosed enough,
Your hair I will grab to dry my drunken, unseeing eyes.
Then, looking out through a haze of smoke,
I will see only bright colors.

There, white bodies gyrating.
There, lusty laughters ringing in peels,
Provocative, promiscuous, suggesting heat.
And titilating or tear-jerking songs.

Ladies of the night, tainted lovers,
Do you know if these pleasures
Will help me care not for tomorrow
And my life? For tomorrow might bring sobriety.
Like yours, my soul is dead cold.
Seems so long ago, when
Light and the song of birds, or the falling darkness,
A fresh flower, or a fallen leaf
Were enough to move my heart.
So innocent was I, like a virgin.
Now the maiden has become experienced,
Practiced, having seen sullied life at close range.

With a blighted heart, no longer with faith,
I'd rather forget, drowning everything in drunkenness,
In the throes of faked passion,
Just to avoid the empty hours.

I dare not let my soul look back and remember.
For, occasionally in the present madness,
Through the long night, a part of the dying poet’s heart
Might long for its former innocent life.

The decline of romanticism as a trend was signalled by stylistic misadventures as well. At his best, Xuân Diệu exemplified the romantics’ innovative style and open sensuality in unforgettable poems such as “Vi Sao” [Why?):

How can one explain love?
For it doesn’t make sense. One afternoon,
It captivates us with its gentle sunshine,
Its fluffy clouds, and its tender breeze.

Now this most westernized of Vietnamese poets lapsed into unlikely stylistic experiments. An example of such experiments is his poem “Chiều” [Dusk]. Even though the musical quality is unimpeachable, the feelings and images are so vague and confusing that it is impossible to procure an exact translation:

Today, the sky looks light and far above.
I feel melancholy, not knowing why. . . .
Red leaves fall quietly on long alleys;
Virgin dew drops from the source of love.
Swayed is the soul of the roses
Pink cheeks still linger in passing breaths.
It sounds as if the wind has crossed the river
Hidden in the reeds, boats haven’t left the bank.
The air seems to be made up of gossamer
The slightest footstep could disturb, the lightest touch will dissolve.
Smoothly, dusk broods upon dusk;
The heart feels fine, moved by but a breeze of quiet melancholy.

The decay of the late 1930s was not contained within a poetry of despair, but spilled into the poets' real lives. Many members of the “village of literature” (làng văn) in Vietnam at this time resorted to opium or alcohol as an escape from the emotional disorder that typified a large portion of urban intellectuals just like themselves. Of greater significance and direct relevance to the present study is the fact that the emotional distress of the 1930s was rooted not only in the modernism of the period, but in the larger context of foreign oppression and exploitation, which the global economic depression of the 1930s and its effects on the colonial economy in Vietnam seriously aggravated. In fact, increasing foreign oppression and exploitation underpinned the rise of social realism over romanticism in Vietnam even as proletarian literature was becoming fashionable elsewhere in the late 1930s. And it is through the evolution of the prose novel, which started out as the other vessel of romanticism but matured as the weapon of social realists, that we see the quantum leap in political consciousness among the many Vietnamese writers/intellectuals who would later on become the pillars of the Việt Minh leadership.

In pre-modern Vietnamese literature, the verse tale (truyện) had existed for quite some time. The most famous of the verse tales is Nguyễn Du’s Truyện Kiều [Tale of Kiều] of the late eighteenth century. But the novel of the twentieth century, like the “new poetry,” differed from the verse tale in both form (prose, as opposed to verse) and content (psychological, as opposed to courtly). Unlike the classic verse tale, in which plot and action were paramount, the modern novel focused more on psychological analysis.
The characters' personalities and inner motivations, their feelings, thoughts, and emotions were dissected and described in much greater detail. Modern novelists also employed other forms of modern art (painting and sculpture) in their constructions of scenery and character. Modelled on the French *romans*, the Vietnamese prose novel of the 1930s and 1940s was distinguished from earlier versions in its natural spoken language and creative plots.

The modern romantic novelists took as their topics personal relationships and the fate of individuals at odds with (and often powerless in) a corrupt, hypocritical society that stifled them. Their writings struck out at the traditional paradigm of loyalty and moral debt to family, village and state—and in this manner anticipated the later drive for a social revolution. The evolution of the romantic novel can be best charted along three famous works of the period: Hoàng Ngọc Phách's *Tố Tám* (1925), Khải Hưng’s *Hôn Buông Mơ Tiên* (1933), and Nhật Linh’s *Đoàn Tuyết* (1935).

*Tố Tám* focuses on the eventual, tragic resignation of a young woman in her struggle for romantic love against traditional family obligations. In love with a young man from an inferior background, Tố Tám (which means “pure heart”) is forced by her parents to marry into an established family in accordance with the age-old “good match” (*môn dẳng hô đối*) requirement. Unable to reconcile her duty as a daughter with her parents’ inflexible insistence on “face,” she finally yields to their demands. But, being educated and sensitive, Tố Tám cannot suppress her personal desire for happiness. Her death by heart failure is meant to implicitly indict the murderous combination of practicality and Confucian morality. The novel’s publication in 1925 marked the first
awakening of individualism and of the desire for freedom from the ancient institutions of family and community.

_Hồn Buồm Mơ Tiên_ [Butterfly’s heart dreaming for an angel] is another story of thwarted love. The protagonist, a university student in his summer vacation, becomes enamoured with a young monk, whom he later discovers to be an intelligent, educated woman. Although his love is reciprocated, Ngọc is made to promise he will not upset the platonic relationship if he is to see Lan again. In this novel, the barrier to romantic fulfilment and personal happiness is as flimsy as spiritualism—in particular, the Buddhist wish to escape from worldly ties. The novel’s immense popularity at the zenith of romanticism is thus an indication of the taste for dreamy sentimentalism and escapist pleasure amongst urban youths. What is significant about Khải Hùng’s first and probably most popular novel is its inconclusiveness and indirection, however. On the one hand, it does present a collision between the new and the old, represented by the meeting of Ngọc, who is westernized in dress, ideas and habits, and Lan, with her conservative Buddhist ideals. On the other hand, it is devoid of harshness and criticism. Although there is little in common between the two worlds (signifying the impossibility of a merging of the old and the new), there is no lacking in mutual sympathy and affection. Ancient institutions may stand in the way of his personal, romantic fulfilment, but Ngọc’s acceptance of and respect for Lan’s decision implies acquiescence to tradition, a theme that emerges again in Khải Hùng’s next novel, _Nửa Chìng Xuân_ [Unfinished spring].

Thus, in a way, these two of Khải Hùng’s novels, published in 1933 and 1934 respectively, ironically foreshadowed the amalgamation of tradition and revolution adopted by Việt Minh revolutionaries in the 1940s.
Of the three novels, Nhật Linh’s *Doan Tuyệt* [Breaking the ties] is the most radical and signifies a fully-fledged individualism. Loan, the heroine of the novel, is forced to marry into an established family even though her heart belongs to a revolutionary. Perpetually criticized by her sister- and mother-in-law for being headstrong and “modern,” Loan feels miserable in her husband’s strict, traditional family. When she accidentally kills her husband in a row, Loan is charged with murder and arraigned before the court. She is acquitted, however, thanks to the eloquence of her lawyer, who advocates women’s rights to freedom, respect, and personal happiness. Her final departure from her husband’s family and all it stands for, together with the hope of reuniting with her revolutionary dream lover, signals a clean break with the traditional culture. The novel is an overt, bitter attack on traditional practices, rituals, and values. The character Loan was intended to personify the modern ideal woman, and her acquittal was in essence a defense of the individualistic ideology that Nhật Linh subscribed to. Yet, Loan did not draw complete sympathy from many readers because of her aggressiveness, arrogance, intolerance and self-righteousness, qualities attributed to Nhật Linh himself by many of his contemporaries. Published in 1935, at the time romanticism was starting its decline, *Doan Tuyệt* completed the evolution of the romantic novel from emotional resignation to sentimentalism to open defiance.

In summary, romantic literature sparked intense interest and enthusiasm among young, Western-educated Vietnamese when it first appeared. In an atmosphere that was palpably amenable to change, romanticism at first seemed to embody novelty and modernity. The individualism championed by romantics appealed to urban, educated youths because it addressed their newly acquired sense of self and reflected the tension
between their awakened desire for personal fulfilment and the traditionally required conformity to communal codes of behavior and morality. While it incited revolutionary latencies, individualism as an ideology proved to be narrow and exclusive. Moreover, it failed to address the questions of national independence and self-determination, which had become burning issues to the majority of Vietnamese at the time. Turning around on itself, individualism quickly ended in exhaustion, offering its followers not solace but despair, not fulfilment but further alienation and fragmentation. In just a few years, the initial enthusiasm had fizzled into a lost and desperate whine. From the late 1930s to 1945, social realism ascended as a school in Vietnam and eventually far eclipsed romanticism both in the public’s appreciation and in its influence on the Vietnamese development of political awareness.

**Social Realism and Nationalist Consciousness (1930-45)**

The fast decline of Vietnamese romanticism was brought on as much by its internal problems as by external events. Economic and political circumstances from the late 1930s leading up to the war in 1945 made the exaltation of the individual seem increasingly irresponsible, hence unethical. The economic crisis of 1936, repressive and exploitative colonial policies that denied Vietnamese people their rights and dignity, the looming spectre of war and famine, all helped expose the futility, even irrelevance, of a focus on the self’s inner world and the naivété of the utopian reforms espoused by Trần Lực Văn Đoàn. Vietnam in the early 1940s was experiencing major social and political problems that demanded real, practical solutions, but the problems portrayed in romantic novels (i.e. the clash between the individual and tradition, or unfulfilled personal dreams)
were affecting only a small number of Western-educated Vietnamese. The two million (or about ten percent of the Vietnamese population) who died in the 1945 famine exposed much more immediate issues facing Vietnam: political and economic disasters, as well as spiritual and physical demise as a result of foreign rule. Individual freedom was a valid demand, as those who had just discovered it recognized; but perhaps a better time for it would be when all Vietnamese were living in a country free and independent from outside interference and domination. The teachings of the previous generation of revolutionaries such as Phan Bội Châu and Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, who urged greater social responsibility in these times of need, were still resonant in the hearts and souls of most Vietnamese. Additionally, more and more people were realizing that the social and nationalist revolution called for in 1940s' Vietnam demanded the action and unity of the majority for the social good, if Vietnam was ever to emerge from the darkness of colonialism. Thus, when faced with a choice between dwelling on personal issues and searching for ways to unite and stand up, most educated Vietnamese to whom this choice presented itself felt that now was the time to exercise their social responsibility, and that the personal could wait. Theirs was not too hard a decision at the time, given that the recent experiment with individualism had ended rather disappointingly. Moreover, many educated Vietnamese in the 1930s and 1940s may have benefited from a French education, but, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, they also grew up with a traditional Vietnamese awareness of the lý of national sovereignty and of the prime virtues of trung and hiếu, which underscored duty to both the family and the nation.

Against this background, various political parties emerged and started, often in competition with one another, to recruit members, seeking to convert potential candidates
to the party’s ideology in the process. One of the parties, Đại Việt (Great Việt), had among its leaders Nhật Linh and Khải Hưng, the romantic authors, respectively, of *Breaking the Ties* and *Butterfly’s Heart Dreaming for an Angel* discussed earlier. The party that proved in the end to be by far the strongest and most organized, however, was Hồ Chí Minh’s Indochina Communist Party (founded in 1930), which formed the nucleus of Việt Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi (Allied league for Vietnam’s independence), a broad front founded in 1941 and increasingly known by its shortened name Việt Minh. At first, Nhật Linh and his group called for a social revolution without considering the problem of political power, stressing “social thought,” a life based on idealism, egalitarianism, the “new” and the “progressive,” and individual freedom. They condemned Confucianism and advocated Western “scientific methods” in the building of athleticism, the mind, and character (Woodside, *Community* 88). Once they set their sights on political power, however, Nhật Linh and his group promiscuously courted support from divergent groups. They secretly negotiated with the Japanese when the latter had some interest in forming a puppet Vietnamese government. At the same time, they sought support from China and the Allies, actively collaborated with various anti-Japanese Vietnamese factions with ties to the Chinese, and for some time flirted with the Việt Minh. Nhật Linh’s party’s maneuvering earned them the distrust of all the parties involved (Jamieson 180). Furthermore, although Nhật Linh and his group had followers among the urban middle class, they encountered major problems in mass organization, and their alliances with the other factions were at best uneasy and fraught with power disputes, as his own brother admitted in reminiscence (Tường Bạch Chapter 19). Their main problem, according to Woodside, was that “only a minority of Vietnamese
intellectuals were ardently willing to embrace science and organization and individualism without showing even the slightest deference to what might be called the familiar plots of Vietnamese culture and of Vietnamese personality development" (88). To a large extent, the failure to organize and acquire large followings was thus proof of the Vietnamese rejection of Nhât Linh and his group's extremism. Ironically, while romantic writings of the 1930s instigated revolutionary latencies among the educated, specifically in opposition to outdated feudalistic customs and beliefs, the failure of leading romantics in the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn to satisfactorily resolve the tensions between the "old" and the "new," or to offer a concrete, decidedly superior social or ideological model as a rallying tool, helped to explain the success of their arch rival, the Việt Minh. The feeling of dead-end despair and alienation romanticism brought at its decline would, in addition, prepare Vietnamese intellectuals psychologically for the Việt Minh’s model of the revolutionary supervillage.

In the early 1940s, having refined their ideological stance, the Việt Minh succeeded as no other faction did, thanks to their ingenious grafting of national liberation and Marxism-Leninism as revolutionary tools onto a renewed version of the Vietnamese traditional institutions of family and the village. The spread of the Việt Minh’s influence was accomplished in no small part through the writings of its growing members, which together made up a revolutionary literature. The revolutionaries at first published underground and circulated their works only among the supporters, but in time grew to prevail in the countryside as well as in resistance zones near the border with China and in the Southern swamps of Đồng Tháp Mười and U Minh. Revolutionary writings at this time comprised mainly political tracts, the circulation of which was
limited in French-occupied areas due to the heavy-handed suppression of the French. However, the revolutionaries’ efforts were significantly aided by Vietnamese social realists who published legally throughout Vietnam in the 1930s and 1940s, who in turn benefited from the global rise of proletarian literature elsewhere in the world. These Vietnamese social realists may or may not have been members of the Việt Minh at the time, but had all joined the revolutionary ranks by 1945, as had most of the romantics. Social realists contributed significantly to the rise of a leftist revolution in Vietnam since their writings decried the French colonialists, the debauched native bourgeoisie, and the corrupt, tyrannical village officials and landlords who were acting as the colonialists’ compradors. The important achievements of social realism as a literary school and a revolutionary impetus merit consideration in the following section, in which some of the best known social realist works of the 1930s and 1940s will be examined.

Between 1935 and 1939, the victory of the Popular Front in France made possible the growth of social realism and the re-surfacing of leftist philosophies, thanks to a comparative relaxation of censorship. Soon, realism was overtaking romanticism in the literary arena. The emergence of realism immediately started a heated debate over “art for art’s sake” versus “art for the sake of life,” or in other words, the needs of the individual versus the needs of society. Specifically written to argue for the “art for the sake of life” stance are Sông Hồng’s “Là Thi Sĩ” [To be a poet] and Nguyễn Công Hoan’s Cô Giáo Minh [Miss Minh, the schoolteacher].

Sông Hồng [red wave] is a pen name of Dăng Xuân Khu, a revolutionary who was to be better known as Trường Chinh, Party secretary general of the DRV in the 1950s and again under the SRV in the late 1970s-1980s. “Là Thi Sĩ” (1942) is a parody
of Xuân Diệu’s celebration of the heart as the only legitimate source of poetry in “Cảm Xúc” [Feeling], discussed earlier in this chapter: 39

If “to be a poet is to be lulled by the wind
To dream with the moon, and drift with the clouds,”
To have his soul hung upside down on the boughs
Or softly swayed and drooping like a willow;
If to be a poet means to wince and blubber,
To beg for God’s mercy,
His soul lost in every which way,
Weeping incessantly like cicadas in summertime;
If a poet is absorbed in describing
“White breasts” trembling in passion,
Trading life for dreams and unearthly love,
Drowning in grief for flowers and gems;
If to be a poet is to spread an elegant brocade
Over the sores of tyranny in decay,
Straining to sing sweeter and louder
To cover the groans of the people’s distress,
The cry of the laboring people’s long pain,
Then, oh my friends, such a poet
Is a curse to the whole human race!
He is tormenting his own heart while wasting the springtime of youth
Extolling brutality and praising injustice
Bending his knees before power in the poor servile hope
Of catching a whiff of the droppings of the rich,
Lulling the people with obsession and lust
So they will continue living under the yoke of slavery.

Reminiscent of what Phan Bội Châu and other revolutionaries of the previous generation considered a responsible poet should be, Sống Hồng proclaims:

To be a poet is to be true, pure, brave,
Firm-willed, to have purpose and fire,
To sing to freedom, progress, and love
For mankind, peace, and justice.

............................

He must free all the ardour and power of his heart
To bring again to his people's dark winter the courage of Spring.

............................

Seize the pen to cast down the world's tyrants
Turn rhymes into bombs and verse into grenades.

............................

Stop crying with the wind and whining with the clouds.
Let us march on the road to progress.
Light up with the clear beam of verse
The gangrene that devours our land.
Your verse together with peasants' hands
Shall plow the furrows for a splendid future.
If “Là Thi Sĩ” was a poetic rebuttal of the “art for art’s sake” argument, Cô Giáo Minh (1936) is an attack in prose on the kind of individualism advocated by Tự Lực Văn Doàn. Minh, a schoolteacher, faces the same conflicts as Loan in Nhật Linh’s Đoạn Tuyệt. Coming from a very similar social and educational background as Loan’s, Minh is also forced to marry against her wishes and suffers from similar clashes with her husband’s traditional family. Determined to get away from the worsening situation she is in, Minh arranges for her own transfer to a province outside of Hanoi. On her departure, she starts to have second thoughts, however. “Should I really follow European ideas and smash an Asian family?” she asks herself. Memories of a happy childhood come back to her, making her realize that running away is the easiest thing she could do, but not necessarily the best. It is selfish and self-defeating, since it would put a bad name on “the new,” of which she is a representative. In the end, Minh chooses to stay with her husband’s family and devotes herself to promoting mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation between the “new” and the “old” elements in the family. The mutually agreeable conciliation and co-existence of the old and the new to the benefit of both that end the story are Nguyễn Công Hoan’s way of rejecting Nhật Linh’s Western, extreme individualism as divisive, short-sighted and immature. “Whether one follows the old or the new, the goodness of the person is what is important.”

Many readers (and, increasingly, many romantics themselves) came to concur with Nguyễn Công Hoan that simply “breaking the ties” with tradition did not present a satisfactory solution to the problems of individual estrangement, or to the need for an organized community. The Tự Lực Văn Doàn’s philosophy of individualism was so extreme as to be “outside society,”
as a critic of Nhật Linh’s wrote (Woodside, *Community* 88). It was, at the very least, unrealistic.

From 1935 onwards, social realism overshadowed romanticism in both quality and popularity. Although it did inspire excellent poetry by satirists such as Tù Mơ and Đồ Phốn, social realism was at its best in prose (both fiction and non-fiction). To the evolution of the prose novel as a genre, the realists added local color and colloquial language, which transformed the upper-class settings and often stilted language of romantic prose. The most influential prose writers of the period include enduring names such as Ngô Tất Tố, Nguyễn Hồng, Nguyễn Công Hoan, Nam Cao, Tam Lang, Hồ Biểu Chánh, Bùi Hiền, Tô Hoài, Phạm Duy Tồn, Mạnh Phú Tư, Đỗ Đức Thu, Nguyễn Tuân, and Vũ Trọng Phụng. Generally from less affluent backgrounds than the romantics, social realists were often themselves first-hand witnesses and victims of what they would later describe in their writings: social ills, the pauperization of the peasants and the working class under Vietnamese lords and French colonialists, their miserable working conditions, and bourgeois snobbery. Soon, realist writers and Vietnamese intellectuals in general began to identify and to seek culpability for the social problems of the swelling poor, their bleak economic conditions, prostitution, drug addiction, alcoholism, and injustice. It is this social awareness and the subsequent attribution of these social evils to the problem of colonialism that finally transcended Vietnamese intellectuals’ political consciousness.

Of realist literature, the works of Nguyễn Công Hoan, Ngô Tất Tố, Nam Cao, Nguyễn Hồng, and Vũ Trọng Phụng topped the list of those that had the most impact on the Vietnamese reading public. Nguyễn Công Hoan (1903-1977) is considered one of the four greatest short story writers of Vietnam (the other three are Thạch Lam, Nam Cao,
and Ngô Tất Tố). He began writing at a very early age, publishing his first story *Quyết Chi Phiêu Lưu* [Set for adventure] at the age of 17. A prolific writer, Hoan contributed to Vietnamese literature some thirty novels, more than two hundred short stories, and dozens of essays and articles. His first-rate short (sometimes very short) stories reconstruct a panorama of life in Vietnam when colonialism was co-existing with feudalism. Hoan's trademark feature is his sardonic humor and expert use of irony as a primary tool. The subjects of his attacks are the cruel, corrupt and depraved French and mandarins, the insolent, pillaging landlords and village magistrates, and the mercenary, debauched bourgeoisie.

Among the most illustrious of Nguyễn Công Hoan's stories about Vietnamese peasants is a short piece entitled "Tinh Thần Thể Dục" [The spirit of sports]. In the 1930s, French colonialists discovered that sports could be used to distract the attention and energy of young Vietnamese males from nationalist activities. Consequently, great efforts were put into making athletic competitions a regulation, and spectatorship enforceable by fines. In "Tinh Thần Thể Dục" (1939), Nguyễn Công Hoan satirizes this policy and reveals how the promotion of sports, impractical and ridiculously irrelevant, adds yet another burden on the impecunious peasants. At the opening of the story, administrators of Ngũ Vong precinct have just received orders to round up one hundred peasants under five flags for a soccer match at the district stadium. The peasants are ordered to put on their good clothes, clap their hands repeatedly, and walk in straight rows to please the distinguished guests. The story is then played out through several vignettes. Before the big day, the village chief goes about with a big bamboo rod to announce the order. A hired hand futilely appeals to the chief's mercy that his family will
have nothing to eat if he misses the day’s work. A woman begs in vain to replace her sick husband. An elderly woman resorts to bribery so a paid relative can go in place of her son who is getting married on the same day. At five a.m. on the big day, only eighty-two peasants are present. Village guards are ordered to find the eighteen who fail to show up. They succeed in capturing a hapless hider, who is taking shelter with his little boy in a haystack. Poor Cô is immediately trussed up and marched to the village yard. Despite all attempts, the guards still fail to round up the required number, however, for a few ingenious people have fled to other villages or taken refuge with sympathetic neighbors. In the end, the village chief is resigned to shepherding off the pack of unenthusiastic peasants, “keeping a vigilant eye over them as if watching over prisoners. ‘Damn their ancestors! Show them a soccer match and they take off as if fleeing combat!’”

Hoan’s satire exposes most effectively not only the coercion, but also the hypocrisy of the colonialists, who champion sports not for the ostensible benefit of the Vietnamese, but for their own exploitative agenda. As it was to be with the Americans later, the result is a pervasive irony due to a mismatch (and abuse) of Western ideals and Vietnamese actual desires and cultural practices. The use of exact hours (Vietnamese peasants at the time did not have clocks or watches, and conducted their daily activities according to the angle of the sun) and the “scientifically-calculated” quota of peasants to be marshalled for the soccer match predict American scientific efficiency, extensive use of war machines, and the kill ratio or tabulations of “secured” strategic hamlets later employed in what Americans call the Vietnam War. The tyrannical Vietnamese officials, who work for the colonialists against their own compatriots and who carry out imposed
Western ideas in an oddly feudalistic manner, were to find real models in America’s protégés such as the Ngô Dinh family.

Another realist, Ngô Tất Tố (1894-1954) first achieved his reputation in another new genre, documentary feature-writing (reportage). Like Nguyễn Công Hoan and other Vietnamese realists of the time, Ngô Tất Tố was deeply concerned with the desperate situation of Vietnamese peasants under many levels of oppression. His most important fiction work, *Tắt Đèn* [Without a light] (1937), which will be examined next, was developed from his earlier documentaries on the pauperization of the peasants under French rule. If Nguyễn Công Hoan relies on irony to highlight the misery of peasant life under capricious colonial rule and indifferent Vietnamese officials, Ngô Tất Tố employs objectification in *Tắt Đèn* to underline the dehumanization of the rural poor.

By the 1930s, French policies had reduced large numbers of Vietnamese to dire poverty. In order to finance their expanding enterprises and grandiose programs, the French forced Vietnamese peasants to do prolonged, unpaid corvée labor and imposed on the Vietnamese people numerous crushing taxes, both direct and indirect, through state monopolies on certain necessities. Among the most ludicrous taxes was the “body” tax (*thuế thân*), forced on Vietnamese adult males from age eighteen for simply being subjects of colonialism. But even more dreaded than the taxes themselves were the techniques of tax enforcement, which generated serious abuse and corruption (Ngô Vĩnh Long, *Before the Revolution* 61-82).⁴¹

Amid this background of ruinous taxes, forced labor, and oppressive law enforcement, Anh Dậu, the breadwinner of a struggling family of five, fails to accrue enough money for his body tax. He is consequently arrested, trussed up with ropes, and
left exposed to the harsh, beating sun. Unable to see her malaria-stricken husband thus tortured, Chữ Dậu, his wife, is forced to sell her dogs, her meagre yams (the family’s only provisions), and her oldest daughter to meet the official bail set for his release. The village chief pockets the money Chữ Dậu has just painfully acquired but refuses to release her husband on the pretext that the Đậu’s are still owing tax on Anh Đậu’s brother, who has been dead for almost a year, but whose name is still in the tax book. Pushed to the wall, Chữ Dậu fights back against the pompous, threatening tax collectors in order to rescue her fainting husband. She is subsequently brought to the village yard, where the district chief is presiding over several trays of delicacies. Seeing Chữ Dậu’s beauty, the chief demands that she be brought to the district jail for his pleasure. Once again, Chữ Dậu fights back and is fortuitously freed thanks to Madam District Chief’s jealousy. Out of jail, but still owing her brother-in-law’s tax, and having nothing left to feed her ailing husband and two small children, Chữ Dậu is reduced to seeking work as a wet nurse in a rich family far away from home. Too soon, however, she is sexually harassed by her employer. The end of the novel sees Chữ Dậu fleeing her employer’s house “into a night as dark as her own future.”

The novel is a compelling portrayal of the various evils poor peasants faced in Vietnam at the time: the greed and cruelty of the landlords, who enrich themselves by lending money to impoverished peasants at cut-throat rates; the nastiness, corruption and opportunism of village officials who ride on the peasants’ backs as compradors for the exploitative French; and the depravity and pomposity of the pseudo “educated” upper middle-class who submit to the French for profit. The story advances through a series of climaxes, leading the main characters inexorably to eventual despondency. In order to
highlight the dehumanization of the peasants, Ngô Tất Tố ironically juxtaposes the personification of inanimate objects and the objectification of their human owners. Thus, in the Dậu house, “the cheesecloth blinds, torn around the edges, and the coarse bamboo screen in the middle both endeavored to give some privacy to the room. But the gaping crevices on the door frame and the holes on the screen stood out as if to confess that besides an old, decrepit bamboo bed, there were only a chipped water vessel and a mended jar inside.” In the kitchen, “the chipped clay lids lying exposed as if laughing at the idle, sprawling pots” (Chapter III). The residents of the house, by contrast, are likened to animals. Besieged by financial grievances, made even more grievous by the village chief’s daily menace for the body tax in the last few days, “Anh Dậu had been running around like an ant on a scorching pan, blindly searching for escape” (Chapter III). Because of the unpaid body tax, “the collectors roped the wretched chap up the way country folks did a dog soon to be butchered,” the pain making “his face screwed up like that of a trapped rat” (Chapter IV). Anxious to free her husband from the killing sun and ropes, Thị Dậu is bargained down by Madam Representative (MP), who curses the Dâus’ daughter for not eating dog food: “Hey, I’m telling you, you don’t deserve my dogs’ leftovers! The dogs could sell for ten piasters. I’ve bought you for just one. So stop acting superior around me!” (Chapter XIII). Selling her daughter, her dog and a litter of puppies all for a total of two piasters and twenty cents (the tax is 2.70 piasters), Thị Dậu is finally left with only ninety-two cents after paying twenty cents for the sale contract, and one piaster for the notary seal while being bilked eight cents by the avaricious Madam Representative. The despair leaves her “rigid like a piece of wood, not knowing what to say” (Chapter V).
So successful is Ngô Tất Tố’s description of the details of rural life, the customs, habits and language of country people, and the anguish that befell the peasants that many scenes and utterances from Tát Dên have persisted into the realm of the proverbial. For example, in cases of stinginess, people often recite Madam Representative’s “I have already counted. There are fourteen pieces [of meatloaf] left. I’ll kill you if any of them is missing” (Chapter V). To mock the servile worship of foreigners, many people use Mr. Representative’s “Don’t be so rustic. French clocks are never wrong” (Chapter VI). When the bureaucracy, corruption and cruelty of (village) officials are mentioned, there is no saying better than the village chief’s “Even dead people shall not avoid the government’s tax! Who told him not to die before last October?” (Chapter XIV).

If Nguyễn Công Hoan and Ngô Tất Tố dealt with the effects of taxes, arbitrary rules, corruption, abuse of power, and other distresses heaped on the peasants by the colonialists and their local henchmen, Nam Cao (1915-1951) and Nguyễn Hồng (1918-1982) focused on the moral (and physical) depravation of the poor and the oppressed in rural communities that no longer offered economic security or emotional comfort. In Bì Vô, Nguyễn Hồng described the deterioration of morals in the cities as well.

Nam Cao’s Chí Phèo of the title is at the bottom of the village society. An abandoned bastard, he is found at the village kiln one winter morning and sold to a childless peasant. After his adopted father dies, he spends his teenage years eking out a living as a hired hand. It is bad enough to live in poverty, but the depravity and cruelty of the rural rich drive Chí Phèo to an even lower level: that of a drunkard and a small-time criminal with no hope for a better life. At twenty, Chí is commissioned to perform massages on the highly-sexed third wife (bà Ba) of the semi-impotent, then lý truông
(village chief) Kiên. The honesty and naiveté of a peasant and a fear for the rich deeply inculcated in the underprivileged combine to render him unresponsive to bà Ba’s sexual demands. Caught between bà Ba’s frustration and lý Kiên’s jealousy, Chí is sent to jail with no charges for eight years, at the end of which he returns to the village a reckless tough. Lý Kiên is now bà Kiên, one of the most influential and wealthy officials in the region. He has come to understand that

it is unwise to oppress the people until they have to leave the village. Out of ten of those who leave, nine will come back as ruffians, with the kind of insolence learned in far away places. A wise man squeezes only half way. Secretly push them into the river, then bring them back so they can repay the debt. Bang the table for five piasters, then toss back five hào “because I feel sorry for you being so poor!” Moreover, it pays to squeeze the right people. The relatively well-to-do with beautiful wives and children—they are the ones easy to intimidate. By contrast, the homeless with no family to speak of are easy to kill, except what is there to gain but bones? [. . .] He has since learned that, in rural areas, the poor break their backs to feed the magistrates, but sometimes the magistrates are forced to grit their teeth and provide for those who are poorer than the poorest, simply because they are reckless.

As it is unwise to “squeeze” a homeless tough like Chí Phèo, bà Kiên uses him. Chí is thus paid to collect debts, destroy property, or throw the occasional rice wine bottle onto a farmer’s land. The villagers suffer while Chí turns to alcohol to drown the purposelessness of his life and to rack up the courage for further, similar activities. When he drinks, he curses—anybody from the villagers to his own parents. He feels revengeful,
without knowing who the culprit is for his state. One day, Chí meets Thị Nở, the ugly, simple-minded spinster in the village. The care of a woman opens his eyes, for the very first time in forty-odd years, to the happiness of a simple, honest life. But Thị Nở’s aunt opposes her liaison with Chí because of his notoriety. Drunk and desperate, he seeks out bá Kiến, demanding: “I want to be an honest man!” Derided by the unluckily obtuse Kiến, who believes people can always be bought, Chí stabs Kiến to death before turning the knife on himself. His suicide ends a life that knows no love, sympathy, or even decency. However, the image of the village kiln reappears at the conclusion of the story to suggest that the vicious circle of poverty, exploitation and lack of dignity does not end with Chí’s death.

“Chí Phèo” (1941) marked the height of Nam Cao’s art as a short-story writer. The characters’ speech is such an accurate record of the peasant language in North Vietnam and their psychology is so well developed that not only have the main characters become classic metaphors and allusions in the Vietnamese language, but their names have been used as verbs, adjectives, or common nouns ever since (e.g. “Chí Phèo” means “to get things one otherwise would not be able to by behaving recklessly, as if with nothing to lose;” while “Thị Nở” is synonymous with “ugly as sin”).

Like Chí Phèo, Bình in Nguyễn Hồng’s Bi Vô (1936) has become a symbol of human corruption. An innocent, fresh country girl, Bình is abandoned by a smooth-talking urban clerk when she becomes pregnant. Unable to face her parents’ hurtful insults and the looming punishment by the villagers, Bình flees for the city in the vain hope of reuniting with her lover. In the city, she is nearly raped by another clerk, whose wife arranges with the corrupt police to put her in a brothel. Financially and physically
exploited by coarse, lewd clients and an avaricious madam, Bình sinks into a most sordid life until rescued by a thug with the alias of Nam Sài Gòn. The happiness of being cared for is short-lived, however. Nam Sài Gòn is jailed for his crimes, and Bình soon becomes, out of necessity, a bà vò (slang for a woman pickpocket). Similar to Chí Phêo, the country girl in Bình cries out for a simple, honest life. She tries to persuade Nam Sài Gòn to quit his trade and start a new life away from the city. But it is easier for a jailbreak criminal like him to dive deeper into it than to get out. Events later lead them to mistakenly murder Bình’s own lost son for the gold chain he is wearing, for which they are finally executed. The novel is a blunt tale of how goodness and innocence are corrupted as much by the debauched urban well-to-do as by poverty and people’s indifference.

The social realists’ attacks on the urban middle and upper classes culminated in Vũ Trọng Phung’s Só Đố [Dumb luck], first published in serial form in Hà Nội Bão (Hanoi Newspaper) in late 1936. A sardonic caricature of Vietnamese urban society in the 1930s, Só Đố follows the meteoric rise of a vagabond, Red-Haired Xuân, to socialite and national hero. When the novel opens, Xuân is working as a ballboy at one of Hanoi’s tennis courts which have sprung up as a result of the sweeping Europeanization movement among the urban bourgeoisie. Arrested for peeping at a French woman in the changing room, Xuân is rescued by a widowed me Tày, Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer, who plans to take advantage of his lasciviousness. He is then put to work at the tailor shop of Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer’s niece, Mrs. Civilization. “Just like that, Xuân became a member of the movement for social reform” (64), and the social elevation of the street-smart hawker begins. Although Xuân is unable to comprehend the ideas behind those Western “movements” that the Vietnamese bourgeoisie of the time are so fond of,
he very quickly catches on the terminology and the advertising techniques required to promote them. His rise is amply aided by the wish of the people around him to conceal his lowly background for their own benefit. Xuân is catapulted to doctorship when the Civilizations need a quack to accelerate their Grandpa’s death so they can inherit his money sooner. A private tennis court is built so Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer can occupy Xuân as a tennis “professor.” In the end, Xuân conspires to put in prison two Vietnamese tennis champions, and replaces them at the critical match with the champion of Siam. At the government’s request for diplomatic reasons, Xuân accepts defeat, is awarded several medals of honor for it, and is hailed as a national hero. His lucky streak continues when he is happily embraced into the Civilizations’ family by marriage to Mr. Civilization’s “modern” niece.

The novel is a crushing verdict on the follies of the Vietnamese urban society in the 1930s. From the nouveaux riches who make their money prostituting themselves to foreign powers, to the upper and middle classes with their pseudo-intellectual Western fads, or the now impoverished and ineffectual old-school scholars, to the opportunistic working class, Phung spares no one, men or women. The commercialization of what once was a spiritual life is a prominent theme in Sóc Đồ. The monk Tăng Phú is thus presented as a businessman soliciting donations in an aggressive manner. Also among the novel’s many objects of ridicule are the snobbish, pretentious modernists, who advocate utopian reform. Mr. Civilization is described as a “revolutionary within the prevailing legal framework,” who hopes to “radically reform society without being jailed or executed” (76-77)—an obvious caricature of Nhật Linh and those who fancied themselves to be
revolutionary, but who continued to benefit from consorting with the French and, later, the Americans.

It is clear from the novels and short stories of the period leading to the August Revolution in 1945 that Vietnamese society was disintegrating at a dizzying pace in both the village and the city. Social chaos and decay became the order of the day, and in the fast changing Vietnamese society of the 1920s-1940s, lowly characters like Xuân could fool their way to the top of the society by employing the signifiers of success, such as ostentatious language and arrogant manners.

The development of Vietnamese literature from the onset of French colonialism to 1945 corroborates the conclusions of many historians in the West regarding the “hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese. Alexander Woodside, in particular, argues that, by the 1940s, the two distinct, yet ultimately inter-connected Vietnamese national aspirations that had become all-consuming were resistance against foreign domination, and the search for a new organized community. The resentment against French rule that had been alternating between simmering and boiling points now demanded a more radical outlet than simply verbal protests, and the unraveling of traditional society required a new, yet-to-be-determined model on which to build the future of the nation.

Romantics succeeded in highlighting the tensions between traditional Vietnamese society and democratic tendencies as espoused in the West. As such they contributed to the Vietnamese awareness of the need for a social revolution that would move the nation forward, as opposed to a return to the pre-colonial past. However, romantics failed to offer practical solutions to the most pressing social and personal issues for a majority of Vietnamese. The despair in the wake of romanticism instead highlighted the importance
of an organized community for Vietnamese revolutionaries seeking the strength of unity, as well as for sensitive intellectuals disappointed by their experiences with romantic individualism and a fragmented society.

The social realist literature that succeeds romanticism exemplifies the empowering appropriation of a literary school initiated by French avant-garde writers such as Anatole France and Emile Zola. Vietnamese social realists pointed at colonial rule as the original culprit for many of the social evils and injustices the Vietnamese in both rural and urban societies of the 1920s-1940s were experiencing. French colonialists imposed a repressive and exploitative rule on the Vietnamese people, of which the ridiculous obligatory sport spectatorship in "The Spirit of Sports" and the body tax in *Without a Light* are but two manifestations. In the process, the colonialists supported corrupt, tyrannical village oligarchs, whose potential abuse had traditionally been checked by their dependence on the peasants for their very authority and maintenance, but who were now acting for the colonialists, and given free rein to exercise their power over Vietnamese peasants. These oligarchs, moreover, worked in tandem with a class of greedy, abusive landlords to form a second, native yoke on the rural poor. In *Tất Đänn*, for example, Representative Quế is a cruel, avaricious landlord whose "buffaloes, cows, chickens, and pigs secured him a seat in the Parliament" (Chapter IV) in pursuit of further riches. Bà Kiên in "Chí Phèo" is another example of the scheming, exploitative, and corrupting landlords-cum-oligarchs in village society. In the city, social and moral chaos and decay prevailed in every walk of life, as Vũ Trọng Phùng's hyperbolic *Số Đo* makes evident. Later Marxist critics may criticize Phùng for overlooking the revolutionary potential of a portion of enlightened intellectuals and the revolutionary power of the
working class. But it is impossible to deny that, together with other leading social realists such as Ngô Tất Tô, Nam Cao, Nguyễn Hồng and Nguyễn Công Hoan, Vũ Trọng Phụng contributed a significant part to setting the course for a revolution against both colonialism and its appendage of Vietnamese followers and imitators. Stylistically, irony and satirical humor became most effective weapons for Vietnamese social realists. These literary tools invited readers to look at the different manifestations of colonialism, and at the same time masked what would otherwise be punishable as criticisms of colonial rule. The prevailing sarcasm was also indicative of the writers’ disillusionment and bitterness at the common plight of the Vietnamese as a people under colonialism.

Finally, it is interesting to note how intimately literature is wedded to politics in the case of Vietnam, where there is a time-honored tradition of scholars’ involvement in government and revolution. Like generations of scholars before them, writers of the period between 1930-1945 were fervently engaged in politics when it became clear that nobody could stand aloof from the nation’s destiny. One by one, most of the romantics and social realists, including most of the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn writers, joined the Việt Minh. The few exceptions included Nhât Linh (Nguyễn Trường Tam) and his brothers, who formed a rival party for the same dual purpose of freeing Vietnam from colonial rule and creating a new society. These writers would later migrate South in 1954, but, under Ngô Đình Diệm’s repressive rule, became reclusive and unproductive in both their writing and political activism.

From the prewar literature examined in this chapter, it is obvious that writing did not conflict with participating in a political cause for Vietnamese writers. In fact, there was a strong correlation between literature and the people’s political consciousness and
zeal. Many Vietnamese writers became political activists as a result of the heightened social awareness their own writings brought them. Subsequently, as these writings were accepted by large audiences, the writers were able to powerfully incite their readers to political activism. Considering the lively interaction between literature and politics in Vietnam, and the profound influence of the scholar/writer/administrator on the political awareness of the literary-minded Vietnamese, it becomes increasingly evident that the literature of the Vietnam War itself should illuminate some of the most debated issues about the war.
CHAPTER III: THE JUST CAUSE—THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF THE LEADERS

The Vietnam War has defied neat explanation as no other war in modern history. Some thirty years after the collapse of the RVN, U.S. discourse on the war still shows disparate views on the American involvement and/or the nature of the Vietnamese factions embroiled in the conflict. In 1965, McNamara’s foreign policy specialist John McNaughton quantified the reasons for sending American soldiers to war in South Vietnam as:

70%—To avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor).

20%—To keep SVN (and the adjacent) territory from Chinese hands.

10%—To permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life. (Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie* 535)

Yet, as late as 1993, American scholar Neil Jamieson still argued that the “anticommunist stance was a legitimate one” (318), and that, therefore, the RVN represented *chinh nghĩa* [the just cause].

As Chapter Two has shown, by the 1940s, the Vietnamese were preoccupied mainly with national independence and the search for an organized community that would effectively lead Vietnam not only to freedom and self-determination, but also to social progress and harmony. By the August Revolution in 1945, the Vietnamese had largely polarized into two opposing blocs: those who fought the French for Vietnam’s independence under a broad-based movement led by the Việt Minh; and those who were purportedly striving to achieve the same goal by collaborating with the French. By all accounts, supporters of the Việt Minh, both active and in spirit, made up the large majority of the Vietnamese population, if the multitude of Vietnamese writers to join the
Viet Minh is any indication. The subsequent division of the country into North and South at the 17th parallel by the world powers at the Geneva Convention in 1954 was arbitrary and initially merely geographical. Even as the division was supposed to be only temporary, it went against the wish of practically all Vietnamese, as the memoirs of the Vietnamese on both sides examined in this chapter affirm. However, for its own purposes, the United States government violated even this arbitrary Geneva Agreement and attempted to make the division political and permanent by creating the RVN, a client regime in South Vietnam, and installed its protégé of Ngô Đình Diệm, a Catholic with no popular base in Vietnam, as the president. From that starting point, the appellation of a "Vietnamese government" in South Vietnam and American propaganda of its own mission of "democracy" and "freedom for the Vietnamese" formed the ideological basis for the American invasion of Vietnam, which officially dated from 1965, when U.S. marines were sent in country to rescue the embattled RVN, supposedly at the latter's request. Confused by their own misleading labels of "North Vietnamese," "South Vietnamese," "non-Communists," and "Communists," Americans were shocked to discover that the majority of the South Vietnamese did not want them there, that many of those South Vietnamese they were supposed to help were actually trying to kill them, and worse, that their ally was unacceptably corrupt and despotic.

During the war, the RVN and the NLF utilized the same terminology (e.g. "nationalist," "just cause," "revolution," or "democracy") to rally the people to their respective causes. Further, reading the contesting literatures about the Vietnam War coming out of both Vietnam and the West, it occurs to me that most people, Vietnamese and Americans, use terms such as "Communist," "democracy," or "nationalist" as if these
terms were somehow self-explanatory. In fact, injudicious use of these terms has resulted in a great deal of confusion among many Americans. For example, it led to miscalculations of the RVN's ability to win popular support, or to the American impression of the notorious "Vietnamese untrustworthiness" or "political/ideological flexibility"—for those who spent time in Vietnam could often cite numerous incidents that attested to the seemingly speedy "change of hearts" among the local civilians as well as among members of their own indigenous ally. Aptly alluding to this confusion, Marilyn Young in *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* describes the war as a "zone of contested meaning" (314). It is my intention, therefore, to help clarify some of the confusion by examining the arguments of Vietnamese leaders on both sides of the battle.

This chapter will compare and contrast memoirs by Nguyễn Thị Định and Trương Nhựt Tăng on the NLF side with those written by Trần Văn Đơn and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, who represent the RVN. The comparison will follow four ultimately interconnected concepts that are most often employed as well as contested in writings about the Vietnam War: "nationalism," "communism," and "freedom/democracy."

Upon examination, all the leaders appear to be invoking the lý-tinh paradigm and its moral corollaries as the implicit foundation of their arguments in the memoirs. However, the RVN leaders encounter inherent contradictions because the very nature of their regime runs counter to the lý of nationalism. Their arguments end up being not only lacking in tinh, but circular and incoherent in both form and content. Meanwhile, convinced of the lý of their position, the NLF leaders notably highlight the tinh dimension of their organization. Their memoirs are markedly different from those of their opponents in the emphasis on interpersonal relationships. The resultant perception of a
mutually supportive and caring community of dedicated, selfless revolutionaries explains the NLF's success: the revolutionaries' strength is grounded not only in the demands of history, but in the depth of Vietnamese culture.

Of the thousands of books on the Vietnam War, three American texts are of particular importance to my reading of the memoirs. They are Frances FitzGerald’s *Fire in the Lake*, Neil Jamieson’s *Understanding Vietnam*, and Alexander Woodside’s *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*. These three texts all combine an analysis of Vietnamese history and politics with observations of Vietnamese society and culture. Their insights into the war from a cultural and socio-political point of view have led to their widespread influence on American discourse on the Vietnam War. In turn, my reading of the Vietnamese texts discussed in this chapter will enable a reassessment, from a Vietnamese point of view, of the validity of the arguments the three above scholars advance.

“Nationalism”

The first contentious term to be discussed is “nationalism.” In *Fire in the Lake*, Frances FitzGerald writes:

At the beginning of the American war in Indochina certain American scholars of Vietnam argued against U.S. support for a regime in Saigon on the grounds that the Communists had already “captured” the forces of nationalism. Their intentions were to defend Ho Chi Minh, but their argument merely hardened the semantic paradox created by the administration officials who defined “Communism” and “nationalism” as mutually exclusive terms. “Nationalism” in
Vietnam did not wait like a brass ring to be “captured” by the most energetic pursuer: it had to be created. After seventy years of French rule in the north and ninety years in the south, even the idea that it ought to be created was not shared by all Vietnamese. “Vietnam” had, after all, disappeared. [...] Many Vietnamese were “nationalists” in the sense that they looked forward to the disappearance of French rule, but few conceived of the creation of a nation-state and only one group succeeded in organizing on a national basis. Regionalism, class interests, or a traditional outlook defeated the rest of them. Because the French decided to contest Vietnamese independence, these defects showed up very plainly at the moment of engagement. Among all the anti-colonial political movements, only the Viet Minh actually created a “nation” strong enough to defeat the French armies. Apart from the specific political organization the Viet Minh made from the society as it emerged from French occupation, “Vietnam” was no more than a theory. (65-6)

However, many other historians have discussed the Vietnamese deep-running awareness of their own nation’s history of nationalist resistance against foreign invasion and domination. Over what the Vietnamese claim to be four thousand years of history, the struggle against foreign invasion and domination had become a defining feature of Vietnamese identity, pride, and heroism, the way the frontier defines American culture and history as a whole. Vietnam as a political entity may have been dissolved by the French colonialists, but the Vietnamese nation as an imagined community (to use Anderson’s phrase) is, as Woodside puts it, “one of the longest enduring acts of faith in human history” (“Vietnamese History” 27). The literature examined in Chapter Two
certainly demonstrates that this national history of resistance was deeply lodged in Vietnamese tradition, and that, again, it was the book-loving Vietnamese scholars/writers who kept alive over the years “the most meticulously preserved memory” (30) of the injustices and losses their people suffered from the hands of foreigners. In fact, reinforced by the literature written during the period of French colonialism, nationalist resistance made up the lý element in Vietnam’s struggle for independence in the twentieth century, capable of commanding “profound emotional legitimacy” (Anderson 4) in the Vietnamese consciousness.

But it is equally clear from the same literature that Vietnamese identity and self-confidence underwent a crisis during confrontations with the West in the early twentieth century. The Vietnamese belief in their own superiority was seriously fractured after the country’s conquest by the French “barbarians” and the failure of the early resistance. By 1945, almost a century of French rule had created a class of dependents, economically and mentally, on the colonial regime (Woodside, Community 9-13). Woodside points out that the children of the well-to-do and upper-classes of Vietnam were trained in French-founded “superior schools,” the function of which was to “produce servants, not leaders—to produce competent Vietnamese subordinates who could serve the colonial system and the French administrators who controlled it” (296). In their mission civilisatrice, the colonialists even attempted to erase Vietnam’s historical memory by teaching Vietnamese students in French schools that the Gauls were their ancestors. Paradoxically, the colonialists simultaneously imposed a double-tier system of values in Vietnam in which Vietnamese, no matter how educated, had to answer to even the lowliest of Frenchmen. Over time, many Vietnamese growing up this way acquired what
may be called an external locus of control, manifested by a "generalized obsequiousness to foreign standards" (Woodside, *Community* 297) that inhibited creative thinking as well as a sense of responsibility for their own fate. Woodside discovers that this "holdover from the colonial period" (297) persisted among the RVN intelligentsia with the arrival of the Americans. FitzGerald observes that the same was true with RVN officials in the Diệm government: "Under the colonial regime the French had exercised the only initiative, the only authority. With their departure the old-line functionaries seemed to lose all powers of forward motion" (117). In contrast, the "discovery of a transcendental 'righteous cause' (chinh nghiã)" transformed members of the same French-educated class who made up the Việt Minh and its successor, the NLF (Woodside, *Community* 299). That righteous cause is motivated by nationalism, which, as Anderson proposes, is "capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations" (4). In their struggle against foreign forces, the Việt Minh’s (and the NLF’s) identification with the people of Vietnam and the realization that they would have to carry out this revolution on their own as a mass organization (albeit external assistance would always be appreciated) enabled them to shake off the servant mentality and to effectively internalize their locus of control. In August, 1945, as the Axis armies were surrendering over the world, Hồ Chí Minh led a national uprising to overthrow the Japanese and the French Vichy regime throughout Vietnam, and declared the country free and independent from Western domination. Supported by the majority of the population, the Việt Minh formed the first independent Vietnamese government since the French invasion.
In the 1940s, Tô Hữu, a revolutionary who was to head the Literary Association for National Salvation in the Việt Minh, describes his transcendental discovery of the righteous cause of national salvation in the poem “Từ Áy” [Since then]:

Since then summer light has burned in me,
The sun of truth has imbued my heart
And my soul has become a splendid garden
All scent and chirping birds.

I link my mind with other minds,
My love flows a hundred ways
My soul mingles with multitudes
Side by side, we’re creating life.⁴⁶

The poem speaks of the poet’s transformation into an active participant in a like-minded community for the goal of “creating life” from the dearth of colonialism. The “truth” (chấn lý) that Tô Hữu credits for the transformation is derived from the lý of nationalism, and meant to extend to the công lý (justness) of the revolutionary cause.

In fact, much of the Việt Minh’s appeal came from their ability to weave the lý of nationalism with the other aspects of the lý-tinh paradigm to successfully project their cause as the embodiment of the umbrella đạo lý, or morality, something which is not necessarily associated with politics or ideology in the Western mind. As we shall see, Trương Như Tăng’s account of his first meeting with Hồ Chí Minh, the “turning point” (16) in his life, illustrates the profound effect of the combination of the lý, tinh, and đạo lý dimensions that Hồ personified. Tăng was “hardly alone” in being powerfully affected
by this combination. He observes that “Hồ had had a galvanizing effect on almost all the Vietnamese students in France” (16), who represented the essence of the contemporary Vietnamese intelligentsia. Thus, it is not a coincidence that the conversion to the Việt Minh cause of both of the NLF leaders examined in this chapter should be explained in terms of the lý-tinh paradigm and its moral virtues.

The author of *A Vietcong Memoir*, Trương Như Tăng speaks for a class of French-educated cosmopolitans with privileged economic and social backgrounds from South Vietnam, who formed a large part of the NLF’s original leadership. One of the founders of the organization, Tăng served as minister of justice in the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG), the NLF’s administrative organ, from its inception in 1960 until 1975.

As a boy, Tăng received from his beloved grandfather moral lessons in the five Confucian virtues and the two “unshakeable necessities: protection of the family’s honor, and loyalty to the nation” (4), or trung and hiếu. At the same time, he attended the prestigious French Lycée of Chasseloup Laubat in Saigon, where his father, an affluent business owner from an old, wealthy family, was a professor. Growing up ensconced in this “family cocoon” of “spiritual and material abundance” (4), Tăng was not aware of his “Vietnamese identity” (5) until he encountered puzzling but stinging discriminations from his French schoolmates at the Chasseloup Laubat. However, shrouded by a colonialist education that glorified the civilization of “nos ancêtres les Gaulois” (5) like many of his contemporaries, Tăng was not to learn of the root of French colonialism in Vietnam, nor of Vietnam’s long history of resistance to foreign domination, until he met Hồ Chí Minh in 1946 while studying in Paris. Immediately, Tăng was struck by
the imperturbable dignity that enveloped [Hồ] as though it were something tangible. I [Tăng] had never thought of myself as a person especially sensitive to physical appearances, but Hồ exuded a combination of inner strength and personal generosity that struck me with something like a physical blow. He looked directly at me, and at the others, with a magnetic expression of intensity and warmth. (12)

Tăng’s feeling of warmth was substantiated when Hồ, with the “same effortless communication of wisdom and caring with which [Tăng’s] grandfather had personified to [him] the values of Confucian life,” began to inquire after the personal and family history of each of the Vietnamese students gathering there at Montmorency. Hồ then extrapolated the students’ blood family with the “great family of Vietnam,” and said, gently but with great intensity, “[. . .] You must remember, though the rivers may run dry and the mountains erode, the nation will always be one.” To Western ears such phrases may have sounded artificial. To ours [the Vietnamese] the simple sentimentality was evocative. (12)

What Hồ said to the students at Montmorency in 1946 later formed one of his most famous sayings:

*Ngôn Việt Nam là môt.*

*Đàn tộc Việt Nam là môt.*

*Sông có thể cạn, núi có thể mòn,*

*Song chẩn lý dố không bao giờ thay đổi.*

(Vietnam is one.

Our Vietnamese people are one.

Rivers may go dry; mountains may erode.
But this truth will never change.)

The lý of nationalism is here invoked as a truth (chân lý) and an appeal to the Vietnamese to struggle against foreign forces that kept Vietnam divided. At Montmorency that day, Hồ was in fact educating the students in the lý of the revolution against foreign domination, ignorance and poverty when he talked about “the proud traditions and history of [their] ancestors’ struggle against the Chinese and the Mongols, [. . .] [and] the heroes who had defeated these invaders: Tran Hung Dao, Le Loi, Nguyen Trai, and Quang Trung” (14). He also encouraged the students “to study and learn and to contribute to the national family” (13). As Tăng remembers it,

It was a message that combined ardent and idealistic nationalism with a moving personal simplicity. Hồ had created for us an atmosphere of family and country and had pointed to our own role in this great patriotic endeavor. Before an hour had passed, he had gained the heart of each of us sitting around him on those steps in front of Aubrac’s house. (13)

Tăng’s account of his meeting with Hồ illustrates the combination of tradition with revolution, and of lý and tinh with dao lý and công lý:

[Hồ] had done it all in the traditional Vietnamese manner with which we felt so comfortable, with touches of light humor, legends, anecdotes, and moral tales to amuse and instruct at the same time. It had been another Sunday with my grandfather at one of his educational sessions, but with a difference. Grandfather’s text had always been morality. Hồ’s was politics and revolution. (15-16)

This powerful combination of lý, tinh, and dao lý converted Tăng into a believer:
That afternoon [. . .] brought together the separate fibres of my *training and emotions*, whose unity I had never before been able to see clearly. The values of *learning and virtue and loyalty* to the nation had somehow been crystallized for me into a whole. I could see how they fit together, and I began to make out, however dimly, the shape of my own future as a fighter for *independence*. (16, emphases added)

Hồ’s lesson at once put into perspective the indignity Tăng had suffered first-hand from his French schoolmates, and showed him how to combine the “values of learning and virtue and loyalty to the nation” by using his knowledge, as Hồ advised, “to build the future of our country and the happiness of our people” (16). In the five years following his meeting with Hồ Chí Minh, Tăng was to discover his Vietnamese identity, and his understanding of the *lý* of Vietnamese nationalism was to deepen:

I had arrived in France a superb product of the French colonial system and its *mission civilisatrice*. Paradoxically, life in the French capital had imbued me with an understanding and a love for my own country far deeper than I had previously known. After five years I was at one with my Vietnamese identity, with the history, the national culture, the Asian soul of my country. (26)

Delving into political science, he discovered the economic background to French intransigence and how the British fear for their own colonial empire spurred them to support France’s reestablishment of colonial claims in Vietnam after World War II. Recognizing the “contradictions between France’s democratic ideals and her imperialistic motives,” Tăng was also struck by the “complete absence of support among the democracies for the colonized and oppressed peoples” (21). Gradually, his understanding
of his ancestors' heroic past, as well as of colonialism and of the West's indifference to
the fate of his people led Tăng not only to his decision to partake in Vietnam's nationalist
resistance, but more importantly, to the belief that it was possible and ethical to resist. As
Tăng recalls,

Everything that I knew and that I had seen in Vietnam—the French
administrators, the privileged position of French families, the poverty of the
countryside, the racial bigotry—all began to appear in a new light. It suddenly
dawned on me that these things were not [emphasis in original] part of the natural
order of the universe. On the contrary, there was a single cause, a comprehensible
pattern that was amenable to analysis. The subordination of the Vietnamese nation
to France could be understood as a historical and social phenomenon, and it could
be fought—if one had the right tools [emphasis added]. (18)

The awareness that foreign domination went against "the natural order of the universe,"
or in other words, against lý, and therefore could only result in injustice (or lack of cỏng
lý) transformed Tăng from an impassive "product" of colonialism into an active
participant in Vietnam's struggle for independence. He then started agitating for
Vietnam's independence from France.

General Nguyễn Thị Định initially headed the Women's Association for
Liberation, and later became deputy commander of the People's Liberation Army, the
armed forces of the NLF. Coming from a poor, landless peasant family in the South of
Vietnam, Mme. Định arrived at revolution by a very different path from Trương Như
Tăng's. Known in the West as the official memoir of Mme. Định, No Other Road to Take
is in fact a recorded oral history of her life as a revolutionary until 1965; as such, it is also
very different from Tăng’s memoir in several ways. But, like Tăng’s, Mme. Đính’s recount of her conversion to the revolutionary cause is framed in the familiar paradigm of lý, tinh, đạo lý, and công lý.

Early in the story, Mme. Đính tells how the history of Vietnamese resistance came to her, condensed in the verse novel, Luc Văn Tiến. The novel was composed by Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (1822-1888), one of the great patriots and certainly the most popular and revered scholar/teacher/writer of the South in the late nineteenth century (see Chapter Two of this dissertation). Following the title character’s struggle to remain true to moral virtues, Luc Văn Tiến contains a strong message of “humanity, kindness, filial piety, courage, determination, and loyalty” (Đính 25). The quote from the novel, which was sung by Mme. Đính’s mother, is apparently Luc Văn Tiến’s avowal of hiếu (filial piety), but it can also be linked to the virtue of loyalty to one’s nation:

“In the Netherworld, if your soul is blessed with power,

Mother, please be aware of your son’s sincere feelings.

All around me, rivers have their sources and trees their roots.

You bore me in your womb for nine months

And my gratitude and debt to you is boundless.” (25)

The “Mother” in the second line refers to Văn Tiến’s blood mother who has just passed away; but it also recalls the phrase “đất Mẹ,” or Motherland. Additionally, the sense of moral debt in the last three lines echoes a Vietnamese saying, “Uống nước nhớ nguồn” (remember the source when you drink the water), which is often used in conjunction with trung, or loyalty to one’s nation—the word for “water” and that for “country” being homonyms in Vietnamese.
Even as a little girl, Mme. Ðình was greatly influenced by such patriotic and righteous poetry. The persuasiveness of Nguyễn Đinh Chiêu’s verses was all the more effective because they were written by a man who lived the life he preached. In real life, the poet urged noncollaboration with foreign invaders and sacrifice for a just cause, and popularized the Buddhist belief of “nhan qua” (causality), in effect a kind of natural justice when good and virtuous people will be rewarded, and the bad and the wicked will be punished. Such poetry as Luc Văn Tiến had since childhood cultivated in Mme. Đính a sense of justice (công lý). She learned to hate “those [. . .] who abused their power, position and wealth to harm honest people like Văn Tiến and Nguyệt Nga” (25). Later on, her sense of justice was brought to bear against the wicked landlords who were bringing “miseries and poverty to [her] family and other families at the time” (25). The hen she had been raising, which Muôn, the village landlord, greedily consumed as a bribe for putting off his collection of the rent Mme. Đính’s family still owed him for a ricefield lot, became in her young mind a symbol of the loss of công lý for poor people like herself. The incident, Mme. Đính implies, was to lead her to “make revolution” (27) against social injustice, embodied in the enemy of her class, the wicked landlord. When she learned that her beloved older brother Ba Chấn was making revolution, she “began to understand and to firmly believe that making revolution was a good thing [that is, ethical], since [her] brother continued to do it even though he had been jailed and beaten up for it [by the hated landlords who were now also canton officials]” (27). Later, Mme. Đính’s realization that the lack of công lý was ultimately caused by the colonialists, who preserved and enforced the power of the landlords, was to tune her in to the lý of nationalism.
In the same manner that Tăng’s nationalistic sentiments empowered him, Mme. Dính’s awareness of lý fostered a sense of responsibility for her own actions and destiny. She might have been just “a girl” (27) from a peasant family with little formal education, but Mme. Dính nevertheless chose not to wait passively for peace and prosperity to come, but to “make revolution” to precipitate them. Different as they were in their backgrounds, both Mme. Dính and Tăng had arrived at the same conclusion: there is “no other road to take” but to fight for Vietnam’s independence against colonialism and its abuses.

It is also clear that for Tăng as for Mme. Dính, the past functions as a link to the present. The history of Vietnamese struggle against foreign invasion and domination plays an important part not just in the two memoirs under discussion, but in all Vietnamese nationalist war literature, for it serves to demonstrate the link of lý between the twentieth-century resistance against the French and later the Americans, and that of historical heroes such as Hai Bà Trưng (the Trưng Sisters), Lê Lợi, Trần Hưng Đạo, or Nguyễn Huệ (King Quang Trung) against the Chinese and the Mongols. Consequently, appealing to a history that all Vietnamese as a people understand and take pride in helps to establish the resistance against the current French and American interference and domination as continuous with that past, thus grounding the Việt Minh/DRV/NLF in Vietnam’s time-honored nationalist tradition.49 A major source of strength imbuing the nationalists with a sense of continuity, purpose, and identity, history also presents Tăng and Mme. Dính with an ethical foundation. Implicit in their accounts of history and of traditional moral virtues is the revolutionaries’ argument that not only was the cause they were to join in accord with the lý of nationalism, but, in seeking to reverse the injustice
(lack of công lý) they and other Vietnamese were suffering, the revolutionaries were putting into practice the moral virtues (dao lý) inculcated in them since childhood.

Positioning themselves as resisters of foreign domination, the nationalists convey a strong sense of their identity as Vietnamese, which they consciously seek to define and highlight historically and culturally. By aligning their cause with Vietnam’s proud past, the nationalists not only reassert their Vietnamese-ness, but also tap into a formidable source of collective power. Just as trees take nourishment from the roots and rivers flow from their sources (Đính 25), the nationalists were to draw strength from this “historical self-confidence” (Woodside, “Vietnamese History” 16) for a revolution that was to take on, somewhat paradoxically, nature’s power of renewal. In short, the lý of nationalism forms the core of the compelling paradigm of interwoven tinh, dao lý, and công lý, which upholds the NLF leaders’ sense of the justness of their cause. Stylistically speaking, this paradigm serves as a thematic thread to coherently piece Mme. Đính’s experiences together in what would otherwise have been just a series of events. The same paradigm maps the trajectory of Tằng’s life as a revolutionary, as well as informs his decision to leave Vietnam when he perceived that the postwar leadership no longer represented the revolutionary cause for which he and so many other Vietnamese had fought.

Given that most Vietnamese of the 1920-1945 period shared more or less the same cultural heritage (and its crises), it is not surprising that the memoirs of the RVN leaders also cite Vietnam’s historical past to corroborate their claim of lý, and ultimately, of representing the just cause. However, their position of collaboration with the colonialists, who were then succeeded by the Americans, contradicts Trần Văn Đôn’s and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ’s assertions of lý, and renders their subsequent claims of morality and
justness unstable. While the memoirs of Nguyễn Thị Định and Trương Như Tăng illustrate how the paradigm of lý, tinh, dao lý and công lý acted as the transcending impetus behind their opposition against malignant foreign powers, the RVN leaders’ memoirs are mired in a language of passivity and victimization, which explains their failure to appeal to a broad popular base.

Trần Văn Đơn, ARVN general since the 1950s, minister of defense in 1963, and RVN senator from 1967-75, was born in France of Vietnamese parents with French citizenship. His father came from a humble family of hired boatmen, but, helped by a kind French doctor in his studies, eventually became a wealthy doctor and landlord who owned “some 2,700 acres of rich rice-paddy land in Long Xuyên in the lush Mekong Delta” (3). Under the French and the Americans, Đơn’s father became the first “mayor of Saigon (1949), and ambassador to London (1951) and Rome (1953-7)” (4). Written after the 1975 collapse of the RVN, Đơn’s Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam, as an attempt to rationalize the RVN’s defeat by the NLF and DRV, reveals the narrator’s passivity and disclaims his responsibility for the failures of his own regime.

“By birth […] a French citizen and later an officer in the Army of France” (1), Đơn nevertheless cherished being a Vietnamese nationalist. His memoir opens with a moment of Vietnamese nationalistic impulse, ironically while he was standing “at rigid attention” (1), saluting the French tricolor flag at a French military academy outside of Hanoi. Tears in their eyes, Đơn and a Vietnamese friend swore that they would “from now on dedicate [their] whole lives to serve only one country, Vietnam, and to defend only [their] own national colors in independence and freedom” (1). The friend later
answered Hồ Chí Minh's call and became an effective guerrilla leader. Đơn continued on the “Western side” (10) with the French colonialists and later, the Americans.

Given the intimate relationship between his family and the French, in light both of Đơn’s father’s gratitude to his French patron and of the benefits Đơn’s family later acquired thanks to the French in Vietnam, it is not hard to understand just why Đơn should remain with the French. In his memoir, Đơn views French rule as having “both positive and negative aspects, as my own life so clearly shows” (8). Đơn’s explanation of French colonialism reveals a dubious stance, as we can see from his use of broad, misleading, generic terms referring to the people of Vietnam, which reflects his shallow understanding of colonialism, subsumed in yet another of his broad generic terms, “the West.” As he says, and I will italicize the generic terms and insert their intended meaning in brackets:

_The Vietnamese_ [all of them] benefited greatly from French advances in science and technology, health services, modern farming methods, [. . .] and the encouragement of industrial and business development. _Our youth_ [all Vietnamese youths, symbolizing Vietnam’s future], including myself, learned of free enterprise and social justice, and respect for Western democratic principles. _We_ [all Vietnamese, or at least all youths] also attended French schools, learned the French language, and came to realise that _we_ could compete favorably with Westerners in a variety of disciplines. As a by-product of all this education and _example_ [colonialist example?], many of _us_ became political militants, prepared for the coming struggle against oppression. _We_ [all Vietnamese?] learned from
France herself, not the French colonialists, that we should fight to better the lot of the underprivileged and to recover independence and national unity. (8)

Two things are evident from the confusing generic terms and curious assessment of colonialism in this passage. First, Đôn identifies himself with a minority of Vietnamese who formed a privileged class under the French (e.g. the landlords, the officials, and the collaborating bourgeoisie) and who, as the prewar literature shows, more often than not caused additional misery to the rest of the luckless Vietnamese population. Second, Đôn mistakenly extrapolates the interests of his class of collaborators to the Vietnamese population at large, whose two million dead of starvation in 1945 should be a clear indictment of the "benefits" of colonialism. This position conflicts with his later revelation of the detriments of colonialism, and of the indignity and despair (in other words, the lack of công lý) the majority of Vietnamese felt under French domination and oppression:

[Under the colonial regime] racial discrimination was practiced universally. The native Vietnamese were represented either poorly or not at all, and thus could not articulate their legitimate aspirations. Many Vietnamese functionaries were better qualified to fill positions in the government than the Frenchmen who held them, but these locals were excluded. We were deprived of essential liberties by a prying, arbitrary police network which was aided by courts that systematically denied accused persons elementary rights of defense. [. . .]

Agriculture and mining were financed almost entirely with French capital and directed by French technicians, with the greatest benefits going to the French, while local manpower was exploited and mistreated. A Vietnamese youth could
go to France [...] and graduate from a university with a first-class diploma, only to find when he returned to Vietnam that he would be given a menial job, subordinate to a semiliterate Frenchman who had never completed high school.

Economic development always involved what benefited France and her French colonialists, not the Vietnamese. Vietnam was kept [...] dependent on the mother country[...], both as a source of raw materials and as a captive market for French manufactured goods. (8-9)

Dôn’s confusion about his identity, and about the nature of colonialism (the intransigence of which Trương Như Tăng understood perfectly), led him to contrary conclusions about his own political stance. On the one hand, he observes that a “less short-sighted administration could have predicted the eventual outcome of these restrictive policies, but it took raw armed force to shock the French and the rest of the world into the realities of the situation” (9), and “signs [of] nationalist sentiment and sub-rosa resistance were everywhere to be seen but failed to have any effect on the unseeing French” (10, emphases added). On the other hand, he chose to “work with the West toward Vietnamese independence” (10).

To rationalize his stance, Dôn attempts to characterize Vietnam’s history as one of internal conflicts and northern invasions, so as to prepare the reader for his (implicit) argument that the war to come was an internal, civil war of two equal factions, and that the “invasion” would come from the north of Vietnam.

As a schoolboy, I learned that my ancient country had a rich tradition and desire to be independent, but had been beset over the years by factional disputes internally and by invasions from China externally. Periods of warfare between
competing royal factions had been interspersed with periods of Chinese domination, when the nation had united to throw out the northern invaders. (8)

The fact is, “invasion” could not come from inside of Vietnam, as Đôn irrationally implies, but did so from France in the West, as Đôn himself admits earlier (8). Nor were the two factions (the Việt Minh with their large popular base, and the French collaborators, who constituted a small minority) ever equal, either in number or in the validity of their respective claim of the lý of nationalism. As Đôn’s account of the origin of the RVN makes evident, the regime’s status vis-à-vis the French (and later the Americans) completely refutes Đôn’s claim of nationalism.

Initially, apparently aware of the lý of nationalism, and possibly out of the wish to identify with the winners, both Đôn and Kỳ tried to join the Việt Minh. Đôn was rejected and Kỳ deserted. 50 Without hesitation, both went straight to the other side and enlisted with the French colonialists. As Đôn recalls, “We were told we were not worthy to join them [the Việt Minh], so as the only choice open to us as young military men, we joined the newly released French troops under [Colonel Jean] Cédile [of the French High Commission and Administration of Colonies]” (32). This obvious flip-flopping should have warned the Americans of the kind of leadership the RVN was to have. Lacking in popular support, the minority group Đôn calls “non-communist nationalists” (21) was weak and disorganized, composed as the several little parties were of fading romantics like Nhật Linh, cynical non-participants like Bảo Đại, or opportunists and Việt Minh rejects like Kỳ and Đôn themselves. 51 Motivated by self-interest and having no clear, viable ideological vision binding them together, these parties were fraught with discord and power struggles from within, and could not even “manage to agree on programs of
action or leadership;” consequently, they were in no shape to compete with the Việt Minh (Đơn 22). Blaming their “lack of cohesion and mutual trust” on “the ‘divide-and-rule’ tactics of the French colonial administration” (22), Đơn and his partners paradoxically assumed Western mastership, instead of trying to create their own popular base and “stand on [their] own feet” (180). Having read Machiavelli, Talleyrand, Clausewitz and histories of the First and Second World Wars and understood the “economic background to French intransigence” and lack of support for the colonized (Tăng 21), Trương Như Tăng had come to realize that the only way to achieve independence was for Vietnamese to unite and wrestle it from the claws of Western powers. Đơn, however, lacked a similar understanding, and persistently hoped that, somehow, the French colonialists would miraculously “grant” Vietnam her due independence, even though this hope had been disappointed time and time again (28). The RVN leaders’ collaboration and compromise only facilitated their continued servility to those Đơn calls “our French masters” (3).

What Đơn could not admit is that the RVN members’ collaboration with the French can be easily accounted for by self-interest, as opposed to genuine nationalism. The NLF leaders suffered a great deal of personal losses for their nationalistic endeavors. Trương Như Tăng was “not only completely cut off from the parental love that had enveloped [him] for [his] entire life, but also [left] without a sou for food or rent” (24). He later lost two marriages and his children due to long separation, and eventually his health due to the adverse conditions of life in the jungle. Mme. Đinh braved arrests, tortures, the deaths of her husband, brothers and mother, and separation from her only son. Đơn and Kỳ, on the contrary, continued to receive salaries from the very French colonialists they allegedly wanted to topple. Claiming to be nationalists, Đơn and Kỳ
nevertheless at times reveal in their memoirs that opportunism motivated the RVN cause and their participation in it. Đôn explains his running for the RVN Senate in the following words:

I think it is appropriate at this time to explain my political activities and what I was trying to achieve through them. As I explained during a previous chapter, when I saw my military career coming to an end during the last few months of Nguyen Khanh’s erratic reign, Kim, Xuan, and I organized an import-export business called DOXUKI. Events quickly proved that Xuan and I were not cut out to be businessmen, so he bowed out and I became a silent partner, leaving Kim to run the business, which he did successfully until 1975.

I am not sure exactly what pushed me toward politics; maybe the urgings of many friends; maybe a chance to further serve the country in a new way; and probably a desire to be a little in the limelight. (177)

Ky, ever someone who speaks his mind, cites the power of the dollar in his “plea [. . .] to a mighty nation [i.e. the U.S] which believes above all in freedom, and is prepared, as it always has been, to back up its beliefs with a check. Let it [. . .] be an open check” (124). In fact, the main contention of Đôn’s and Ky’s memoirs is that the two foreign masters should have given them the carte blanche in whatever they wanted to do, and paid for their expenses without asking for anything in return. Ky, for example, devotes a whole chapter to rationalizing aid without “strings,” arguing that “the American elastic band was [. . .] too tight” (119). Their goal being “a check” from “mighty” foreigners, it is no wonder that Đôn and Ky voted for Western forces who were trying to “maintain colonial control of [Vietnam]” (Ky 11). Not only can self-interest explain why Đôn, Ky,
and other RVN leaders would bow to the French and Americans for support, they also account for the infighting that would advance these “nationalists” to RVN leadership. Independence or not, they would put up with indignity after indignity from their foreign “masters.” As a corollary, they would also tolerate the injustices these foreign forces dealt the Vietnamese people as a whole.

Out of their subordination to “mighty” foreign powers, on the receiving end of the feeding line, and having neither intention nor capacity to support themselves, Đôn, Kỳ and others on the RVN side found themselves having little control in their negotiations with France, and later, the U.S. Here, Frantz Fanon and Frances FitzGerald help expose the nature of collaborating regimes similar to the RVN. As is the case in other colonized countries over the world, a privileged minority of foreign collaborators would be engaged in politics as an “intermediary between the foreigners and the natives” (FitzGerald 300) of the colonized country. The purpose of this collaborating intermediary is

not to organize the people against the foreigners, but to manipulate the foreigners for its own ends, using the threat of the discontented masses as its means of leverage. It demands independence for the country, but it cannot produce it, for its interests lie not in building a nation but in assuming exclusive control over what the foreigners have created. Granted independence, it will attempt to continue to act as an intermediary with the foreigners and to defend its own exclusive entrée into the trade market, the higher educational system, and the government bureaucracy. (300)
Calling themselves nationalists, Đôn and Kỳ nevertheless reveal in their memoirs the RVN's servant status when they protest against indignity in the language of the victim, marked by passivity and ineffectuality.

On the origin of the RVN, Đôn recounts the fate of its early version, the CochinChinese Republic. Meant as a counter to Hồ's DRV, this "local government" was established by the French and operated totally under their direct control. The president of this "government" was Dr. Nguyễn Văn Thịnh, a French citizen with a French wife much like a combination of Đôn and Kỳ. Thịnh's, like Bảo Đại's and other "Vietnamese governments" erected by the French and Japanese, was, as the involved collaborators themselves called it, "only a puppet government" (20). The French did not even pretend to be subtle in their snubs:

[Thịnh] had to use his own house as both office and official residence because the French gave him insufficient means for getting his work done. They did give him an official car, but the license plate was marked with five zeros in order to make him an object of ridicule. (34)

Enduring such insults, Thịnh was still, in his own words, "not [...] enough of a puppet for [the French]," so they sought to replace him with more "complacent" ones (34). Upon the news, Thịnh hanged himself.

In March 1945, the CochinChinese Republic was passed on to Bảo Đại. At the end of World War II, Japanese forces surrendered while the French in Vietnam were still disarmed. As Đôn reflects:

A great popular insurrection could have been instigated at any moment by militants of any political tendency. But [Bảo Đại's] government was powerless to
act because most of the problems were caused by matters quite out of their control. (20, emphases added)

The Việt Minh, on the other hand, took the initiative—they disarmed the Japanese, kept the French imprisoned and declared Vietnam independent. The DRV was established. Bảo Đại abdicated, leaving the symbolic mandate as the last Vietnamese king to the new government headed by Hồ Chí Minh. Forgetting his own earlier descriptions of Bảo Đại’s puppet government, Đôn now tries to verbally cancel out the Việt Minh victory. But once again, his language in support of Bảo Đại is that of passivity and powerlessness:

The fact that we already had established a legitimate, independent, and unified government headed by Bảo Đại made no difference to the Communists. They, of course, had the weapons and ammunition, so there was not much the Bảo Đại government could do to avert destruction. (24)

Thus, Đôn and his like-minded group stood by and helplessly “watched as the Việt Minh took over[. . .], exploiting daily their successes of August and September, 1945” (26, emphasis added). It is only with French and British arms that the Bảo Đại government was resurrected in Central and South Vietnam in 1946. Again, it was a puppet, powerless government. Đôn blames this powerlessness on Bảo Đại, who had “trouble grasping the significance of ‘independence’ as a concept vis-à-vis the French” (38). Ironically, unlike Đôn, Bảo Đại was sophisticated enough to know (or honest enough to admit) that he was simply a “real whore” for the French, and that his position depended on his very lack of capacity for leadership (Sheehan, Bright Shining Lie 171). From then on, the collaborators engaged in little skirmishes with the French over what they should be allowed to do—and always came out defeated. As Đôn witnessed, Bảo Đại’s premier
once defied the French by proposing a charter warranting Bảo Đại’s government the right to send diplomatic emissaries abroad. The French High Commissioner for Indochina “got quite upset about it” (39) and “threatened to cancel [. . .] the new government.” Xuán was forced to “withdraw the charter provision, which was, of course, a real defeat for him and the new government” (40).

Particularly interesting, given his nationalistic aspirations, is Đôn’s language of the passive inferior, evident on several occasions when he hopes the French would “let [them] organize a separate national army” or “grant [them] authority [. . .] outside French immediate control” (38, emphases added). Similarly, Kỳ later “begged American advisers” (Kỳ 124) to let him take control of the ARVN. Behaving as an inferior hoping for favors from his superiors, Đôn reasons thus about the French veto of the Cochin chinese Republic’s rights to foreign representation:

I think the French erred in this. Had they granted this concession, the Viet Minh position would have been greatly undermined. As it turned out, the French had no intention of letting us operate as an independent country. This event was merely the first real indication. (40, emphases added)

This language effectively nullifies the repeated claims of his league’s supposed fight for independence in the spirit of Vietnam’s heroic history, during which generations of Vietnamese chose to sacrifice their lives to repulse foreign invaders.

The more Đôn invests in the French, the harder it is to defend his position. Realizing, as the above quotation says, that “the French had no intention of letting us operate as an independent country” (40), Đôn and his league still opted to acquiesce, ostensibly (and ironically) for independence from the French. When the Việt Minh
triumphed over the French at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954, and France was forced to withdraw from the north of Vietnam, the same ineffectual “government” that had succumbed to the French colonialists earlier continued in the South under the U.S. with barely a change of personnel. When Ngô Đình Diệm was installed by the Americans to be the president of the RVN, he inherited the very same assembly who had buckled under the French. The flag and anthem adopted by the Bảo Đại government remained unchanged, as if signalling the RVN’s continued servitude to foreigners. The similarities between the relations of Bảo Đại’s government to the French and those of Đôn’s and Kỳ’s to the Americans are pointed out time and time again by Đôn and Kỳ in their memoirs.

Left with little power in their relation with France and the U.S., and at the same time no logical explanation for their subordination to Western powers, Đôn complains that the RVN leaders were in a difficult position. To the French, and later the Americans, if we failed to agree with them, we were either Communists or neutralists [to be removed and outlawed by those foreigners], while to the other side [the Việt Minh and NLF nationalists], by cooperating [with the French and Americans], we became puppets. (10)

Đôn’s confused rationalization of his position toward the French and his victim mentality are typical among other RVN leaders, even the most cocky, as Nguyễn Cao Kỳ’s memoir, Twenty Years and Twenty Days, attests. Kỳ belonged to a group of ARVN military officers nicknamed “the Young Turks,” who succeeded Đôn’s original generation of collaborators. Backed by the Americans, Kỳ acted as RVN prime minister from 1965 to 1967, and vice president from 1967 to 1971.
It seems from Kỳ’s arguments that he is also aware, albeit in a confused and contradictory way, of the appeal of the lý of nationalism against foreign domination. That explains his befuddled account of Vietnamese history during the war against the French, in which he at times tries to include himself in the national struggle led by Hồ Chí Minh, and at other times denounces that very nationalist movement when he is forced to defend his association with what he calls “the Vietnamese government,” as opposed to Hồ’s “Communist” one. This gives rise to dizzying contradictions, such as when he tells Americans that “when the French gave us freedom—or rather when the Vietnamese beat them, and they had to leave—the French gave us aid” (119). It took me quite a while and some rereading to figure out that the pronouns “we” and “us” referred to the various French-staged local governments, while “the Vietnamese” who beat the French so that they had to leave were the genuine nationalists led by Hồ Chí Minh, “a national hero” (17) and “to all of us [. . .] a great patriot” (11) in Kỳ’s own words (also Đồn 21). Likewise, his defence of the minority group of Vietnamese he calls the “Nationalists” flies in the face of the fact that this “nationalist” government was set up and paid for by the same French colonialists he claims to hate. It is simply amusing to see both the terms “Nationalist” and “French-backed Vietnam [sic] government” (18) are actually used to refer to the Bảo Đại government that Kỳ served, while he has just denounced on the previous page the French “plans for a system of phony republics and controlled kingdoms” (17, emphasis added), before going on to inform readers that the very same French colonialists “created a southern Vietnamese military force” which Kỳ joined as an air force pilot. Next, Kỳ tries to extricate himself from the colonialists, saying, “I never did [serve in the French army]. I was trained [italics in the original] by the French, a very
different matter” (17)—although he of course fails to mention that he was also paid by the French. Insisting that the RVN he served was tied to the Americans but not the detested French colonialists, Kỳ later indicts himself by pointing out that the United States helped “the vain French struggle to retain their mastery of our country” (120). Kỳ’s awkward accusation, “How ironical that the Americans backed a loser, even then” (120), underpins a major theme of his memoir—that his American ally is accountable for the RVN’s problems and eventual demise.

Đôn and Kỳ insist that they represent the lý of nationalism (the RVN would call themselves “quốc gia,” or the Nationalists, and their cause “chính nghĩa quốc gia,” or nationalist just cause). Contrarily, neither wants to accept responsibility for their own regime’s failures. Thus, in an attempt to justify the political chaos in South Vietnam in the early 1960s and his own subsequent failure to establish a stable government, Kỳ finds it necessary to blame his American ally for most of the problems the RVN faced. In Kỳ’s words, “The general problem was this: by insisting that the hated President Diem should remain in power for so long and then discarding him so abruptly, the Americans created a political vacuum which only the Communists were able to exploit” (45). The Americans nearly thwarted Kỳ’s attacks on his own troops in Đà Nẵng and Huế during the Buddhist crisis. According to Kỳ, American red tape and bureaucracy turned the hundreds of billions of dollars’ worth of aid money into “sour milk,” as effective in winning the hearts of South Vietnamese peasants as the American-provided “toothbrushes,” battery-operated “lavatories” or “Hershey bars” (123) were in helping farmers who were dying for peace. American presence encouraged black market activities and corruption, turned South Vietnam’s cities into brothels, and destroyed
Vietnamese traditional values. Americans advisors forced on the ARVN their own inappropriate military tactics. At the same time, they tended to promote "lazy" officers, who "[sat] back and [agreed] with everything, as their fathers had politely pretended to agree with everything the French had told them" (128).

In his vigorous attack on his powerful ally for bringing defeat on him, Kỳ reveals that the Americans decided the fate of the RVN army and politics:

The Americans controlled the fighting of the war. American aid financed the country; without which we could not survive. Americans selected or influenced the selection of our politicians and leaders, even at village level, and had a natural tendency to pick the most compliant rather than the most gifted. American culture—its films, television, and advertising—swamped our own. (137)

Kỳ blames the RVN leaders’ lack of initiative on their sudden “independence”:

We [the RVN leaders] were not capable of filling [the political vacuum left by Diệm’s death] because we did not know what to do. We had jumped from being a colony *ruled by the French* to being a country *dependent on America*, and the transition from independence French style to independence American style was so swift that we never had the opportunity to learn the art of governing ourselves unaided and uninfluenced. (45, emphases added)

His “nationalistic” RVN regime, Kỳ declares, held both the “ace [of freedom]” and “the deuce” of not being free:

True, we were not puppets, yet we never achieved the standing or appearance of an independent, self-governing country. The Americans criticized us for not having a highly developed system of government, but how could we have that
when every Vietnamese in Saigon referred to the American ambassador as “the Governor General” [after the French Governor General overseeing Indochina]? [. . .] South Vietnam had been a colony until the defeat of the French, and in many ways, it remained virtually a colony. [. . .] We still lacked our own identity. (137) Naturally, ARVN soldiers found it “hard [. . .] to realize that the Americans were friends, not new overlords” (126), while South Vietnamese villagers believed “they had merely exchanged their French masters for new ones” (124). The assessment of the RVN’s position vis-à-vis the French and the Americans in the RVN leaders’ own words has thus rested the case of “nationalism” insofar as the RVN is concerned.

“Communism”

The terms “communism” and “freedom/democracy” are used by many Americans when talking about the Vietnam War in an attempt to separate their cause from their Vietnamese enemy’s. Instead, the paradigm of lý-tinh, dạo lý and công lý is again implicit in the examined leaders’ accounts of their political choices.

In No Other Road to Take, Mme. Định tells of her first moment of political awareness when she saw the Việt Minh flag and heard the crowd talk excitedly about the presence of the communists in her hometown of Bến Tre province:

All at once many things rose in my mind: hammer and sickle flag, Communism, Phu Rieng. On the way back from the market, I went all the way to the three-way confluence of the Huong Diem river to take a look. I had the vague feeling that the flag was exactly the red piece of cloth that I had seen in my house a few days before. The yellow lines I could not make out now appeared clearly as
the crossed hammer and sickle. I did not understand anything, but felt very happy about what my brother had done. (26, emphases added)

Her beloved brother was arrested a few days later, and brutally tortured by the same landlord Muơn who had earlier deprived Mme. Đinh of her hen and who was now the Canton Chief. When her brother was finally released, Mme. Đinh was eager for an explanation of the whole situation. The reply was to initiate her into communism.

He [Mme. Đinh’s brother] explained to me at length, but I did not understand anything more than that the Communists loved the poor and opposed the officials in the village. My love for my brother and the men who had been jailed blossomed and deepened with such new and significant events. When I remembered the villagers’ comment that the Communists would soon rise up in Ben Tre province, I immediately thought that the time was coming when Canton Chief Muon—the viper of two cantons in Chau Thanh district—would perish. I was very happy and eagerly looked forward for that day to arrive. (27, emphases added)

Mme. Đinh then offered her assistance “with a lot of zeal” (28) to those who she saw were striving to overthrow Canton Chief Muôn and the cruel village officials. It is obvious from the italicized words in the quotations that Mme. Đinh’s perception of communism had very much to do with tinh (feelings, affection), lý (here, the logical connection between events), and công lý (justice). In her young mind, communism was intertwined with her beloved brother, her family, and the community of poor peasants who were being oppressed by the likes of Canton Chief Muôn. And, since her brother was with the communists, whoever they might be, to make revolution to bring justice to
the poor peasants, communism must be “a good thing” (27), or, in other words, moral. This perception of the communists as embracing đạo lý as well as the goodness of tradition is further illustrated by another of Mme. Đinh’s associations, this time with Buddhism, Vietnam’s traditional and principal religion, which extols the moral virtues of honesty, dedication, benevolence and selflessness. As she recalls:

At first, seeing that several of the [communist revolutionaries] were living in the pagoda disguised as monks, I thought that Buddhism and revolution was [sic] the same thing. Besides, my parents were fervent Buddhists, and this influenced me. I imitated my parents and fasted six days a month. Later, I stopped fasting and wanted to join the revolution, but every time I asked to be allowed to go, the people who came to my house said, “If you want to carry out revolutionary activities, you can do it at home, you don’t have to leave and go anywhere to do that” (28)

The revolutionaries’ reply also underlines another dimension of the Vietnamese version of “communism”—that it started “at home,” and as such, involved a sense of the familial, and eventually familism in a revolutionary community.56

Almost two decades before the Việt Minh nationalists defeated the French at Điện Biên Phủ and established a government in full effect (the DRV) in 1954, there was a passionate buổi chiến (fight with the pen) in the Vietnamese literary arena of the 1930s between the romantics, who championed unfettered individualism, and the social realists, who were concerned with larger social issues. The battle culminated in the head-to-head publications of Đoạn Tuyệt (1935) by Nhật Linh (Nguyễn Trường Tam) and Cô Giáo Minh (1936) by Nguyễn Công Hoan, already summarized in Chapter II. In this
dichotomy, Nhết Linh stood for Western-style individualism and rejection of traditional customs and social values. At the end of Doan Tuyệt [Breaking the ties] the heroine Loan leaves her husband’s traditional family, making a clean break with the old social values in order to seek individualistic happiness with her dream lover. While Loan’s struggle against certain outgrown traditional values appealed to some readers, particularly the young and French-educated, many realized that in real life, one could not just sail into the sunset with a dream lover, but had to live among other, tradition-bound people. Moreover, Loan’s total rejection of time-honored traditions was also seen as arrogant, unduly self-righteous, and extremist. Nguyễn Công Hoan, one of the best prose writers in Vietnamese literary history, capped this view with a novel of his own. Cô Giáo Minh [Ms. Minh—the schoolteacher] mimicks the beginning of Loan’s struggle with conservative forces, but offers what the realists saw as a superior ending. The climax has Minh realize that the individualistic happiness considered supreme in Western cultures matters less to her, a Vietnamese, than the satisfaction of building a family where the old and the new live in happy cooperation. She then reconciles herself with the family, and works to have the new accepted by the conservative members while learning from and respecting their traditional values. This solution of a community working together toward harmony and respect, as opposed to an alienating, individualistic happiness, represented a vision of the new society for the realists. That romanticism gave way to social realism in the later half of the 1930s, a period of incubating revolutionary activities, and that all the major social realists and most disillusioned romantics would go on to become active participants in the Việt Minh, can perhaps be taken as indications of the “personality” and nature of the new society this popular resistance movement was to advance. With Cô
Giáo Minh, Nguyễn Công Hoan, a representative for Vietnamese social realists, has thus argued for a Vietnamese solution to a largely imported problem. In the context of colonial Vietnam, when the nation was crying out for independence and a coherent vision for a new organized community, according to Hoan, individualism would be a form of selfishness.

In Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam, Woodside argues that the Việt Minh’s success stemmed from their capacity to build a community which was based on the traditional family, but which transcended the narrow blood family with the lý of nationalism to form a larger community of revolutionaries for the advancement of Vietnamese nation. Hồ captured the essence of this grafting of tradition and revolution perfectly when he urged the Vietnamese revolutionaries to be “trung với nước, hiếu với dân” (loyal to the nation, and observing their filial piety in relation to the people), a lesson which the later professional revolutionaries and ideologues of the postwar period, over-confident of their Party being representative of the nation, changed to “trung với Đảng, hiếu với dân” (loyal to the Party, and observing the moral debt to the people). This amalgamation of tradition and revolution was not always smooth-sailing, as we shall see in Chapter Four of this study, which discusses the representation of the revolutionary Vietnamese woman as embodying the best of both tradition and revolution. However, the Việt Minh was able to project, as no other organizations in Vietnam at the time could, their community of revolutionaries as exemplifying lý, cống lý, tinh, and đạo lý.

This paradigm of lý, tinh, cống lý, and đạo lý not only appealed to the comparatively traditional rural population (as Mme. Đinh’s memoir shows); it also persuaded many Western-educated intellectuals from privileged backgrounds to join the
Viet Minh (and later, the NLF), against the economic interests of their own class, and sometimes, as in the case of Trương Như Tăng, against the wishes of their blood family as well.

It is evident that Tăng is interested in, but also somewhat ambivalent about communism as a social theory. What he first sees in it instead is corroboration for the lý of nationalism. About Marxism-Leninism, he says: “The vogue for Marxism then current among French intellectuals led me to Lenin and to Stalin’s Book of Contradictions. Lenin’s Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism impressed me as an excellent justification for Vietnamese nationalism” (21, emphasis added). On the other hand, Tăng feels affiliated with Western democratic ideals as he saw them, ironically, in France, although this affiliation is by no means binding. If Mme. Đính’s participation in the Việt Minh cause was influenced by direct, personal grievances as a poor peasant under the tyranny of the RVN-favored landlords, Trương Như Tăng’s account reflects thoughts which Americans might find, if anything, to be very much in accord with the desired Third Force they were ostensibly looking for in Vietnam in the early 1950s: national independence and sovereignty, and the construction of a democratic society based on national concord and unity. His nationalistic and patriotic beliefs, shared by many Vietnamese, also advise flexibility and a pragmatic drive for eclecticism in order to achieve this dual goal:

Specifically, I was looking for a government that would strive to reconcile the former pro-French Vietnamese (among whom were my own parents), the various groups of nationalists, and especially the former Vietminh fighters and sympathizers (the overwhelming preponderance of people in the countryside, if
my experience in Chau Doc was any indicator). In my opinion, domestic policies were needed that would move toward building a broad-based, inclusive government, along something like French democratic lines. Also, I was not willing to accept a permanent, hostile confrontation between North and South imposed arbitrarily, either by the major powers (as had happened at Geneva) or by a domestic politician subservient to them. (35)

Nationalism and patriotism being his motivation, Tăng is not set on a fixed ideology, but instead would assist any force that would advance his country. And as my italicization will show, his beliefs are couched in the lý-tình paradigm:

The wholehearted nationalism that had consumed me in France (and that I shared with so many others) was in essence far more a diffuse patriotism than a political philosophy. My personal struggle had been one to realize my Vietnamese identity against the cultural and psychological backdrop of French colonialism. Compared to this, adopting a systematic political philosophy was for me an important but secondary endeavor. My years of struggling to understand the character of Ho Chi Minh had convinced me that at heart his motivations were similar, that the Leninism he espoused was an accretion that served the cause of Vietnamese nationalism. Whatever my political inclinations, I would have been willing to accept almost any regime that could achieve real independence and that had the welfare of the people at heart. (36)

Tăng recalls that in his first conversation with Hồ Chí Minh, the latter “emphasized that [Vietnam’s] struggle was not only against aggression, but against the ignorance and poverty that afflicted our fellow countrymen.”57 According to Tăng, Hồ’s
most famous saying, “Nothing is more precious than independence and liberty” (15), bespoke the centrality of Vietnam’s independence, liberty, and prosperity over any set ideologies in Hồ’s revolutionary agenda. The same nationalism and patriotism make affiliations to any fixed ideology non-binding to Tăng and many other NLF leaders. Following Hồ, Tăng embraces an eclectic, flexible approach to revolution in Vietnam, seeing “no reason that Vietnam [. . .] could not adopt the best from the world’s political and economic cultures” (20). Later, Tăng and his like-minded colleagues in the NLF were to argue for “the primacy of nationalism [. . .] [and] democratic freedoms” (196) over what they saw as “dogmatism” (196) amongst the “Party ideologues” (194) who rose to power after Hồ’s death in 1969: “‘Nothing,’ they recited, ‘is more precious than independence and liberty’—with the emphasis on ‘nothing’” (196). At one point, together with a group of NLF leaders, Tăng states his opinion that “there is no necessary [emphasis in the original] connection between Marxism-Leninism and independence, let alone a causative relationship.” Tăng goes on to quote Hồ Chí Minh that it is “dogmatism [. . .] to ignore uniqueness and to prefer to draw profit from the experience of others—the ‘others’ being Communist revolutions elsewhere” (196). Discussion of the battle between the dogmatists and other NLF nationalists will continue in the last chapter of this study; for now, suffice to say that the NLF, whom Americans and RVN leaders dubbed the Việt Cộng, was not necessarily “communist.” According to Tăng, there were several colorings in terms of ideology among the NLF and DRV. Many of the so-called Việt Cộng were fighting, as Mme. Đinh obviously did, for a better life for themselves and their families, and to rid the country of foreign domination—“simple motives [. . .] uncolored by ideological considerations” (166). There were also “many Front members whose
communism was the thinnest of veneers” (216), and many “Western-educated individuals with generally liberal and democratic (in the Western sense of the term) political principles [. . .] [who] were decidedly not dogmatic people, and [who] had an instinctive distaste for those who were” (134).

The problem is, a truly independent and unaffiliated Vietnam was not what the Americans were interested in, and their Manichean mindset had already dictated a division of the country to thwart the rightful aspirations of those they labelled Communists, whatever that might mean. Consequently, Tăng’s above-quoted specific points regarding a democratic and independent government, representative as they are of truly nationalistic and patriotic aspirations, found little correspondence from either American policy makers or their sponsored Vietnamese henchmen who, for their own self-interests, would try to hammer the rest of the population into submission. In his memoir, Tăng assesses the nature of the Diệm regime as follows:

First, the country had settled into an all too familiar pattern of oligarchic rule and utter disregard for the welfare of the people. Second, subservience to foreigners was still the order of the day. We had a ruler whose overriding interest was power and who would use the Americans to prop himself up—even while the Americans were using him for their own strategic purposes. (65)

The resistance that flared up in South Vietnam was, in Tăng’s opinion, inevitable, as “South Vietnamese nationalists were driven to action by [Diệm’s] contempt for the principles of independence and social progress in which they believed. In this sense, the Southern revolution was generated of itself, out of the emotions, conscience, and aspirations of the Southern people” (68, emphasis added). Significantly, Diệm sought to
overturn these rightful aspirations of the Vietnamese from North to South by coining the term “Việt Cộng,” short for Vietnamese Communists, to refer derogatively to anybody who did not acquiesce to America’s needs and Diệm’s own demands. This blanket ideological term that aimed to replace the immensely popular name of Việt Minh and its powerful associations would eventually confuse American soldiers (if not American politicians) who would find that the people they came to kill were ordinary civilians who had very little to do with their imagined ideological enemy, and most of whom were actually the people of South Vietnam that Americans were supposed to be assisting in their cause against the “Communist North Vietnamese invaders.” Tortured and forced to sign a declaration that he was a Communist even though he was not, Tăng reflected thus on the RVN’s and Americans’ label of “Communist”:

It was part of the regime’s ideology that anyone who opposed them must be a Communist. They could not accept the fact that there might be people who hated them for the travesty they had made of the country’s life, for their intolerance and corruption and cold indifference to the lot of their countrymen. Any opposition, as far as they were concerned, had to have an insidious external source, and they were going to label it for what it was and stamp it out. (113)

Their cause lacking in lý, RVN members and leaders widely resorted to suppressive measures to try to bolster their rule (imposed as it was by foreign powers) among the Vietnamese population, resulting in serious transgressions on ordinary human rights (lack of công lý). What Tăng, Mme. Đinh, and hundreds of thousands of other Vietnamese experienced first-hand in RVN prisons simply reflected the RVN leaders’ disregard of
tinh ("cold indifference") and dao lý ("corruption") in their relation to the general population of South Vietnam.

To offset this bogus government with its modern killing machines (e.g. Kỳ’s American Skyraiders), the nationalist revolutionaries continually honed the most powerful weapon they possessed—the traditional base of lý, tinh, công lý, and dao lý. Ironically, as one learns from the NLF leaders’ memoirs, their participation in the revolution was motivated by a social awareness that approaches communism in its etymological origin: egalitarianism, equal sharing of resources, and ultimately, the emotional security that should accompany a mutually supportive community of moral and selfless members. This would explain why Tằng repeatedly frames his descriptions of the NLF, the community of nationalist revolutionaries, as a big, mutually caring family where the members were bound together not only by the lý of nationalism, but also by their observation of time-honored moral virtues.

Tằng’s reminiscence of his “turning point,” the meeting with Hồ Chí Minh, recalls clearly the lý, tinh, công lý, and dao lý in a context that combines both tradition and revolution, as I have analyzed earlier. Just as Mme. Đính was to experience in 1964, it did not take long for “Uncle Hồ” to “gain the heart of each of us [the group of Vietnamese students meeting Hồ Chí Minh for the first time in Paris]” (13), and “from that afternoon [Tằng] was Ho Chi Minh’s fervent partisan” (16, emphases added). The revolutionary zeal Mme. Đính and Tằng demonstrated came from a “whole-hearted nationalism” that they “shared with so many others” (Tằng 36), although the English word “whole-hearted” fails to convey satisfactorily all the aspects of lý, tinh, công lý, and dao lý that motivated the nationalist revolutionaries. It is only understandable that Tằng
and Mme. Đính should both project the NLF, the revolutionary community these nationalists formed, in the same framework of lý-tinh.

FitzGerald has written at length about what she calls the NLF’s “children of the people” approach, and devotes another section of her book to the NLF organization on different levels. Her analysis of the NLF’s relationships to the people and among themselves, though observant, reveals a Western perspective in which the emphasis is merely on the rationality of the actions.

It is indeed true that the cultivation of interpersonal relationships was valued by the original leaders of the Việt Minh and later the NLF, as Tăng’s reflection on Hồ Chí Minh’s character demonstrates:

Nationalist, humanist, Marxist-Leninist, Machiavellian, Confucianist—these were just some of the aspects of his remarkable character. One undeniable element in his success, though, was his ability to affect people with his humility and personal warmth. My encounter with him at Montmorency was just one example of the impression he conveyed in many far more significant situations. But that occasion exemplified the value he placed on cultivating personal relationships, and it also suggested something about his habitual determination to look toward the future. At the time Ho invited Miss Ly and myself for afternoon tea, he must have been a man in deep despair. The Fontainebleau negotiations for Vietnamese independence were ending in a personal disaster. [. . .] When [positive results] were not forthcoming, Ho knew he faced at least the possibility of his own political demise and at best a bloody uphill war. It was with these thoughts oppressing his mind that he set aside an entire afternoon for two young students
from the South. It is hard to think of another world leader who under similar circumstances might have done the same. (16-17)

Tăng's later view of the NLF's top leadership is quite comparable to his impression of Hồ. Vietnamese nationalists coming from different social and educational backgrounds and ideological views were united as an extended family and motivated for the entire duration of the war by the lý-tình paradigm and its moral corollaries. To Tăng, "the scene at NLF headquarters was like a family reunion" (132). Many members of the NLF leadership and its sister organizations enjoyed a special, deep-running personal bond. As Tăng writes:

Although Vietnamese are often suspicious and inconstant in their feelings toward organizations and institutions, they place great value on personal loyalties and trust. Between the intellectual, upper-class nationalists outside the Front and those within (both Communist and independent), associations ran deep. In the stratified world of Vietnam, many families in the traditionally monied and governing classes had known each other for generations. They had gone to school together, raised children alongside each other, and inter-married. They had incurred toward each other debts and obligations of every imaginable sort. [. . .] Multiply such situations and incidents over an entire social stratum and extend it for generations, and you have some idea of the personal bonds that existed between the people who joined together to form the Alliance and those in their parent organization, the NLF. Under these circumstances, a world of tradition and cultural expectations militated against the likelihood of personal betrayal. (135-6)
This brotherhood (*tinh*) was not reserved only for people within the formal organizations of the Alliance and the NLF, but extended to anybody who saw the *ly* of an independent Vietnam. In fact, it is in the prison cells of the RVN that members of some of Saigon’s best families started to feel a sense of solidarity and brotherhood, the kind of *emotions* that attend on fighting and suffering for a cause. They began to *feel* like revolutionaries. For a number of them, this was the beginning of careers of political activism that the [RVN] government would later have cause to regret. (100, emphases added)

This familial network (both real and symbolic) is heightened by Tâng’s impression of the NLF’s first president, Trịnh Đình Thao, as resembling “someone’s amiable and debonair grandfather” (138). The resulting “phenomenon of nationalist/communist concord” (138), which in Tâng’s opinion can be ascribed in part to the interpersonal bonds between the NLF members, was an “inbred Vietnamese psychology,” which “Kissinger and Nixon did not fully comprehend” (137).

Likewise, Mme. Đinh’s moving reunion with an aunt of her martyr husband’s at the scene of the successful uprising in her home province in 1960 gives the same indication that the large community of NLF nationalist revolutionaries had succeeded, and simultaneously transcended, the boundaries of family blood ties. The result was “self-confidence” (77) and strength of will, as Mme. Đinh concludes:

> In struggling against the enemy, I had come to fully realize that we had to have the strength of the whole forest in order to stay the force of the strong winds and storms. As I thought about the protection and support of the people, about the enormous efforts that the revolution had expanded in educating and nurturing me,
about the countless comrades and beloved people—some of whom I had mentioned but whose names I could never exhaustively enumerate—I felt more intimately bound, more so than ever before, to the road I had taken and had pledged to follow until my last days. This was the road for which I would sacrifice everything for the future of the revolution and for the interests of the masses. For me there was no other road to take. (77)

Frances FitzGerald, however, completely misses the *tinh* dimension in the NLF (and DRV) revolutionary philosophy. Instead, she sees the NLF’s channelling of hatred as the decisive tool for inciting the general population (211-20). The emphasis on *tinh* (and simultaneously on moral virtues, such as loyalty and selflessness) in Tăng’s and Mme. Đinh’s memoirs has effectively contrasted FitzGerald’s view. The two memoirs demonstrate that respect for traditional culture underlay the nationalists’ cultivation of affection and moral virtues in interpersonal relationships (the “correct behavior” in FitzGerald’s terms), which played an important part in winning the hearts and minds of the majority of the people, turning what might have been merely a guerrilla war into a people’s war.

FitzGerald may note the “children of the people” strategy practiced by the NLF, but she does not grasp the root of the strategy. When the RVN pacification teams adopted a “line-for line copy of the NLF teams” (203) and still failed to achieve the same results with the peasants, FitzGerald attributes this failure, rightly, to the fact that the peasants saw through the RVN cadres’ charade, and that both the RVN cadres and the peasants knew that RVN officials “lived on the endless supplies of money and goods from abroad, and that without foreign goods, foreign weapons, and finally foreign soldiers, [the RVN]
cause would be lost” (205). Not so convincing, however, is FitzGerald’s ensuing argument that the NLF succeeded in earning the peasants’ trust and support because, “instead of giving generously” without asking as the RVN officials did, the NLF cadres simply reversed the normal, traditional roles of ruler-superior and the ruled-inferior, thus giving the villagers “a position of power such as they had not had even in the days of the empire.” The peasants then “let down their traditional defenses” when they saw that the NLF cadres “behaved well out of necessity” (205—italics in original). From Ky’s testimony, though, “giving generously” (FitzGerald 205) did not seem to be the cause for the RVN failures. For example, fertilizers were of vital importance to the peasants. Yet, in his chapter on corruption, Ky mentions a 1974 RVN Senate report confirming that “more than 70 percent of imported fertilizers, financed by American aid, had been hoarded and then resold to peasants for at least double the official price” (111). Again according to Ky, even on the rare occasions “generous” American-supplied gifts did get through the RVN’s corruption line, they did not seem to help much. An example Ky gives of the futility of those “generous” gifts is when American Marines came to a small village west of Đà Nẵng before it was designated a free-fire zone:

They had not come to fight, but as part of the pacification program—in other words, to win the hearts and minds of the population of Tuylon. Whether they did so is open to question, though they certainly arrived armed with gifts and goodwill. The most astonishing gift of all consisted of 7,000 toothbrushes—the large number due to some error in accounting back at base. The village chief was staggered when he was presented with four portable lavatories. Each one had a flushing device operated by batteries. The women of the village were equally
mystified when Sergeant Murrell presented them with cartons. How eagerly they must have torn the tops open! Each carton contained, of all things, “Uncle Ben’s” rice [Vietnamese do not like Uncle Ben’s rice, which tastes different from the jasmine variety popular in Southeast Asia]. Only the children’s hearts and minds were easily won over without any of them having to think, for even the rich rice fields of Tuylon could not grow Hershey bars. (123)

It was not hard for the peasants to see the indifference even behind the gifts when, as Mme. Dinh tells us, RVN officials “blatantly resorted to force” (59) and abuse in their attempt to establish agrovilles (strategic hamlets) throughout South Vietnam.

Every day, they set fire to houses, cut down trees and crushed lush rice fields with tractors. The brutes poured toward the house of sister Tu. [. . .] After the Dien Bien Phu victory the revolution gave her 3 cōng of land to farm and support her five young children. After peace returned, she painstakingly built an embankment to grow tangerines, clod of earth by clod of earth. The tangerines were beginning to ripen when the [ARVN] soldiers came to cut them down. Watching them destroy what she had constructed with sweat and tears, she shouted in anger:

- Heavens above, what kind of government is this that can be so cruel?

Her children rushed in and tried to prevent the soldiers from cutting down the trees, but the soldiers were unmoved for they could not care less whether the people starved and died.

[. . .] A couple of old people came forward and protested:

- The government said it is concerned about the life of the people but haven’t done anything to prove it. Now it is forcing us to tear down our houses,
destroy and burn our properties, dig up the graves of our ancestors, and perform exhausting corvee tasks. How are the people going to survive?

Ba Huong—a fellow notorious for his brutality—[. . .] picked up his whip, ran over menacingly and lashed wildly at the villagers:

- Your mother . . . how dare you resist the orders of the government?

Where are the soldiers? Shoot immediately anyone who refuses to work. (59-60)

Furthermore, FitzGerald’s model of analysis cannot explain the appeal of the Việt Minh and NLF both to the peasantry (of which Mme. Đinh was a member) and to intellectuals like Tăng. In his memoir, Tăng makes it clear that he and his intellectual, upper-class colleagues, who constituted most of the NLF leadership, did not join the resistance out of “necessity,” if that means for their own self-interest. In fact, as fighters for Vietnam’s independence, they had, by their own volition, rejected the material comforts and social privileges they had been accustomed to since childhood:

Many of us [the NLF leadership] were from well-to-do families and had been used to the good life before we enlisted in the revolution. Our reasons for joining were perhaps varied, but we all regarded ourselves as people who had already sacrificed a great deal for the revolution and were quite ready to sacrifice everything. Many of us had struggled in one way or another against the French, and in moving to the jungle all of us were decisively committed against the Americans. Whatever comforts we might previously have enjoyed were part of history. (187)

According to Tăng, the lý of nationalism was the “primary mover” (196) for the many NLF leaders from the upper echelon of Vietnamese society, who chose to partake in the
cause for national independence as successful architects, engineers, doctors, and lawyers with degrees from prestigious Western universities. But equally important were the respect and affection Tăng and Mme. Định accorded, and received from, their “brothers [and sisters] in struggle” (Tăng 190). Although not explicitly stated as a major “mover,” this tinh aspect seems to have played a vital part in helping the nationalists brave “prisons, B-52s, diseases, and malnutrition” (188) for the length of the war. Tăng certainly demonstrates the prime significance of tinh when he tells of the reception NLF delegates received in Hanoi in the following words:

The delegation was scheduled as well to visit Ho Chi Minh (who was then suffering his final illness and in fact died several months later), but in a characteristic gesture, Ho refused to allow them to come to his cottage[. . .]. Instead, he sent a message to Thao [President of the NLF] saying that the representatives of the proud Southern people should not have to come to him; rather it would be his honor to go to them. Early that evening, well before he was expected, Ho arrived at the house where the delegation was staying. He was not accompanied by an entourage, and his presence was not announced. He simply walked in through the back door, as if he were an intimate friend or member of the family. The first person he stumbled across was Madame Thao, standing in front of a mirror putting the final touches on her makeup. At first she didn’t recognize him. But as soon as she realized who this frail old man was, she was overcome by emotion. With tears running down her face she called Thao and the others. All of them were moved beyond words by the honor Ho was paying them through this gesture of simple friendship.
It was a story that was repeated time and again by all of the [NLF] delegates when they returned to the South. Ho’s personal warmth thus touched not only Trinh Dinh Thao and his wife, but the entire Southern leadership. As a demonstration of esteem, it had an unsurpassed effect, further highlighting the prevalent sense of North-South fellowship in this struggle. (140-1)

“Freedom” and “democracy”

Unlike the Americans, who consider the legal framework all-important, the Vietnamese have always put the “person factor” first and foremost when it comes to the business of government. According to FitzGerald, Americans (and Westerners in general) see government as a “complex machine” of policies and organization in which “men are replaceable and their ‘personalities’ almost incidental to their functions” (35, emphasis added). On the contrary, the Vietnamese look upon government not so much as the “product of a doctrine, a political system that hangs somewhere over their heads, but as an entire way of life, a Tao, exemplified by the person of the ruler” (34). The Vietnamese belief has always been that the people work the machine, not vice versa. On this topic, Ms. Minh, the schoolteacher of Nguyễn Công Hoan’s novel, perfectly sums up the Vietnamese way of thinking: “Whether one follows the old or the new, the goodness of the person is what is important.”

If it is true that the personality of the leaders indicates the nature of their government, the following analysis of the RVN leaders’ memoirs should illuminate why the RVN regime and its kind of “democracy” and “freedom” were doomed. The analysis
will concentrate mainly on Kỳ, the more famous and “likeable” (FitzGerald 37) to Americans of the two ARVN generals.

It becomes evident, when one reads Kỳ’s memoir, that Kỳ was self-absorbed in himself, and that “freedom” to him simply meant having his way, regardless of possible harm to other people. Even as he acknowledges that “there was a war to be fought” (55), his self-absorption is manifested in the pages Kỳ devotes to discussions of his reputation as a lady-killer (71-2), and of his cars (72-3) and luxurious houses (73, 85).

There is one particular story of Kỳ’s that demonstrates better than anything else the “individualism” and “freedom” the U.S. was helping the RVN defend. It tells how Kỳ showed off to a pretty woman to the detriment of several other Vietnamese. The story is told in brief in the first version of his memoir (Twenty Years 72), then detailed with great relish in Buddha’s Child: My Fight to Save Vietnam. In this second, detailed version, which I am quoting from, Kỳ recalls his romancing an Air Vietnam hostess. He invited her out for dinner, but she was scheduled to go to Đà Lạt that day. Kỳ then decided to “borrow” an Air Force Skyraider, a powerful machine he was not at all acquainted with, so the hostess could see him flying alongside her plane on the way. Against the protests of the squadron leader, Kỳ replied: “Are you the commander of the air force, or is it me?” (116-7), and took off with the American-supplied Skyraider. When he caught up with the Air Vietnam plane, he “sideslipped until only a few inches separated [the] wingtips” of the two planes, thus endangering the lives of all the passengers and crew on that Air Vietnam flight, just so he could impress “a certain pretty face” (117). A few weeks later, he was late for another dinner date with the hostess, and decided on “a grand gesture” (118). This is how Kỳ describes it:
My new girlfriend lived on Le Loi, Saigon's principal boulevard, and when I hovered my Huey helicopter just above the trees near her house, the late-afternoon streets were jammed with cars, pedicabs, taxis, and pedestrians. My rotor wash kicked up an enormous whirlwind of dust, trash, and tree leaves that stopped traffic in all directions. I hovered until she came outside, then shouted, "Please wait for me, I will be a little late!" Then I flew off in a cloud of debris.

(118-9)

The episode reminds me of a similar scene from the chapter "Souvenir" of Tobias Wolff's *In Pharaoh's Army*. The scene is also of debris, dust, and whirlwind, created by a hovering Chinook by the order of an American, Captain Kale. The author Wolff was experienced enough to know that the Chinook's descent would wreak havoc on the Vietnamese peasants' hooches and their inhabitants near the airfield. But out of revenge, he did not try hard enough to stop the ignorant but officious Kale. The utterly senseless damage to the Vietnamese peasants Wolff witnessed was to be forever imprinted in his, and Kale's, traumatic memory—a "souvenir" of their undoing to be agonized over in moments of peace. Wolff writes:

I looked around at what had been done here. This was my work, this desolation had blown straight from my own heart. [...] This was, I understood, something to be remembered, though I had no idea what that would mean. I couldn't guess how the memory would live on in me, shadowing my sense of entitlement to an inviolable home; touching me, years hence, in my own home, with the certainty that some terrible wing is even now descending, bringing justice. (180)
Wolff’s account exudes grief, agony and self-accusation over something he had let happen to the innocent peasants, even though he was not really the person causing the destruction. The same consideration for the injured people, or at least a sense of regret over his own wrongdoing, however late, is not to be found in Kỳ’s account, for all that he was the perpetrator himself. Instead, Kỳ seems perfectly oblivious of his misconduct as he goes on to tell readers:

I enjoyed a very pleasant evening, but the next morning at seven Prime Minister Khanh called my office. “Hey, Ky!” he bellowed. One of your pilots landed right in the center of Saigon yesterday! [. . .] Find out who that fool is and kick him out of the air force! Send him to prison!”

I waited a few beats. “Well, General, it was me,” I said. His voice changed. “Oh, you again. What were you doing down there?”

I told him about being in love. “I was late for our rendez-vous. I was afraid she would go out with someone else. So I stopped by to tell her to wait for me. That’s it.”

Khanh understood. [. . .] I heard nothing more about my near landing on Le Loi Boulevard. (119)

Meant to show off his perceived “gallantry” and power, the episode is actually included in the memoir in which Kỳ calls himself “Buddha’s child,” but which seems plainly devoid of the Buddhist moral virtues of compassion and self-abnegation.

Kỳ’s actions and the complete absence of apology for them or compassion for the people he offended demonstrate that his individualism is but the worst kind of egotism, irresponsibility, and selfishness, just as Ms. Minh, the schoolteacher, has concluded in
Nguyễn Công Hoan’s rebuttal to Nhật Linh’s endorsement of this Western philosophy.\(^6^1\) Kỳ’s “individualism” is further proven by his speedy severance with his then-pregnant girlfriend in order to marry the hostess. When the bride-to-be’s mother opposed the union, he shut her up with “But that depends who is talking. [. . .] I was good and polite enough to ask your permission—but I can tell you that with or without your agreement, I will marry your daughter. You can do nothing” (119). I am certain not only Vietnamese people can appreciate how obnoxious such statements must have sounded to Kỳ’s soon-to-be mother-in-law.

At the same time, the “freedom” touted by the RVN and its American sponsors was in reality a kind of lawlessness and anarchy, with a repressive yet flimsy government appended, rather than the democracy that Westerners have in mind. There are too many stories of pandemonium caused by RVN leaders of all ranks to recount here. Ironically, Đôn’s own arbitrary arrest and demotion by his supposed colleagues and partners in the Diệm coup that brought them all to power serves as one of the best examples of the capricious, nonsensical nature of the RVN’s “freedom” and of the general chaos South Vietnamese society was in under Đôn’s and Kỳ’s reigns. The whole debacle is totally ludicrous from beginning to end: Đôn and some older-generation officers were unceremoniously incarcerated for “neutralism” and “pleasure-seeking,” found guilty of “lax morality, insufficient qualifications for command, and a lack of a clear political concept” (Đôn 128), and then relegated to a committee responsible for “[formulating] a constitution for the new regime” (129).

It is evident from Kỳ’s memoir that the RVN-style “democracy” seemed like a kind of lawlessness that was practiced rigorously by Kỳ himself. Kỳ once told Time
magazine of his job as prime minister of the RVN: "Governing a country like South Vietnam is a very delicate matter, requiring balance. The way we work is that my colleagues and I decide what we want done, and then I try to carry it out" (Twenty Years 89-90). As commander of the ARVN Air Force, he "[carried] it out" by bombing anybody that stood in his way, regardless of ideological orientation: North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, Americans, and even Kỳ’s colleagues in the ARVN.62

One example of Kỳ taking the law into his own hands is his 1966 confrontation with the Buddhists, when the latter staged demonstrations for a free election in South Vietnam. Kỳ accused them of "causing trouble" (88) and "hampering the war effort" (87). The Buddhists had many supporters, among them the ARVN First Corps troops and commanders stationed in and around Huế and Đà Nẵng, who would rather disobey Kỳ than shoot at the demonstrators. Therefore, Kỳ decided to attack his own troops in order to “liberate Đà Nẵng” (93). Without informing Americans of his intention, he proceeded with “paratroops, marines, and tanks in a commando-type assault” (94) on the city. According to Kỳ, he soon “ran into a problem: an American problem.”

It is not difficult to imagine the consternation among the Americans in Danang. They had been advising Vietnamese troops, who were now attacked by other Vietnamese troops. Ignorant of the problem behind the action, they asked themselves whom they should support. The United States Marines at Danang were commanded by General Lewis W. Walt, who was also adviser to First Corps. He was furious at an assault without warning on what he regarded as his territory. (94-5)
As Kỳ’s forces entered the city, he was ready to bomb the First Corps troops if they resisted, telling them: “If you fire one single round, I will destroy every gun in the artillery base” (95). At that time, Walt contacted the ARVN Joint General Staff and asked whoever was responsible to stop the operation—otherwise he would send American planes into the air to fight back. Kỳ instantly telephoned Ambassador Cabot Lodge, telling him: “If it is true [that Americans are going to fight back], then I am going to fly up to Danang in ten minutes and lead the planes in action, just to see if the Americans have the courage to shoot down the prime minister of Vietnam” (95). As Kỳ describes it:

Lodge could hardly believe what I told him and promised to send a message immediately to Walt. Even so, the Vietnamese commander on the spot still asked me to fly up, so around lunch time I flew to Danang to review the situation. I told my local commanders to line up our biggest guns and train them directly at the American base on the other side of the small river. “If Americans start to shoot down our planes,” I said, “destroy the marine base. That is an order.” (95)

As prime minister of the RVN, Kỳ vowed to combat corruption. But *laissez-faire* (or some may correctly say laziness and indifference) seems to have taken the better of his intentions. Watching his colleagues in this war-torn country “pulling strings to try to acquire new and shiny automobiles slightly larger, if possible, than their rivals’,” Kỳ “made no attempt to stop [them]” because, as he writes, “I was too busy to try to buck the system” (73). If the Vietnamese belief is that a government reflects the character of the leader, it should surprise no one that the RVN under Kỳ was completely anarchistic. From that vantage point, it is only natural to envisage ARVN General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan’s summary execution of a Việt Cộng suspect in the middle of a street in Saigon, an
act that created such a shock among Americans accustomed to being told of the “freedom” and “democracy” their government was helping its Vietnamese protégés preserve at the cost of American lives and tax-money.

The “freedom” the RVN practiced includes, among other con strictions, the closures of any newspapers that dared to differ with the government, and the execution or persecution of political activists of all versions. It is significant that the champion of the Western concepts of individualism and freedom in the 1930s, the writer and former activist Nhat Linh himself, committed suicide in protest when faced with a court trial by the Diệm regime for complicity in subversive activities (Nhat Linh apparently had only met with his friends to discuss politics). In his death note, Nhat Linh condemns the RVN’s dictatorship as “a serious crime,” and proclaims his death “a warning to those who would trample upon freedom of every kind.” Under the Thiệu-Ky reign, Đồn contrarily proposed a “benevolent dictatorship,” arguing that “the rules of democracy were not very feasible while [the] country was engaged in a life-and-death struggle” (176). What transpired instead is what he delicately calls “a semi-dictatorship,” which according to Đồn, resulted from Thiệu’s inflexibility and rigid intolerance for any criticism, constructive or not, manifest as a “built-in instinct to take personal offense at well-meant suggestions” (177). Kỳ is especially bitter at Thiệu’s arduous efforts to ensure his stay in power by all means, which he accomplished by excluding all other potential candidates from running against him in elections, such that there was only one name—Thiệu’s—on the ballot in the presidential election of 1971 (Ky 193-6). The Thiệu-Ky rule, which turned out to last the longest of the ever changing RVN leadership, is concluded by Đồn to be no different from the first American-created Diệm administration
(Đồn 177), which came to be unanimously detested, even by the Americans in hindsight. The true nature of the RVN’s “freedom” and “democracy” is best revealed by yet another of Kỳ’s statements when he told American reporters that the RVN “needed a Hitler,” a proclamation that alienated even his British ally (Kỳ 76).

In short, it seems the RVN leaders also wish to portray themselves and what they represent within the paradigm of lý, tinh, dao lý, and cong lý. By including the above-discussed episode of him “being in love” (Buddha’s Child 119), Kỳ is in fact playing up the tinh dimension (in addition to showing off his power). Similarly, when he emphatically prefaces his account of the confrontation with the Buddhists with “I was not going to be manipulated by anyone. My job was to try to win the war” (87), he is in effect trying to assert the lý of his coming assaults on his own troops and the Americans. However, as clearly illustrated, his actions came off quite the opposite of the image he wished to project. “Being in love” is a poor excuse for Kỳ’s violation of the tenets of morality (dao lý) and justice (công lý), while his willingness to bomb his own troops and allies shows a complete disregard for tinh in this battle for the hearts and minds even of his own “supporters.”

Surprisingly, Kỳ does not seem aware of his own inconsistencies in representations both of himself and of his enemy. Maintaining that lý was on his side, Kỳ ironically sported an “American cowboy movie” (Buddha’s Child 14) look. The RVN leaders’ lack of identity is unmistakeable from the way Đồn and his Francophile colleagues preferred to speak French among themselves, to the Young Turks’ trend of using English. It is apt that, after Kỳ finished a speech in his meeting with Lyndon Johnson, the latter would pat Kỳ on the back and exclaim: “Boy, you speak just like an
American.” Kỳ took it with great pleasure, congratulating himself that “from him [Johnson] that was high praise” (Kỳ 81). Later, Kỳ relates that Johnson looked at the RVN’s newly-drafted constitution, in Johnson’s words, “just as proudly as I looked at Lynda, my first baby” (99). In reciting Johnson’s approval, Kỳ inadvertently reminds readers acquainted with Vietnamese literature of Tú Xương’s satire “Mock the Graduates” in 1897, discussed in Chapter II. Modern times simply added a twist: the exchange of the French mistress’s “ample rump” for an American “baby,” and of the collaborating graduates’ “dragon heads” for the Air Marshal insignia and prime minister seal.

Not only lacking in self-awareness, Kỳ is also inconsistent in his explanation of the NLF and the popular support it was able to gain, and of the United States’ role in South Vietnam and the fact that his government, like all previous and subsequent RVN governments, could capture neither the hearts nor minds of the South Vietnamese population.

Early in his memoir, Kỳ states the importance of learning history, using his father’s words, “The past is the key to what you are doing today” (12). He then turns to the Americans, blaming them for having only a “skin deep” (11) knowledge of Vietnam and its people. The problem, according to Kỳ, is that “To many Americans in Vietnam, we were just vaguely ‘Chinese.’ We are not. We are Vietnamese” (11). He continues: “It is easy to say that none of this matters, but it does; it helps one to understand the reason why. Why a villager in the South might hide a killer from the North; why ‘Uncle Ho’ could inspire his men while so many of our leaders failed” (12, emphases in the original).
One part of Kỳ’s argument is that Americans should not have made their presence in Vietnam so obvious. On the other hand, Kỳ is unable to account for the Southern and nationalist origin of the NLF, having presumed for himself the legitimacy of chinh nghĩa [just cause] accorded a government which represented the lý of nationalism. Consequently, Kỳ applies the labels of “communists” and “North Vietnamese infiltrators” to “anyone actively fighting South Vietnam [i.e. the RVN government]” (22). Kỳ then explains the nationalists’ success in winning hearts and minds in the following words:

the Communist cadres, infiltrating from the North, exploited our corruption and black marketeering as they tried to win over puzzled (yet at heart loyal) peasants to the cause of Ho Chi Minh. They were diabolically clever, for they made no spectacular promises; they held out no bribes. Like Churchill, they offered nothing but blood, sweat, toil, and tears, but they were able to build up the image of a simple, Spartan leader as great in his way as Churchill, and contrast it with our squabbling, corrupt politicians, as squalid in their way as the French politicians in 1940 who bickered among themselves while the Germans streamed across their land. (136)

Against the “Communists’ skillful propaganda,” Kỳ’s government failed to win the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese population, because, as he writes, “we had one ace in our hand, if only we could play the hand properly [. . .]. It was freedom, the world’s most precious—yet most elusive—treasure. [. . .] But if we held an ace, we also held a deuce. For while I was preaching the need for freedom, I was not always free myself” (136).
In contrast, it is clear from Mme. Nguyễn Thị Định’s and Trương Như Tằng’s memoirs that lý, tinh, công lý and đạo lý sustained the NLF nationalists through their several ordeals to the very end of the thirty-year war. The appeal of the NLF’s lý and công lý of patriotism and nationalism was such that John Vann, an American colonel respected among his colleagues for his talents and knowledge of Vietnam, once admitted that, given the choice between the NLF and the RVN as a “lad of eighteen [. . .] and a member of a rural community,” he would “surely choose the NLF” (Sheehan, Bright Shining Lie 524). On the other hand, disregard for lý and a desire to secure their position as the number-one power in the world led the U.S. to oppose legitimate demands by the Vietnamese, and consequently to its own defeat. Of parallel significance to lý is the NLF leaders’ emphasis on affection and interpersonal relationships, even when they are discussing armed struggle and warfare. Mme. Định, for example, tells us how, with the ARVN in hot pursuit, she tried to protect sympathetic peasants by not seeking the refuge of their houses (54). While being imprisoned, tortured, and starved in RVN jails, Tằng and his fellow nationalists were concerned about the “people in [their] networks, whose fates [they] were unaware of” (118). If Kỳ unwittingly reveals selfishness in his tales of power and imagined grandeur, the love and care Mme. Định and Trương Như Tằng express for other people in times of stress are particularly telling of their compassion and selflessness, and render their portrayals of themselves dignified and moving.

The RVN’s lack of lý, tinh, công lý, and đạo lý, and ultimately, of legitimacy helps illuminate some incidents Neil Jamieson considers puzzling in Understanding Vietnam. The first is Jamieson’s story of a priest who took down the NLF flag flying on a canal in 1967. According to Jamieson, the NLF then boycotted the local market in
retaliation and a number of people in the priest’s hamlet rudely and publicly criticized him for his bravado. Jamieson attributes the disrespect this “staunchly anticommunist and Catholic community” showed to their priest, something which “would not have been tolerated” (300) or even questioned in the past, to changes in the South Vietnamese sense of loyalty and hierarchy. This leads Jamieson to contend that in the social and political turmoil of late 1960s’ South Vietnam, “many people came to feel that too firm a commitment to any particular cause or leader was sheer stupidity, and some were not embarrassed to say so” (300). However, if it were only expediency and upset social values which caused “many people” (i.e. a number of the RVN officials and soldiers Jamieson conversed with as an American in South Vietnam) to be reluctant to entrust their loyalty to the RVN regime, and which led, in this particular incident, to the villagers’ disrespect and protest against their priest, how would one explain the commitment and loyalty NLF fighters and their many supporters in South Vietnam sustained for the nationalist cause even when they faced the very possible, very deadly destruction to their lives and everything they held dear from the hands of the RVN government and its ally? I argue that it would be more elucidating to view the common lack of loyalty to the RVN government and the mentioned villagers’ disrespect as symptoms of their realization that the RVN government and the priest failed to embody lý and that, whatever limitations their NLF opponents might have had as an organization, they at least represented what accorded with the lý of nationalism. It is simply not adequate or accurate to assume, as Jamieson does, that “Catholic,” or even “anticommunist,” automatically meant “anti-NLF.” On this point, Nguyễn Khải offers a relevant incident of Vietnamese Catholics’ “communists versus NLF” view in Past
Continuous. A Catholic worker on a rubber plantation exclaims when told that Ba Huế, the caring woman he knows, is a Communist: “How can a nice person like you be a communist? Why didn’t you join the Liberation Front instead? Liberation Front people are nice; they love the people—not like the communists.” When Ba Huế asks him what communists he has met, he replies: “Of course I have never met a communist! If I had, I wouldn’t be alive and speaking to you now!” (52). While this Catholic worker is a character in a semi-fictional novel, his understanding of communism as an abstract category, no doubt inculcated through previous church sermons, serves to illustrate the fact that designations like “communism” and “capitalism” made little sense, at least to the uneducated Vietnamese during the war. It also demonstrates that many Vietnamese people, Catholics or not, tended to make judgements about the NLF based on their interpersonal relationships to its members. Moreover, even assuming that many Catholics did take an oppositional stance against communism in the abstract, that is still not to say that they could not recognize the lý of nationalism, or the tinh, công lý and dao lý that the NLF represented. After all, the NLF in reality did include Catholics in their ranks. As it is, Tăng’s memoir offers two of the most interesting examples of Catholics being ardent NLF members and leaders: “master spy” Albert Phạm Ngọc Thảo (who was later assassinated by Thiệu, ironically because of his envy and jealousy for Thảo’s high standing in American eyes) and his brother, Lucien Phạm Ngọc Hùng (42-62 and 133).

In *Understanding Vietnam*, Jamieson essentially argues that the RVN (and its American supporter) failed because of the gap between “modern roles and traditional culture” (311), or in other words, the “discontinuity in values” (312) in South Vietnamese society. As he explains it, the “formal design of this entire structure [of operation and
government that the advanced Americans brought to South Vietnam] assumed and depended on a radically different pattern of communication, one based on radically different values” (313) from what the Vietnamese were accustomed to. To illustrate, Jamieson tells the story of a middle-level ARVN officer who had some urgent information, but who hesitated to dispatch the information to the province chief because, as he explained to Jamieson, the telephone on his desk was put there “so [the province chief] could call [the subordinate officer]” and not the other way around. What Jamieson sees as “modern systems of communication clogged by traditional values” (312) suggests another explanation, however. The mentioned officer clearly saw the ARVN (and by extension, the RVN government) as an imperious and corrupt bureaucracy that had little to do with his own life and person other than as an impersonal employer; hence the reluctance to do whatever it took to dispatch the urgent information. In fact, in view of the informal but effective system of communication within the NLF and between the NLF and its supporters during the war (FitzGerald 248-51), this presents the only possible explanation for the RVN’s corruption and ineptitude. Given the abundant evidence of the RVN’s nature, as we have seen from the memoirs of all the leaders examined in this chapter, corruption and inefficiency were inevitable when the majority of the people felt that their relationship to the government was coldly impersonal and characterized by demands of unilateral loyalty from a corrupt government that was unable and unwilling to provide the general population with a safety net, material, political, emotional, or moral.

Jamieson is clearly trapped in his own (American) biases, and consequently fails to satisfactorily explain the roots of the problems of the RVN government. The start of
his *Understanding Vietnam* offers as the rationale for his book that “we [Americans] must learn more about Vietnamese culture and Vietnamese paradigms in order to untangle the muddled debates about our own” (x). He argues that “few Americans had any conception of the immense ideological, historical, or psychological connotations of the term *chinh nghĩa* [just cause],” and that, to the Vietnamese, “going with the *chinh nghĩa* brought moral and ideological power that would transcend and generate all other forms of power: military, political, and administrative” (317). Jamieson accordingly begins his analysis with a description of the Vietnamese cultural paradigm of *ly* and *tinh* as manifestations of *yang* and *yin*, as if this paradigm would inform his explanations of the RVN’s problems, and alternatively, of the NLF/DRV’s success. However, three-quarters into his argument, Jamieson claims that “at the personal, intellectual level—that is, as individuals, many GVN [i.e. RVN] officials, cadre [sic], and supporters sincerely believed that their anticommunist stance was a legitimate one” (318). Thus, in spite of his earlier analysis of traditional Vietnamese culture, this vague and sweeping generalization shows that Jamieson has curiously abandoned his attempt to follow “Vietnamese paradigms” and resorted instead to the American communist/anticommunist mindset. Naturally, this premise of anticommunism being moral and legitimate fails to explain the RVN’s rampant and self-defeating corruption, as well as the ARVN soldiers’ perception of the lack of legitimacy of their government, leading Jamieson to contradictions, as the passage immediately following the above quote demonstrates:

Yet, many of them also believed that [. . .] their government and army were corrupt and ineffective, their industrial goods and commercial products were shoddy, their arts were imitative. The social system, in short, was not meeting
their own standards and expectations. [. . .] Few men in such a situation could avoid corrosive doubts as to the moral legitimacy of their position. Both their own experience of social life and the expressed opinions of persons who counted in the eyes of the community served to undermine the strength of their personal convictions as to the properly constituted nature of society. (318)

Claiming a better understanding of the Vietnamese, Jamieson contrarily turns the blame on the rise of *yin* over *yang* in South Vietnamese culture and society as the war progressed, or in other words, accusing “the female Oriental” for corroding the intrinsic American (male) goodness and strength. Significantly, his tacit Cold War framework is abortive in accounting for the fact that even RVN officials and soldiers were equivocal in their loyalty to the RVN government while NLF supporters and fighters were for the large part steadfast in their beliefs even in the face of severe retribution from the American-backed RVN, and were able to procure at least neutrality from the non-partisan population. Jamieson’s failure to address the root causes of the RVN’s problems is also the reason why he chooses to leave unexplained the NLF’s success in maintaining its members’ morale and convictions. It is not, as Jamieson argues, because the ARVN witnessed unprecedented upheavals of values that challenged their traditional sense of loyalty and instigated competing complexes in their identity as males. For, after all, not the ARVN alone were enmeshed in the social and political turmoil at the time, and such upheavals should have affected NLF supporters and fighters at least to the same degrees. It is because, as my analysis of the leaders’ memoirs demonstrates, as long as the United States financed and controlled the RVN, repressing the Vietnamese national desire for freedom and independence in the process, it would only beget a regime that ignored *lý*
and công lý, which in turn led to the absence of tinh and dao lý—an absence fatally detrimental for such a government to obtain the desired legitimacy vital to success in Vietnam, political, military, or administrative.

The RVN’s lack of lý, tinh, dao lý, and công lý would also illuminate what Americans perceived as the ARVN’s low morale and cowardice, often cited as two of the causes leading to America’s defeat and a main reason for American hostility toward its own ally.

Literary representation of Asians (allies or enemies) at war with the United States as the Other, either subhuman or superhuman, but never “human like oneself,” is nothing new. Renny Christopher points out in The Vietnam War, the American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives that such representations of Vietnamese are but a continuation of the racist stereotyping of Asians in general and of the racism in the wars the United States had previously fought in Korea and Japan in particular. However, Christopher also notes a peculiar split in American Vietnam War representations: whereas the Việt Cộng/DRV soldiers might be perceived as simultaneously subhuman and superhuman, the ARVN was simply subhuman, or at least disastrously incompetent.

Different schools of American scholars have attempted to explicate the disparity between the two groups, who are both Vietnamese and, by logical extension, should have shared similar traits. Some have sought to attribute the courage and tenacity of DRV soldiers to the highly disciplined nature of North Vietnamese culture. Others point to the political instructions as a means of “brainwashing” the North Vietnamese to turn them into fanatical fighters. Alternatively, they may ascribe the NLF/DRV success to the
excellent organization of their fighting units. However, as in Jamieson’s self-contradictory arguments above, regional characteristics and ideological differences cannot adequately explain to Americans the dedication and tenacity of both Northern DRV soldiers and Southern NLF guerrillas in the harsh conditions of a prolonged, horrendously bloody war, and at the same time, the ineptness and cowardice of the ARVN, who were trained and supported by the best America could offer. Even those scholars who argue that NLF guerrillas, operating clandestinely, could not afford to be anything but suicidally courageous cannot account for the seemingly incomprehensible cowardice and fatal corruption of the RVN and ARVN, who were supposed to be also fighting for their own lives and properties. It is here that all these labels of “North Vietnamese,” “South Vietnamese,” “Communists” and “anti-Communists” fail to fathom what motivated fighters of the two warring factions.

Attributing the NLF’s success simply to their correct strategies and organization and to a lack of effective counter measures from the RVN regimes, FitzGerald can only partially justify NLF fighters’ and supporters’ determination and bravery. The heart of the matter is, it was impossible for the United States to “create” a democratic government for its protégés (whoever they might be) when it had chosen to pit itself against the lý of nationalism honed over thousands of years in the psyche of the Vietnamese people as a whole. It is simplistic to say that “the Vietnamese Communist leaders differ from the non-Communists only in that they have successfully assimilated the Western conceptual framework and translated it into a form of intellectual organization that their less educated compatriots can understand” (FitzGerald 23-24). Contrary to her otherwise perceptive analysis, FitzGerald’s Manichean division of the Vietnamese at this point into
communists and non-communists not only fails to reflect the people's varied political stances during the war, but also obscures the U.S. government's erroneous and immoral foreign policy that led them to Vietnam. In addition, FitzGerald's characterization of the RVN's failure mainly as a mismatch of manners and values between Saigon officials on the one hand and the peasants on the other hand runs contrary to the fact that the NLF was created and supported by many intellectuals with a sophisticated understanding of both world and national politics, a fact Trương Như Tăng well demonstrates. In fact, it is only by successfully enlisting the support of all groups of Vietnamese, "intellectuals and peasants, shopkeepers and businessmen" (Tăng 309) that the NLF/DRV were able to prevail against the RVN and the United States. In the end, the NLF/DRV succeeded because their revolutionary goals and strategies not only embodied the lý of nationalism and patriotism, but were infused with tinh and represented công lý and dao lý to a majority of the Vietnamese, a combination that allowed them to draw strength from the time-honored Vietnamese culture deeply lodged in each and every one of its citizens.

It is no wonder ARVN soldiers were so reluctant to fight, backed as they were by the best in military training and weaponry that the United States could offer. Jamieson's observation is well taken that ARVN soldiers as a rule put their own self-interests and the demands of their blood family over and above those of their government when forced to choose between the two. Obviously, aware in varying degrees that they were not acting in accordance with lý, and that they were but hired pawns in the United States' political schemes, most ARVN soldiers could not whole-heartedly sacrifice their lives for such a cause, or as they often simply said, "for the Americans" (Đôn 150). Kỳ echoes the same thought, recounting other ARVN soldiers' view: "Why should we fight? The Americans
are doing the fighting for us. Let’s relax” (Kỳ 151). The RVN and its army were thus trapped in an acute quandary of their own making. On the one hand, they were made constantly aware of their subordination to the French and the Americans. On the other hand, as Vietnamese, RVN leaders and their soldiers could not ignore the deeply-entrenched lý of nationalism. Unable to assert their wish for independence in any other way, and yet compelled to resist being completely bulldozed by American advisers, policies, and goals, RVN leaders and soldiers often felt a wayward need to compromise their “masters” whenever they could in order to compensate for their feelings of indignity and powerlessness. This is particularly evident in situations where, logically speaking, the RVN leadership and its army apparently had no reason to oppose certain acts generated and directed by the Americans, but they did all the same, just so they could parade their imagined identity. Such situations have been amply documented by both Americans and Vietnamese: the skirmishes between Captain Kale and the ARVN soldiers in the chapter “Souvenir” of Tobias Wolff’s book, ARVN General Cao’s debacles in Neil Sheehan’s A Bright Shining Lie, the murder of Mme. Lê Thị Riengkap and Trần Văn Kiều in Trương Như Tằng’s memoir (120), or RVN President Thiệu’s passive recalcitrance to American suggestions in Nguyễn Cao Kỳ’s report (176). Thiệu himself indicated the sensitivity of the dilemma when he confided to Đôn that “he had to fight more against [their] American friends than against the Communists” (Đôn 241).

The absence of tinh, lý, công lý, and dao lý among the RVN leadership—an absence obvious in Trần Văn Đôn’s and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ’s memoirs—was not missed by the majority of the Vietnamese people during the war, no matter what side they appeared to be taking, which ultimately accounts for the lack of fighting spirit on the part of the
ARVN. On the other hand, the final victory of the NLF/DRV is proof of the persuasive tinh-ý paradigm and its moral virtues in the nationalist cause the NLF/DRV upheld, regardless of occasional inevitable mistakes in the application and administration of certain strategies and policies. This blending of the mind and the heart is not only manifest in Nguyễn Thị Định’s and Trương Như Tăng’s memoirs, as I have shown, but also in writings by other NLF/DRV leaders and in the NLF/DRV’s war literature in general, a point I will pick up again in the next chapter. Kỳ himself understood that the French (and by extension, any other foreign imperialist) could not “establish peace” in Vietnam, because “no number of military conquests would achieve” (17) success against Hò Chí Minh’s nationalist movement. And perhaps no one could be in a better position than Kỳ, ARVN Air Force commander, prime minister, and vice president of the RVN, to conclude that “If one works and fights for a cause, an ideal, considerations like pay and comfort do not matter. This was an essential difference between the forces of North and South Vietnam” (151)—except, of course, his “North and South Vietnam” are actually the US/RVN and the NLF/DRV nationalists, respectively, during what Vietnamese people call the American war.
CHAPTER IV: PEOPLE'S WAR AND PEOPLE'S WILL IN LITERATURE

Both Vietnamese and American political discourse has proved that in the Vietnam War, success ultimately depended on the conversion of an adequate portion of the masses to a cause. The analysis in Chapter III of the leaders' memoirs has shown that the NLF leaders advanced the virtues of their just cause through both tình and lý, while the RVN leaders manifested confusion and incoherence in their position and presumed goals.

Against the overwhelming financial and military advantage the U.S. possessed and endowed its RVN ally with, the NLF nationalists had, during the course of the war, realized their fight on three strategic fronts—political, military, and diplomatic—in which the political struggle was crucial (Trương Như Tăng 145). The question of morale and fervor, which are decisive factors in a long-winded war, particularly one in which the political aspect was of paramount importance to victory, can be further illuminated by considering how the general populace shared the leaders' views, and the extent to which the cause the leaders represented energized their supporters. This chapter will therefore examine the literatures written by supporters of the RVN and NLF in order to determine, on the whole, the popular Vietnamese response and conviction to each side's war effort. The chapter will begin with a summary of the literary philosophies and trends that governed the literatures of Vietnam from 1945 to 1975. This summary is necessary to the understanding of the Vietnamese literary development since 1945, and provides the background for the examination of the selected works later in the chapter. The chapter will conclude by looking at representative works by writers of the opposing RVN and NLF in South Vietnam during the war.
The period from 1945 to 1975 is punctuated by major historical events: Hồ Chí Minh’s proclamation of independence for all of Vietnam in 1945, the battle of Dien Bien Phù that officially terminated French colonialism on Vietnam as a whole in 1954, the birth of the NLF in the South in 1959, the fall of the Diệm regime in 1963, the landing of American marines at Đà Nẵng in 1965, and finally the fall of the RVN in 1975. The following discussion of the literary philosophies and trends of what was to become by 1960 three different strands of Vietnamese literature will take place along these important timelines.

**Vietnamese Literature 1945-1954**

The first period, from 1945 to 1954, is often referred to as the nine-year nationwide resistance (*chin năm kháng chiến*) against the French. With the announcement of the DRV government in September 1945, the Cultural Association for National Salvation (*Hội Văn Hóa Cứu Quốc*) was also officially introduced. Very soon after, the Association’s official newspaper, the *Tiến Phong* (Vanguard), published a series of articles by its first chairman, Nguyễn Đình Thi, on “A New Culture” (*Một Nền Văn Hóa Mới*), which set out the parameters for a new, “nationalistic, democratic, and realist” culture for the country. The Việt Minh’s control of the cities abruptly ended when French expeditionary forces, released by the British responsible for disarming the capitulated Axis troops, began to push for a reoccupation of major cities in both the North and the South. The Việt Minh again went underground in urban areas, but remained in effective control of the vast countryside.
Among the Vietnamese of the time, the response was split in three ways: a large majority were imbued with fervent nationalistic enthusiasm, among whom an increasing number became militant revolutionaries under the Việt Minh; on the other hand, some Vietnamese adopted an attitude of *attentisme*, cautiously waiting on the sidelines for a winning force to decisively emerge; and finally a small minority willingly submitted themselves to French domination and authority. The literature of the period was divided along these lines. The literature of the Francophiles and uninvolved *attentiste* circulated mainly in Hanoi and Saigon. The topic of the day was the effects of war, and the writings were marked with political ambivalence. In any case, no works of memorable quality, aesthetic or ideological, came out of the French-controlled areas. On the other hand, the literature of the resisters continued to circulate underground in French-occupied areas, and openly among the supporters in ever-widening resistance zones and liberated areas. The subjects of the resistance literature in this period naturally included the ravages of war on Vietnamese life, but more importantly, the popular nationalistic struggle against the French colonialists, selfless sacrifice, and the feeling of camaraderie and affection among the resisters and between the resisters and their supporters. The spirit of revolutionary enthusiasm was all-consuming and palpable in the works written at this time. Contributors to this resistance literature include most of the best-known prewar writers, whom I have discussed in Chapter II, and who had rallied to Hồ Chí Minh’s government: Xuân Diệu, Thế Lữ, Chế Lan Viên, Nguyễn Bình, Lưu Trọng Lự, Huy Cận, Tế Hanh (poetry); Hoài Thanh, Nguyễn Tuân, Nguyễn Hồng, Nguyễn Công Hoan, Tô Hoài, Nam Cao, Bùi Hiện, Hải Triệu, Mạnh Phú Tư, Nguyễn Huy Tưởng (prose and drama); Đăng Thái Mai, Hoàng Như Mai, Hoài Thanh (literary criticism). Some writers
and playwrights who made their names in this period are Tô Hữu, Nguyễn Đình Thi, Chình Hữu, Minh Huệ, Nguyễn Mỹ, Tú Mô, Trần Đăng, and Hoàng Trung Thông. The upheaval of the time (among which the evacuations and fighting) inevitably shortlisted the known literary works created under the Việt Minh during this period, especially the longer ones. More often than not, the longer works never made it to official publication even after the Việt Minh regained control of the North in 1954. Besides, the realities of fighting a technologically superior enemy certainly limited the time and energy that could otherwise have been spent on producing quality works of epic dimensions. In addition, according to Phan Cự Đề and Hà Minh Đức, revolutionary writers were taking the necessary time to adapt and develop the revolutionary consciousness and experience required to create longer literary works of quality. By contrast, this was a time when shorter works, especially poems, flourished. Shorter works also had a much better chance of surviving the turmoil, as they could be committed to memory and recited for a comparatively large audience in entertainment sessions. From here the proverbial Vietnamese knack for poetry helped spread the more popular of these poems to an even wider audience, thereby allowing for a deeper impact among Việt Minh supporters as well as the general populace. The result is the survival of a number of deeply stirring poems, many of which lived on as lyrics in songs familiar to the people of both North and South after 1954, and which in their own way transcended the geographical and political division of the country. Going through the collection of poems printed bilingually in *Mountain River: Vietnamese Poetry from the Wars 1948-1993*, carefully edited and translated by Bowen, Chung, and Weigl, I found at least four such poems from this period that my generation and the two generations before it grew up memorizing.
“Mâu Tim Hoa Sim” [The sim flower lavender] (1949) by Hưu Loan mourns the death of a young wife, who takes to wearing the lavender color of the sim flower as a symbol of longing for her absent soldier husband. Hữu Loan served in the Việt Minh army during the war of resistance against the French (he was also the editor-in-chief of the soldiers’ wall newspaper of the famous 304th Division in the Fourth Interzone), and regrouped to the North in 1954. But the song of the same title composed from this enormously popular poem, sung in the legendary soprano of RVN chanteuse Thái Thanh, remained one of the best known and most often requested in the South through the RVN regimes. As the war went on, the RVN’s general population soon grew war weary, and the incredible sadness of separation and of not being able to “speak [. . .] [or] see each other one last time,” beautifully lyricized in the poem, struck a chord in the audience, which explains the poem’s enduring popularity during the American war.

Also inspired by the feeling of longing, Nguyễn Đình Thi’s “Nhớ” [Remembering] (1951) is about two lovers who are both fighting for freedom in the Việt Minh. The young woman in the poem is the object of the poet’s love and longing. At the same time, she symbolizes the country for which the poet is fighting.

I love you as I love our country,
In pain, hardship and with great passion.
Every step I take you are in my thoughts,
Every meal I eat, every night I sleep.

The star never dims.
We’ll fight all our lives for our love.
The fire in the forest flickers its red flame.

We love each other, and we stand up straight, proud to be human.

The poem plays beautifully on vibrant colors, light, and the symbols of nationalism, patriotism, and revolution: the star lighting the “soldiers’ way on the mountain pass” and the “red flame” of the fire are clear pointers to the golden star of nationalistic guidance in a background of red in the DRV’s flag. Take the young woman as symbolic of the nation and the last line of the poem can be interpreted to mean the poet’s love for his country has turned him into a proud human being (with the stress on “human”), in contrast to those other Vietnamese who buckle under Western mastership as humiliated slaves. This poem was also rendered into a popular song, frequently exchanged among Vietnamese youths during the French and American wars.

If the soldier’s love for his country is the underlying theme of “Nhớ,” the love of the country’s leader for the individual soldier is the theme of “Đêm Nay Bác Không Ngủ” [Uncle doesn’t sleep tonight] (1951) by Minh Huệ, another soldier from the Fourth Interzone. The multiple-award-winning poem tells of a soldier witnessing Uncle Hồ’s sleeplessness out of concern for the common troops and civilian workers. The poem is significant because it helps explain in verse the reverence and devotion Hồ Chí Minh enjoyed among his followers. Hồ’s were never grand, forceful gestures, but simple, tender ones of “[lighting] a fire” for the soldiers sleeping after a day’s work, of “[tucking] the blanket in/For each and everyone,” of moving softly so as not to waken the soldiers. Hồ’s deep, quiet love for the people is shown when, several times in the wee hours of the morning, the soldier awakens to find Uncle restless. To his concerned queries, Hồ finally admits that he is unable to sleep in peace, knowing the civilian workers are out there
sleeping on a bed of leaves in the rain, with only “their coats for a blanket.” As the leader of the nation, Hồ thus wins the people’s undying devotion not with guns, authority, or pompous speeches, but with his characteristic simplicity, humility, and immense love for the people.71 The poem itself has won the people’s hearts with its own simplicity, informal yet dignified tone, and sincere emotions.

Immense love, this time between the people and Việt Minh troops, is again the theme of “Bao Giờ Trở Lại” [When will you return?] (1955) by Hoàng Trung Thông. This classic poem has been rendered into at least two songs, and continues to be a great favorite of Vietnamese people of all ages today. It tells how “the young men and women,” as well as children and mothers of the village, look forward to news of victory and the final return of the resisters. The family atmosphere is notable in this poem, with the village elderly women mothering the troops (“Old mothers in plain brown clothes long to be at your side/Overjoyed at their sons’ return”), and the soldiers in turn become brothers to the youths and children of the village (“Waves of younger brothers and sisters will follow you”). The poem also alludes to the good harvests and reduced taxes under the Việt Minh administration and conveys the pride of the villagers in turning their poor village around. The village is still poor, the narrator tells the soldiers,

But our hearts stay open wide.

Pots of rice cook

And bowls of green tea brew.

We’ll crowd together to share intimate stories

Of where you have fought the enemy.
The soldiers have earned the villagers' respect and love by shedding blood on the battlefield

[... ] to protect our village, our land,

The banyan tree, the dock, and the village courtyard.

We remember the vows you made before you left.

You left to keep those vows,

And the love of the people forever—

Like the fragrance of areca flowers

That spreads further and further

To the wide, open rice fields.72

A strong sense of community and bonding is thus created and maintained by the common cause of national salvation the villagers and soldiers are fighting for, albeit in different ways. Like the three poems discussed above, "Bao Giờ Trở Lại" is grounded in both lý and tinh, making for a profoundly moving effect on the reader.

The division of the country into North and South following the Geneva Convention in 1954 saw a separation of Vietnamese literature into two distinct strands under two opposing governments. In the North, the DRV under the leadership of Hồ Chí Minh embarked on the construction of a new society. The South fell under the U.S.-created Diệm government.

**The Literature of the North 1954-75**

Between 1954 and 1959, the young DRV government enthusiastically set out to create the new society that had only been broadly envisioned in the previous two decades.
By this time, the Vietnamese Workers’ Party had decided that socialism was the path for this country trapped between feudalistic means of production and a state of colonized mentality and economic dependency. The century of colonialism and ten years of fighting had left a dependent economy, a fragmented culture, a ravaged countryside on which 14 million people depended for food, a scarcity of technicians of every kind, and a small and outdated industrial plant the DRV would have to enlarge and refurbish as an essential step to modern nationhood. The circumstances thus dictated that the building of North Vietnam’s independent economy must also be accompanied by a social and cultural revolution. In the absence of the desired social and economic structure, the social and cultural revolution was to take on the task of creating a new social order and simultaneously engineering new manners and new ways of thinking. At this point, the rise of a proletarian revolution within the broad nationalistic movement in Vietnam seemed inevitable, as Chapter II and III have shown that the most oppressed and exploited Vietnamese under colonialism were the rural and urban poor, who together made up the large majority of the population. Committed to reversing the old social order, the new government now vigorously pursued, as a part of the social revolution, the land reform which had been introduced earlier in liberated areas during the nine-year resistance. Meanwhile, a cultural revolution, which was deemed to be as important to the reconstruction efforts as the economic and social revolutions, was conducted through art and literature. DRV leaders stressed the importance of the people to the long-term future of the country in a slogan of the time: “Vi lợi ích mười năm trọng cây. Vi lợi ích trăm năm trọng người” (Grow trees for the benefit of the next ten years. Grow people for the benefit of the next hundred years). Consequently, they sought to rally the people and
artists under the banner of socialist realism, because, according to another slogan, “Muốn có chủ nghĩa xã hội, trước hết phải có con người xã hội chủ nghĩa” (Socialistic people must first be created if we want to create socialism). For the purpose of this study, I do not intend to discuss socialist realism as a school in the Eastern European bloc as a whole, but only its application in Vietnam.

Dubbed kỹ sư tâm hồn (engineers of the soul), intellectuals, artists, and writers together with their literature and art were considered a crucial weapon in the struggle for a new society. At a time when unity and organization were paramount to success (in fact unity and organization accounted for two of the distinguishing features of the Vietnamese Communist victory), people were asked to put social responsibility above their individualism and complete freedom of expression. They were required to conform to certain aesthetic guidelines and to support government policies to facilitate unity in the name of national salvation. In A Vietcong Memoir, Trương Như Tằng relates Hồ Chí Minh’s words that were to be indelibly imprinted in his memory: “We must fight a war against foreign domination, a war against hunger, a war against ignorance. To gain ‘victory, victory, great victory,’ we must have ‘unity, unity, great national unity’” (26). What Hồ said to Tằng in 1946 was later turned into the slogan “Đoàn kết, đoàn kết, đại đoàn kết. Thanh công, thanh công, đại thanh công” (Unity, unity, great unity. Victory, victory, great victory). Commitment and revolutionary zeal at times resulted in radicalism, however. Concomitant with the land reform excesses and strains in 1956-7, some tension arose between the individualism recently discovered in the 1930s and the required conformity and direct supervision by the Party in the production of art and literature under the DRV. In the name of intellectual integrity and literary freedom, some
intellectuals demanded the right to uncensored expression in what was to be known as the *Nhân Văn Giai Phạm* (Humanities and Literary Selections) incident. The former romantics of the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn, who had now found a new, invigorated life with new beliefs, were quick to respond. In 1958, Chế Lan Viên, who twenty-one years earlier had wanted to “close [his] eyes to disregard the present,” being so “sick and tired of the colors and forms of this world” — a world he saw as having been “created in a moment of grief,” now wrote the poem “When You Have Purpose” that stresses the psychological rewards of participation in meaningful group action. Théré Lữ, the despairing, tortured poet of “Truy Lạc” [Decadence] in the 1930s who had since then found psychological rebirth in the cause of national salvation, now criticized Phan Khôi, the instigator of the protest, and the dissenters:

They have resorted to heresy and sophistry to deceive the people and seduce the rotten elements to follow them, to sell their hearts and minds to them cheaply. And in the ranks that followed them before all else came those literary artists who had gone with the revolution but carried along with them a heavy burden of personal feelings from the old life, and regretted the passing of a way of life characterized by unfettered selfishness, thinking and working in an easy manner, according to their own individualistic preferences, crawling into a dark hole of literature that was smoke-filled and debased and taking that as the universe for their souls to create in.

Building on the hands-on approach of prewar social realists such as Tam Lang, Nguyễn Hông, and Vũ Trọng Phùng, the Association of Arts and Letters now encouraged writers to study the life of the soldiers, peasants and workers who were doing their share
in turning the country into an independent state. In order to avoid the kind of literature from ivory towers and dark attics—literature which might be shallow for want of real life experience, observation trips (chuyên đi thực tế—literally “reality [experiencing] trips”) were organized to bring writers and intellectuals closer to the people they were writing for and about. For months at a time, entertainment troupes (văn công) travelled to faraway places, while artists, writers, and poets lived and worked among the people, occasionally joining forces with the văn công to entertain the villagers, workers, or soldiers. In addition, people from the peasantry, factory, and the army were encouraged to contribute their own writings to the national literature. Along with established writers from previous periods, the literary scene continued to brighten with new personalities, who wrote from personal experiences. Between 1954 and 1965, the best-known of the new talents included Nguyễn Ngọc, Võ Huy Tấn, Đào Vũ, Nguyễn Văn Bông, Vũ Tú Nam, Lê Lưu, Nguyễn Khải (prose); Hoàng Ngọc Phách (criticism); Vũ Cao, Quang Dũng, Tạ Hữu Yên, Văn Đại, Anh Thọ (poetry). From 1965 to 1975, there were Hồ Phương, Vũ Thị Thương, Chu Lai, Nguyễn Kiên, Chu Văn, Nguyễn Minh Châu, Lê Minh Khuê (prose); Hoàng Nhuận Cẩm, Chính Hữu, Phan Thị Thanh Nhàn, Xuân Quỳnh, Ý Nhi, Phạm Tiến Duật, Trần Đăng Khoa, Nguyễn Duy, Hữu Thịnh, Phạm Hồ (poetry); Lưu Quang Võ, Đoàn Hoàng Giang (drama). Their literature, some of which is to be examined next, was full of passion, clear in its purpose, and warm with emotion. It would not be a great exaggeration to say that this literature played a fair part in the eventual victory of the nationalist Vietnamese war effort.

When remnants of the resistance in the South gathered under the NLF in 1959 to oppose Diệm’s ruthless and indiscriminate repression, the North had to be prepared for
another important task: providing assistance to this Southern resistance. The continued aggression from the U.S.—culminating in American General LeMay's threat of bombing the DRV back to the Stone Age—now demanded even greater sacrifice and unity under a strong leadership. The DRV literature continued its role in the construction of a desired society within the parameters set out by the overall efforts for national salvation. After the Hồ Chí Minh trail was opened, several writers went B (the code name for the South) and conducted their thuc té trips in the NLF-controlled areas, or fought in the army and Youth Brigade (thanh niên xung phong—literally, volunteer youths). Literary talents from the North and the South were now truly intermingled, with writers born in the North now serving in the South, and many Southern writers having regrouped to the North, who every so often volunteered to go South again during the resistance war against the Americans—a fact that greatly complicates the usual black-and-white designations of "North" and "South" in the RVN's and American vocabularies. The revolutionary writers and artists had their fair share of members killed in action as well. In the next section, I will discuss some representative poems composed by DRV poets between 1965 and 1975—poems my generation grew up committing to heart and copying in our personal diaries.

One of the poets coming to fame in the 1960s in the DRV is Chình Hữu (born 1926). Holder of a French baccalaureate in philosophy, Chính Hữu participated in the August 1945 Revolution, joined the Việt Minh army in 1946, and served in the capital regiment fighting around Hanoi. Upon release from the army, he was elected assistant general secretary of the Vietnam Writers' Association and served on the board of directors through 1996. Regarding the writing of poetry, he says: "I've told myself that I
should and must be an amateur, a nonprofessional poet to preserve my freedom. Freedom to write, and only write, whatever my heart moves me to. And freedom to cross out whatever I have composed that is not true to my feelings. Perhaps it is due to this quality of being true to the feelings that his poems were so successful in reaching the hearts of millions of readers. "Ngon Đèn Đứng Gác" [The lamps standing on guard] (1965) is one among such poems, which was later woven into a song that millions of Vietnamese hummed. In this poem, the simple oil lamp symbolizes hard work, hope, determination, and unity. The poet notices lighted oil lamps everywhere he goes on his way to combat the enemy, from North to South. For the guerrillas in the South, night time was always bustling with activities, from meetings and food production to making contacts with the people or preparing for the next battle. The lighted lamps mark the hard work in those sleepless nights of NLF fighters and their sympathizers in the struggle for independence and unification: "Like the South/Twenty years/Sleepless." In the North, the ongoing reconstruction and production continued at night in relative safety from U.S. bombing, serving both to modernize and develop the economy, and to meet wartime needs so that the North could stand strong as the South's large rear area: "Like the whole nation/With the South/Is staying awake every night." In this "protracted struggle," lighted lamps become the symbol of hope, determination: "Like spirits that never give up." They also stand for continuity and unity between the North and the South, illuminating the way for trucks and troops of fighters South-bound along the Hồ Chí Minh trail:

Our lamps light up the joys

Our lamps light up the appeals.
Faster, faster
The battles are calling
Over the mountains, the rivers
Our lamps glow.

In the wind, in the rain
The lamps are standing guard
For victories to follow
One after the other ahead.\textsuperscript{83}

If light plays up the central themes in "Ngọn Đèn Dúng Gác," sound is effective as a symbol of determination and continuity of the war effort in the North in Trần Đăng Khoa’s “Tiếng Đàn Bầu và Đêm Trăng” [Sound of the one-string guitar and the moonlight] (1972). The traditional one-string guitar (đàn bầu) links the two now-divided halves of the country, playing both “the tender lullabies of the South” and “the freshly improvised quan ho exchanges” of the North.\textsuperscript{84} The guitar links the heroic past and the epic present: the “sounds of love of thousands of years past” lead to “the sounds of love today,” and the “curving corners of the village communal temple’s roof” that have lasted through the history of Vietnam are now juxtaposed with “the high rise of the new factories on the other side of the river.” The guitar links the social and industrial revolutions to the fighting on the battlefield, the “young village guard woman driving a tractor/her big toe covered with fresh mud” to the “village elders who have many times said goodbye to children and grandchildren going to the battlefield,” as naturally as it entertains between “two crops of rice.” The one-string guitar played by the “liberation
entertainment troupes” who are staying in the village on their way to the fighting line "vibrates with songs of the people, of earth.” “The string seems only to skim the fingers/yet intensifies in the space/vibrating with the strength of thousands of years of Vietnamese history,” making poets out of “nine-, ten-year-olds.” When U.S. bombs explode in the distance, the areca palm passes its shade over the guitar, “erasing the polluting sound of the bombs/leaving only the music of the guitar, gushing out/fresh as a stream at its source.” Considering that the poem was written when Khoa was only fourteen years old and had never left his native village, the profound beliefs that electrified the general population of the DRV during the war are as plainly expressed as the talent of the young poet, who went on to become a soldier in the last months of the American war and who remains one of the most interesting writers of Vietnam today.

Many songs, poems, and stories have been written about the Hồ Chí Minh trail, the most famous icon of unity, continuity, and determination in the Vietnam War. One thing is for certain: poet and soldier Phạm Tiến Duật’s “Trương Sơn Đông, Trương Sơn Tây” [Trùông Sơn east, Trùông Sơn west] (circa 1968) will forever be remembered as a most popular poem coming out of the war. It was later lyricized in yet another best-known song of the war. Apparently a love story between a soldier and a youth volunteer on Trùông Sơn, the mountain range that connects the North to the South, the poem plays brilliantly on the theme of separation and yet deep connection through love and support, not only between the young couple in love, but between the soldiers and the support people, and between the North and the South of this divided country.

We both hang our hammocks in the Trùông Sơn forests

At the far ends of the same mountain range.
The road to the battlefield is beautiful this season
Because Trưởng Sơn East is thinking of Trưởng Sơn West.

One mountain range, but the colors of the clouds can be different
When one side is raining, the other may be shining,
Like you and me, like the North and the South
Like east and west: two connected ends of the same mountain.

In the West I march, feeling for you
On the other side where it rains hard on the heavy rice baskets,
Mosquitoes blanketing the forests, your sleeves being pulled down.
No greens left, are you now searching for bamboo shoots?

And you must be thinking of me in the winter West,
Where streams have dried up and butterflies shade the rocks.
Knowing how passionate I am to be living in this unfamiliar terrain,
Perhaps you are worried about the bombs that block our roads . . . .

When I get in the truck, the rain starts
The windshield wipers chase away my longing;
When you walk down the mountain in the blazing sunlight,
The tree branches wipe away your private concerns.
The route from east to west is not for mail:
It’s the route for rice and ammunition.
On the east side, the “three-ready”\textsuperscript{85} young woman dresses in green
On the west side, the soldier wears olive camouflage.

From your end to my end,
Waves of troops are marching to battles.
Like our love that never ends,
Trương Sơn East connects with Trương Sơn West.\textsuperscript{86}

The above poems are but three of many such pieces of whole-hearted writing, copied and recopied in tiny notebooks to be brought along to the battlefield in the South, or to the factories and offices in the North, and recited for millions of people through the “Tiếng thơ” [sound of poetry] program or the “Chương trình đọc truyện đêm khuya” [late night story reading program] of the Voice of Vietnam radio station in Hanoi. I myself numbered among the audience that were glued to those programs through the 1970s, at times crying or laughing from the shared emotion.

\textbf{Literatures of the South 1954-75}

In the South, between 1954 and 1963, the overall atmosphere of repression stultified literary development as fear spread and people withdrew into general \textit{attentisme}—or were driven to resistance in the jungles. Publishing houses mainly republished apolitical works by authors from previous periods, particularly the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn group, most of whom had rallied to the Việt Minh. In July 1963, Nhất Linh,
the best known figure of the Tư Lức Văn Đoàn, also the most respected writer in Saigon and one with the largest following of readers among the urbanites of the South at the time, was driven to suicide when slapped with a police court order for “subversive activities,” which would have ended in persecution. His suicide note denouncing the RVN’s dictatorship (quoted in part earlier in Chapter III) was read by tens of thousands of Saigonese and distributed to American newsmagazines such as Time and Newsweek, and sparked waves of protests and demonstrations in Saigon throughout the rest of 1963. As far as policy goes, Ngô Đình Nhu, Diệm’s brother and special adviser, tried to make writers produce anti-Communist works along the lines of his Personalism (Nhân Văn) doctrine, an incomprehensible, distorted combination of both right-wing and left-wing varieties of totalitarianism that traced its roots to the works of Emmanuel Mounier, a French Catholic priest. The party that was formed on this doctrine (the Căn Lao Party) took the form of a clandestine police force within the RVN’s own government and army. But few people ever understood or cared much for this hodgepodge of a philosophy, and so the attempt failed.

The RVN-controlled cities enjoyed a break of sorts after the ousting of Diệm and his family in 1963 led to a period of the several coups and countercoups conducted or joined by Trần Văn Đôn and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. Preoccupied with their plotting, counterplotting, and consolidation of power, the generals left RVN writers pretty much to themselves, on the condition that the latter stayed away from anything that was vaguely labeled as “Communist propaganda.” Even after Thiệu-Kỳ had more or less consolidated their power, the unconcerned RVN government was still in no frame of mind to offer direction for the development of culture and literature under their jurisdiction, being even
more ignorant, passive and dependent on outside initiatives in these areas than they were in many other aspects. In the general anarchy that ensued, the RVN literature’s development was characterized by its haphazard, anything-goes nature. Only when the Thiệu-Kỳ rule (or more precisely, the lack of an effective government under their rule) ushered in American marines in 1965 did the RVN literature acquire a focus. Destruction of South Vietnamese life, racism, resentment, and despair emerged as the most prominent themes.

First, there was a school of realists who dealt with the physical, spiritual, and moral destruction of South Vietnam under the RVN and its American sponsor. In particular, the focus was on the depravation of South Vietnamese society when forced to cohabit with a destructive foreign army: the unemployment, inflation, and poverty of the cities, and the prostitution of Vietnamese women under the evil influence of the dollar. At times, this section of RVN literature also conveys different reactions to the comparative appeal and wholesomeness of the “Communist” nationalists. Some realists were professedly anti-Communist. These writers were mostly Northerners fleeing South in 1954 as Catholics and/or supporters of the French, and those who held jobs in the ARVN at one time or another, such as Doãn Quốc Sỹ, Võ Phиén, Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, Duyên Anh, Mai Thảo, and Hồ Hữu Trường. Others wrote from the sidelines of the war; their writings inclined more toward the authors’ own powerlessness, their guilt and resignation in describing the horrors of a war in which they were taking no part. Writers in this group include Lê Tất Diệu, Tạ Ty, Nguyễn Thị Thụy Vụ, and Nhã Ca.

At the other end of the spectrum, a number of RVN writers tried to ignore the war altogether and produced a body of escapist literature heavily colored by eroticism,
anarchic romanticism, and narrow individualism. The best-known authors of this trend formed a group called “the five she-devils” (ngữ quy): Chu Tử, Túy Hồng, Thế Uyên, Nguyễn Thị Hoằng, and Lê Hằng. Of all the literary schools, this group had the most best-sellers amid the RVN public’s blasé demoralization, even as RVN critics decried these erotic novels as immoral, and knowing parents forbade their children from reading them (as the parents of my South Vietnamese friends did). Nguyễn Thị Hoằng’s Vòng Tay Học Trở [In the arms of my student lover] was passed from hand to hand among school students in Saigon soon after its publication. This novel about an affair between a schoolteacher and her sixteen-year-old student was particularly shocking in a culture where teachers were as revered as parents. The scandalous relationship hits home not only because the novel is based on the author’s actual personal experience, but because of the reversal of gender roles—traditionally, the already scandalous student-teacher affair happened between a male teacher and a female student. Another extremely popular author in the RVN, Lê Hằng, produced love stories such as Thung Lũng Tình Yêu [The Valley of Love], Chết Cho Tình Yêu [Dying for Love], Mắt Tim [Violet Eyes], which caused great sensations with a heavy dose of what in the Vietnamese standard of the time were graphic intimations of (often extramarital) sex.

On another level, the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Françoise Sagan was very popular among French-educated intellectual writers. RVN writers and poets of this trend include Thanh Tâm Tuyên, Vũ Hoàng Chuong, Đình Hùng, Tò Thùy Yến, Nguyễn Sa, Nguyễn Đình Toàn, and Nhà Ca. In Fire in the Lake, FitzGerald observes that the Saigon intellectuals and civil servants, from which came the political parties of the RVN, constituted a “privileged elite [. . .] that [sustained] itself not
on any local base of production, but on the work of the foreigners” (300). Acting as an intermediary between the foreigners and the Vietnamese natives, many of the Saigon intelligentsia under the French as under the Americans became, FitzGerald concludes, “a group of people with a very different culture from the rest of the Vietnamese” (300).

While the leaders spoke French among themselves or took pride in their English, there continued to be a prestige to being “Western” in Saigon under the RVN. It was considered trendy for well-to-do Saigonese to send their sons and daughters to “trường Tây” (schools for the messieurs) and “trường dâm” (schools for the mademoiselles), where they acquired fluency in French and English while taking only a few courses in Vietnamese. One of the consequences is that some writers, such as Vi Huyền Dắc, chose to write in French instead of their mother tongue. In addition, educated this way, a new generation of RVN youths preferred to read in French or English, further contributing to the RVN literary doldrums. A compromise was readily reached through the best-selling novels of Hoàng Hải Thùy in the form of phong tác (loose translation) of internationally famous novels (mainly love stories), such as Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre, in which the plot, narrative, and character names were modified to suit a Vietnamese audience. Translated works were also popular, although the quality of the translation was questionable, judging by the surprisingly mediocre Vietnamese copies of A Farewell to Arms and Doctor Zhivago printed under the RVN that I happened to possess in the late 1970s.

From 1965, when American military troops landed en masse in South Vietnam and took over the fighting, till the end in 1975, antiwar (and anti-American) sentiments became increasingly vocal as the war quickly expanded and became much more
ferocious. Spokespersons of this trend came from the most popular of poets and songwriters: Nguyễn Sa, Tô Thùy Yên, Du Tử Lệ, Trần Đạ Tử, Phạm Duy, and most of all, the quintessential Trịnh Công Sơn. These poets and songwriters expressed a profound sense of alienation and bitter displeasure with the existing government, war weariness, a feeling of futility, and a strong desire for peace. Significantly, antiwar themes were not restricted to a few writers and artists, or a few works of literature and art, but eventually came to permeate practically all works of note until the collapse of the RVN. Many poignant antiwar poems by the best-known protestors were set to music by even better-known songwriters, both reflecting and setting an atmosphere of degeneration and anguish, of outrage and resentment that enveloped the RVN. The instigator of the war was perceived by some to be the “Việt Cộng,” by others to be the RVN leaders (in which case the real object of the blame, the existing regime, was often left unidentified for fear of consequences), and by an increasing number to be the Americans.

Also in the South, the founding of the NLF in December 1959 heralded the establishment of Hội Văn Nghệ Giải Phóng (the Liberation Association of Literature and Arts) soon after. The Association represented scholars, writers, poets, artists, and Vietnamese of learning who had rallied to the NLF cause, and who contributed to the Front in three ways: by orchestrating the cultural movement by and for the people in NLF-controlled areas; by producing literary works reflecting “men and facts in combat, in production, and in all social activities in the liberated area;” and by mobilizing patriotic artistic and literary forces in both NLF and RVN areas, as well as externalizing internationally for the revolutionary cause, the liberation of South Vietnam and the reunification of the Fatherland. The chairman of the Association’s central committee
was Trần Hữu Trang, a playwright from Saigon who had founded the Saigon Brotherhood organization to agitate against the Diệm government. Comprising the rest of the Association’s central committee were other writers, poets, and artists from South Vietnam, including Mme. Thanh Loan, a famous chanteuse and comedienne from Saigon. In 1960, the Association put forward the Nguyễn Đình Chiểu prize to further the production of quality literary works from NLF fighters and members. The Association published a weekly magazine, the Văn Nghệ Giải Phóng (Liberation Literature and Arts), of stories, poems and other artistic productions by the guerrillas and the people under the NLF. The mere existence of the Association was an impressive achievement of the NLF in the harrowing conditions of the time. Talented Southerners who made their names writing passionately about the nationalist revolution in South Vietnam include Phan Tú, Giang Nam, Thu Bòn, Anh Đức, Thanh Hải, Nguyễn Vũ, Lê Anh Xuân, Nguyễn Thị, Nguyễn Sáng, Trần Hiếu Minh, Nguyễn Trung Thành, Nguyễn Quang Sáng, Lâm Thị Mỹ Dân, Nguyễn Khoa Diệm, Viễn Phương, Lê Vĩnh Hoa, Nguyễn Mỹ, Trần Ngọc, Dinh Quang Nhã, Cửu Long, and Hoài Vũ. The body of NLF literature was further complemented by the writings of Southern regroupees and of Northerners who were fighting side by side with NLF revolutionaries in the South. In an attempt to define the NLF literature in the context of an actual integration of writers from both halves of the country in the South as well as in the North, in the next part of the study I will discuss only Southern-born writers who were actually writing from the South during the American War. In other words, the NLF literature is here defined as the body of writing produced in the South by Southern resistsants. As far as content goes, the DRV literature paid equal attention to the efforts and success at reconstruction and
modernization in the North, and compassion and encouragement for the fighting in the South, while the NLF literature was naturally devoted to revolutionary heroism, dedication and determination to the cause, hatred for the enemy and their atrocities, and love, compassion and camaraderie for the people and other members of the revolution.

A remarkable feature of the revolutionary literature is that there is little distinction between writers and fighters, between real life and literature. Literary writing came from the guerrillas and cadres in the simple form of personal diaries and letters, or pieces composed between fighting and food production for the unit’s báo tuồng (literally “wall newspaper”), a gazette of news, poems, stories, journals, anecdotes and humour to be pinned on the walls in the bomb shelters or headquarters cottages in every unit of the liberation army in the jungle bases. NLF (and DRV) leaders encouraged literary writing among the members as they realized in it an effective outlet for emotions, a source of psychological and intellectual sustenance, and a means to connect the fighters to the nation’s historical self-confidence (Woodside, “Vietnamese History”). Under wartime circumstances, the constant production of a body of literature, together with the establishment and maintenance of coherent cultural and literary policies in the jungles, was an admirable feat. It spoke volumes about the leaders’ consideration of the time-honored Vietnamese tradition of love for literature, and about the revolutionaries’ determination to popularize a tradition long reserved for intellectuals. The Nguyễn Đình Chiểu prize continued to sustain interest since its inception, offering recognition to the best of the writings. The prize was aimed at encouraging the resistance spirit, expression of the revolutionaries’ thoughts and feelings, and the depiction of revolutionary life. At the same time, it offered a measure of excitement through competition and provided
opportunities to discover literary talents among the fighters. Under the RVN, writing was a domain reserved for intellectuals and people of leisure, which explains in part the prominence of relatively well-to-do female writers from big cities, as urban women generally did not work unless forced by necessity to contribute to the family's finances. NLF writers, on the other hand, were simultaneously guerrilla fighters. Many of them died in combat (among whom three of the best-known: Nguyễn Thị, Lê Anh Xuân and Nguyễn Mỹ), in the bombing, or from the malnutrition and diseases of the jungle. Coming from active participants of the struggle who were shouldering their share of the sacrifice in the national cause, the passion and realism were palpable. Their determination and optimism, admirable through the most difficult stages of the war, played an important part in sustaining the morale of the fighters and their supporters.

**RVN literature 1954-1975**

Even though all of the different schools of literature under the RVN (realist, escapist/erotic, existential, antiwar) in their own way both reflected and contributed to the despair and nihilism prevailing in RVN-controlled areas until 1975, I will examine only representative works by writers of "serious literature"—which means the exclusion in this study of romantic, escapist prose and poetry, which happen to be the most popular among a RVN readership increasingly exhausted by the war and its consequences. The phrase "the RVN literature" in this dissertation, therefore, refers to the body of serious literature coming out of the RVN during the American war.

As the examination of the political leaders' memoirs in Chapter III has made clear, the RVN leaders were lame in their rationalizing of their own cause, and the
“freedom” and “democracy” they claimed to uphold were in effect anarchy, lawlessness, and a culture of each acting on his own for his own motives. In this context, it should be no surprise that the RVN literature during 1954-75 shows a strong sense of ambivalence, passivity (with the exception of some rousing anti-war works), alienation, pessimism and lack of direction. In this study, I will look at only writers who were either supportive of or neutral to the RVN government. Although the scope of this study precludes a more detailed analysis, the representative works introduced below should sum up the prevailing sentiments and concerns in the RVN from 1954 to 1975.


One of the staunchest anti-Communists in the RVN, Võ Phiên criticizes the Communists’ self-discipline and their supposed replacement of family ties by love and sacrifice for the larger community in “Thác Đồ Sau Nhà” [Waterfall in the backyard].
The story is told from the point of view of Hạnh, a young, noncommittal woman whose first love and husband Thọ is a serious, honorable teacher. Problems begin, it seems, when Thọ answers the nationalists’ call and becomes a member of the Communist Party. The quite rambling plot revolves around the dilemmas and emotional turmoil caused by both wartime conditions and differences in ideological beliefs amongst Thọ’s family and circle of friends. Since Thọ joined the Party, he has been constantly at odds with his father and his friend Kha, although the reasons for the latter’s opposition are left unexplained. Henceforward, Hạnh witnesses her husband’s efforts to monitor his actions and thoughts in an “honest aspiration to perfection because he is a revolutionary Party cadre.” There seems to be an inner struggle within Thọ every time the interests of his family and of his own differ from those of the larger society, and eventually, the interests of the society always triumph. When Thọ’s grandmother dies, he does not attend her funeral because she has sided with a landlord’s family. When Hạnh joins in the village community work at her husband’s encouragement, Thọ struggles with himself to keep in check his jealousy toward the men his wife comes into contact with. Although she says she loves her husband more for trying to be a better, selfless person, Hạnh thinks of his efforts as dreadful, unnatural, and alienating. Thọ’s friend Kha takes Hạnh’s implicit criticism one step further—he calls this self-discipline and the class struggle “inhuman,” to which Thọ replies:

“Then affection put in the wrong place is human? Blind affection for an uncle, an aunt, a brother, or any other relative who is reactive is human? And affection for the oppressed and the poor—when in order to save them from exploitation, you hurt your relatives—that is inhuman?”
Tho explains to his wife that his political choice is prompted by a wish for a disciplined, organized community and a better society:

“People want to have order in their lives, to systemize thoughts, to categorize animals and things, to organize life so that there will be rules, directions, goals. Until now, life has been drifting along its haphazard course, society has been so disorganized and chaotic we have remained stagnant for a whole century. . . . A funk has developed in the chaos and despair, the old society has given us nothing to believe in. Our parents’ generation is different, you see. Father has his own beliefs while my generation is lost and miserable. How could I keep on living like that? I had to find things to believe in. Now I’m a small part in a big machine running at full speed to reach a dream. . . .”

When Tho prepares to regroup to the North, Hanh blames their imminent separation on his “resigned acceptance” of “their rationalization for the benefits of the whole society,” instead of the individual. According to her understanding,

for the benefits of the society, we have to separate—one off to the North, the other staying in the South. Because the separation, the resulting unsatisfied love will create a yearning that will benefit the plans for the common struggle. Willfully causing our painful separation and yearning in order to use it as a tool, that’s what they are calculating. . . . Does Tho think he and I do not have a duty to each other? That our duty is to the community only? In arguing for the benefit of the whole community, he has conspired with them to capitalize on our yearning.

After Tho is gone, Kha becomes a district chief in Ngo Diem’s regime and develops a theory of the necessity of a dictatorship. One night, while tending the buffaloes for her
sick keeper, Hạnh comes across a wandering hunter and has sex with him. In the morning, however, she is repelled by his satiated look of indifference—the uninvolved look of a person who, as we learn at the beginning of the story, goes on a hunting trip the day the Japanese overthrew the French, and whose only complaint about the upheaval is that it makes it impossible for him to find worthy game. She suddenly feels sorry for Kha, who is increasingly bitter about “the current [RVN] government’s indecisiveness against Communist espionage, its wieldy organization and ineffectual work style, [and] its powerlessness in the face of rampant corruption,” but who is powerless himself as a lonely district chief. The story ends abruptly with the information that Kha is now Hạnh’s husband and the father of the child she is carrying.

The story was published in 1957 while Diệm was consolidating his control in South Vietnam with heavy-handed measures, including the tô cống (denunciation of Communists) campaign. Tens of thousands of former Việt Minh who had resisted and triumphed over the French were sent to prison, those who would not pledge allegiance to Diệm risked a death sentence without trial, and the regroupees’ and resistsants’ relatives were subjected to punishment by prison and to various other forms of abuse. It was, as Trương Như Tăng’s memoir tells us, a time when important decisions were demanded from the so far equivocal section of the South Vietnamese population. “Thác Đổ Sau Nhà” interestingly carries conflicting feelings about both the “Communists” and Diệm’s RVN. Although Võ Phiền obviously put more thought into an ideological argument than most other RVN writers had been doing or were to do later, the conflict between Phiền’s advocacy of the RVN and his realization of the Communists’ superior appeal and effectiveness is translated into serious problems in this story, both literary and historical.
First, the choice of narrator weakens the story's credibility. A twenty-year-old woman like Hạnh, who grew up in a Vietnamese village in the 1940s with apparently little education, who married at sixteen, and who has always lived in her husband's shadow and in his rather well-to-do and stable family, could hardly have had the maturity, finesse, or social and political knowledge to assess the national situation nor the men whose thoughts and social activities constitute a world she does not share. Putting into Hạnh’s mouth an argument about ideologies and presenting her choice for Kha as the correct solution for a national political issue therefore feels extremely forced and seriously damages the validity of Võ Phiền’s ideological argument. Credibility suffers even further as Hạnh’s remarriage would be seen as shameful disloyalty, especially in the Confucian context of her family, when Thọ, her husband, is still alive, and the separation is supposed to be only temporary.

Secondly, the ideological and political case Võ Phiền tries to present through the story is incoherent, especially so because readers only catch random snatches, often in unfinished sentences, of the conversations between Thọ and Kha that Hạnh overhears while she goes about doing the housework. Especially worth noting is Võ Phiền’s representation of historical facts in this story. In their memoirs, RVN leaders Trần Văn Đôn and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ admit that, of all Vietnamese political groups, the “Communists” were the most eloquent and “often successful” in their propaganda (Kỳ 21). In “Waterfall in the Backyard,” Võ Phiền counters this historical reality and arranges to have Thọ, a teacher and a Party cadre, stammer in his argument with Kha, whose profession is unknown and whose argument is superficial. In their discussions, the lý of nationalism and its công lý and đạo lý facets, which I have shown to be appealing to
many Vietnamese, are never mentioned. Instead of extending familial affection (*tinh*) to a
larger community of like-minded nationalists as we have seen Mme. Nguyễn Thị Định
and Trương Như Tăng do, Thọ in this story is described as curbing his emotions and
opting to sacrifice his ties with his wife, family and friends in order to become a
Communist. Oddly, the community of “Communists” that Thọ renounces everything for
is not even present in the story.

The story also contains numerous other unaccountable factual holes. For example,
Võ Phiền leaves the reader in the dark about Kha’s political activities during the national
resistance against the French. All we are told is that Kha is arrested by the Việt Minh
every time the French deploy, and no information is available as to how he later rises to
district chief, a relatively high-ranking position which in those days was filled
exclusively with military men. Kha’s arrests by the Việt Minh and his position later in the
Diệm regime make it seem probable that he has been spying for the hated French. If so,
the sympathy the reader is supposed to feel for Kha would be unwarranted and Hạnh’s
final choice pathetic and hard to understand. Last and most importantly, Võ Phiền
completely distorts history regarding the Geneva Convention and its impact on the lives
of Vietnamese. Hạnh’s blaming her separation from her husband on the “Communists” is
informative of the author’s subjective view, since in reality it was Ngô Đình Diệm and
the U.S. who thwarted the election which had been planned for 1956 and which would
have unified the country. In summary, Võ Phiền’s experience as a writer shows in the
rather elaborate plot and relatively natural language. However, one could surmise that his
superficial, distorted argument was in all probability more appealing to supporters of the
Another anti-Communist RVN writer who devoted some thought to the issue of ideology is Duyên Anh (real name Vũ Mông Long, 1935-1997), who was born in Thái Bình (North Vietnam). In 1954, Duyên Anh moved South together with many other Catholics with the help of the French and Americans, and he settled in France after 1975. Some of Duyên Anh’s best known fiction titles before 1975 are “Hoa Thiên Lý” [The thien lý jasmine], Luật Hè Phố [Law of the streets], Dung Dakao [Dung from Dakao] Thàng Còn [The guy named Còn], Áo Vòng Tuổi Trẻ [The illusions of youth], Ngày Xửa Còn Bé [Childhood], Nhà Tôi [My family], and Vết Hàn Trên Lưng Ngựa Hoang [The marks on the wild horse’s back]. The last two were later turned into movies directed by Lê Hoàng Hoa and Lê Dân.99

Áo Vòng Tuổi Trẻ [The illusions of youth] (1964) is a tale of skepticism and cynicism written during the period of the several coups and countercoups staged by Trần Văn Đơn and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. The time of the story is set in the Diệm era (it became politically correct to criticize this despotic president after he was removed by Đơn, Kỳ, and their team in 1963). A group of urban, educated youths aged between 20 and 25 are recruited by an older man, Hiền, to engage in a “revolution.” They profess opposition to Ngô Đình Diệm, Hồ Chí Minh, the “Communists,” the French and Americans, but their fascination with the Việt Minh success and prestige is obvious. The strategies they employ are eerily reminiscent of those of the “Communists”: a stress on the priority of a political front and effective propaganda, criticism and self-criticism, and pride in continuing Vietnam’s heroic past. The Nationalist Revolutionary Party (“Đảng Cách
Mạng Dân Tộc”) to which the youths swear allegiance has been founded by a mythical Mr. Trần, with a declaration and a philosophy none of the youths have read, but understand to be as profound as philosophies by “Marx, Engel, Jesus, or Buddha” (Chapter 3). In particular, Mr. Hiền, the real leader of the party, has risen to fame and respect with a resistance past lasting from 1942 to 1946, although the author does not say whom or what Hiền resisted. Hiền claims that

our party is rooted in a sound philosophy. We oppose the Communists with our own ideology, which they are most afraid of. You must agree with me that only ideology is considerable; no weapons can suppress it. Don’t hesitate. We have a good ideology. Our party has created a clear path. Be brave and follow the proud tradition of the past. (Chapter 3)

But the similarities, which would have given rise to interpretations of the story as a portrayal of the Việt Minh otherwise, end there. The group of twenty-five-something-year-olds appears as a kind of adventurers-meet-gangsters. For months, they practice throwing knives and car racing while taking lessons in martial arts, shooting, and lithographic printing. They also learn how to distribute propaganda leaflets, and to act as “the pillars of the party” (Chapter 8). Hiding in the forest, in a sort of imitative maquis, the youths live on an odd melange of Western food cooked Vietnamese style: “[American] aid rice, vegetable soup with American cheese,” and “breakfasts of glasses of powder milk donated by the United Nations” (Chapter 2). And they enjoy Mr. Hiền’s gifts of fine English cigarettes, lighted with gold and silver lighters. After proving they are worthy of more important tasks by knifing two unarmed French officers, the youths are put to work in various South Vietnamese provinces, mainly to finance the Party.
Some smuggle opium across the border from Laos. Some rob the bank. Some infiltrate other criminal organizations. When the two leaders of the party, Mr. Binh and Mr. Hiền, have acquired brand new cars, a Peugeot 403 and a Chevrolet (symbols of French and American luxury and power), and enough money to go over to Ngô Đình Diệm “on an equal footing” (Chapter 18), they plan to rid themselves of the smugglers and bank robbers in their party so as to ensure themselves a “squeaky clean” reputation. The opium smugglers die in a police shooting. The bank robbers are killed in the car chase following their biggest catch, leaving only one member to carry the cash to the party leaders. The remaining youths who have come to “know too much” are instructed to assassinate the chief of a mafia group. However, they are betrayed to the mafia before they could take action. The end of the novel sees Mr. Hiền and Mr. Binh work their way to the posts of a minister and a senator respectively in the Diệm regime, leaving behind disillusioned survivors of their betrayal.

The story is simplistic, the characters flat and uninspiring, and the dialogue stilted and crude. In addition, the supposed appeal of the Nationalist Revolutionary Party is based on flimsy, ahistorical events and information. But the delineation of the illusion of a generation of youth under the RVN regime is oddly explicit, considering that Duyên Anh was a supporter of the RVN. The chaos of the time is expressed thus in the thinking of the self-proclaimed third-force leaders:

Ever since 1954, Vietnam’s political parties [under the RVN] had been in a defeated, pitiful state. Some parties founded before the August Revolution had achieved some prestige among the populace, but the talented and moral leaders had either been assassinated, or died of old age or illness. Those that were left
were ignorant conservatives that craved the fame and power of leadership. Hence daily the people saw one group cursing another, although they both belonged to the same party. Many party leaders loved driving American cars, having luxurious residences, and enjoying good food and fine clothing. As a result, they sold their party to Ngô Đình Diệm for a high position with the government so they could benefit in their old age. In addition, new parties and movements mushroomed. Many of them had members only on paper. But these lists kept going to Mr. Ngô Đình Diệm or the American ambassador, and still fetched coveted positions. Vietnam’s parties were languishing in decadence. Mr. Diệm feigned respect, but really despised them. (Chapter 18)

The Tết Offensive of 1968 marks one of the many turning points in the war. In the U.S., it unleashed waves of anti-war demonstrations. In South Vietnam, the NLF lost many of its best members, while the fierce fighting and the American and ARVN’s subsequent, even more brutal crackdown than previously on the “Việt Cộng” had polarizing effects on the attentiste population: some chose to join the resistants’ ranks, as Trương Như Tằng tells us, while some others lost faith in the NLF nationalist cause. Tết 1968 was also the rare occasion when the usual restraint and discipline of the NLF’s ranks were broken: some vengeful members and sympathizers in the field violated NLF policies and executed certain high-ranking RVN civilian officials in Huế, a major city in Central Vietnam. Neither the rationale for the violence nor the exact number of casualties can be accurately determined in the chaos, however, after the U.S. and ARVN completely levelled the city with shells and bombs “in order to save it” (see, for example, David Hunt).

Nhà Ca’s “Truyện Cho Những Tình Nhân” [A story for lovers], from the collection Tình Ca Cho Huế Đổ Nát [Love song for a ruined Huế] (1969), is basically a short version of Giải Khánh Sở Cho Huế. A young woman Diễm recently became engaged to her boyfriend Phan, and is dreaming of the day when she will be married. Tết, the
traditional Vietnamese new year, is approaching, and Diễm is preparing for her family’s celebration as Phan leaves for his grandfather’s at Truổi (a village outside of Huế). Fighting breaks out between the U.S./ARVN and the NLF, and during the siege of Huế, Diễm writes tearful letters to Phan describing the horrors of death and destruction around her, her fear of dying, anxiety for her family’s safety, and her dismay when forced to carry ammunition and the wounded for NLF fighters who are resisting U.S./ARVN attempts to recapture the city. When Phan is able to return to Huế, he finds Diễm’s body with her ring finger cut off and her engagement band gone. From then on, every afternoon, Phan rides his bicycle along the lane which he and Diễm used to cruise together. With him is the empty bicycle that once belonged to Diễm, and his engagement ring on the handle bar.

Nhã Ca’s aim in writing “Truyện Cho Nhũng Tình Nhân” is to appeal to readers’ sympathy for the plight of women and civilians, who are, like the ants in the proverbial Vietnamese saying, caught in a war between trampling, careless elephants. The RVN literary critic Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha Trang remarks that a characteristic of Nhã Ca’s fictive world is the lack of confidence that genuine love, which is traditionally women’s strength, can effect happy endings; if anything, love only makes the pain more poignant. “Truyện Cho Nhũng Tình Nhân” is typical of Nhã Ca’s works and of her view of RVN women’s (as well as men’s) victimization by circumstances which are beyond their control and which offer no redemption. The meaning of the story revolves around Diễm as a passive witness and victim with no hope of salvation. Her boyfriend Phan is also passive and ineffectual. As worried as he is about Diễm’s fate, he does little but “[stand] beside the road [. . .] and ask about the city” (136). The Americans, who are shelling the
city and whom Diệm herself refers to impersonally as “người Mỹ” [the Americans], are not looked to as saviours. Although Nhà Ca holds the “other side” responsible for a larger share of the destruction, the bombs and shells she describes dropping on Huế are clearly from the Americans. The word “rescue” is never used, and the ARVN is not even mentioned. There is no redeeming ideological faith, when the almost invisible “enemy” is vaguely designated as “ho” [they] in the absence of a pointed hatred that could arouse action. The characters of the story move in a setting physically and emotionally confined to a family, a house, and one lane. The story ends in indifference and resignation, as Nhà Ca tells us that the neighbors “grew used to seeing Phan ride along with an empty bicycle beside him. No one had time anymore to ask him about his love” (137). There is no talk of Phan ever going to do something about his fiancée’s death. Even though he is supposed to be leaving for training at the ARVN recruit center in Thu Duc early in the story, the author chose not to develop this thread.

Destruction is also a major theme in the fiction of Nguyễn Thị Thùy Vũ (real name Nguyễn Bằng Linh, born 1939 in Vĩnh Long, South Vietnam). Thùy Vũ describes the corruption of South Vietnamese society through the depraving of individual women who in one way or another ended up in the mushrooming brothels that catered to Americans. Her collection of short stories Lao Vào Lửa [Into the fire] (1967) contain the experiences of three women with no past or family, which together make up the different stages in the life of RVN prostitutes. Although Thùy Vũ is considered a prominent writer in the RVN circle, her stories lack depth, the characters are flat, the settings limited, and the language plain and static. Still, the three short pieces in Lao Vào Lửa provide glimpses of the author’s despair at South Vietnamese society under RVN regimes.
In the title story, “Into the Fire,” Tú, a new highschool graduate who is unable to pay the necessary bribe for a job in an American office, is driven to the last measure: seeking employment in one of Saigon’s numerous bars that entertain Americans in-country. She spends the first few days sitting on the side, nervously watching the other bar girls, like “hungry fish swarming around morsels of food” (68) trying to empty the Americans’ pockets. Fear of poverty eventually forces Tú to put aside her sense of decency and self-worth, and to get in the trade. Her first customer is an American who courts her for two weeks with roses, then pays for her virginity with a cheap diamond ring, never to come back. Following her mentor’s dehumanized treatment by an angry GI, Tú is humiliated by another American who has been led to believe that she has more sexual expertise than she does. Carefully counting and putting away the stash of greenbacks the “gorilla” (73) has flung in her face, Tú looks in the mirror to see, instead of her former innocent self, the smeared face of Tina, her American prostitute persona.

“Đêm Nơi Lửa” [The night on fire] in a way continues with Tú’s life as a more seasoned prostitute. It is a life of “red light in the bar, a high-pitched voice screeching ‘yeah, yeah’ from the counter,” where Bích, an embodiment of a weathered Tú, employs “all [her] charms and seductive tricks,” where night after night she burns her “once fresh young soul [. . .] like a splendid firecracker burning up in sparkles for one short moment,” and wakes up in the night, “vainly searching in [her] soul for the tiniest shred of affection [for her American customer] after the recent exchange of passion” (99-100). One night, Bích is picked up by the vice squad for entertaining American customers at her unregistered place, and sequestered in Thanh Quan hospital for an STD checkup. While waiting to be transferred to Binh Khang (a camp for detained prostitutes), Bích and her
fellow bar girls burn their sheets, set off the fire alarm, and escape in the ensuing chaos. Bích runs into a former Vietnamese lover, who takes her in as the firecrackers start, announcing the new year. Though relieved that she is not alone on this most sacred night of the year, she idly wonders how long she will be able to live on his mercy.

"Chiếc Giường" [The bed] is about Tâm, an aging prostitute who decides to buy charms from a magician for her bed in order to revive her flagging allure. Before Tâm recovers enough from her fourth abortion to entertain patrons, she periodically rents her place to Minh, a fellow bar girl. One day, Minh spends the night with a wild American and leaves a mess of blood and fluid on the mattress. When Tâm gets back to work, she is unable to get customers. Believing that the dirtied mattress has disabled the charm, Tâm gets into a bitter fight with Minh. The next day, however, Tâm learns that business has been slow because many Americans are boycotting "Saigon tea"—overpriced drinks served in bars catering to Americans, which are charged at ten times the costs at normal bars. Tâm and her fellow bar girls accept this development with resignation, as Juliette breezily admits, "It serves us [the bar girls] right. Everybody knows how we cheat and trick them [the Americans] and then leave them out on the streets waiting in vain for us" (39). Reasoning that the GIs will still need sex, if not Saigon tea, Tâm tells Juliette, "Oh well, I'll just go with the flow. If they don't buy me drinks, I'll make do by giving them more sex" (40). Indifferently, Tâm shrugs off a future in which, as Juliette warns, she will likely turn into a sickly, bed-ridden old woman for her indiscretion.

Thuy Vũ was not alone in her concern about the debasement of RVN women, and through them, of Vietnamese moral values and traditions under the RVN. Many other RVN writers also chose to deal with this subject, among whom Mai Thảo (real name
Nguyễn Đăng Quy, 1927-1998) achieved some success. A Northerner who migrated South in 1954 from Nam Định (one of the two largest Catholic communities in North Vietnam), Mai Thảo first attained reputation as a writer with the novel Đêm Giả Từ Hà Nội [The night of saying farewell to Hanoi]. His main prose works before 1975 also include Tháng Giêng Cỏ Non [Young grass in January], Mái Tóc Dĩ Vàng [Hair of the past], Đêm Lạc Dương [Lost in the night], Sông Chi Môt Lân [We only live once], and Khi Mùa Mưa Tồi [When the rain comes]. Although Mai Thảo belongs to the RVN camp, reading his stories, one does not see a positive view of life in the RVN.

In the collection of short stories Đêm Lạc Dương [Lost in the night] (1967), the prostitution of RVN women under the power of the dollar from both Vietnamese and American pockets and a feeling of confusion and forlornness are the focus of three stories, which I am going to examine below. The collection also contains at least three more stories on the subject of corruption of innocence in the RVN by the promise of riches and material comforts (“Thế Giới Của Thơ” [“Thơ’s world”—also reads as “the world of poetry”], “Mảm Non” [“A young sprout”—also reads as “The young generation”], and “Những Ngày Tháng Mới” [The days ahead]).

“Đêm Lạc Dương” [Lost in the night] attributes a young married woman’s fall to debauchery, poverty, the corrupting power of luxury, and lack of love. Huỳnh is a pretty girl from Lái Thiêu (an area outside of Saigon known for its lush orchards) who gets married to escape poverty. Her husband, a factory worker, is unable to provide her with either romantic love or material wealth. Out of boredom, Huỳnh wanders the streets of Saigon, taking in all the glitter of a big city where “money rules in blatant arrogance” and where “the pitiful poor are relegated to its margins and dark corners” (26-7).
Momentarily forgetting her “small world of a dilapidated room with dirty walls, cheap furniture, and chairs with loose creaking legs, of petty daily chores that weigh down on her like punishments” (28), Huong enters a shop of imported goods, and is immediately dazzled by a string of pearls. A roué who walks in the shop sees her naïve beauty and the desire sparkling in her eyes. He presents her with the pearls, and the fall begins in “a sweeping tornado she is completely powerless to resist” (34). After an evening paying for the pearls with her body that leaves her exhausted, she returns home and watches her snoring husband, feeling laden with guilt and “not really understanding who she is anymore [...] or what she wants” (34).

“Ông Già Im Lăng” [The silent old man] describes the financial and emotional predicament of an old man that eventually drives him to suicide. The old man is a Northerner who used to own a villa and a plantation in the North and who fled South in 1954. Now his family is in financial difficulty “in this strange land, with no relatives” (91). Every day, he curses the revolutionaries who have taken away his wealth and forced his family to poverty. Eventually, his daughter announces that she has found work as a cashier for a restaurant in Chợ Lớn (Saigon’s Chinatown), and it seems that for now, the fear of impending bankruptcy has been relieved for the family. One night, however, the old man falls asleep on the swing chair in the garden, and overhears the conversation between his wife and daughter. The discovery that his daughter has been working as a prostitute shocks him and he hangs himself on a bough. It is worth noting here that Mai Thao’s anticommunist stance capitalizes on the historical fantasy of wealth in association with Western powers. In fact, as both Western historians and Vietnamese realist writers of the period have verified, it was impossible under the French colonial system for a
supposedly honest Vietnamese farmer to accumulate, “from scratch” (89) and “by ethical means” (90), assets of such dimensions: a plantation of “hundreds of acres where even cranes had to stretch their wings to fly to the other end” (89), a luxurious villa, and an emergency fund large enough to buy a small house in Saigon, with ounces of gold to spare. In the 1960s, few Vietnamese had so much as an ounce of gold, and a few ounces of gold should last for years for a family of five provided they were not unduly extravagant. On the other hand, the pitiful financial situation the old man’s family supposedly incurs, which Mai Thào believes to be a result of the nationalist revolution in the North, is another example of the author’s alteration of history. Catholic refugees like this nameless old man in fact made up the most privileged group, financially and politically, in the RVN, as they were rewarded with land, resettlement funds, and various subsidies from the Diệm regime for their religious beliefs and political support.

In “Câu Chuyện Trong Con Mưa” [Conversation in the rain], Toàn is waiting out the rain under a porch when he strikes up a conversation with a woman standing nearby. To his observation, the woman is a perfect picture of a Vietnamese lady. Looking at her silk traditional áo dâi in a subtle, elegant color, Toàn spontaneously comments on the bright Western costumes some young girls on the other side of the street are wearing, which in turn leads to the subject of inter-racial relationships between Vietnamese women and American men. He denounces the Westernized young girls as “butterflies of the night—bar girls, sex workers, who sleep with foreigners just like that!” and rhetorically questions, “You ever seen worse eyesores?!” (103). The rain eventually breaks, and Toàn is struck dumb when he discovers that the boyfriend the beautiful, elegant woman is waiting for is a despised foreigner. The significance of the story goes
beyond the simple prostitution of RVN women. Racism and misogyny are simultaneously at work in this story, which reflects RVN men's bitter view of their women and their society under the Americans.

In all of the RVN novels and short stories examined above, passivity is notable even in resentment, one proof being that the object of the resentment remains unidentified or diffused. The youths in *Ao Vong Tuổi Trẻ* [The illusions of youth] do at first entertain the illusion of agency in their actions, only to find themselves powerless victims of calculating, jaded con-artists-turned-politicians. Nguyễn Đình Toàn’s *Ngày Tháng* [Days and months] (1968) alone portrays the characters as having full power and taking responsibility for their thinking and actions. Yet, bogged down by their own aimlessness, despair, and nihilism, they can find neither energy nor will to get out of the doldrums and funk that are gnawing away at their souls.

The narrator in the novel is a woman in her thirties whose stream-of-consciousness narration yields little in terms of concrete details or coherent story or message. All we can gather is that she works in a government office, that her ARVN airforce husband was killed on a mission flight, and that her current lover is a war correspondent whose life and work she knows little of, but whose uncertain presence and care are the only link between her and a normal life. We do not know the cause of the narrator’s vague and formless, but pervading unhappiness. It is not really because of her husband’s death, although memories of him are the only positive thing in her thought; for her love dies with his death, and at times she is not even sure of her love for him (9; 33-4). Nor is the war the main cause, even as it “day after day leans increasing weight on the country, the sounds of bombs, bullets, and machines shaking the houses, roaring over and
drowning people’s conversations” (10). For to her, the war is “both intimate and foreign [. . .] [it] is happening everywhere, but always somewhere else, I am taking no part in it, and at the same time I have already contributed to it with my husband’s death” (24). Amidst rising inflation and impoverishment, financial stability is not her major concern. Consequently, she turns down an American’s marriage proposal, for all that a life with him would mean escape from the war and relative economic affluence. Her unhappiness is not even due to the uncertain nature of her relationship with Vinh. It is true she needs his presence so somebody will listen to her “meaningless talk, the significance of which lies more in having a listener than in the talk itself” (25). It is equally true that he “meticulously avoids the answer” to her question “Do you love me?” (24). But the relationship is not unlike the gifts he gives her, gifts she does not “dislike, but which are unnecessary” (24). The root of her displeasure is dispersed—it floats somewhere in the “dusk that is no longer afternoon and not yet night” (9), between “meals that are not really meals, a home that doesn’t feel homely, a lover that is not a husband, a life that is not really a life” (31).

Nguyễn Đình Toàn’s skillful use of images and literary techniques is truly effective in creating in Ngày Tháng a greyish picture of a wasted life with no hope of redemption. The repetition of the woman’s routine and thoughts, her own awareness that the same movements and facial expressions “bear the significance of death, not of life” (15), the confining walls of an apartment filled with cigarette smoke, the chain smoking of one cigarette after another, the identical sleeping pills she takes at night, the sensation of being irresistibly sucked down by the white painted lines at the bottom of the building’s deep ventilation well—all effectively contribute to an atmosphere of
hopelessness, inescapability, and the inevitability of both spiritual and physical death. The stream-of-consciousness narration emphasizes the feeling of unending trivialities, stifling boredom and dreadful uncertainty and instability. The description of light and sound in the narrator’s life with her husband contrasts with the perpetual silence and semi-darkness of the room she is now spending most of her time in, indicating the downward slide of her life, while her increasing emaciation and growing indifference about everything, including her own looks, anticipate a future of unrelieved desperation. Even the fact that her name is mentioned only once seems to efface the person beneath the name, befitting the perceived doubt of her own gender: “they say a woman is not a woman if she has no child, I do not have the necessary condition to be a woman (what would I do with a child?), what sort of gender am I then?” (69). Obviously influenced by Françoise Sagan, Nguyễn Đình Toản’s literary style effectively conveys a profound and unabated sense of despair and hopelessness of life in the RVN.

The growing body of antiwar literature in the RVN, which became a significant voice as early as 1965, added considerably to this sense of despair and hopelessness. Regretfully, the unavailability of materials and the fact that antiwar literature is neither neutral nor supportive of the RVN government have precluded an analysis of this important body of writing in the present study. Suffice it to say that, following the invertebrate nature of the RVN regimes from Diệm’s to Thiệu-Ky’s, and the indifference and corruption of the leaders, the works of RVN writers do not express an involvement or identification with a cause, any cause, nor a desire to stand up and take action and responsibility, nor even a clearly stated direction for a channelling of energy and feeling. Seen in this context, the representation by both male and female writers of RVN women
as passive victims of circumstances beyond their control and understanding poignantly reveals RVN supporters’ perceptions of, and feelings for, their government and society.

**NLF Literature 1959-1975**

*Representative Poems*

In contrast to the feeling of degeneration and disintegration in RVN literature, NLF literature is full of energy, passion, and optimism for the eventual victory of the revolutionaries. Because the resistants’ struggle against American invasion is first and foremost predicated on nationalism and patriotism, there are a great number of literary works about love for their country. Very often, “homeland” does not appear in literary pieces as a broad concept, but a particular place (e.g. the writers/fighters’ native village), with particular loved ones (e.g. sisters, mothers, neighbors, or sweethearts). It is these images, full of nostalgia, love and connection, that were to accompany and inspire the fighters all through the struggle. In 1960, Nguyễn Ngọc Tấn wrote in the short story “Lâm Việc” [Work] of soldiers who took to engraving on their hard hats the names of their native villages, so that “when they took on the enemy, they brought their native village with them.” Within NLF poetry, two poems—Lê Anh Xuân’s “Trở Về Quê Nội” [Return to my father’s native village] (1965) and Giang Nam’s “Quê Hương” [Homeland] (1960)—are examples of the way the country is portrayed by NLF fighters. Again, the poetry examined in this section is anthologized in Bowen, Chung, and Weigl’s *Mountain River*. This highly instructive collection also contains some information about the authors in the Notes on the Poets section at the back of the volume. The translations provided in this study are mostly my own.
“Quê Hương” is particularly well-loved among Vietnamese from both the South and the North. It has made Giang Nam a name to remember for generations of Vietnamese, during the war as well as today, and earned him a Văn Nghệ (Literature and Arts) prize in 1961 and a Nguyễn Đình Chiểu prize in 1965 for the collection in which it appeared. Born Nguyễn Sung in 1929 in Khánh Hòa (South Vietnam), Giang Nam joined the Revolution in 1945, working in communications. After 1954, he stayed in the South to work as an ideology and training cadre in his hometown, and later became deputy general secretary of the Liberation Association of Literature and Arts for the South. After the war, he served in the National Assembly in the sixth term, and was a member of the board of directors of the Vietnam Writers’ Association in the second and third terms, editor-in-chief of the weekly literature and arts journal Văn Nghệ (1978-1980), and vice-president of the People’s Committee of Khánh Hòa province (1989-1993). His published works during the war include the poetry titles of Tháng Tâm Ngày Mai [A future August] (1962), Quê Hương [Homeland] (1965), Người Anh Hùng Đồng Tháp [The hero of Đồng Tháp] (1969), Vàng Sang Phía Chân Trời [Light in the horizon] (1975). His wartime prose works are documentary narratives: Vô Kịch Cô Giáo [A play of a teacher] (1962), and Người Giòng Tre [The people of Giòng Tre] (1969).

“Quê Hương” (1961) achieves its lasting appeal perhaps largely because it concretizes the broad concept of the homeland so beautifully. Or rather, the little nooks and creeks of one’s childhood that so many Vietnamese relate to elevate the general “homeland” and transcend it with the power of nostalgia, love for the people, and hatred for those who are destroying the poet’s home village. During the war, these emotions
infused NLF fighters with the duty to avenge their comrades and loved ones who had laid
down their lives to protect the country:

When a boy I went to school twice a day
Learning to love my homeland from every page of my little school book.
Who says tending buffaloes is a hard task?
As in a trance, I listened to the birds above.
There were days when I played hooky
To chase after butterflies by the pond.
Caught by my mother,
I cried before she reached for the whip.
There was a little girl next door
Who looked at me and went all a-giggling. . . .
Then the revolution flared up
The long war
My village was overcast by the shadows of the enemy.
Saying goodbye to my mother, I left
The little girl next door—who could have believed it—
Had now also joined the guerrillas,
Still giggling the day I saw her,
Her eyes wide and black—oh so lovely!
As we were marching toward battle, I couldn't say a word.
My unit having passed, I turned my head to look back.
Rain was filling the sky, but my heart beat so warm.
During the cease-fire [in 1954], I returned
To the old school, the fields of sugarcane, the plowed tracks of earth.
Again I saw her
Shyly hiding behind the door,
Giggling when I whispered in her ears—
“Marriage? That’s a tough subject to talk about!”
I held her small hand in mine, choked with feeling,
She remained in my burning hands. . . .
Today I had news of her
I still can’t believe it, even though it is true
The enemy shot her dead, then threw her body away
All because she was a guerrilla protecting our homeland.
My soul wrenched with such pain, half of my being is paralyzed.
In the old days I loved my village with its butterflies and birds,
Where I got the lash for playing hooky.
Now that love has multiplied, for in each and every clod of earth
There is the flesh and blood of my little girl.
The raw emotion of the poem is so contagious Vietnamese people are still fond of reciting the poem among themselves today. About what made his literary works so memorable, Giang Nam explains:

From my experience as an activist fighting against the French during the nine years of resistance and then staying in the South to continue the struggle against the U.S., I have become a poet. I know one thing: this struggle is the
source of inspiration, the instigator of both the joy and the sadness in my poems. To tell the truth, there were periods we had to face death every day; they were so fraught with dangers that none of us thought we could survive the war. In those days poetry was my heart’s and my spirit’s support. The first poems that I wrote were for myself, for my own reading, and for my friends and comrades in prison. They were therefore factually raw—from which came both their strength and their weakness. Now that I am getting older, things have changed and mellowed. There is, however, one thing that never changes: the writer’s passion for life and for fellow human beings.

I appreciate the new discoveries in form that help writers express feelings and thoughts in an intelligent, honest, and impressive manner. However, any kind of “supercilious pretension” and “ornamental diction” will prevent poetry from reaching the human heart. I do believe that Vietnamese poetry must bear Vietnamese characteristics. The more we develop, the more we renew our poetry, the more we need to understand and preserve what it is that makes Vietnamese poetry Vietnamese.

Another NLF poet, Thanh Thao (real name Hồ Thành Công, born 1946) did not publish a lot, but this soldier from Quảng Ngãi, a province in Central Vietnam that suffered some of the fiercest fighting and destruction by U.S. bombing, has left his impression in Vietnamese literature with two notable collections: Đầu Chân Qua Trảng Có [Footprints across the grass] and Những Ngọn Sông Mặt Trời [The sun’s waves], which were awarded Vietnam Writers’ Association’s prizes in 1979 and in 1995. The theme of continuity and determination in the midst of difficulty is expressed through the
All afternoon we walk across the elephant grass
Looking up, the sky is glowing so far away
The wind swirls in blue
The cries of the két echo far and wide.

The well-worn path looks like a thread
Imprinted with thousands of footprints
Footprints who can ever read
To know where the soldiers are going?
Life opens out wide before our eyes
This small path is leading us to the battlefield
There are those of us under fits of malaria
Whose footprints blunt on the slippery ground. . . .

What is in the tubes of rolled cotton\textsuperscript{104}

To carry on till the end of the world?

Packed in them all hopes and passions

The small footprints are nameless words—

Time passes and grass grows over them,

Yet the path remains an enduring thread.

The soldiers have travelled far and near

All that is left is the footprints

Buried underneath the grass of time,

Spreading silently as far as eyes can see,

Still warm with a lingering heat,

Marking the path to the front for those who follow them.

During the war, and particularly in the difficult period post-1968, there was no sacrifice as great and rousing as that of Vietnamese women. And the ultimate victory depended to a large extent on the work of young women who fought to keep the Trùơng Sơn (later named Hồ Chí Minh) Trail, the famous North-South artery, open despite frequent bombardment, napalm chemical attack and strafing by the powerful American air force and a million other hazards, such as starvation, jungle sores, malaria and scabies, so that the South received timely assistance from the North.\textsuperscript{105} Serving with the youth brigade and the women’s engineering units in Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên—another fierce fighting zone in South Vietnam, a poet from Central Vietnam, Lâm Thị Mỹ Dạ (born
1949 in Quâng Binh), is moved by the quiet sacrifices of the women working alongside her in the jungle in support of the war efforts against the Americans. “The only way to create a beautiful poem,” she says, “is to lead a life that’s true to who you are.”^106 One beautiful poem of hers, “Khoảng Trời— Ho Bomb” [The sky in a bomb crater] (circa 1969), is about a young woman blazing the trail on the Trường Sơn range for the convoy of trucks Southward. To save the trail from American bombers, she one night attracts their attention away with her torch, and is killed by the bombs as a result. Her sacrifice becomes the source of inspiration for soldiers and support troops in the jungle to keep on fighting, seeing in it the loftiest example of selflessness and patriotism, and promising to themselves to “carry [their] own version” of the young woman’s heroic dedication.

It is said that you, a trailblazer,
To save the road that night from being wounded
So that the convoy could make it to the front on time,
Have lit the torch with your love for the country
To distract the enemy, calling bombs down on yourself . . .

Our unit marched along the trodden path,
The crater reminded us of the story of the young woman,
Whose grave was colored by the sun shining on the rock,
Whose grave had been piled on with love . . .

I looked in the crater left by the bomb that killed you,
Where the rain had gathered to form a piece of sky.
For our kind country,
Rain falls in grace to alleviate the pain.

Now you rest deep in the ground,
as the sky that rests quietly in the crater.
Night after night, your soul shines
With the bright, twinkling stars.
Could it be that your pure, soft skin
Has transformed into those white clouds?
And during the day, sunshine
Emanates from your sky—The sleepless sun
Or your own beating heart
Is shining for us
Today to continue on with our long road?

This jungle trail now bears your name;
You died in youth, leaving a sky of young womanhood
For me to see my soul in.
My friends and I have never seen your face,
Yet each of us is carrying our own version of you.

Hundreds of thousands of young, unmarried Vietnamese women spent the better part of their youth in the harrowing conditions of the jungle and fierce fighting so that the revolution could move forward. Hundreds of thousands more Vietnamese women carried
the war on their shoulders at the same time they were tending the children in the absence
of their soldier husbands. Nguyễn Khoa Diệm’s “Khúc Hát Ru Những Em Bé Lớn Trên
Lung Mẹ” [Lullaby for the babies growing up on their mothers’ backs] (1971) is about
the work and sacrifices of such mothers-as-fighters. Diệm’s hometown is Huế. During the
war, he worked in the student movement at Huế University, participated in military
activities, and wrote as a journalist and a poet for the revolution until 1975. Among his
published works during the war are Cửa Thép [Steel door] (documentary narrative,
1972), and Dâť Ngoai Ô [The suburbs] (poetry collection, 1973). He received the
Vietnam Writers’ Association prize for poetry in 1986. “Khúc Hát Ru Những Em Bé Lớn
Trên Lung Mẹ” is essentially a minority mother’s talk to her baby boy, who is being
carried on his mother’s back in the Ė Đê fashion (Đê is a minority group that live on
the Southern highlands and along the Trường Sơn range). The mother’s hopes and wishes
for her son reflect the intertwining in the mother’s mind of freedom and personal
fulfilment with the revolutionary cause, and identification with and dedication to the
struggle against American invaders. Although carrying a child on the back is the practice
of Vietnamese minority groups, the image of mothers bringing up their children while
fighting or working for the revolution was common to all Vietnamese—a fact that
explains the universal appeal of this poem. The poem was later turned into a popular real-
life song of lullaby for mothers and their babies in both North and revolutionary South
Vietnam.

Baby Tai sleeping on mother’s back,

Sleep well—don’t move.

Mother’s thrashing rice for our soldiers,
The rhythm of the pestle bending her posture, and so your sleep.

Mother's sweat falls hot on your cheeks,

Her thin, moving shoulders pillow your head.

Her back swings like a hammock, and her heart sings the words:

“A Kay, sleep well, my baby
I love you and I love our soldiers.

Dream of grains of white rice for me,

When you grow up, you will swing the pestle hard . . . .”

Baby Tai sleeping on mother’s back,

Sleep well—don’t move.

Mother’s picking corncobs on the Ka Lui

The back of the mountain is so large,

And mother’s back is so small.

Sleep well so you won’t tire mother.

Over the mountain, the sun’s shining on the corn,

Over the back, mother’s sun is lying in deep sleep.

“A Kay, sleep well, my baby
I love you as I love our hungry villagers.

Dream of strong buds of corn for me,

When you grow up, you will clear ten Ka Lui’s.”
Baby Tai sleeping on mother’s back,
Sleep well—don’t move.
Mother’s moving our huts, working deep in the jungle.
The Americans force us to move away from the stream;
Our brothers will take up guns, and our sisters will plant pungi sticks.
Mother’s carrying you toward the last battle;
On mother’s back, you’re going to the front.
Out of hardship and hunger, you are on the way to Trường Sơn.¹⁰⁷

“A Kay, sleep well, my baby
I love you as I love our country.
Dream of Uncle Hồ for me,
When you grow up, you shall grow up in freedom.”

Images of Revolutionary Women in NLF Literature

Heroic mothers who devoted their lives both to the bringing up of their children and to the revolutionary cause are not just fiction. Nguyễn Thị’s famous Người Mẹ Cảm Súng [The Mother Who Holds a Rifle] (1965), a documentary narrative (truyện kỳ) about the life of a real hero-mother Mrs. Út Tịch, attests to such living models of NLF women who excelled in both family and national matters (giới thiệu quốc, đảm nhiệm nhà, as the slogan of the time went). In fact, the image of the woman-as-hero arose as a phenomenon in both DRV and NLF literatures, directly contrasting the decorative, passive RVN
women portrayed by RVN fiction writers—or, for that matter, corrosive American women by American writers in such stories as Tim O’Brien’s “The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong.” The consistent representation in NLF literature of Vietnamese women as well-informed, active, and determined in their country’s struggle against foreign domination also provides an interesting contrast to the character Phượng in The Quiet American. A look at NLF (and DRV) literatures shows that the majority of their literary works, including the two I am about to examine in detail, have at the center of the story women who perform active and decisive roles in the revolution.

Many factors converge to account for the central role women play in both revolutionary literature and revolutionary activities. As Mariam Frenier and Kimberly Mancini observe, Vietnamese women have always enjoyed a comparatively high status in Vietnamese society since the very beginning of Vietnamese history. Classic Vietnamese history also demonstrates the high regard accorded Vietnamese women in two specific areas: military and literature.108 In classical Vietnamese literature, women and their predicaments had been the topic of a number of literary works, from Truyện Kiều [Tale of Kiều] by Nguyễn Du, to Chinh Phu Ngâm [Song of a soldier’s wife] by Đặng Trần Côn and Phan Huy Ich in the early eighteenth century.109 The voice of the Vietnamese woman had also been raised through two eighteenth-century poetesses who challenged the Confucian rule of the time with their poetry—Đoàn Thị Điểm and Hồ Xuân Hương.110 During the 1930s, male writers and intellectuals found in the Vietnamese woman the symbol of Vietnam’s double bondage by feudalism and colonialism, and a safe topic for revolutionary discourse under the scrutiny and suppression of the French.111 The result is a series of modern works on the Vietnamese woman that paved the way for the later
revolution, such as Nguyễn Hồng’s Bi Vô, Ngô Tất Tố’s Tất Đèn, Nhật Linh’s Đoạn Tuyệt, and Nguyễn Công Hoan’s Cô Giáo Minh (see Chapter II).

The negotiation of the locus of control for the heroines of classical Vietnamese literature is a fascinating topic that is outside the scope of this study. For the present discussion, it is illuminating that, while the earlier reviewed RVN literature reveals the powerlessness and passive suffering of its women, revolutionary literature by the DRV and NLF capitalizes on the Vietnamese tradition of martial women and recognizes and encourages Vietnamese women to be active agents of their own fate, and crucial participants in creating and defending the nation’s destiny. This has vital implications to the revolutionaries’ eventual victory, since the character of the American and anti-American war efforts in Vietnam differed considerably. The U.S. military organization was almost uniformly male and institutional and, despite the fact that two million Americans served in Vietnam from 1965 to 1975, involved a small fraction of the entire American population. Likewise, although the ARVN maintained more than half a million in its forces throughout the war, which necessitated a general conscription starting from 1965 of all males between the ages of 18 and 60, its members were mostly male. RVN women who were in one way or another supporters of the Saigon regime shared similar experiences with American women of the time as either the waiting wife for a soldier husband, or the uninvolved outsider, or the very rare non-combat personnel. On the other hand, as the DRV and the NLF engaged in a total war, their war effort involved a major portion of the civilian population and large numbers of women.

Psychologically, both women’s active participation and their suffering, love and affection embodied in the image of the ideal Vietnamese woman in revolutionary war
literature evoked empathy and helped to justify the sacrifices required of the whole population. Highlighting women’s contribution serves another psychological aim: to impeach the enemy and challenge Vietnamese male effectiveness all at once. On the practical side, the extended nature of a total people’s war employed to outwait a militarily superior enemy meant women’s support and labor were especially needed in order to maintain the level of production as well as the high morale essential to the war effort. In addition, for guerrillas in occupied territories, feminine resources often turned out to be more effective than the traditionally male face-to-face combat. The extraordinary feats by revolutionary women fighters throughout Vietnam, together with the many hardships that they suffered, commanded respect and admiration from both men and women, which accounts for the proliferation of images of women at war and the widespread tribute to their accomplishments in Vietnamese revolutionary war literature.

Lastly and most importantly, the prominence of active women in revolutionary literature testifies to the fact that the revolutionary forces represented by Hồ Chí Minh’s DRV government and the NLF in South Vietnam after 1954 were the only organizations sincerely committed to the emancipation of Vietnamese women from the bonds of feudalism and colonialism. At the meeting of the Central Committee of the Eighth Plenum of the Việt Minh on August 16, 1945, six days after Hồ Chí Minh declared Vietnam independent, the revolutionaries proclaimed their advocacy of “universal suffrage, democratic liberties, equality among all ethnic groups and between men and women” (Nguyễn Khắc Việt, “A Century” 137). Hồ Chí Minh himself pointed out: “Women make up half of the population. When women are not free, half of the population are not free.” Their call for equality and freedom for women, as a part of their
social revolution, was one of the factors that attracted unprecedented numbers of women to the resistance, first against French colonialists, and later against the Americans, as we have seen in the memoir of Mme. General Nguyễn Thị Định, the leader of what was to become known as the “long-haired army” of the South.\textsuperscript{114}

It is perhaps not surprising that the NLF fighter rarely ever appears in RVN literature. Most RVN writers came from the attentiste section of the Vietnamese population, and never participated directly in the conflict. Consequently, their literature often looks at the fighting from a bystander’s point of view. The very few who more or less did take part in the fighting and ideological confrontation often chose either to exclude the NLF fighter, or to view him or her as something of an enigmatic, invisible menace, and therefore impossible to describe except very fleetingly, not unlike the invisible mass referred to as “they” in Nhã Ca’s works about the war. As far as I know, in none of those RVN works that do feature NLF fighters is there a female “Việt Cộng,” even as the RVN female fighter is non-existent.

As for the American point of view, while there is more interest in the “other” side than there is in RVN literature, few American literary texts, including memoirs, feature Vietnamese women in the role of the fighting enemy, even as one often gets the impression that the whole Vietnamese population was to some extent hostile.\textsuperscript{115} The few American Vietnam war texts that admit Vietnamese women’s involvement in the war effort (e.g. Gustav Hasford’s \textit{The Short-Timers}) are far outnumbered by those that victimize them in the roles of sales clerks, bar girls, or prostitutes.\textsuperscript{116} While this may be due to the circumstances in which many American GIs came to know Vietnamese women, it also reflects the conservatism of American society in the 1960s, when the
imbalance of power between men and women was such that victimization of women in popular culture and literature was not uncommon, and women’s political engagement often went unheeded—ironically, perhaps, considering the concomitant rise of American feminism during the very same period.

In contrast, Vietnamese women play a prominent role in both DRV and NLF war literature. If DRV and NLF war stories seldom feature a single, central male hero who dominates the action, choosing instead to represent collective effort and team-work, war narratives about Vietnamese women (often authored by males) are much more likely to depict striking examples of individual initiative and heroism. *Chi Tu Hậu*, which is arguably the most famous Vietnamese war movie and which won several national and international awards in the late 1960s, is about a woman “Việt Cộng” in her role as both a sister and a guerrilla. Another famous example of Vietnamese female heroism is the real-life picture of Nguyễn Thị Kim Lai, a small, young woman farmer in the DRV Civil Guard, detaining the downed American air force Captain William Robinson, which inspired the hugely popular war poem “O Đu Kích” (Our [female] guerrilla) that sums up the essence of Vietnamese revolutionary literature and women:

Our small guerrilla holds the gun high
The giant American walks with bowed head.
See? Gall has triumphed over fat face!
Heroism is not just for men.

In summary, on the one hand, it can be argued that the different roles women play in the literature of the RVN and that of the DRV/NLF illustrate the different natures of the two opposing sides and of their war efforts. On the other hand, as the NLF leaders’
memoirs in the previous chapter and the preliminary discussion of revolutionary literature earlier in this chapter have demonstrated, revolutionary writing, be it fiction or non-fiction, shares three common characteristics: the feeling of belonging to a revolutionary family/supervillage; the members’ assumption of responsibility and active participation; and the sense of optimism and purpose in the common cause of nationalistic resistance. These three characteristics are inter-connected, and they simultaneously contribute to the strength and determination resistant fighters from North to South evinced during the thirty-year war.

I will now examine how the three above characteristics of revolutionary literature are crystalized in the portrayals of women in two NLF novels, Hòn Đất (1966) by Anh Đức and Mân và Tôi (1972) by Phan Tú. It is argued that the shift from femininity in Hòn Đất, which was completed in May 1965, just before the landing of American marines in Đà Nẵng, to feminism in Mân và Tôi, completed in October 1971, shows both the honing of revolutionary ideals among NLF resisters and the increasing maturity of NLF writers.

**Anh Đức and Hòn Đất**

Anh Đức (real name Bùi Đức Âi) was born in 1935 in a peasant family of Việt Minh sympathizers at Bình Hòa village, Châu Thành district, An Giang province (South Vietnam). His family’s involvement with the Việt Minh, and the fact that his eldest brother was killed in action early in the nine-year resistance against the French, had a profound influence on Anh Đức’s development of revolutionary consciousness. As a twelve-year-old, he joined the Resistance communications department in Rạch Giá province. After two years in Nguyễn Văn Tố Resistance Highschool, Anh Đức started to
write for *The South for National Salvation* (Nam Bồ Câu Quóc) newspaper in 1950 until he regrouped to the North in 1954. His first collection of eighteen short stories *Biển Động* [Stormy sea] about guerrilla warfare appeared in 1952 and was awarded the third degree Câu Long prize, a literature and arts award jointly organized by the Southern Resistance Administrative Committee and the Southern Literature and Arts Branch. In 1957, Anh Đức published the novel *Một Chuyện Chép Ở Bệnh Viện* [A story recorded at the hospital], which he adapted into a screenplay in 1961 for *Chi Tru Hậu* [Sister Fourth Hậu], a now classic, highly acclaimed, and multiple-award-winning movie directed by Phạm Kỳ Nam about the revolutionary uprising in the South. His second collection of short stories, *Bức Thư Cà Mau* [Letters from Cà Mau], was published in 1960 and earned him his first Nguyễn Đình Chiểu prize. In mid-1962, Anh Đức returned to the South and worked until 1975 in the Liberation Association of Literature and Arts in different provinces: Cần Thơ, Rạch Giá, Cà Mau. For many years, he was chief-editor of the *Liberation Literature and Arts* magazine. During his first years back in the South, while building up the experience for longer works, Anh Đức produced a number of short stories, the most important including “Khói” [Smoke], “Đất” [Earth], “Dứa Con” [The child], “Con Chị Lộc” [Sister Lộc’s child], and “Ông Lão Vườn Chim” [The old man in the bird garden]. *Hồn Đất* was published in 1966 and awarded the Nguyễn Đình Chiểu prize for prose fiction. Since then it has been translated into many languages and acquired in many countries over the world the reputation as the quintessential novel of Vietnamese guerrilla warfare. In 1972, Anh Đức started the novel *Dứa Con Của Đất* [Child of earth], which was finished and published in 1976. After the war, he served as a member of the National Assembly in the seventh term. Anh Đức’s postwar publications include *Miền*
Sống Võ [Land of Crashing Waves] (1983), Hai Mưa Truyện Ngắn [Twenty Short Stories], Ởng Già Về Hưu và Những Ðứa Trẻ [The retired old man and the kids], Tuyển Tập Anh Đức [Selected stories by Anh Đức] in two volumes (1997), and Anh Đức—Truyện Ngắn và Bút Ký [Short stories and documentary narratives by Anh Đức] (2002). He is currently deputy-chair and Party deputy-secretary of Vietnam’s Association of Literature and Arts, and chief-editor of Văn (Literature) and Kiến Thức Ngày Nay (Current knowledge) magazines. ¹¹⁹

Anh Đức’s most famous novel, Hòn Đầu, was published in the context of the special war conducted by the ARVN under American supervision, when aircraft, helicopters, armored personnel vehicles, and tanks were increasingly used to drive peasants into strategic hamlets, and in search-and-destroy missions against NLF guerrillas. The plot revolves around the efforts of a group of nineteen guerrillas from Hòn Đầu in 1961 to push off an ARVN/U.S. military campaign which seeks to turn this beautiful, fertile village in Cà Mau, the southernmost province of Vietnam, into a “secure” area for the RVN. The final victory of the guerrillas over their militarily superior enemy is brought about by a combination of military and political means, and with the participation in unison of both the guerrillas and the people in the village. The novel was written at the time the revolutionary spirit was running high among the majority of the Vietnamese population, North and South, and before village life in South Vietnam was irrevocably disrupted by the constant bombing and other terrorizing measures. The emotions that shine through the narrative and the author’s use of real incidents (e.g. the Bến Tre uprising, headed by Mme. Nguyễn Thị Định in 1961) invite identification with and sympathy for the characters, earning the novel its reputation as
one of the most popular war stories and a permanent place in Vietnamese textbooks. Interestingly enough, the novel is conspicuously—and perhaps not coincidentally—absent from all American discussions of Vietnamese literature.

What is remarkable is in Hồn Đất, Anh Đức portrays the people’s war in the South of Vietnam in the early 1960’s as really a women’s war. Moreover, the novel’s main character is Sứ, a young woman who does not carry a gun and has never fired a shot, even though she is one of the nineteen guerrillas fighting from inside the Hồn cave in defense of their village.

The female characters in the novel are of all ages, from Mother Sâu, an elderly lady in her sixties, to Thím (Aunt) Ba Ú in her forties, to Sứ and her sister Quyên who are both in their twenties; the youngest is Thúy (Sứ’s daughter), who is eight years old. Except for Mrs. Ba Ú, who supplements her household’s income by managing a small village grocery shop that also serves as a roadside eatery, all the other women work in the field, tend their gardens, or hang nets in the ocean to catch fish. These women aid the resistance against the Americans and the RVN regime while, and by, tending to their normal tasks in the village. They hide guerrillas in their homes and keep them fed, clothed and cheered the way they would members in their family. When Americans and ARVN soldiers come to the village, these women stand up together for demonstrations against the bombing and shelling that fell their trees and kill their people and animals. Supporting the revolution does not prevent them from fulfilling their duties as women at home. On the contrary, they view their participation in the resistance as an extension of their duty as mothers and daughters in the family. As Mother Sâu explains, fears for her “children and [her] granddaughter” (38) under the constant bombing and shelling, and
worries “for all of you, young ones who see your families scattered” (40) motivate her to join the revolution and fight for peace.

In the novel, the Americans and their allies are viewed as hated evil outsiders who harm the villagers’ lives, destroy the physical beauty of the countryside, and upset the traditional, peaceful way of life the inhabitants of Hòn Đất have always enjoyed. In contrast, the resistance against these evil forces takes strength from the lý of nationalism. As Tâm Chân, the district Party secretary, says to Mother Sâu:

“We only wish to live in peace and to have the country unified. But Diệm and the Americans will not leave us these rights. Anybody who asks for unification has his head cut off and his belly ripped open. People couldn’t stand it anymore, we had to rise up. Now that we have stood up, we will put down our guns only after we have won the right to live peacefully and with dignity.” (39)

If Americans and their allies are delineated as evil aliens, the revolution is represented as a large, happy family. To most of the villagers, it seems, the revolution is not something abstract or external; instead, it is made up of everything and everyone they know and love. For Mother Sâu, for example, the members and leaders of the revolution are the people she has always known and trusted, and all of them are bound together by tradition as well as by personal and national history (i.e. village life and the Việt Minh nationalist movement that they all joined some time before the events in the novel start). The revolution, moreover, embodies her love for the village as well as the future of her children and grandchildren for which she is now fighting.¹²⁰

[Mother Sâu] was [. . .] tied to the cause of the revolution with every possible link—her husband and her children, her garden and her paddy field, her flesh and
blood. She had put all her hopes in the revolution. It was the source of all the joy she knew. This joy swelled her great and simple heart, often quietly, but now it was so passionate that anyone could see it. In that moment, seeing Ngan, Tám Chân and the rest of her family united around her, her lined face beamed. (43)

Her complete trust in the revolution is justified and strengthened by the havoc she sees American-armed ARVN soldiers inflict on Hòn Đất every day, and is similar to the way a daughter trusts her parents to always protect her interests: “[Mother Sâu] had complete confidence in the Party of whom Tám Chân was the representative in charge of looking after her, her little house, and all the hamlet, so that everything worked well, joyfully and on the right road” (39). The revolution, personified in the guerrillas Mother Sâu supports, is thus entitled to complete obedience. As she tells Tám Chân, “In spite of my old age, I’ll stick to you like your shadow. No matter where you go, I will join you. I’m still able to take part in the political struggle. I can cook for the troops” (40). Her words interestingly conjure the Confucian “tam tông” (“three obediences”), the prevailing code of morality for women of pre-Revolution time that asks a daughter to unconditionally “follow” (obey) her father, her husband, and her eldest son in that order.

The deaths of her husband and only son for the revolutionary cause only heighten her hatred for the Americans and their RVN compradors, and strengthen her support for the fighting revolutionaries. In fact, most other villagers of Hòn Đất are intimately linked to the revolution in similar ways, and joining the resistance against the American-backed RVN regime seems the only natural path open to them, an ethical path that harmoniously combines necessity, reason, emotion, and tradition. That the revolution is a natural force,
and its ultimate victory therefore inevitable, is further represented through the inseparable association between the Cause and Hòn Đất’s natural beauty, as we shall see later.

Taught to keep faith in the revolution and to excel in their work in the political struggle, Mother Sáu’s two daughters also support the revolution for personal reasons.

Quyên, the younger sister, embraces the revolution whole-heartedly, having as her sweetheart a good young man who is also a fierce believer and fighter for the revolution. Falling in love with a revolutionary creates stronger ties with the revolution, helping her find personal happiness in fighting for the cause, in the same way fighting for and along her blood family does. This source of double happiness threatens to fall apart when, on one occasion, her boyfriend Ngàn is rumored to have betrayed the cause and brought enemy soldiers to the guerrillas’ base. Facing the possible choice of, on the one hand, her revolution family and on the other, her personal affections for Ngàn, Quyên indicates that she would act the way a traditional daughter is supposed to act: putting her family’s harmony and happiness above her own, even if it means heartbreak. She would, as she confides in Hai Thép, act “as if [Ngàn] were dead, as if he had never existed” (21), so that it would be easier to sever her ties with him. In this difficult decision, the character Quyên recalls to mind the heroine of the first successful modern Vietnamese romance novel, Tỏ Tâm (1925) by Hoàng Ngọc Phách, previously discussed in Chapter II. Tỏ Tâm, as a good daughter, chooses to sacrifice her romantic love, which eventually causes her own death, in order to fulfill the duty of hiếu (“filial piety,” in this case, obedience to her parents). Luckily, as it turns out, Ngàn is finally cleared of his suspected disloyalty and comes back to fight along Quyên and the other villagers. Another proof of Quyên’s virtues as a young woman emerges in the scene of her cooking for the guerrillas who
come to her house for an important meeting. The length and detailed nature of this scene (including the way she expertly handles the fish and the mouth-watering description of the finished dishes) not only adds local color to the story, but also demonstrates Anh Đức’s subscription to the virtues of công, dung, ngôn, hành in the traditional definition of the ideal Vietnamese woman, even as he is championing her as a revolutionary.

It is in Sũ, Quyên’s older sister, that Anh Đức’s ideal image of the Vietnamese woman culminates. Her prime virtues of loyalty and quiet sacrifice remind us of heroines of classical tales, such as Cúc Hoa in Phạm Công—Cúc Hoa, or Kiều Nguyệt Nga in Luc Văn Tiến. Despite repeated arrests and tortures by the Saigon regime, Sũ will not give in to their demand that she divorce her husband, who has regrouped to the North. Instead, love for her husband and their only daughter turns Sũ into a most active supporter of the resistance against a regime that wants to keep the country divided and which continually brings war and destruction to the village, threatening her loved ones’ lives. Like her mother and sister, she enthusiastically partakes in the hiding and nourishing of guerrillas and joins in the local political struggle. She lives and fights for the day when the country will be united and her husband will return to the village to see their daughter for the very first time. Well trained in the art of domestic management, she becomes an excellent logistics manager for the guerrillas.

The crisis of the story occurs when a battalion of ARVN soldiers surround Hòn Cave into which Sũ, Quyên, Ngân and sixteen other guerrillas have retreated. Sũ is arrested by the enemy when she sneaks out of the cave in the night to get water. Tortured by the enemy, Sũ steadfastly refuses to persuade her fellow-guerrillas to surrender. Furthermore, she tricks them into providing her with the chance to warn her comrades
that the water they brought back from the river the previous night is poisoned. When threats to her own life fail to persuade Sứ, the commander of the ARVN Rangers Xâm orders Mother Sậu to be brought over. Originally from Hòn Đất himself, Xâm knows enough of the local custom and way of thinking to believe that Sứ will now have to think twice about getting herself killed. Indeed, Sứ’s love for her mother and the Vietnamese code of morality that a daughter’s foremost duty is to look after her old mother for the rest of her life combine to put her in a very difficult position. On the one hand, her duties as a daughter to Mother Sậu, mother to little Thúy, and wife to her husband, all require her survival, and consequently, her defection to the other side. On the other hand, her sense of duty as a citizen-warrior to her Mother country and her Revolution family, amplified by the knowledge that her disloyalty could break the guerrillas’ spirit in this critical moment, prevents her from succumbing to the enemy’s demands. It is at this time that Sứ, much as her mother has previously done, visualizes the lý of the nationalist cause in the concrete beauty of Hòn Đất stretching before her in the early morning:

She loved this place with a boundless love, this place where she had been born and whose delicious fruits had given her such a healthy glow. Here her mother had rocked her to sleep; here, in time, she herself had rocked her daughter to sleep with the same lullabies. Here she had raised her small fist to salute the Party flag and had learned from this to love even more her parents, her husband, her child, her sister and her comrades. She loved Hòn Đất with a love that came from every fibre of her being, from her flesh and blood. Loved the old house on piles with its age-old stairs from which she could see through the trees the sea, the
hamlet, the fields and Mount Ba Thè, against the blue sides of which the egrets etched their white flight every evening.

And never before had her heart swelled with so much love for Hòn Đất as this morning. Never had she loved life more than now, at this moment, waiting for death on her knees. Never had she loved more this native soil on which dawn was ushering in a new day. The sun had reached the sandy bank and was now throwing its golden rays on the leaning bamboo trunks. Sunshine had turned the estuary into a bay of light, and the whole fishing hamlet bathed in it.

Sứ watched the smoke climb above the roofs of the fishermen’s houses. She could even make out the nylon lines which glistened and swayed in the wind amidst other lines of a uniform black. The rays reached her, reflecting in her eyes, falling on her disheveled hair, on her full shoulders. (182)

This lyrical passage, the classic lesson on the love for one’s country in DRV and NLF highschool textbooks since the late 1960s, challenges the American belief that the “fanatic” patriotism and bravery they see in many Vietnamese revolutionaries of the time is an outcome of endless political brainwashing by “Communists.” Here, the abstract concepts of nationalism and patriotism are personalized for Sứ in the appreciation for the beauty of her native village, where live her mother, sister, daughter, childhood friends and long-time neighbors. The sense of place is inextricably linked to the people she has known and loved since childhood, and finally to the common cause her family and fellow-villagers are now fighting for.

The sun filtered through the palms and bathed Sứ from head to foot. And the winds, breaths of the sea, the smells of the coming spring. Sứ could tell very
distinctly the sea exhalations, warm and salty, from the balmy, light breezes from the rice fields. Her arms twisted in fierce pain, she tried to get a glimpse of the cave hidden behind the coconut palms. If only in these precious last minutes, the wind would part the coconut leaves so that she could see her loved ones. Perhaps she would see Quyen carrying Thuy on her back. Please, Heavens, let me see my daughter, if only for a fleeting moment. (198)

In contrast, the alien, evil ARVN soldiers are symbolized by the guns they are pointing at her and her village, and the ropes that are now twisting her arms. The stark contrast between gentleness and cruelty is lingered upon in order to evoke sympathy for Su. Her femininity, symbolized by her long, thick hair, round arms and exemplary motherhood, is dwelled upon to offset the enemy’s victimization of womanhood:

Su was lifted off the ground; her bare arms, beautiful and pale, were cruelly pulled up behind her back as she rose. Arms so admirable and soothing, capable and untiring. Loving, gentle arms which had so many times tenderly encircled her husband, her daughter, her sister, her parents, her comrades, now mercilessly twisted. The cruel rope pulled on her arms, distorting the slim figure of this gentle young woman. Every feature on that figure showed gentleness: the long hair which hung down to her heels, the face deathly pale from the pain, her full breasts tight against her black silk blouse. And the relentless rope held her suspended, this daughter of Hon Dat, of the South, this mother who was all hope and faithfulness. Here at this moment, everything spoke of cruelty. This rope and the soldiers who stood around it. (197-8)
The source of Sú’s strength and resistance, then, comes from her gentleness and affection for her family, a thread that weaves together love of the place and its people, hatred for the intrusive, ruthless aliens, and dedication to a resistance movement that embraces everything and everyone that Sú loves. So even if it takes her life, she is prepared to accept it, trusting that her sacrifices of herself and of her immediate family’s needs will be of benefit to the bigger family of her hamlet and country, which will in turn secure a happier future for her own loved ones. She apologizes to her family, one by one, for not being able to fulfill her duties to them. First, she talks to her husband in her mind:

I know how sad you will be, not seeing me when you come back. Forgive me, my darling. But Thúy will be there, as a gift of my love to you. Look at her and you will find me again. I don’t know what will happen to her, but I’m confident she will come out of this alive, for our comrades are still there with their guns in hand. (185)

To her mother, she now entrusts her daughter, hoping that Thúy will fulfill the daughter’s duty for her. “Raise Thúy for me, mamma. Think of her as your little Sú of years before and it will be like having me always at your side” (186).

In the meantime, Mother Sáu is also undergoing a similarly difficult inner struggle between her love for her daughter and her duty and ties to the revolution.

For twenty-seven years since she had brought Sú into the world, she had lavished care on her, squeezing from her own breasts drops of milk, lovingly handling the smallest pieces of clothing for her little daughter. These legs swinging above the ground she had watched take their first steps. This hair which now caressed her shoulders she had stroked when it had just begun to grow. Then
the first prattle of her daughter—and she already a widow with Sûr and Quyên to raise. It was Sûr who had understood her best and helped her most during those hard years. Her girl had not had all the happiness she deserved as she grew up. Sûr had to raise Thúy all alone, just as her mother had before raised her. Leave her now, lose her forever. How could it not tear Mother Sâu’s heart?

But, holding onto her daughter, she could not do what the enemy told her to do. For this hamlet, this cave which was fighting, the revolution in which she put all her faith and ties—were they not more sacred than her daughter? (200-201) Mother Sâu’s painful decision to uphold her daughter’s will to fight releases Sûr of the difficult choice and strengthens her resolve to die for the common cause rather than surrender to the enemy.

The three main female characters—Mother Sâu, Quyên, and Sûr—illustrate Anh Đức’s view of the ideal Vietnamese woman in wartime: a perfect combination of traditions and history. In Hôn Đất, we see manifestations of the link between traditional Confucianist femininity and women’s contribution to the revolution. Early in the novel, an important meeting takes place in which the members are all men, who are then treated to a sumptuous meal while the women look on. But it is the women who eventually tip the balance of battle toward the guerrillas. They proselytize so that the ARVN soldiers desert or lose spirit. When the surrounded guerrillas have almost run out of provisions and ammunition, the women villagers break the ARVN siege to bring them food and water. At the same time, they stage a political demonstration that in the end forces the well-fed, American-backed ARVN soldiers to withdraw. Because the revolutionaries are viewed as members of one’s own family, women’s deference to male guerrillas in certain
areas is perceived by the female characters (and supposedly by the readers as well) as the affectionate care women in a family traditionally shower on their brothers, sons, uncles, fathers and husbands. The feeling of belonging to one loving family is further indicated by the familial designations attached to each of the villagers and guerrillas.\(^{121}\)

The novel also shows that in a people’s war, the definition of “fighters” is fluid. When the war occurs not on a distinct geographic front where combat takes place, leaving a relatively safe rear, but in people’s own backyard, everyone who supports the resistance becomes a fighter.\(^{122}\) Although none of the women in this novel actually handles guns (the only exception is when Quyên is so aroused by her sister’s death that she seizes a rifle and fires at the ARVN soldiers), the unarmed women are portrayed to be the deciding factor in the final victory of the outnumbered, out-gunned guerrillas over American-armed ARVN soldiers. Moreover, the women in Anh Đức’s novel are so formidable because they are armed not with guns, but with love and affection. If care and affection are traditionally women’s domains, Hòn Đất’s women can be said to have defeated the enemy with their femininity. Conversely, this femininity embodies for the guerrillas everything worth fighting for, evident in the way Sứ’s feminine care maintains the guerrillas’ spirit in the midst of destitution and physical hardships. After Sứ is captured, the leader of the guerrillas Hai Thép muses:

In this fight, she had not fired a single shot. She simply took care of them, every mouthful of food they had, every drop of water they drank. Her presence unfailingly meant warm care, measured steps, quiet giving. Since a little girl, she had won all hearts. Like the river, the leaves, the fruit, she belonged body and soul to Hòn Đất, inseparable from it, just as her beauty and noble heart had long
become the pride of the whole region. Even more than that, her unyielding faithfulness had braced her hamlet and its compatriots through every test of will.

(191-2)
The symbol of this femininity, Sử’s long, thick hair, provides her with a resistant shield against Xâm’s “U.S.-made” (203) saber. Its “thousands of silky strands” (203), thick and shiny, simultaneously a symbol of the united force of her people, three times protect this gentle but “indomitable” (203) woman.

Although the confrontation between the ARVN and the NLF drives the action in the novel, Hồn Đất in fact conveys a strong desire for peace, social harmony, and an end to violence in Vietnam. As peace and harmony are traditionally associated with femininity, women and their female virtues receive special treatment over male aggressiveness in this novel (and in much of Vietnamese revolutionary war literature in general). This explains why Anh Đức seeks not to enumerate Sử’s accomplishments as a combatant, but to erect a monument of feminine virtues at the heart of the resistance against outside forces. Sử, an unarmed woman, is hence extolled as the heroine of the novel amidst gun-bearing male guerrillas, for she represents both the fighting woman and a woman worth fighting for.

The idealistic solidarity and unity in the novel creates a simplistic situation which makes it fairly easy for the characters to act and choose as they do, when their personal wishes coincide with the aims of the revolution, and when femininity does not run counter to the duties of a nationalist. As painful as they are, sacrifices such as those made by Sử and Mother Sâu are comparatively easy to make because, with everyone in Mother Sâu’s family joining the revolution, the resistance has truly become their extended
family, tying all members of the family to most of the other villagers. It is when personal interests or feminine virtues contradict the goals of the revolution that invites interesting comparisons, as in the case of Mrs. Cà Xợi, the Khmer mother of Xám, the blood-drinking, liver-eating commander of the ARVN Rangers attacking Hòn Đất.

Throughout most of the story, Mrs. Cà Xợi remains on the margin of both femininity (being a taciturn, short-haired drunk) and revolutionary zeal. Her association with Xám and his landlord father seems to have robbed her of the feminine qualities which she once possessed and which are extolled in other Hòn Đất women. In the same village where her son has committed monstrous crimes against families she knows, Mrs. Cà Xợi’s natural bond with her son is in constant struggle with her spiritual debt to the kind Mother Sâu, who once saved her from starvation, and with her own conscience as a person. This struggle drives her to frequent inebriation and she secludes herself from the other villagers. Xám’s murder of Sứ, another of her benefactors, puts the final straw on his mother’s back. Unable to kill him herself, Mrs. Cà Xợi finally allows the guerrillas to assassinate Xám in her own home in her absence. It is not a simple decision, and Mrs. Cà Xợi cannot easily put Xám’s death out of her mind. Nevertheless, this breach of feminine conduct (neglect of a mother’s duty) restores the villagers’ sympathy for Mrs. Cà Xợi, and reconciles her to the extended family of Hòn Đất and to the cause her daughter Cà My is fighting. Earlier, Mrs. Cà Xợi has refused the comparative luxuries of the city promised by her son, preferring her life as a potter among the villagers of Hòn Đất. This preference for the village community life further separates Mrs. Cà Xợi’s personal interests from those of Xám, facilitating her decision to aid the village revolutionaries. Anh Tứ also justifies, through a series of situations, the villagers’ acceptance of Mrs. Cà
Xôi back into a revolution that values femininity. Xăm’s inhuman treatment of the Hòn Đất inhabitants is explained by the fact that he is the son of a cruel landlord who raped Cà Xôi and abused her after she gave birth to Xăm. Brought up by his father away from his honest mother, Xăm is as foreign to Mrs. Cà Xôi as the red-haired Americans are to the villagers. His callous reference to Sú’s blood, contempt for the village way of life, and vows to return to Hòn Đất, bringing back with him the whip and the high taxes that once impoverished and enslaved the villagers, including Mrs. Cà Xôi, distance Xăm from the son Mrs. Cà Xôi once hugged to her heart, and propel her to the difficult decision which, while violating the traditional mother’s role, redeems her as a dutiful, sacrificing daughter to the extended family of Hòn Đất revolutionaries.

According to Chu Nga, a DRV literary critic, Hòn Đất earned its special reception by both the public and the critics in the revolutionary world thanks as much to its being first in what was to be a “successful harvest [. . .] of novels in Southern revolutionary prose fiction” (33), as to its emotionalism (trù tinh) and representativeness (tinh tiêu biểu). The novel covers a specific event (the guerrillas’ repulsion of an American-led ARVN military campaign) within a short period of time (two weeks) with quite individualized characters. Yet it manages to project rather successfully an overview of the NLF’s twenty-year struggle against the U.S. and its client regime in South Vietnam—a struggle in which victories resulted from both military and political means conducted simultaneously by a guerrilla force and the people of a particular geographic area. Southern life and customs, such as the names of the characters (Southerners call each other by their birth place in the family) and the way they interact with one another, their spoken dialect, and the scenery are all recorded with charming authenticity. The
juxtaposition of revolutionary activities with normal daily life (for example, the scene in which Quyên prepares food) creates an almost casual tempo befitting the decades-long struggle, and provides moments of normalcy that render the guerrillas entirely human. *Hòn Đất* is also representative of the revolution occurring in South Vietnam at the time in that it forecasts the eventual triumph of the out-gunned, but disciplined and creative guerrillas over a militarily superior enemy who, as it is, does not know or believe in what he is fighting for. The emotionalism of the novel, evident in heart-felt descriptions of nature and of Sù’s feelings for her village, family, and her fellow-fighters, is not only moving and contagious, it simultaneously shows that

> the difficult struggle in the South does not harden or stunt our [the fighters’] soul, but on the contrary, only opens it up and transfuses it with life and love. [. . .] Loving life as they do, the fighters are also willing to sacrifice their own lives when necessary for a better life for everybody else. Their willingness to sacrifice does not run contrary to their optimism and faith, but parallels and complements them. For optimism and faith lead to confidence in the fight, and only through fighting and sacrificing can we achieve victory, which in turn will maintain our optimism and faith. (Chu Nga 31-32)

However, Chu Nga’s review also points out the novel’s weaknesses as seen from a social realist perspective. One is that, while opting for a third-person narrator’s point of view, Anh Đức sometimes reveals himself too much. For example, he at times indulges in lengthy emotional, even romantic sotto voce passages (as in the emotional description of the ARVN soldiers’ cruel treatment of Sù quoted earlier), or voices his thoughts and feelings rather obviously when describing events (as in the previously quoted passage on
Su’s love for her home village), instead of devising situations that would allow the characters to express those emotions and thoughts through their own words and actions. As such, according to Chu Nga, Anh Đức runs the risk of being “carried away” (36) and unrealistic. The use of real place names has also created problems, as some readers in the know have reportedly questioned the existence of the Hồn cave, while some others have wondered why Anh Đức did not choose a Khmer as a main character when the majority of the people living in real Hồn Đất are Khmer.

My own critique of Hồn Đất lies not so much in the author’s emotional intrusion, however. Technical weakness or not, the author’s identification with his characters provides the text with unforgettable passages shining with patriotism and dedication to the revolutionary cause that would be hard found from the mouths of simple Southern villagers who are known nation-wide for “doing rather than talking.” With Southern women like Sú especially, the virtue of quiet sacrifice would have been compromised if she herself were given into explanations of her own feelings. Hồn Đất’s limitations, in my opinion, are threefold. First, the stress on femininity and the supporting (however important) roles the women play in the novel reveal Anh Đức’s rather patriarchal subconsciousness. However, showing women as always impeccably feminine in a Confucian way and in only supporting roles does not reflect the reality of contemporary Southern women (such as Út Tịch or Mme. Nguyễn Thị Định) taking up guns the same way men did. Another of the novel’s limitations is the simplistic dichotomy of “us” versus “the enemy,” as well as the unrealistic unity among the revolutionaries. The “enemy” in the novel comes either from outside the village (the ARVN and Americans), or from the well-to-do, property-owning class (Xâm and Ba Phi). The guerrillas and their
sympathizers in the village never for one moment waiver; their road to revolution is also made incredibly easy. As a result, the only person that grows and changes in the story is a fairly minor character, Mrs. Cà Xôi. Finally, the novel does not concern the extended, national revolution outside the village. All of the characters on the NLF side are from the village itself, and the final uprising feels somewhat isolated from both the revolution in other South Vietnamese villages and the NLF's higher leadership. Hòn Đất, therefore, is not without flaws, both structurally and ideologically. But the novel as a whole is redeemed by the honest, unmistakable faith and passion for the revolutionary cause in the author’s narrative and the charms of his equally honest and passionate villagers.

Whatever weaknesses the first noteworthy novel of NLF literature may have, they seem to have been largely overcome in only a few years. Phan Từ’s Mần và Tôi (1972), published six years later, epitomizes the height of NLF literature.

**Phan Từ and Mần và Tôi**

Phan Từ (1930-1995) was born Lê Khám in Qui Nhơn, Bình Định, into a high-profile intellectual family originally from Quê Phong village, Quê Sơn district, Quảng Nam province (Central Vietnam). His maternal grandfather was Phan Chu Trinh, a leading patriot and revolutionary of the Đồng Du (Go East) movement in the early twentieth century (see Chapter II). A Việt Minh liaison at 15, Phan Từ participated in the uprising that took over Quê Sơn district in 1945, and joined the Việt Minh army in 1950. After graduating from the Academy of Infantry, he fought the French in Laos until 1954, when he regrouped to the North under the Geneva Agreement. In 1961, armed with a degree in Literature from the University of Hanoi, Phan Từ returned South to work in the
Liberation Association of Literature and Arts in the Fifth Interzone (south Central Vietnam, including Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, Đà Nẵng and Quy Nhơn) and was for a long time chief-editor of the Liberation Publishing House. After the war and until his death in 1995 in Đà Nẵng, Phan Tú served in the executive board of the Vietnam Writers’ Association in the third term, as chair of the Association of Literature and Arts in Quảng Nam-Da Nẵng, and a member of the National Assembly in the eighth term. He was awarded the Independence Medal (the highest medal for Vietnamese soldiers) of the third degree. His first short story, “Một Ngày Bên Đồn Dịch” [One day at the enemy’s post] (1957), and first novel, Bên Kia Biên Giới [Beyond borders] (1958), are accounts of the life and work of Vietnamese resistance fighters in Laos and the deep friendship between them and the Laotian people. His other titles include “Trở về Hà Nội” [Return to Hanoi] (1960), Trên đất Lào [On Laotian ground] (documentary narrative, 1961), Về Làng [Return to the village] (collection of short stories, 1964), Gia đình mà Bây [Mother Seven’s family] (1968), Trong dâm bụa [In the bamboo bushes] (collection of short stories, 1968), Măng mộc trong lửa [Bamboo shoots growing in the fire] (documentary, 1972), Mận và tôi [Mận and I] (1972), Trại ST 18 [Camp ST 18] (1974), Trong mưa núi [In the mountain rain] (memoir, 1984), and Người cùng quê [My fellow home villagers] (novel in three volumes, 1985, 1995, 1997). He is also credited for translating to Vietnamese the novel Sông Hằng mẹ tôi [My mother—the river Hwang] (1984). For his contribution to Vietnam’s literature, Phan Tú was awarded the Nguyễn Đình Chiểu prize twice during the war. He also earned the Quảng Nam-Da Nẵng’s Thirty-years 1945-1975 prize, the Quảng Nam-Da Nẵng’s A-class Literature prize (1985-1995), and the Hồ Chí Minh prize for Literature and Arts (the most prestigious prize in Vietnam) in 2000. Out
of Phan Tú's always well received works, the best loved, and at the same time critically
acclaimed, are Về Làng, Gia Đình Má Bây, Mân và Tói, and Người Cùng Quê. During the
American War, together with works by Anh Đức, Nguyễn Sáng, and Nguyễn Thị, Về Làng, Gia Đình Má Bây, and particularly Mân và Tói, inspired the people in the North
with stirring portrayals of the Southern people's struggle for independence. The
following section is an examination of Mân và Tói, a most lively work coming out of
NLF literature and one of my personal favorites.

There are many discoveries awaiting readers of the novel. Entitled Mân and I, the
novel is actually about a large community of revolutionaries and their numerous
supporters in a struggle not only against American invaders and the cruel local
oppressors, but also against ignorance, poverty, and complacency. The love story
between the two title characters speaks of personal happiness; however, their love is but a
part of the struggle in the South, a thread linking together the events and people of the
revolution, even as it develops gradually as a result of the events and multi-faceted
relationships that interweave in the novel. Told by a male main force NLF fighter with
relatively extensive life and battle experience, the credit in his narration goes to the many
inhabitants of a small village in Central Vietnam, and especially to a female guerrilla
eight years his junior who has never seen a big city in her life. These are just some of the
findings that the reader of Mân và Tói may encounter.

The novel is set in 1965, a few months before American marines land in Đà Nẵng.
The narrator is Thiêm, twenty-eight years old, deputy platoon leader of a main force NLF
unit. The novel begins with Thiêm's battalion running against time to reach their next
battlefield in South Central Vietnam by the designated hour. The incessant rain is turning
the rice fields of Quang Ngai (Central Vietnam) into unfamiliar rivers of sucking mud, downing the soldiers with malaria and exhaustion, and submerging whole areas on their way under rising floods. The liberated area of Tam-tran is on relatively high ground, and thus spared from the worst consequences. But in the RVN-occupied village of Ca, hundreds of villagers are trapped in the barbs and mines surrounding their strategic hamlets while the flood keeps rising. The ARVN and self-defense forces occupy the only hill in the village, leaving the villagers on the low land. Moreover, to keep the village in order, they periodically call on canons and rocket planes to shoot down any villagers trying to get away from their “secured” hamlets. The malaria-stricken and undermanned NLF main force soldiers shuffle plans to assist the overstretched guerrillas in the village, but find themselves in a tight situation between the villagers’ plight and the deadly consequences to their own regiment if the designated hour is not met. The pained apology Thiêm offers gives rise to some initial misunderstanding and tension between himself and a guerrilla, Mân. The tension is only resolved when a change in the situation finally allows Thiêm’s platoon to stay behind and help, and when the main force soldiers’ whole-hearted efforts save many of the dying villagers.

The rescue accomplished, Thiêm and his platoon catch up with their battalion in Binh Đình, his home province. Just as he is hoping to see his long-separated mother and sister, however, Thiêm is assigned a special reconnaissance mission back to Ca village in anticipation of the American landing at Chu Lai. Becoming at once a witness of and participant in the fierce fighting the villagers are going through, Thiêm gradually comes to a deeper understanding of the area and its people. The ensuing close relationship he establishes with the villagers in time leads to the romance between him and Mân. The
experience, which covers a year of living and fighting in this contested area of Quang Ngai and which spans almost the entire length of the 642-page novel, is to be a valuable journey of discovery and learning for Thiem, even as he is “throwing all his weight in” (309) to help the villagers, and train and assist the guerrillas in numerous jobs he is not assigned to, but chooses to take on nonetheless.

His reconnaissance work is to help in the eventual NLF victory of Nui Sam, but Thiem is wounded before his battalion attacks the Americans. He is transferred to a hospital in a liberated, relatively safe area, where he is treated by Dr. Hao, his long-time friend from Da Nang, and by Thu Yen, a beautiful twenty-year-old from Qui Nhon who is both a complement and a foil to Man. Having time on his own for the first time in years and frequent talks with Hao and Thu Yen occasion a reassessment of the demands of the self and those of the society that the usually intense confrontation with the enemy has always eclipsed in Thiem. In this inner struggle, memories of Man’s dedication and sacrifices eventually help anchor Thiem, as does her actual three-day visit to the hospital. Later, Thiem also succeeds in persuading the hitherto cynical Hao to venture closer to the fighting. The death of Ba To, Thiem’s platoon leader and admired mentor, sends Thiem back to his unit as Ba To’s replacement. The novel ends in brief recounts of new victories and more marches toward the fighting, and the circle is completed when Thiem catches news of Man and the inhabitants of Ca village on the radio she gave him, and learns how much she and her village have progressed along their own road to the final victory.

The novel’s appeal is proof of the author’s commendable success at presenting an ambitious picture of the revolution in its multi-dimensional complexities that, moreover,
are in constant change: its historical past and present; normal daily life and fighting; the
dry and the monsoon seasons; "liberated" (i.e. NLF-controlled) and "occupied" (RVN-
dominated) areas; the cities and the villages; North and South; among the intellectuals as
among the workers and peasants; with the participation of the Kinh and other ethnic
minorities; on local, national, and international levels; on all the three military, political,
and diplomatic fronts; the main force and village-level guerrillas; withdrawals and
attacks; temporary defeats and increasing victories; sadness and joys, hatred and
affection; and many more dichotomies aligned on a continuum like the above. Through
this keenest, most comprehensive picture of the revolution in NLF literature, Phan Tú
tackles many hot and relevant issues among NLF resistsants at the time: the dynamics
between the self/personal and the society/revolutionary community; the relationship
between Party members (representing the Party) and the masses; friendship and romance;
generational differences; femininity versus feminism; ideals versus the practical
consideration of career choices; the bad versus the worse, mediocrity versus excellence;
observation/analysis/criticism and self-observation/analysis/criticism, etc. Moreover, the
novel offers a sophisticated view of NLF fighters, their ARVN/U.S opponents, and the
masses of people in between, every one of them in different (and changing) degrees of
dedication. Of all the above dynamic themes and issues, for this present study, I have
singled out as the focus the concentration of the woman, feminism, and revolutionary
strength in Ẩn và Tôi.

The revolutionary supervillage in the novel is made up of a large community of
individuals of different political stripes, many of them choosing to support the NLF’s
nationalist cause in varying degrees. The main force soldiers, represented by Thiêm’s
battalion, compose an elite fighting force of mostly men, and hold a rather special place with their discipline and military expertise. But the heart of the novel resides with the inhabitants of Cả village, who populate the book. Among the villagers, there are men of all ages, some of them quite extensively depicted. They include the ancient astrologer Mr. Muội, with his silver white hair and a contrasting black beard, who is fond of reciting the village’s historical anecdotes; Tâm Liệp, the smooth and cautious hamlet guerrilla leader who for a long time puts his own safety and welfare above that of the revolution; the financial cadre Ba Thân, an opportunist who betrays the guerrillas after embezzling the villagers’ contributions, as well as spreading negative rumors about those who dare to expose him; a young guerrilla Näm Ri, who laughs till his eyes close at everything and is “quiet, very slow but sure in everything he does” (228); Tư Luan the village Party secretary, whose arthritis and rheumatism are the result of some twenty years fighting first the French and now the Americans (as the guerrillas joke, speaking in verse: “one body, two long wars/twenty years odd, where has your youth gone?” [472]); Ba Tâm, a fifteen-year-old liaison whose talent with slingshots turns into formidable grenade throwing skills when he is finally allowed to participate in actual battles; and the four-year-old Hoàn, whose innocent skipping, laughter, and lisping demand that “grandmother cook rice for Hoong” (315) at Mân’s mother’s graveside underscore the pathos of the adults’ griefs, and who is later blown to pieces by American/ARVN canons.

Those men and boys are portrayed each with his own lively idiosyncrasies, but it is the women of Cả village who hold the revolutionary community together and make it invincible. They emerge in the narrator’s account in great numbers and with especially memorable traits and admirable deeds. In charge of the underground revolutionary
structure in the village is Mrs. Biën, a former Việt Minh guerrilla platoon leader who has been jailed by the RVN government for her role in the nine-year resistance against the French, and who is now raising five children and caring for a husband bed-ridden due to the cruel torture of the Chinhs, local landlords turned vengeful RVN officials. She is later discovered and executed by the ARVN in front of other villagers as an example; but before she dies, Mrs. Biën gathers all her strength, spits at her killer in the face, and shouts to her fellow villagers: “Uncle Hồ, you uncles and aunts, take revenge for me!” (488). Quiet but very versatile is Út Liêm, a brown, lanky fifteen-year-old lass whose work includes liaising between the “legal” and underground forces of NLF supporters, getting information from the ARVN and Americans, and killing the enemy with mines and other explosives in broad daylight when opportunities present themselves. Quick to tears (for which she is continually criticized by her brother Ba Tâm) is another fifteen-year-old, Út Hoa, about to graduate as a nurse. Chin Cang, a chubby, round-faced, fair-skinned nineteen-year-old, is Männ’s right hand, and proves to be as efficient a guerrilla as she is tireless at sowing and reaping rice. Mother Sau raises her grandchildren by herself while juggling the numerous, often nameless tasks of feeding and “disciplining” the guerrillas (whom she considers her sons and daughters), taking care of her garden and paddy plot, and helping her neighbors generously. Männ’s mother brings up her three children while waiting for her husband, who, last time she heard, has been imprisoned in Côn Đảo, a prison island famous for its tiger cages for opponents of the RVN. As the wife of a Việt Minh, she herself is jailed from time to time by the RVN government. When a NLF soldier’s wife sharing the same prison cell with her dies, Männ’s mother takes on their newborn baby, Hoàn, whom she in turn dies protecting from the ARVN
canon shells spraying on the villagers in the rising flood. Xuân is a tall, shy girl with a deep, booming voice which she frequently uses to fool ARVN soldiers into believing they are confronting male NLF fighters when she leads the all-female guerrillas in and out of skirmishes. The Big Rốt [Final] and Small Rốt sisters (so called because they were born after their parents had decided that ten children were enough) can be querulous and trigger-happy at times but are enviable markswomen. An exceptionally pretty Tuổi finds ways to hide her husband from ARVN conscription while she assumes the tasks of observing and finding information about the newly landed American marines; Tuổi is later killed by the Americans, and her husband dies in suicide bombing the American tanks invading Cả village. The underground guerrillas of the occupied hamlets near Chu Lai military base, whom we only know by their code names of S.22 or S.26, are busy expanding secret cells of supporters in the hamlets and persuading ARVN soldiers to desert. Mrs. Binh from the liberated hamlet of Tam Trần has a broad, muscular back, and an even broader heart as she plays big sister to Mản and the young guerrillas of Cả village. The district-level cadre Mrs. Tâm Giâu, whose name means “rich” but who is the poorest of all the villagers, has been separated from her regrouped husband for eleven years—his two letters and a faded photo have since imbued her fight for national independence and unification. Mrs. Giâu alternately directs the struggle within the district from hideouts on the wooded Trúc hill and from secret shelters in the hamlets. Meanwhile, she quietly facilitates the burgeoning love between Mễn and Thiêm, happy to play matchmaker when she herself is unable to have children after severe, prolonged beatings in RVN prisons.
These are the women for whom, Thiềm and other male NLF main force soldiers insist, “a special Medal of Loyalty” (129) should be devised to recognize their quiet suffering and tireless, admirable, and unwavering contributions in every way possible to the success of the nation-wide revolution. As loyal, loving and self-sacrificing wives, mothers, and sisters, who make a Home out of the revolutionary community, these Southern women prove themselves to be worth fighting and dying for. But even more than that, their will and skills in bringing the common struggle to success are the lethal weapons that complement the work of the male fighters, and at the same time dazzle and inspire them.

Once, seeking to demonstrate that unity equaled strength, Hồ Chí Minh used the metaphor of the chopsticks. “One chopstick can be broken with not much effort,” he said, “a bunch of them held together, however, would be very hard to bend, let alone to break.” Composed of several members of both genders and all ages as it is in Phan Tư’s Mằn và Tôi, the revolutionary supervillage appears very hard to break. When one takes into account the loyalty, determination, resilience, and clever modus operandi of fighting of the women who make up the better part of this revolutionary community, it seems utterly indestructible.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the eventual victory of the Vietnamese revolutionaries rested in no small part on their success in tapping into the power and resources of a great number of women. Phan Tư’s success in Mằn và Tôi, on the other hand, rests on a credible and endearing portrayal of several admirable women, particularly of the title character Mằn. As the most fully developed female character in the novel, Mằn personifies a perfect blend and balance of femininity (tradition) and
feminism (revolution), and concurrently embodies a move in emphasis from the former to the latter as the story progresses.

Like all other characters in Vietnamese revolutionary literature, Mễn is described not as a lone character, acting on her own, but as a part of a community. In her small family, Mễn is daughter to her mother (who, having lost her husband to Côn Đảo prison, single-handedly raises three children and an unrelated grandson), big sister to the argumentative Ba Tâm and Ứt Hòa, and mother to the unrelated but dearly-loved little Hoàn. In the big family of the revolutionary supervillage based on her actual Ca village and the bigger Tam-sa district and Quảng Ngãi province, she is also neighbor/like-daughter to Mother Sâu, like-niece to Tứ Luan, like-daughter to Tâm Liễp, younger sister to Mrs. Tâm Giàu, Mrs. Binh and several older women in the district who trust and care for her, big sister to the younger guerrillas of her hamlet, girlfriend/comrade/fellow-fighter to Thiêm, the narrator. At the same time, she is a member of the People's Revolutionary Party of nationalists fighting for independence and a better life for Vietnam, of which her Ca village is a small part. Through her efforts (and Thiêm's own view of them) to navigate all the above interconnected relationships with their complexities and nuances, the reader is led to an understanding of several issues of concern among NLF fighters and supporters at the time.

Let us now conduct a close reading of one of the episodes that show Mễn in this complex relation to her personal family and her revolutionary supervillage. The episode begins when Thiêm is called upon to meet with Mrs. Tâm Giàu at Mễn's mother's grave. Below is my translation of the section from page 307 to 316, which I hope will give the reader an idea both of the issues discussed and of Phan Túr's literary style:
Măn and Sister Tâm had just cleared the grass around the grave. Sister Tâm looked relaxed, no “ohs” or “ahs” when I arrived—it must be something negligible. Ba Tâm was adding to the hedge of bamboo branches to ward off the cows and buffaloes. Út Hòa was tying some red and white trang flowers into a bunch. Skipping here and there was little Hoàn. Allowed a rare long-distance trip with his mother Măn [the grave is in fact only outside the hamlet, trans.], he was absolutely thrilled; after jumping up and down on grandmother’s grave, he crawled down and played between his mother’s legs, talking to himself nonstop. I had just played airplane with him last night and he had remembered my name, running over to greet me: “Uncle . . . uncle Xiêm!” He was very cute and quite an armful, though covered in heat rash and infected with trench foot due to sleeping constantly in underground bunkers. He remembered everything he heard. Mother Sâu found it a bit scary. Just the other day she had scolded him, “You’re so clever you’ll turn into a Spirit,” and the following morning, she caught him warning the cat, “Your so cleber you’ll xurn into a Spirit.”

In Măn’s joke, I recognized an apology:

“I hold a family cell meeting only once in a while to visit a martyr’s grave, and lo and behold, here’s a visitor! It’s just so hectic in the middle of the harvest. . .”

“Who needs all these uninvited visitors, right?”

Sister Tâm laughed, pausing her hoe:

“According to long-time traditions, people clear grass on graves and eat pork come Têt. You do it when everybody else is reaping, no wonder the village elders
are here to mark it for future punishment. Where are you going to get the rooster
to sacrifice to the village?”

“With rice overflowing in baskets, you want roosters or prawn tails, you got
them!”

It was also harvest time in Mãn’s household.

After the flood, the three siblings worked on their plot whenever they had
some time between all the other tasks, raking the layer of sand the flood left on
top, piling up the borders, finally clearing off enough sand on four ang [a
traditional measurement, trans.] for sowing on their family plot, leaving one ang
fallow which was too thickly covered with pebbles and stones. The three ang they
previously sowed for hire now went back to the owner for lack of labor. After
that, there was only Mãn who hurriedly stopped by the field in between mission
trips to pull off the grass, the watering having taken care of by sympathetic
neighbors. Now Út Hòa was complaining that brother Tâm was a member of the
Youth Association but far from being exemplary, spending his rare few days in
the village roaming the orchards with his catapult. Ba Tâm for his part called his
little sister lazy-bones, other people having graduated the nursing course while
Hòa was still nursing it.

Mãn interfered:

“OK, OK. Let’s see, this afternoon you two are not really tied up with much
else, consider yourselves the main force in reaping. I’m up to my ears with work,
but will be there to tie and carry the rice home. Yes?”
“After that, Brother Ba should build stores to hide the rice, if it’s lost, he’ll have to make up for it!”

“Make up for it? Are you going to make up for months of studying for nothing?”

Ears flaming red, Út Hôa flung down the hoe with a thud. Mân tried to smooth her down:

“Look, everybody’s laughing at you. Physicians are like gentle mothers, what kind of mother is so quick to get offended. . . . Alright, my command is of no avail to you, I will withdraw now, you’ll have to vote for someone else to take the post, I don’t care who! See, who told you to argue. . . . Brother Thiêm, can you see how tiring it is?”

Every time I saw her bathing little Hoân or thatching the hut temporarily erected after the flood, Mân often joked but sounded like she needed to offer an explanation, which I found pitiful. It was as if she thought that, when somebody not born on this land was throwing all his weight in, fighting day and night, then as a person from the village, she should toil twice as much and not spend time doing her own housework. But I knew how nagging a concern food was to cadres like Mân.

Hundreds of tasks funnelled down to the hamlet, all stressed as top priority, primary, central, urgent, crucial, key; all demanding the hamlet level to research carefully, internalize, be creative, and most of all, to be exemplary in; cadres of big and small orders who came to “bolster the movement” all griped that the hamlet leadership was not adequately attentive to their particular department, all
asked for, if not top priority, then at least first place. . . . Mân was not one of the “quickly get it done and over with” cadres, and disliked the way some adroitly shoved the mountain of tasks to other people with practiced excuses, and so she became frantically busy. But one is never too busy to eat. Mân still had little Hoân and herself to feed (Mother Sâu was kind, but very poor), and Út Hòa to send rice to so she could study; she still had to buy her brother and sister new clothes every now and then so they would not feel self-pity among their friends. For herself, Mân possessed only one wholesome set of black pyjamas, carefully saved for meetings or big gatherings. For everyday life, she was in either one or the other of the two cheap cotton sets, the shoulder of which had been patched over several times, yet the dye still washed her skin grey every time it rained. This morning when at their place to look for Tâm, I looked through a hole in the tattered sieve used as a makeshift door, and saw in the otherwise empty hut three stones put together as the stove, a lop-sided pot, and a few bowls drying in a colander. The only thing of any value was a wooden shelf hung from the roof to be used as an altar, upon which, next to the incense pot, was a brand-new gilded photo frame with no photo, the glitter only enhancing the poverty of its surroundings.

It would be hard to count all the hundreds of thousand piastres that had passed through Mân’s hands in the thousand-odd nights of destroying strategic hamlets.

A few years ago, before the coastal and suburban areas rose up, the people from there looked to the firelight of burned fences to find the revolution; hundreds of bamboo sticks piling up into mountains and the fire rising twice the height of the sticks were the surest guiding light to the harbor before sunrise. Flocking to
the border post of Tam-sa were mostly women, who could travel more easily, and who also needed to go more than men. Back home, each of them whispered in three or five select pairs of ears: “If you go, remember, look for Hai Măn. Whoa, that adolescent babyface of a girl puts all the guys in order. She holds a machine gun across her hip like this and chased the [ARVN] soldiers till they shat. They say she single-handedly brought in a bag of grenades and blew up the American offices in Tam-ky in broad daylight, got it? The local brutes are so scared their tongues hang out like frogs’ . . . and she’s only about the same age as your youngest . . . alright, maybe a bit older, seventeen, eighteen at the most, she called herself niece when talking to me, didn’t even dare to say younger sister! Us women, we can understand each other better. . . .” Tongues ticking and lots of “ooh”ing and “ah”ing. One was rumored to be ten, ten to be a hundred, such that even some of the not-yet-brave risked it going to Tam-sa “just to see what it’s like,” and returned home, whispering for months, full of Hai Măn this and Hai Măn that. Some women from Đà Nẵng, Hội-an, having missed their Liberation soldier sons they came all the way to see, pressed into Măn’s hands a pouchful of cash and gold rings before leaving. Some others Măn called over for letters and photos of regrouped husbands were so happy they took off watches or gold necklaces and stuffed them indiscriminately in Măn’s pockets. The majority carried over basketfuls of fish or pickled seafood, sold them and gave Măn all the proceeds as gifts for the revolution.

That was from people in other areas. People in Tam-sa, when they made contributions, only wanted to hand them over to Năm Tuất and Măn. Тур Luân,
hiding in secret bunkers in the village, was not supposed to surface and in any
case had difficulty moving around with his swollen joints. Ba Thân was
everywhere, glib and unctuous, but few people trusted him with anything unless
there was no other way to get things to the revolution.

Whatever she received, Mān recorded everything in a booklet, handed in to
the last penny, and made a point of getting Nam Tuật to take it straight to the
district and not going through Ba Thân. Thân tattled to Tám Lięp, who scolded
Mān for trespassing into the financial cadre’s territory, and hinted at ulterior
motives, such as power grasping and climbing over immediate superiors and
whatnot. That was the time when the investigation into Tam-sa’s declining
contributions was being temporarily suspended. Mān coolly replied: “You may
not know, being away from the village, but people are saying everywhere that
they are gathering material goods for the financial cadre to build brick houses. I’m
already so busy with the fighting there’s no time to breathe, why would I want to
mess with somebody else’s work? But it is one thing to bear Thân’s defamation of
myself, it’s another to see him stealing the money people are sending the
revolution. . . . To think of my own mother spitting blood from the [ARVN]
beatings for sheltering the cadres. . . .” Mān choked and left, while Tám Lięp
grumbled, “Always use tears, never listen to reason.”

Many Tam-sa mothers cared for Mān, wishing to adopt her, buying her a
hammock or a new set of clothes; Mān handed in everything. At this point, the
guerrillas and even Tự Luận thought Mān unduly scrupulous. Mān countered:
“Just think, if I stopped being a cadre, would the people still pamper me like that?”

When telling me the above, Luân dropped his voice, as if afraid Mân would become conceited had she overheard: “See? See how she thinks? I was dumbfounded! Many times when people competed to invite me in, calling me Big Brother Tư and so on, I didn’t say it, but felt rather pleased, wow, they respect me so much. But in fact it is the whole revolution and the country that people love, not just this individual Tư in particular. As the secretary, I’m a representative of the Party to receive that love and give it back to the other members, if I kept it to myself, it would be the same as embezzlement, that’s what she meant. . . . And she’s right, many of our comrades are toiling on high mountains, or languishing in prisons, or hiding in sewage pipes in Saigon, those are the ones who most deserve the chicken and rice wine—and they are not living near the people, and we are here . . . if we don’t watch out, we could be like a liaison agent stealing goods along the way!”

I looked at his skinny figure, remembered the times Mân nearly fainted out of exhaustion, and did not know what to say. The hamlet-level comrades were given not a penny of salary, and they thought every meal they had with the villagers was misappropriation. . . . Luân scratched his shaved head:

“She’s tough, this Mân. She says resolutely that she’ll only have what she can make. When still at Tam-trần [the liberated area, trans.], at noon under this sun, she went up the hill to hoe by herself. The people snatched her hoe, scolding: “OK, we’ll give you ten out of ten for being exemplary, go away, stop roasting
your poor body like that!” She laughed, saying she was going away in the evening to destroy a strategic hamlet down there. Many people felt for her, and together they hoed with her so she could have a bit of a rest later. Come to think of it, in a good year, she could produce as much as seventy, eighty ang of rice and three or four thousand cassavas, enough for her own use and for her siblings, if anyone else was in need, she had some to give them too. Back here [at Tam-sa, a bordering area, trans.], it’s very difficult, but she can still rake most of the sand out of her plot in her disrupted spare time. I don’t even imagine I can keep up with her. . . . The kids growing up in this fight with the Americans, they’re strangely quick. Look, each with their own cotton tube and gun, they just carry out everything you put them to, confronting the enemy, they fight wonderfully, put them in a political classroom, they teach, give them two weeks to incite the hamlets to rise up and you hear the drums and see the fire in ten days, even the land issue which is so complicated, they solved it like that. . . . To be honest with you, Tám Liếp hasn’t opened his eyes to these new things, I’ve tried to talk to him, but he’s still doubtful. He thinks the youngsters are long on gall, but short on brain, that their arms are bigger than their heads, that they can be the Lighting Rod but not the Master himself. The people are changing every day, cadres and Party members are being forged and steeled in the movement, he’ll fall behind if he doesn’t try harder, from being the leader, he’s now the follower, I’m disappointed with him although I still care for him. In the coming hamlet Party meeting, he’ll be bound to lose, many are asking to have him removed, even
penalized. When even a newcomer like you can be this upset about it, imagine how the people here must feel.”

I wanted to counter that Liệp was on the decline not just because he “hadn’t seen the new.” A lot of cadres had, for one reason or another, been away from the movement for some time, but they always made an effort to catch up, and because of that, they were still respected as good leaders. This Brother Luân right here was always blaming himself for being ignorant, backward, and unable to keep up, but I bet he wouldn’t be spared the post of secretary of Tam-sa—that is, unless the higher command put him in a hospital or promoted him to the next level of responsibility. Perhaps knowing I had different thoughts, he continued, sadly:

“In life, there are several ways to embezzle. It’s easy enough to discover those who embezzle money, but much more difficult when it comes to those who seek power and position, tsk, that kind of embezzlement can be very hard to see. Makes me sad...”

His face hardened and, for one fleeting moment, he looked really old. Then, leaning on the stick, he limped after some members of the Peasants’ Association to their meeting. The story, affectionate at first, then turning bitter, was etched in my memory, helping me realize the depth of thought in a fifty-odd-year-old cadre, who day after day cheered up the people with his boisterous laugh and jokes, but who was quietly forfeiting the last shreds of his health after eight years in prison to “help raise the calves into plowing buffaloes” before retiring. And I had at times thought of him as easy-going and rather shallow, somebody who steered the middle course, who would praise anyone he liked just to please them...
Mãn, who had succeeded in calming down her sister and brother, now suddenly exclaimed:

“Look, Hoàn’s picking grandmother’s flowers. Drop it, sweet!”

“Grandmother’s flowers... Hoòng give Mommy...”

“Yes, give it to Mommy. Alright, let’s get going, there’s no bunkers out here in case the canons drop. Tâm, where’s the lighter??

Mãn turned her back to me. Her blouse had a big patch on the right shoulder—the rifle strap chewed it like puppies while growing teeth. This cadre, who is exemplary to the point people protested—what does she think of me? A pretty good fighter, carefree, short-tempered, lazy, yes, certainly lazy. When we were still out on the hill, I was always sleeping, only waking up when the rice was cooked and ready to serve, then wolfed down five bowls in a row... My face was hot. I pulled out a handkerchief and nervously wiped my face, pretending it was the sun that made me sweat. Darn, how come I never thought of it before? Had Mãn complained that I was lazy then, surely I would have just bared my teeth in a wide grin, considering it a charming vice of “the guys” who ate a lot, and were willing to carry heavy loads but steered clear of trivial matters.

Luckily, nobody was looking at me. Mãn had just lit the incense and planted it at the head of the grave, and was now pulling Hoàn to one side of it, putting his hands together:

“Say it after me, sweet. ‘Goodbye grandmother, I’m going home with mother now.’”
The boy burst into laughter and jumped up on his legs. He must have thought mother was joking, pointing at a mound of earth and calling it grandmother. Mân knelt on one knee, pleading in his ears:

"Say it after me, love. . . . 'Goodbye grandmother, I'm going home with mother now.'"

"Grandmother cook rice for Hoòng!"

"No. 'Goodbye grandmother. . . .'

"Mommy lobes Hoòng bery much, Mommy plays wi' Hoòng!"

Mân frowned, trying to look serious: "Hoàn, don't be so naughty!" Her lips suddenly quivered, she clammed them tightly together, yet could not control the quivering. Mân pressed her face against her adopted son's back to silence the sobs. The boy wriggled in her arms, laughing all his milk teeth, it was not often his mother played so many games like today. "Got you Mommy . . . got you . . .," he shouted shrilly, trying to reach over backwards to catch Mân's hair and ears. The pink little fingers depressed further the broken thorn in my chest. The little one turned his head, saw me, and called out: "Uncle Xiêm . . . catch Mommy for Hoòng!" His eyes were round and bright, so bright I could not look. Head hanging, eyes closed as if blinded, I had flashes of bright red pieces of flesh turning up on a background of black cloth. A number of sobs broke out of control, and the laughers continued, as round as the sound of crystals striking together.

Ten minutes later, we left for the village. Mân's lower lip had the deep impression of teeth, close to bleeding. She walked in front, hugging Hoàn the way one would a rice tube, away from the cartridges and grenades on her hip. He
pressed his arms on her shoulders, hunching his neck exactly like a puppy pushing himself up on the brim of a bamboo casket to look around the kitchen, and laughed all his saliva to me. Then he writhed, demanding to be carried on the hip. Mạnh had to hand the belt of cartridges over to Tâm in order to satisfy his wish. The little boy had his own schemes: he shoved his hand inside Mạnh’s blouse, seeking a breast. Mạnh was terrified; she pushed his hand off, at which he yelled out at the top of his voice:

“Where’s my teat? My teat! I want my teat!”

Mạnh’s face was red to the collar line. I offered to take him, but he refused and kept on shrieking like a buffalo horn. In the end, Mạnh was forced to run into a house on the roadside and slammed the door after her. We had a sidesplitting fit of laughter. How formidable is the power of a child, he could make people live and die for him, cry and then laugh also because of him.

This episode exemplifies some of the main themes and touches on several issues that are being developed elsewhere in the book. First, it is a deliberation through literary characters on the issues of the individual and the community, of personal welfare and social responsibility, of the justness and morality of the revolutionary cause and its representative cadres, and of tradition and revolution. The people like Mạnh are intimately connected to the revolution. When she risks her own safety and reputation to protect the revolution, she thinks of her “own mother spitting blood from the beatings [of ARVN officials and soldiers] for sheltering the [revolutionary] cadres” (311-2), and of her father under torture at RVN’s Côn Đảo prison, who might have been killed long ago for all she knows. The NLF revolutionary cause is seeking to overthrow the unpopular, suppressive
RVN government so that the villagers can enjoy the fruit of their labor without being robbed by landlords such as the RVN official Chinh, and so that the Việt Minh who fought against the French colonialists, like Mân's father, or those with relatives in the Việt Minh like Mân's mother will not be arrested or tortured. Consequently, by fighting for the cause, Mân is fighting for the personal safety and welfare of herself, of her own family, and of many other people. Now that she is a revolutionary cadre, she considers herself, as Tư Luân phrases it, “a representative” of the revolution, who must strive and set an example of hard work, honesty, and selflessness for “the people” if she and the revolution are to deserve their trust, love and care. The long-time traditional virtues of hard work, honesty, and selflessness, similar to the Vietnamese time-honored ideals of patriotism and nationalism, have now become revolutionary when serving the cause in the form of exemplary revolutionary cadres like Mân and Tư Luân. The transformation of “old” to “new” is completed when these virtues are externalized from the private family to the organized community of revolutionaries. This line of reasoning illustrates, in the words and actions of a peasant young woman, the intertwining threads of the lý of a revolution against oppression (both local and foreign) and the đạo lý (morality) of those who participate in and represent it, while the trust, love and care (tinh) among the revolutionaries and their supporters are a constant source of strength and personal happiness to the members.

Woven into the above themes and issues is a second set of topics that involve opportunism, “average-ism” (chủ nghĩa trung bình), and excellence, and above all, the balancing of femininity and feminism.
Ba Than, the financial cadre (in charge of financial matters for the guerrillas), initially works for the revolution, but with a mind to benefit himself. In the course of the novel, Thân goes from bad to worse. First, he embezzles the people’s contributions to the revolution. When learning of Mân’s suspicions, he spreads negative rumors about her so as to damage her credibility in case she tells on his stealing. When he finally is discovered, knowing he will be punished, Ba Thân defects to the RVN and informs against his former comrades, causing much difficulty and bloodshed to the guerrillas and their supporters.

While not seeking material gains as Ba Thân, his one-time patron, Tám Liệp, initially the hamlet guerrilla leader, fears for his own safety when RVN retribution and the fighting get fierce. As a result, he turns into a leader of “exile cadres” and “exile guerrillas” (167), so called because they hastily withdraw to the safety of the liberated hamlets whenever the ARVN make search-and-destroy forays into Câ village. Tám Liệp cleverly masks his cowardly moves with a wide range of mottoes. When trying to stall the more radical guerrillas from engaging the ARVN, which would make him look bad in comparison, he warns: “haste causes failure” (223). When Mân and some guerrillas suffer casualties returning to the now occupied village, and the villagers suffer even more from ARVN retribution after the guerrillas leave, he shakes his head: “Told you so...” (225), or “watch out, don’t gamble with our blood” (229). When the guerrillas after initial failures start to reap some success, Tám Liệp fears their accomplishments will force him to join the guerrillas in the village; yet, unable to stall them further, he cautions: “slow but sure” (233). For long deeply indebted to Tám Liệp, who took in herself and her siblings when her parents were both in RVN jails, Mân at first feels compelled to obey
Tám Liếp in accordance with the traditional virtues of hiếu (filial piety) and tòng (obedience) for someone she considers an uncle, second in place only to her father. Moreover, she is a young, inexperienced female guerrilla under Tám Liếp’s command.

It takes no less than a revolution, both inner and outer, for Mần to “dare to peel off the gilded veneer of her idol and see the clay inside” (230). She comes to realize that the man closest to the father she has lost

Right from the beginning [. . .] had joined the revolution with calculations of “win-win,” but with his part of win slightly bigger while at no harm to the common effort. [. . .] It would be unfair to say he was totally selfish, that he cared only for himself, no. He knew right from wrong, but he wanted that, put on a scale, his share should be a bit weightier. He believed in the eventual victory of the revolution, he surely did. His resume contained a blank of a few years of inactivity, but not the black mark of betrayal. He wished to advance quickly at work, which was quite understandable. In the context of the former liberated area, with the French landing at some place far away along the coast once every few years, he was a good cadre, if a bit selective in the kind of work he took on. And he would probably have remained a good cadre had the South not entered a much fiercer fight. (230)

She understands now that

He wanted to achieve the highest position while shedding as little sweat as possible, and certainly not blood. The final victory was approaching, and he hoped that he would be rewarded, at least more than anyone else in this village, while losing nothing—not his wife nor his money, and of course not a leg, an arm,
or his own life. When the Tam-sa guerrilla team returned to the village to "dig in," as the leader, he would lose face if he refused to go, so he tried to stall them. When he could no longer do that, he found a way to separate Mạn’s group [who would stay in the village to fight] from his own [who remained in the liberated, safe area to "direct"], all the while afraid "those stubborn kids" would break out of his control. He would not approve the young guerrillas into the Party for fear they would dilute his influence. (231)

The inner struggle between her feelings of adoration and gratitude for Tám Liệp and the painful realization that he represents a "grey thread—definitely not white, but not quite black either" among the revolutionaries, feel like "nights of contesting cold and hot winds," the effect being "a sweltering, ill-at-ease tenseness" (225). Adding to that are the feelings of guilt for being "shallow thinkers" (223), "the arrogant jelly-fish imagining it could jump higher than the net" (224), and of self-doubt: "Why do I think differently from someone so much more experienced? Am I being arrogant, snooty, an individualistic hero wannabe? Or just foolhardy?" (225). No stranger to the self-protective desire to just give up when faced with Tám Liệp’s resentment, his wife’s coldness, and the jeering from unsympathetic colleagues, Mạn has sometimes thought: "There are offers from other places that perhaps I should take, after all what more could I do here? There’s the district’s Women’s Association, the nursing school, the post exchange—lots of jobs far more suitable than this, not to mention good company and safety from bombs and gunshots while I’d be free from these tiring clashes!" (226). It is at this difficult time that the reality of the revolution in and around her Cá village
provides her with answers as to what to do. At a class for young Party members at the district, Mạn

for the first time learned to think with her own brain. Gone was the time when she worked for the revolution just because she loved and cared for her mother, obeyed the uncles, or imitated the seniors. It had been a beautiful time, carefree, with no trace of cloud, which was all very nice, but still the childhood in each revolutionary life. Now comrade Mạn would strive to improve herself with discipline, work in accordance with the majority’s decisions, make judgments about the right and the wrong in herself and in others, and the hardest of all was to take part in helping the right overcome the wrong. (223)

With her own eyes, Mạn can see that

With no interference, the [RVN] brutes in Tam-sa were free to stir up storms. Even the lowliest of them, the block overseers, had the gall to beat the people for their assets. The village self-defense had expanded to a company. Having never been shot at, they were very keen on setting ambushes to get cadres’ ears for rewards. Crying the loudest were the strategic hamlets of two rivers and three mountains. The well-to-do lost their land; the poor lost their land, their cottages, gardens, and even their labor. Sixty-year-old women were forced to go on watch rounds at night with drums and lanterns. Many people had to take out bamboo poles from their own cottages so they could meet the fence quota. Coming in, going out, all at the sound of the gong. As people had to carry manure around the fence, they could only do two rounds in a day’s work. Half of the land now lay
fallow while the kids were crying for food. . . . Tam-sa people secretly came to the guerrillas, urging them to fight.

Mrs. Biën pointed at her cousin Nắm Ri in the face: “Give me the gun. I’ll swap it for a pair of silk pants for you. I’ll recruit the girls—even they should fight better than you!” Mother Säu confided to Mân and Chín Cang: “Hey Mân, your mother, she asked me to ask you if you’re busy trying to catch a husband—you’ve been so quiet lately. . . .” Even the astrologer Mr. Mươi, who previously advised “just wait,” now walked into Mrs. Lięp’s eatery with a chuckle: “Aha! Looks like Mr. Tám’s making tons of money running from the enemy up to here, huh?” Some women whose sons had been conscripted by the ARVN said loudly to Lięp: “You have to come back at night, fire a few shots, burn some fence sticks, and take the boys so we could tell them the Liberation Army has taken our sons. Only that much and you ignore our pleas!” (227-8)

It is very difficult and dangerous for the guerrillas the first few months back at the hamlet:

The enemy was like a virus which had already got through to the blood stream and developed drug-resistance. Mân’s squad got them a few times, but suffered a lot more defeats and casualties than they did. The squad was ambushed here, attacked there, and chased around the hills. The people, seeing how hard they fought with difficulty, felt sorry for them, but did not believe in them. Some avoided contact, for “it’s no use, we could die just by standing near.” Three comrades got shot in a row, one dead instantly, the two wounded sharing their last
grenades with the enemy. Some were disheartened, retreating back to Tam-trần to
t hoe and plant yams for the team. (228)
But the guerrillas keep on, fuelled by the oath to “at least die on Tam-sa land if we have
to” (228). Gradually, they discover the “cracks on the roughshod surface full of guns and
barbs of the enemy” (229), and start to win back the land and influence they have lost.
Understanding the enemy, Mạn now also understood the people more. Our power
was so great thanks to four thousand people in rage. Those who were now still
hesitant would sooner or later play their hand. When the village rose up, the part
in them that was patriotism and unavenged feuds would also rise up. The people
knew it well: one day away from liberation meant one day of languishing; worse,
they were being used to kill the revolutionaries. One stick down for the [strategic
hamlet] fence and they might lose a beam for their cottage, or possibly a son or
daughter [in the Liberation Army] when they came back to uproot the [strategic]
fence. The younger brother recently conscripted [by the ARVN], whenever
lobbing a cannon shell, could be firing at his older brother on the Liberation side.
That was a shame more painful than the beatings, heavier than the taxes. (229)
Through all of this, the external revolution encourages and corroborates the inner
revolution in Mạn. Still deferring to Tâm Liệp, she chooses to work and fight
determinedly until he is made to recognize the error of his ways by the people’s reactions
and by his own conscience. Still a young woman quick to blush at the prospect of
marriage and children (such that the episode with Hoàn given in the earlier excerpt is
excruciatingly embarrassing to her), Mạn has learned not to give in easily to crying, for
“the enemy is afraid of bullets, not of tears” (55), but to revenge the death of her mother,
of her adopted son, and of several of her beloved neighbors and fellow resisters. When she avenges Mrs. Biên’s death, Mãn chooses a fighting strategy that perfectly blends femininity and revolutionary feminism: fully made up, dressed in tight, transparent outfits, Mãn and three of her female comrades “go legal” in daytime, blow up five ARVN brutes with a 105 mine and grenades, and kill four more with the Thompson they have just acquired from the enemy. Chided by Thiêm for taking risks, Mãn is once again the shy, deferential girlfriend, gently pleading: “Please don’t be angry, it scares me. . . . I had to revenge Mrs. Biên’s and her husband’s deaths” (487). Always impeccable as a hard­working, considerate, giving young woman, Mãn is also constantly organizing battles that combine the three fronts of military, political, and diplomatic action. The main force soldier Thiêm, who is accustomed to fighting mainly on military terms, at first finds these battles baffling, only to come to appreciate them as superior and invincible. No longer in a supporting role, however heroic, as Sử is in Hòn Đất, Mãn excels not only as a best fighter, but an intelligent and courageous leader of an advancing team of both female and male guerrillas.

The highest acknowledgment of women revolutionaries comes when Mãn in the latest meeting is elected Party secretary of the village with the largest majority vote. To Thiêm, it is a serious “personal lesson”:

I had been used to thinking of women as decorative flowers or the rice plant feeding people, but incapable of replacing us, the hardy wood. Look, even science acknowledged that men were stronger than women. In terms of morality, one might be equal to the other, but in talent, perhaps we should look a bit more carefully. Women had just come out of thousands of years of subjugation, now
the time had come for them to make up for it, but let us do it slowly, shall we. If they ran before they were able to walk, they would surely fall.

Throughout the South gradually appeared female guerrilla cell leaders, female squad leaders, female hamlet leaders, female village leaders. At some places, there had already been the occasional female district and even province leaders. I had thought: “That’s right. We should encourage them.” At meetings with a competitive spirit, I clapped my hands vigorously for the female guerrillas, always ready to yield to them the highest of awards, for they needed the encouragement more. I considered myself generous for that. I was in addition respectful, well-mannered, affectionate to all the mothers and sisters, never to interrupt a female cadre who was in the mood to impart all the theoretical stuff she had just learned, and never, ever, to drop a line in front of the provincial entertainment troupe that Brother Ba To had deliberately put me together with. It was all very good.

However, whenever I represented the platoon to work with the village or district level, I tried to avoid female cadres. In a fight, guns of steel were needed, not the wooden ones of the theater. I always greeted the female village cadres in a very friendly manner, exaggerated to the highest degree the importance of the tasks of carrying the wounded and bringing the food to the soldiers, yet I saved the actual fighting for the male cadre. The female village cadre was so much prettier than her male counterpart, but the enemy was afraid of bullets, not of bright eyes and rosy lips—matters of blood and bones should not be relegated to luck. There, after you—you women go ahead and confront the enemy,
proselytize, curse them as much as you wish, or plow, sow, or reap rice to your heart's desire—but in matters of leadership and command, well, wait a minute. . .

My style of avoidance had fared quite well. I had never been seriously tripped—there had been a couple occasions of slight discontent, but no serious harm so far.

My rather sound reasoning had recently suffered a bit, but not until I came to Tam-sa did it disintegrate into tiny, little pieces. It disintegrated when I came to understand Mân. (439-40)

In her own village, Mân is thought highly of especially by Tư Luân, the leaving Party secretary of the village, who, for all his revolutionary antics and genuine affection for Mân, is still not free from the "rut of feudalistic beliefs" (459) when it comes to the three obediences in marriage. The gradual transition from an emphasis on femininity to celebration of feminism is observed by Thiêm to be conscious and rapid in some people, or unconscious and slow in others, but certain as a natural occurrence nonetheless:

In the army, where the younger generation concentrated, we were taught the new view of love and equality between the genders. On this land of alternating flood and fire, of daily fighting for survival, those topics were still a luxury.

But life itself naturally and selectively rejects the outdated. Since my arrival in Tam-sa, I had not heard of any directives concerning female cadres, yet the new committee elected last year included two young women, voted for not because of an artificial need for "both sticky rice and dry rice," but because of their proven capabilities. From respect for female cadres in political matters to respect for women in general in everybody's thinking, it now did not seem the remaining distance would take all that long. (460-1)
There is a Vietnamese saying that is derived from the country's historical experience over four thousand years of nationhood: “giặc đến nhà, dân bà cũng đánh” (when the enemy comes, even the women must fight). The theme of “even the women must fight” is expressed, illustrated, reiterated, and reinforced in myriads of ways in Phan Tú’s novel: through the women’s own actions and words, as through the narration (and admiration) of Thiem and other male characters in the novel. The women in Hồn Đất and Mạn và Tôi have responded to Hồ Chí Minh’s call on all Vietnamese: “Use guns and sabers if you have them. If you don’t, there are picks, shovels, or sticks. Children, women, you can all contribute your share, in small ways or in big ways.” In their “small ways,” the women of the revolution care for the fighters and provide assistance when and where it matters most. Even more admirably, several women have gone on to contribute “in big ways” to the struggle for independence. It is impossible to name all the real-life heroes of the revolution who have modelled fictional characters like Mạn. Well-known are Mrs. Út Tích, a young mother who was awarded the title Heroine of the Liberation Army in early 1965 for killing a now mythic number of enemies, and who died on the battlefield in 1968; Mme. General Nguyễn Thị Định, Deputy Commander of the Liberation Army, who famously wore her hair in a bun and her checkered scarf around the shoulders Southern-style; Võ Thị Säu, the illustrious guerrilla of the “eighteen hamlets of areca beets” just outside of Saigon, who was killed in action and whose name now graces the streets of Vietnamese cities; Nguyễn Thị Thắng, the Saigon commando whose name of “victory” and whose bright smile upon receiving the death penalty dealt the enemy a slap in the face, and many others, both in and out of official records. In turn, characters like Sủ of Hồn Đất and Mạn of Mạn và Tôi have inspired many other heroes
and heroines in real life. Their femininity, embodied first and foremost in their affection for each other and for the people they nourish and protect, is a continuation of traditional virtues; at the same time, it has taken on a revolutionary quality when comes the time for them to actively fight against those who threaten their loved ones. When even women, the “weakest” members of a society upon whom, paradoxically, rests the family—the basic and most stable nucleus of the society—are taking the road of revolution, the eventual victory of that revolution seems not only very possible, but inevitable.

The “long-haired army” of Southern women fighters, headed by Mme. Nguyễn Thị Định, whose memoir we have had the chance to look at in Chapter III, may be unconventional in the American view, but it is in fact inspired by time-honored Vietnamese traditions of both the feminine woman and the woman fighter. While American scholars are still busy debating the nature of revolutionary Vietnamese feminism, often holding it up against their impossible feminist ideals, representatives of NLF writers (not to mention the works of DRV writers that I have not included in this study) have succeeded in making their women the center of their literary creations in a way RVN writers never did and American (Vietnam) war writers have yet to learn. It is not to say that everything has always been perfect for the Vietnamese woman of the revolution, but in real life, the revolutionary feminism is not exactly fiction either, both in absolute terms and comparatively against RVN and American women, if my own mother and my sole maternal aunt, one a mechanical engineer and the other an architect since the late 1950s, and both earning exactly the same salary as men in similar jobs, are any indication. The RVN fiction of Nhã Ca and Thụy Vű discussed earlier in this chapter portray RVN women as helpless, pitiful victims of forces outside their control; while the
sexual liberties of Lê Hằng's and Nguyễn Thị Hoàng's characters, who engage in extramarital affairs or forbidden sexual/romantic relationships with younger students, are extolled by the RVN critic Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha Trang as feministic. In comparison, NLF writers such as Nguyễn Thị, Anh Đức, and Phan Tú have portrayed the Vietnamese woman actively participating in and leading a revolution for a better life for everyone in their revolutionary community. Their literature has recorded and advanced the work of revolutionary men and women, who in life as in fiction have given their best to the struggle for an independent and better Vietnam, even while the writers themselves were fighting for the revolution with both guns and pens, risking their own lives to give the reader authentic and moving accounts of the revolution against foreign invasion, ignorance, poverty, and complacency. In contrast to RVN writers who wrote from the comforts of their air-conditioned city villas (as in the case of most RVN popular male and female writers) or of ARVN offices as conscripted staff (as a few RVN male writers did), NLF writers lived and fought with the people who were later to appear in their literary works. Each in his/her own way, these NLF writers as fighters made meaningful, substantial contributions to the common struggle so that the victory they had envisaged in their works would come sooner. While the road to complete victory has been arduous with inevitable setbacks, a marked improvement from Hòn Đất of 1965 to Mân và Tới of 1971 in the portrayal of women as in the depiction of the revolution and its complexities in general shows the NLF's advancing position and proves that "the remaining distance [to satisfactory realization] did not seem to take all that long" (Phan Tú 461).

As a thirteen-year-old, I enjoyed Mân và Tới thoroughly for its witticisms, intelligent word play, humorous yet profound paradoxes, refreshing metaphors, and
endearing characters. Now rereading it as a thirty-nine-year-old woman with three times the worldly experience, I found myself incredibly even more impressed by the novel’s fullness and depth. Stylistically speaking, Phan Tú’s choice of narrator is excellent. Thièmes is introduced as a relatively worldly and sophisticated twenty-eight-year-old NLF soldier from the city of Qui Nhơn who, thanks to his background and personal effort, has acquired a rather sound formal and informal education in bookish knowledge, guns, machines, and military tactics, and who is now on a special surveillance mission to Cá village in Quảng Ngãi (a free-fire zone later in the war). From that vantage point, while embarking on a journey of discovery and learning for himself, the character Thièmes is able to deliver a logical and credible account of the complexities as well as progress of the revolutionary community of both main force and guerrillas among their supporters in the city as well as in the village. Far from being the lone, know-it-all hero the American audience is treated to in American Vietnam war movies such as The Green Berets, and RVN leaders Trần Văn Đôn and especially Nguyên Cao Kỳ try to portray themselves as, Thièmes achieves his appeal from being the modest witness and constant learner of a large community of both men and women who are fighting with him and for him in a common endeavor. This choice of point of view also frees up a lot of options for the author’s narrator, enabling a recording of contrasting local colors, a shift from an initially more or less “outsider’s” stance to a later involvement, and a colloquial style of narration that combines chronological narrative with flashbacks, dreams, observation/self-observation, analysis/self-analysis, stream-of-consciousness, dialogues, and retelling. Having the educated, urbane Thièmes as the mediator solves the potential problem of writing a literary work on Southern villagers, who are known for their reticence and straightforward style
and manners, that would also appeal to the more cosmopolitan, intellectual, and analytic audience of the cities; at the same time, it occasions an interesting, self-aware note of contrast between the urban and the back country. Furthermore, Thiêm’s surveillance mission necessitates an examination, naturally from an NLF revolutionary’s angle, of his opponents on the other side of the battle line, namely RVN officials, the ARVN, and their American ally. Although not written with an American audience in mind, Mạn và Tôi contains passages about the American soldier that could be illuminating to an American reader. For example, when an American is found dead in the tea bushes of Cã village, the villagers react to it in the following ways:

I [Thiêm] collected all the papers. The guerrillas turned the corpse over, relieving it of the cartridge belt, boots, and flak jacket. The astrologer Mr. Môi advised putting its skull on sticks and placing it in front of the village to terrorize the enemy, as in historical times. Tứ Luan, who had been organizing the transfer of the three wounded to the district and the burials of Xâng and Đâu, limped over on his stick and quickly averted the discussion. Mother Sâu quietly brought over an old mat, wide enough to cover up two-thirds of the American. Mother spoke slowly to the corpse:

"Were you alive, I’d probably be trying to cut you up with my chopping knife. Now that you’re dead, that’s it. . . . I just feel sorry for the woman who gave birth to you, who now will have to traipse her way all over here for your grave, traveling on lumps of pre-cooked rice and pickled seafood, deprived of your expected assistance and all that.\textsuperscript{131} I’m giving you the corner near the fence over there, just stay there and keep your bones warm until your mother comes to
retrieve you, in your next life, if you return as human, don’t take on the life of a burglar, alright?” (534)

Later, when Thiem examines the dead American’s papers, he finds Richard Carson’s personal letters; among them are some from his mother wishing her “little Dicky back to your Mommy.” Below is what crosses Thiem’s mind:

Poor Mrs. Carson, her Dicky is now lying here in Cá village, in Mother Sau’s garden corner, waiting for you. My two AK bullets had put a “finished” sign—one dash, two dots—on his short life as a pirate. Forced or mistaken, a crime is still a crime, and the verdict still has to be carried out.

I copied down her address: Betty A. Carson, 1625 Larsen Blvd., Dalton County, Georgia.

When I have the time, I will send a letter to console a respectable and pitiable American mother; but at present, I am still busy finding ways to kill as many as possible of those Americans who are pointing their guns at us, though I know there are many Dicky’s out there. First and foremost, I have to take care of the little Hoàn’s, blown to pieces and buried with parts still missing, to care for all those in this world who are suffering under the crushing heels of the Dicky’s. As I pity his long-suffering mother, I will try even harder to hit him. I’m used to measuring my life not by the months and years, but by the number of American soldiers I have killed or tied up and taken prisoner. Can you understand me, the American mother whose writhing pain I would so love to alleviate?

I dropped the letters and lay still, listening to the torn belly right then getting very itchy where the skin started to heal, thinking of Brother Nam Đồng’s
comment. Right on. Our radio and newspapers have talked quite a lot about American people who oppose the war; I myself have often read and listened to those. When in the city, I had also looked for progressive reading materials about America. Why am I now deliberately brushing aside my liking for Americans? I have never wanted to appear “ideologically reliable.” Perhaps I simply suffer from the mitral valve stenosis syndrome of narrow heart valves. My heart is narrow because it is unable to contain at once both the deep hatred and the immense humanity of a Communist. I am still unable to at once care for Mrs. Biên, whose stomach was slashed open, her liver hanging out, and sympathize with Mrs. Carson on the other side of the globe.

Years ago, I read about America as a young man curious about a very young land, for all that it was a trash can for the ridicules and contempt of Europe—its estranged father, for all that it turned itself into the world’s laughingstock with the leaflets advertising its movies: it looked as if in America, guys were always busy shooting at each other, and girls always stripping, as if the oil tycoons were always sucking on big cigars and the blacks were always standing in wait, with all those grotesque lives set on a background of beehive buildings and seared grass fields. I had to penetrate that curtain of evil and foolishness to find the decent Americans. I liked Jack London and Mark Twain, then met Hemingway, and then later discovered a whole treasure of social realist literature written before World War II. I took on the life-long pain of the black slaves, yearning to live like Harriet Tubman and die like John Brown. I followed the unemployed picking trash for a livelihood, trailing from state to state. I rose
up with the miners in "bloody Harlan County." There, the genuine America, Mrs. Carson’s America has now taken to the streets!

Brother Näm is right. We and the enemy are seesawing, weaving together like the [short and long] teeth of a comb from Chu-lai to New York, and I had wanted to draw a straight line down the longitude, pushing all Americans to the other side for the sake of convenience—it’s simply not on.

I laughed to myself and dozed off, a crisscrossing line running beneath my eyelids. (564-6)

As a girl, I had taken to heart the humor and optimism in this novel of Phan Tú’s, which, moreover, contains lots of loose ends and lively details, and is refreshingly free of trite slogans or didactic preachings. What I did not know, until I researched for this study, is that the book had become a favorite for many other Vietnamese growing up during and after the revolution. Strangely enough, however, there has never been, to my knowledge, a thorough review of Mãn và Tôi by either NLF or DRV literary critics, even though the novel was very well received among both popular and critical circles, judging from the repeated references to it in the essay “About Revolutionary Prose Fiction in the Past Thirty Years, 1945-1975” in Phan Cự Đệ and Hà Minh Đức’s Vietnamese Writers (1945-1975), a reference book for use in nation-wide universities and colleges.

In the one review of the novel (or rather, of Phan Tú’s main works) that I have in my possession, the author comments correctly but rather superficially on the appeal of the book. A number of Phan Tú’s accomplishments in Mãn và Tôi Lê Thị Đức Hạnh briefly mentions have already been discussed earlier, such as the novel’s logical plot and realism, its numerous interwoven themes and issues, a powerful representativeness,
sound narrative technique, and its contagious humor and optimism. The weaknesses in *Mặn và Tởi*, according to Độc Hạnh, include some romanticization of the intense fighting in the South at the time,\(^{132}\) inadequate emotionalism,\(^{133}\) and a somewhat excessive attention to detail that may have inhibited better characterization.\(^{134}\) Interestingly, her criticism of Phan Tú’s “sober” style (“tinh tảo qua” [45]) runs against both Chu Nga’s criticism of Anh Đức’s emotionalism (see the section on Anh Đức in this study) and her own earlier comment that “the more we read [Phan Tú], the more often we encounter elevating emotions that the author would not be able to describe had he not been genuinely touched” (and then some very good examples of such emotions) (45). Furthermore, to someone who even in my teenage years enjoyed piecing together the events and details deliberately sowed far and wide in the novel, such that I memorized whole passages before coming up with what was to me a very convincing storyline, Độc Hạnh’s complaint that *Mặn và Tởi* can be overwhelming with details so as to be at times “tiring” is both unwarranted and hard to understand. However, disregarding her vague style of expression and a penchant for indulging in exaggerated, even imagined “weaknesses” in the name of “criticism and self-criticism” the way many DRV literary critics are wont to do, I think Độc Hạnh offers a valid critique when she points out that the overnight conversion into a militant revolutionary of Hào, Thiêm’s longtime friend from Đà Nẵng, feels somewhat rushed, considering that he comes from a mixed family background of a sympathizer father and an unsympathetic mother, and has always been to a degree stuck-up and “calculating” in his involvement with the revolution. In fact, I personally feel Phan Tú could have expanded his portrayal of the struggle in urban areas to include a wider variety of positions, motives and paths to the revolution of the people.
living in South Vietnam’s cities (something he appreciatively was to do later in his last and longest novel, Nguoi Cung Que). While it is admittedly impossible, perhaps, to fully represent in one work of art the intensity and complexity of the longest war in both Vietnamese and American history, one in which survival alone was an act of heroism, Phan Tú’s Män và Tôi emerges, in my own opinion as well as in the appreciation of both Vietnamese critics and the reading public in general, as one of the closest and most edifying approximations of the life and fight of Southern NLF revolutionaries in Vietnamese literature. Certainly nowhere else in Vietnamese literature do we find an enduring sense of purpose and optimism better revealed in a kind of humor mixed with pathos, as in a pregnant pause preceding the assertion “If the Americans come . . . well, we’ll just fight them” (318), or in Thiêm’s unspoken admiration for Mother Sâu, one of the heroic South Vietnamese men and women who, with “an intensity that is heartrending, [and] a determination that approaches ferocity,” keep on fighting “to avenge the dead and wrestle freedom for the living, never calculating the cost of each liberated square foot, never wondering what they’d have left or lost for independence, every minute prepared to cast down their own bodies to pave the way for the younger generations to go forward” (285). I would like to close this chapter with a scene from the novel, in which Thiêm is helping Mother Sâu reap rice on her plot, while she discusses the imminent American landing in her slow, typically Southern manner of speaking:

“If we leave them [the Americans] alone, they’ll stay all right. Before Old Hồ returned, the [French] high commissioner, the police, customs officers, trade officials, road checkers, legionnaires—they were all getting big and fat. But if we keep on fighting, they’ll have to drop it, Tú. I’ve noticed the Americans driving
about in their vehicles, the sun's breathing fire, the vehicles getting so hot they sear your hands, and yet they remain at the wheel, waiting for helicopters to bring over drinking water after they've finished the bottles they had, the ARVN bring them rice and water and they dare not even touch it. They're afraid of you sniping, of the people poisoning them, of the ARVN turning against them, of everything. In the end, some of them have to be carried away on emergency HUs. If you just crowd in and lay siege to that Chậu-lai, the Americans should all be lying straight unconscious like hoe handles in their stifling bunkers in ten, fifteen days!"

I laughed out loud, very pleased with Mother Sâu's grand strategy of intensive blockading. Over the slashing sound of the hackles cutting through rice stalks, I enumerated a number of American strengths to get her arguing just for fun. Incensed, she quashed every one of the American magic charms, and, moreover, denounced me as gutless, inferior to the girls for all my martial experience:

"Look at that Hải Mân right next door there, her breasts are as big as xiẻm coconuts she has to bind them up to chase the enemy, yet she thinks zilch of the Americans. . . ."

Pi-pi-pi-i-i-ing!!!

The 105 howitzers spat fire all at once. The slopes of Chủa Mountain spatred smoke at six different spots. (356-7)

The struggle continues; complete victory is still ahead.
CHAPTER V—CONCLUSION: THE AFTERMATH

Thirty more years have passed since a unified Vietnam achieved its long-denied independence in 1975. Finally, the Vietnamese people could now move on with the social revolution they had wished to carry out for a modern Vietnam, “ten times bigger and more beautiful,” as Hồ Chí Minh had envisioned when he embarked on the road of revolution in the first decades of the twentieth century.

As it turned out, thirty years of continuous war following a century of colonialism had ill prepared the Vietnamese for the peace they have finally won.

First off, the economic and political legacies of the war were staggering. In the North, the economy had for thirty years been more geared toward sustaining the war than logically planned for peace. The transition from war to peace would take a different kind of talent among the leadership from that required in war, while war was nearly all the leadership had known until then. Among the general public, even the euphoria of victory could not make up for the physical and emotional exhaustion at the end of the long-winded war. Overall, an estimated total of three million Vietnamese on all sides had perished, mostly people in their prime working age—a considerable workforce that could have been tapped for the reconstruction. On the DRV and NLF side alone, about a million died, many of whom represented the best and the brightest of the dedicated revolutionaries. Even today, after thirty more years, the pain of not being able to find their beloved sons' and daughters' remains is still plaguing several families, while the burden of maimed children and adults from both sides of the war is still being borne by the living. Add to those the hidden, undefused explosives that are still occasionally threatening the lives of those supposedly living in peace, or the imbalance of gender
ratios that has left many Vietnamese women with a scarcity of potential husbands (and consequently, children), and the list of human costs and suffering goes on. In the South, the economy since 1954 had always been artificial, largely provided for by billions in American aid money in all areas. The presence of half a million of Americans at the peak of the war had also created and sustained in-country a large number of jobs which catered to the needs of a foreign army, but which were of no use to the locals otherwise. Once that army was no longer there and the aid dried up, the South Vietnamese economy simply collapsed, all the while being squeezed to an even quicker death by the colossal octopus of corruption. Much of the land had been badly damaged by bombs and shells if not by defoliants, and would take years and a lot of work to reclaim, while post-war production plummeted in the chaos. The united Vietnamese government (since 1976, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam—SRV) was forced to integrate into its society the same ineffectual and, for the large part, pilfering, corrupt personnel of the former RVN administration, including its millions of ARVN soldiers and ex-soldiers who had not left earlier in the frantic and desperate evacuation code named Operation Frequent Wind conducted by the Americans in April 1975.

But, most significantly, in my opinion, the twenty-one years of the American war (1954-75) had created a division deeper than anything the Vietnamese people had ever experienced. The measures the united Vietnamese government took with regards to RVN high-ranking officials and ARVN officers after 1975 have often been brought up by critics of the SRV as proof of a repressive regime; but few people appreciate, as Sheehan does, the difficult situation the revolutionaries found themselves in regarding this matter. In 1954, it could be said that the absolute majority of the people from North to South
were united in spirit and action under the banner of revolution and sovereignty Hồ Chí Minh’s government was holding; in 1975, the reality was extremely complex in the South. As Chapters III and IV of this study have intimated, there was simply no neat categorization of North or South, let alone Communist or non-Communist, NLF sympathizer or opponent—a fact that was complicated even more by the constant changing of positions of a number of members on both sides over a long period of time.

On the one hand, there was a large number of NLF supporters in different degrees of dedication and capacities, many of whom were fighting from the jungle bases or in liberated areas, while some were working in RVN-controlled areas in different capacities, or clandestinely in their legal jobs within the RVN government. On the RVN side, around the small core of so-called anti-Communists dating back to colonial times, there grew over the twenty-one-year period a population who out of survival or choice worked for the RVN administration, or were drafted into the ARVN, and who in one way or another depended on the regime. Once they started on their various careers, they acquired a vested interest in the RVN regime, whether or not they really thought the regime worthwhile to defend on the broader level of lý or đạo lý. In Mặn và Tội, Phan Tú touches on a dilemma among ARVN draftees who, unlike many of their more dedicated NLF brethren, were forced to take sides in a war they felt was none of their doing.

The scar-faced lieutenant occupying Mother Säu’s house asked her to go over to [Trúc] hill and plead with the Liberation soldiers who were sniping them:

“‘It’s a hard life being a Front member, we just don’t have the courage to do it. And there’s nowhere else to transfer to anymore. That Châu-lai is being handed over to the Americans, the city is crowded, military posts are being run
over. . . . Could you please ask them to set aside for us just one block in each hamlet so we could catch up on our sleep for a while, the rest shall be theirs to stage operas or whatever to their liking. We’ll just fire a bunch of shots in the air from time to time so the Americans’ll hear us and pay the salaries.” (197)

For a time, quite a few in the puppet [i.e. ARVN] ranks told the [NLF] cadres about to be killed: “I’m forced to shoot you against my will. . . .” That time was now past. That dot of conscientious light, however honest, however appreciated, was now no longer enough to save a person’s life. The [ARVN] soldiers occupying Cá village had many times asked the villagers to persuade the Liberation fighters to stop sniping: “If we don’t accept the draft, they’ll put us in jail. Once in the army, if we don’t go on searches, we’ll be punished. During the searches, if we don’t shoot, they’ll discipline us. . . .” Still better than the brutes, yes, but one day Mother Sâu continued for them, half in jest: “That’s not all, let me add, ‘could you please stop fighting and let us shoot your heads off, burn down your houses, give your wives over to our superiors to abuse. If we don’t do all those things, we’ll be in trouble, we’ll lose our salaries and our ranks. . . .’ That’ll certainly reduce them [Liberation fighters] to tears!” The ARVN soldiers went quiet, glancing at each another. Cornered, one threatened: “If that’s the case, they keep it up, we won’t keep it down either!” (277)

In this manner, the aggression kept up, and many RVN officials and ARVN, especially those who were capable and efficient in their respective capacities, came to incur “blood debts” against the revolutionaries by working for the RVN regime that was paying them. When the revolutionaries took over, it is only understandable that many of
those who suffered so much under the old regime (particularly those who had had their whole families killed by the RVN regime, as is quite often the case among people of the Iron Triangle of Cù Chi and the surrounding areas) would want to settle scores. However, the widely expected bloodbath did not occur, although some of the winners felt justified to exercise their “deep hatred” instead of “compassion” over the RVN’s ex-officers and officials. Instead, in the commotion of newly-acquired peace, an earnest, albeit hastily planned and badly executed, attempt at political reorientation was started, which unfortunately later lapsed into virtual imprisonment amidst renewed war and worsening economic problems, when the large-scale campaign changed hands from the Military Council (the army) to the ministry of internal affairs (the police). Conditions could be grim where the high-ranking ARVN officers and CIA agents were held, but definitely not the kind of “concentration camps” trumpeted by critics, considering that the rest of the population, including the winners of the war, were subsisting on a mere thirteen kilograms of rice per month with all other necessities on a strict ration, and that many (among them university students like myself) were clearing forests in “new economic zones” or toiling to rebuild the villages, reclaim the wasteland left by war, and expand the arable land to feed the postwar population boom. Above all, lack of compassion was not really the main cause for the detention of thousands of high-ranking RVN officials and ARVN officers; it is the issue of trust. In Bào Ninh’s The Sorrow of War, Kiến, the protagonist, witnesses Oánh, his one remaining comrade in the platoon, shot in the back by an RVN policewoman whose life Oánh has just spared out of sympathy (104-6). Reminded of the incident by an armoured-car commander’s passionate outburst over a soldier’s failure to “treat the [ARVN] dead sympathetically,” Kiến thinks, “Oánh had
been sympathetic, and look what had happened to him” (106). Like Kiên, many revolutionaries had learned the lesson of sympathy the hard way and became inevitably wary. The general perception being that the U.S. might choose to interfere again—directly or indirectly, the fear of a fifth column was substantial indeed. Unfortunately, the SRV government’s lack of adequate explanation and poor management of the re-education campaign generated much resentment among those affected by it. At the same time, the lack of trust resulted in the exclusion of some much needed talent among ex-RVN personnel that could have been beneficial to the reconstruction.\(^{137}\)

Moreover, 1975 may have been the end of the war for the United States and its former ally, the RVN, but the united Vietnam was to undergo war for another ten years. Almost immediately after the American War ended, Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge army started to make bold forays into Vietnam’s territory, savagely killing entire villages along the way. The attacks became serious by 1977, and Vietnam’s Southern border regions were subjected to the same terrors of beheadings and atrocities (like the eviscerating of pregnant women) as those suffered by Cambodia’s own people, about a million of whom (out of a population of three million) were to be massacred by their own government by the time the army of Vietnam intervened. To understand Vietnam’s situation with Cambodia at the time, it is best to follow Sheehan’s imagined scenario of a United States bordering on a Canada run by a genocidal government like Pol Pot’s, which continually launched barbarous assaults on Detroit and other cities along the American-Canadian border.\(^{138}\) After two years of border conflict, Vietnam suffered 30,000 troops killed in fighting, with a similar number of civilians dead, and tens of thousands of wounded. In 1979, unable to bear the cost any longer, the SRV entered Cambodia, overthrew Pol Pot,
and helped into government the anti-Pol Pot faction of the Cambodian Communist Party. China, the Khmer Rouge’s patron and provider, immediately retaliated and invaded Vietnam in late 1979. The invasion was quickly repulsed with heavy losses on the Chinese side. However, this international arena kept the SRV government on the alert politically and militarily, thereby forcing it to spend more of its already scarce hard currency on war and not on reconstruction. Meanwhile, the United States supported Pol Pot by imposing an economic embargo on Vietnam, blocking reconstruction loans from international lending institutions such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, and pressuring other Western countries to do the same. The embargo, which was only lifted in 1994, further crippled Vietnam’s reconstruction effort.

Given the economic and political challenges the SRV faced in the wake of the wars, the difficulties of the transition from war to peace would still have been awesome even with a prescient leadership. As it happened, soon after Hồ Chí Minh’s death in 1969, and particularly at the prospect of imminent victory over the RVN after the Americans withdrew in 1973, the power struggle within the top echelon of the Party intensified. Eventually, a group Trương Như Tằng calls “the ideologues” emerged the victors, and respected leaders such as Phạm Văn Đồng and Võ Nguyên Giáp were left on the sidelines. The result is the lack of a pragmatic and flexible leader at the helm who would, in the fashion Hồ Chí Minh had always favored, put nationalism (essentially, doing everything that would benefit the country and its people) above any ideological theory, and whose moral strength would rally the people to the social revolution Vietnam now needed to take on in earnest. By 1985, the prestige of the Party had declined, with its
top leaders gradually abandoning the people, especially the proletariat they claimed to represent. The rise to Party general secretary (the top post) in the SRV government of two consecutive dogmatic ideologues with a Maoist bent, Lê Duẩn, then Trương Chinh (who was responsible for the errors and abuses of the land reform movement in the 1950s), and stories of their combined unscrupulousness unleashed a wave of skepticism and cynicism among both the cadres and the general public. Eventually, the opportunists within the SRV leadership expelled even the recent icons of Vietnamese nationalism. In 1982, General Võ Nguyên Giáp was dropped from the Politburo and relieved of his post as Commander of the People’s Army. Replacing him was Lê Duẩn’s protégé, General Văn Tiến Dũng, the man who is generally thought to have usurped General Giáp’s reputation for the Hồ Chí Minh campaign that toppled the RVN regime in 1975. Văn Tiến Dũng’s lack of talent, and his distance from and disregard for the realities of the actual revolution in the South had also occasioned a lack of appreciation of the Southern revolutionaries, causing resentment and disillusionment among those who had sacrificed so much for the revolution. Thus, in the context of a badly ravished country, the hubris of victory combined with the myopia and gradual corruption of the leadership to produce haphazard and unfeasible policies in peacetime, and an increasingly skeptical, disillusioned public.

Not everything was the consequence of the war or the bumbling of the leadership, however. Often overlooked is the fact that peace had only highlighted the problems inherent in a system that champions the working class to the disadvantage of all others, and a social theory the success of which is predicated on people’s virtuous, selfless nature. The extolling of workers and peasants as the only truly revolutionary and virtuous classes in society had, since the 1950s, inculcated a new elite (Woodside, Community
234-9). From idealism (considering that most of the Việt Minh as well as NLF original leaderships were from the intelligentsia), once institutionalized, the trend turned into favoritism which, like any other form of favoritism, helped into power those who may or may not have the necessary moral or intellectual qualifications for leadership. It is well known that later classes of cadres from the Nguyễn Ái Quốc Institute, composed mostly of those chosen from the radical, “basic elements” of workers and peasants for the job of politics, are well versed in the jargon of Marxism-Leninism and slogans of “revolutionary morality,” but who increasingly fail to understand these tenets, let alone to act on them. Meanwhile, the philosophy of “working according to one’s ability and earning according to one’s needs” bred the mentality of tandem cycling, in which a few virtuous and hard-working people would have to shoulder most of the work if anything was to be done, whereas the forward movement would be credited, theoretically equally, to everyone in the whole team. The complex tensions between freedom and equality, between communal benefit and respect for private property, and between elitism and idealistic championship of the most oppressed and exploited classes in society, explain why there has never existed in this world a model system representing either true democracy or true equality, let alone both. The inevitable gap between expectations and reality may perhaps be the reason why, as Phan Cự Đệ and Hà Minh Đức have noticed, throughout the first thirty years of Vietnamese revolutionary literary development (1945-1975), Vietnamese writers have written more successfully and enthusiastically about the nationalistic resistance than about the construction of socialism (41, 56).

Another often ignored factor responsible for the social and emotional disorientation after the war is the broader postwar sentiment among the public, as well as
a complicated shift in mentality even (or perhaps especially) among those who had fought so selflessly. Naturally there was bitterness after the war among those who perceived themselves to be the defeated, who now would have to live side by side, but not necessarily on equal footing, with the victors. The attentiste members of the former RVN had not attended the resistance—in fact, some of them had participated in the former RVN administration against the resistance efforts of their compatriots and had thus far enjoyed the relative material comforts brought by billions of American aid. Now faced with economic difficulty, they became bitter. Among the supporters of the revolution, the struggle for national independence had consumed their lives and thought for so long, most had simply assumed that after the war, everything would automatically be just fine. The government-controlled media, flushed with victory, for a long time talked of nothing else but the magical power of the Party and its correct path, completely forgetting to prepare the population for the legacy of the war and the even more arduous social revolution ahead. Inevitably, many Vietnamese were to be disillusioned when the difficulties of the peace set in. And in the midst of the postwar economic breakdown and political chaos, corruption started to rise. On the one hand, the corrupt mentality of those serving the old regime had not been vanquished; on the other hand, some of the winners started to demand what they felt was their due. Eventually, the embattled government ceased to help, leading people to feel that they were on their own and should do anything to protect their own welfare. It is the watershed of this selfish, materialistic, “living for today” mentality that further hindered Vietnam’s development and brought even more disillusionment among its population. While it is easy to attribute the diseases of the peace wholly to the moral decline among the postwar leadership, or to regionalism and
class differentiation as Trương Như Tăng obviously does, it is also inadequate as a way to assess the postwar situation.

In any case, the deaths of Lê Duẩn and Trương Chinh brought a respite to Vietnam as a whole in the mid-1980s. Nguyễn Văn Linh, who had spent his entire adulthood fighting in the South and who was dropped from the politburo at the same time General Giáp was, became Party general secretary and immediately initiated a reform policy known as doi mòi (renovation) in 1986. Nguyễn Văn Linh is also an advocate of compassion for the former RVN’s ex-personnel and his leadership brought about a mass release of those by then still held in re-education camps. His long-term experience of fighting in the South had taught him to be flexible and practical, hence the attempted grafting of a market economy onto the tenets of socialism. However, his honesty did not translate to genius where solutions were needed to both improve the economy and enhance the social benefits for the people. Nor was it enough to reverse the tide of corruption and greed that had by then overtaken a large part of the population. The successive leaderships of Đỗ Mười, Lê Khả Phiêu and currently Nông Đức Mạnh have since increasingly succumbed to the demands of the IMF and other international lending institutions (most of them, as it happens, are heavily influenced by the U.S.), which indiscriminately prescribe a fixed economic formula along the line of Western capitalistic economies to all countries in need of financial assistance. And in the process, most of the social benefits formerly offered to the people by the government (for example, free schooling and subsidized health care, among others) have been largely abandoned.

Both the ravages of war and the mistakes of the united Vietnamese government have been summarized and discussed by Neil Sheehan and Gabriel Kolko, who at the
same time also note the positive aspects and achievements of Vietnam in time of peace. In *After the War Was Over* (1992), Sheehan summarizes Vietnam’s situation through personal observation and anecdotes during his visit in 1989. The Harvard-educated journalist who had helped publish *The Pentagon Papers* in 1971, and whose knowledge of the war and sixteen years of work had resulted in a Pulitzer-winning book on the history of the war entitled *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (1988), now offers an insightful look into aspects of the peace with the same meticulousness and conscience he had displayed in his earlier works. In Kolko’s *Anatomy of a Peace* (1997), the distinguished Canadian scholar who had authored an astute analysis of the wartime balance of forces among the DRV, NLF, RVN and U.S. entitled *Anatomy of a War* in 1976, now looks at the SRV’s socio-economic policies and warns that the current renovation could result in the winners of the war losing the peace the Vietnamese people had so painstakingly won. While perhaps only historical hindsight could accurately assess the impact of “renovation” to the future of Vietnam, Vietnamese people of Vietnam today are thankful to be living in an independent and peaceful country. Despite the many bumps on the circuitous road to democracy and prosperity, many Vietnamese are continuing to do their part to preserve the sovereignty of their beloved Vietnam, and to turn it into a stronger nation, “on a par with other countries in the world,” as Hồ Chí Minh once instructed the future generations of Vietnamese.

Given the complexities of the peace, the assessment of Vietnamese postwar literature must be undertaken with great care. A look at postwar Vietnamese literature shows that, just as during the war, in peace there is a whole spectrum of characters among the Vietnamese both inside Vietnam and in exile. There are those who hang on to their
foreign masters, vainly trying to justify their position during the war, and, long after their
defeat in war, are still stubbornly opposing the peacetime common efforts of the majority
of Vietnamese (such as Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ). There are turncoats
who exploit the war and their roles in it for benefit (Duong Thu Huong, Bùi Tín). There
are those who, for a variety of reasons, opt to stay on the sidelines, the permanent by­
standers to a cause they have lost heart in, or feel they are simply victims of (a large
section of Vietnamese exile writers). There are even cases of the attentiste during the war
now wishing to turn into active participants in the reconstruction (Lê Lý Hayslip). Then,
there are those who know first-hand the hardships of the fight and the cost of victory, and
who are, all the same and in their own way, persisting in the fight for a better Vietnam,
equipped with their pens and, often, with memories of the war they and their fallen as
well as surviving comrades had shed blood fighting (e.g. Bảo Ninh, Lê Minh Khuê,
Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Trần Đăng Khoa, Vũ Thị Thường, Lưu Quang
Vũ, Phan Tứ, and many others). And finally, as a Vietnamese saying goes, “Tre già mang
mộc” (as the bamboos mature, the shoots come up), there are writers of younger
generations who grew up in an independent Vietnam and who now look back at the past
with curiosity, unburdened by painful memories of war (e.g. Hồ Anh Thái).

Recently, Vietnamese literature has been enjoying rising attention in the United
States. Besides books penned by the exile community and published in English in the
original, some notable translations have been made by Americans for an American
audience. The translations range from classical literature (Spring Essence: The Poetry of
Hồ Xuân Hương), to prewar literature (Dumb Luck, The Light of the Capital), to works
written during the war (Mountain River and other collections of poems by individual
current poets that cover their war writings as well as more recent ones), and in the aftermath (Women on the Island, “The Retired General,” A Time Far Past). Americans who share a love for Vietnamese literature such as Rosemary Nguyễn, Martha Collins, John Balaban, Peter Zinoman, Greg and Monique Lockhart, and particularly Kevin Bowen, Bruce Weigl, and Wayne Karlin, are now bringing to the American audience an increasing number of Vietnamese literary texts. Motivated by the feelings from, and experience of, the lost war they once fought, some of the above translators and/or editors are sincerely and conscientiously striving to draw the two peoples together in better understanding and mutual respect.

American reviewers such as Wayne Karlin and Kevin Bowen have shown remarkable perceptiveness in their discussions of the available Vietnamese literature, bringing to their interpretation of the literature their full understanding of the war and compassion for the Vietnamese they had once been instructed to kill. However, the politics of translation and literary analysis within the circle of American scholarship is such that works that greatly inspired generations of Vietnamese raised under the revolution, such as Anh Đức’s Hồn Đất, Nguyễn Thi’s Người Mẹ Cấm Súng, or Phan Tứ’s Mân và Tôi, to name but a few, have remained anonymous to a broad American audience. Hồn Đất, the only work among them that has appeared in English in translation by the DRV’s Foreign Languages Publishing House, has never received a thorough discussion by American reviewers. On the other hand, memoirs of the defunct RVN leaders have been published in droves, but, possibly because any due analysis will bring out the inherent contradictions and corruption of America’s former ally, there has never been an analysis of it before this study. Instead, some American scholars have focused
exclusively on what they call “protest literature,” and in the process, projected an American view of Vietnamese people as well as of the Vietnam War onto their interpretations of the “protest” texts, often without understanding the distinctions among the works they are discussing.

Lumped together in the “protest” category by American critics such as Dana Sachs, Peter Zinoman, William Searle, Charles Horner, and a RVN-leaning Vietnamese American, Huế Tâm Hồ Tài, are works by Dương Thu Hương, Bảo Ninh, Lê Minh Khuê, and Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. While the scope of this study circumscribes a full refutation of the critics listed above, in my opinion, these critics have missed the fact that Bảo Ninh, Lê Minh Khuê, and Nguyễn Huy Thiệp consider themselves members of the postwar Vietnamese society, and their constructive criticism is consistent with their perceived role as fighters for a better society. By contrast, Dương Thu Hương is a complete turncoat the way Bùi Tín is, both of them not only vilifying the DRV government and the united SRV, but also condoning most of what the United States was doing to Vietnam during the war and in the difficult period of postwar reconstruction. While Hương may have had personal reasons to feel bitter (she was once jailed by the government for selling her “protest” manuscripts to Western publishers), it should not justify her questioning the wisdom of the resistance against foreign powers the way she did in Novel Without a Name and Memories of a Pure Spring. In any case, Hương’s is the opinion of one individual and should not be confused with that of the Vietnamese people as a whole. Contrary to assertions by those who translate and publish her works galore in the United States, not many Vietnamese in Vietnam appreciate much either her literary skill or her betrayal to the cause of national independence so many had died for and justly believe in.
It is one thing to denounce those who have strayed from the revolutionary cause which the earlier revolutionary leadership had instigated and for which so many Vietnamese had shed blood fighting; it is another thing to negate all that that revolution stands for and has achieved. Huong’s point of view in fact goes against what many Vietnamese believe, if my knowledge and understanding of the Vietnamese is accurate. Perhaps it is apt that in Huong’s first novel, *Beyond Illusions*, the main character Linh, whom the writer portrays with sympathy all through the novel and whom she identifies with, is so outrageously and hypocritically self-righteous as she abandons her daughter and denigrates her doting husband in a selfish, irresponsible and callous manner. Not notable for any of the qualities that can broadly define a character as “good” to start with, except perhaps for her pretty, stylish appearance and education, Linh first deludes herself into marrying a literature professor whom she initially idolizes despite his repeated pleas that she “stop thinking of [him] as [a saint]” (3), for “Saints only exist in the imagination of primitive man. Today, people are intelligent enough to know that great men are thirty percent talent and seventy percent vulgarity. That’s why they suffer when their interests are at stake, make mistakes in judgment, in their actions” (3-4). Then she discovers that he has compromised his professional integrity as a journalist for promotions and raises because, as he honestly explains to her,

“Before we were married, I was a [. . .] free man. Aside from the time I spent with you, I read books. Week in and week out. All I needed for food was a bit of bread. Then we got married and Huong Ly was born. Life was fuller, happier, but more stressful. Suddenly, I was at the ship’s stern, and I watched, terrified, as other families sunk [sic] all around us. [. . .] I don’t want you to go
without a new blouse. I don’t want my daughter to long in vain for a pair of new shoes.” (8)

Uncomprehending and unsympathetic, Linh coldly rejects Nguyên, remembering with bitter regret that “if she hadn’t fallen so madly in love with him, she might have led a rich, comfortable life” (3) with her well-endowed ex-fiancé. Despising her husband for being a conformer and a liar, she revels in an illicit affair with Trần Phương, a slick and famous composer and painter who is also very much married, only to discover him to be, as Linh bitterly realizes, “an imposter” and “nothing but a miserable liar” (238) and complete “coward” (241). Lost and despairing, Linh looks longingly back at the “happy, peaceful life” (228) she shared with her now divorced husband, and sees “in her life with Nguyên [. . .] a refuge that she had too hastily abandoned” (222), but which is now irredeemable due as much to her pride as to his decision to “break with her” (224) for good. Like Linh, her creator has descended into an irredeemable cynicism. Rather than evoking sympathy, Huong’s negation of the very lý of Vietnamese nationalism and of all revolutionary achievements by the Vietnamese people have greatly annoyed and angered the Vietnamese readership.

Another controversial author, Bao Ninh, on the other hand, deserves a much more careful examination than that awarded him so far. During the war, when a concerted effort was needed to prevail over a militarily superior enemy, writing about losses was not encouraged as it could undermine morale when it was needed most. This is not a new phenomenon, nor is it peculiar to Vietnam, as the history of censorship of the arts during World War II indicates. Even so, on a trip to the rear in 1971, the poet Phạm Tiến Duật was deeply struck by the sight of white bands (the mourning sign for the newly dead in
the family) around the heads of half of the villagers in a Northern village near the DMZ.
He later recorded this immense suffering in the poem “White Circle,” published in the
Thanh Niên (Youth) newspaper in 1972:

In the sky, bomb smoke rises in a black circle
On the ground, many white circles appear.
My friend and I walk on in silence,
The silence expected after a night of war.
There is no loss greater than death
The white mourning band forms a zero.
But my friend, inside that white circle,
Is a head that burns with fire.¹⁴⁰

At the time, the poem evoked a firestorm for its emphasis on tragedy. However, once the war was over and national integrity achieved, the general opinion is that, as army writer Nguyễn Minh Chậu, the author of Dấu Chân Người Linh [In the soldiers’ footsteps], asserts, one cannot ignore “the tragic dimension of human life. Without a sense of tragedy, many would argue, the heroic voice cannot project fully, nor can the most inclusive version of Vietnam’s long years of struggle be represented.”¹⁴¹ The literature of heroism of the forty years from 1945 to 1975 is genuine and profoundly moving, but there is also much more to bring to light. In the sobering experience of peace, many people now felt that the time had come to acknowledge the full costs of independence. It is in this context that Bào Ninh’s The Sorrow of War was published in 1991 and awarded the Vietnam Writers’ Association national prize for 1991-1992.
The themes of dehumanizing war and disillusionment with the peace in *The Sorrow of War* have been exploited by a number of Americans seeking vindication of American intervention in Vietnam, among whom are Horner and Searle, who wilfully distort the novel's message. Equating *Sorrow* with American accusations of their own government's hawk policies, hypocrisy, and failures, Searle prefaced his article thus:

It is no secret that frequently there is a contrast, a certain dissonance, between the official version of a war, the sanitized record of noble endeavor sanctioned by the government that sent its sons and daughters to it and the much grittier, often more bitter, portrait revealed in the memoirs and novels of the participants who survived the turmoil. This is especially true, as we all know, of the Vietnam War, in which the confidence and affirmation of General William Westmoreland's memoir, *A Soldier Reports*, is debunked by other American narratives too numerous to name that depict disillusionment, drug use, racism, desertion, loss of moral compass, bloodlust, conflicts within ranks, soldiers cracking under stress, sexual assault, and a breakdown of discipline, just to name a few. (224)

In the same vein, Horner, president of the Madison Center, begins his article:

In the last ten years, Vietnam has come awkwardly back into ordinary international life, obliged by the profound changes that have taken place in the world to shed its pose of defiant desolation.

Before 1945, Vietnam had all the allure of an emerging modern culture, with something cosmopolitan and something French added to its far older East and South Asian traditions. These tantalizing prospects were soon to be buried, unable to survive in either a garrison or a police state. For 30 years of war
between 1945 and 1975, and for at least a decade thereafter, Vietnam became a country that prided itself on drabness and austerity, and seemed determined never again to become enticing.

As we now know, the Vietnamese had among the worst of all Communist experiences. True, Central Europeans were forced to endure the horrors of Stalinist rule, but their own young were not sent off on decades of quixotic and self-destructive military adventures. Even when compared to China and North Korea during their periods of high madness, Communist Vietnam seemed driven by a particularly demonic energy which ended by destroying millions of hapless subjects through war and repression. Only the Cambodians fared worse. (50)

Skillfully employing the term “war” in a generic sense, these critics seek to blanket the fact that the Vietnam War was one of aggression pursued by the United States government and aided by the corrupt regimes the U.S. set up in South Vietnam, and that this war, conducted by the U.S. with high technological killing machines, attempted to suppress the struggle for independence and sovereignty undertaken by a majority of Vietnamese—North, South, and Central, “communist” and non-communist alike. Contrary to all historical and literary evidence, these critics predicate their criticism on the premise that the Vietnamese nationalists waged the war in their own country instead of the fact that it was the U.S. who did—hence, for what Americans call the “Vietnam War,” the Vietnamese rightly name it the “American War.” As such, the terrible destruction, not only to the bodies but to the souls of Vietnamese and Americans alike in those personal and literary accounts should be read as a direct indictment of the injustice and cruelty the U.S. government of the time dealt Vietnam and its people, in addition to
the suffering it brought on its own citizenry. To call the Vietnamese resistance against American invaders "quixotic and self-destructive," as Horner does, is as bizarre as cursing a self-defending citizen for having fought against criminals who break into his/her house to rob, rape and ruin. To say that "Communist Vietnam seemed driven by a particularly demonic energy which ended by destroying millions of hapless subjects through war and repression," as Horner announces, is as ludicrous as blaming the robbery victim's injuries on his/her will to fight back. These critics' political bias has also clouded their academic judgement and led them to mistakenly elevate Dương Thu Huỳnh, a turncoat, to the same category as Bão Ninh, a continuing fighter for Vietnam's future, for all that both authors depict war-weariness among North Vietnamese soldiers.

Bão Ninh's novel is in fact the story of a Vietnamese nationalist's survival and triumph against all odds. Pounded all those long years by B-52s and napalm fire, and experiencing the inhuman slaughtering inflicted in full by the world's major power, Kiên, the protagonist of Bão Ninh's novel, survives to fulfil his "sacred, heavenly duty" (51) as both a writer and a fighter to "expose the realities of war and to tear aside conventional images" (50). Some of the conventional images no doubt refer to the lack of nuance the wartime single-mindedness warranted. In a recent interview by a Vietnamese newspaper, Bão Ninh explained that "there was a time when Vietnamese writers wrote in an unvarying way that was boring. Change was needed, as life, particularly life during wartime, was not so trite" (Interview July 10, 2005, par. 7). When a reporter quizzed the writer in a later interview, "Are you saying that those stories about the war that resonated through the years, even those poetic lines that everyone committed to heart, are still not appealing enough?" Bão Ninh clarified:
Novels such as *Dấu Chân Người Linh* [In the soldiers’ footsteps], *Mành Trăng Cuối Rừng* [The crescent moon deep in the jungle], or *Tiên Tuyến Gọi* [The frontline is calling], can be empathized with because they were written during wartime. Back then, the people’s strength needed to be mobilized; and besides, they did reflect people’s real thoughts. But literature only lives on when it is honest, and sometimes the most appealing aspect of life is the banal. (Interview August 8, 2005, par. 7)

But, going beyond the boundary of Ninh’s native country, his novel has also debunked the conventional American perception of Vietnamese nationalists as fanatical robots in evil machinations that would justify the American genocidal strategy of “attrition.” Not only scrapping the “devil” image Americans had imagined their Vietnamese enemy to be, Ninh tells us “a never-ending story of loyalty, friendship, brotherhood, comradeship, and humanity” (227) in war. This humanism is most clearly illustrated by the episode in which Phan, one of Kiên’s fellow scouts, tries to save the life of an ARVN Commando after “a very bloody fight,” in which “rivers of blood” flow and “both [sides are] battered” (92). Leaving the enemy commando, who has been badly hurt by American artillery, in an American bomb crater to search for bandages, Phan forgets to mark the crater, such that he fails to find it amidst the “hundreds of craters” (93) pockmarking the ground, and the commando drowns in the rain-filled crater. For years afterwards, Phan is still tormented by the memory. He confides to Kiên, “Now, even after many years, whenever I see a flood I feel a sharp pang in my heart and think of my cruel stupidity” (94). Yet we readers appreciate Phan’s act as one of humanism, thwarted as it is by the terrible destruction America inflicted on Vietnam and the Vietnamese.
For those who have supported the murderous foreign policy that brought Americans to Vietnam, and who, as a result, have not realized Bào Ninh’s true message in *The Sorrow of War* as one that reiterates, once again, albeit in a different way, the *lý*, *tinh*, and *dao lý* embedded in the cause of national independence, the last pages of the novel form an assertion that is, however painful, also filled with affirmation: “Each of us carried in his heart a separate war which in many ways was totally different, despite our common cause. [. . .] Our lives may not be very happy, and they might well be sinful. But now we are living the most beautiful life we could ever have hoped for, because it is a life in peace” (232). The novel concludes with the optimism in focusing back on [those] painful but glorious days [of the resistance war]. They were caring days, when we knew what we were living and fighting for and why we needed to suffer and sacrifice.

Those were the days when all of us were young, very pure, and very sincere. (233)

As for the feeling of alienation and disillusionment that Bào Ninh and other Vietnamese writers convey through their depiction of postwar realities, it is nothing new or surprising if we look at world (post)war literature, especially from the point of view of those who have experienced combat. The mismatch between blown-up, photogenic representations of the war by the media and individual sentiments of fear and despair, the feeling of estrangement and disillusionment, as well as the difficult readjustment of ex-soldiers into society, all have long been documented by renowned and classic authors such as Erich Maria Remarque (in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Arch de Triomphe*) and Ernest Hemingway (e.g. in “Soldier’s Home,” “Big-Two-Hearted River,” *A Farewell*
Kien’s feeling that peace signifies “the end of an era” (Bao Ninh 107) certainly finds correspondence in Rhett Butler’s and Ashley Wilkes’ perception of gotterdammerung in Margaret Mitchell’s Gone With the Wind. This body of world literature underscores the fact that exhaustion, disorientation and hollowness customarily follow armistice, no matter how “just” the war has been perceived to be. During wartime, especially in a long, bloody war, dreams of an ideal world in peace keep people alive. The realities of peace, on the other hand, inevitably shatter those idealistic dreams. The experience of World War II and of the nationalist resistance in twentieth-century Vietnam demonstrates that a war perceived as “just” functions as a great uniting force. Even so, or perhaps because it is so, the ensuing peace, which simultaneously dissolves the rationale for unity and returns people to a competitive environment for economic survival and success, is bound to carry an anticlimactic feeling with it. Considering the development of a whole noir culture and post-modernist literature after World War II in the West, Vietnamese postwar literature is certainly not alone in recording the problematic and dubious return to normalcy, particularly among those who had been facing constant death for so long and who had incurred staggering losses in the war.

In that context, Lê Minh Khuê’s “A Day on the Road” explores the complicated state of mind of veterans in the postwar business bustle and materialism. The story begins with a war veteran’s profound disappointment with, and disdain for, the emergent greed and consumerism in her former boyfriend, who avoided participation in the resistance war against the Americans and who is now busy exploiting the postwar conditions to enrich himself materially. The feeling of unbridled materialism deepens when the “I”
narrator travels North with a handsome, expensively-dressed interpreter who is fluent in Western languages and who is constantly discussing business deals with the equally smartly-dressed driver. Though the narrator tries not to feel bitter hearing “the people around [her] talking about things to which [she] could never adapt” (47), the material possessions of these two men and of her former boyfriend and his mercenary circle remind her of the “inconveniences” (47) she frequently encounters in her daily life. Along the way, the car stops at Pha Rang, a wartime heavy bombing site. Recalling the death of her former comrades, among whom a seventeen-year-old Cay, who had never seen a big city and who was innocently curious about trolleys, ice-cream, and lipstick, the narrator feels a sudden hatred for the interpreter standing beside her, whom she imagines to have “been born and raised with so much comfort and happiness” (50), until she learns that he was an artillery soldier stationed for some time in this very area during the war. The two share a moment of recollection as the interpreter tells her, his voice trembling, “Our battalion lost something like five hundred people here, but I still managed to survive. Some were remarkable guys. You can’t possibly know. Some were so handsome” (52). It turns out that the driver, who “will never yield to anybody,” is also a veteran, “an army driver in the Trường Sơn range during the war against the Americans” (52). Fury instantly turns into “admiration” (53), and with “warmth in [her] heart, [and] no longer feelinglonely from the memories that had agitated” (53) her, the narrator comes to a different interpretation of the business acumen she previously branded as petty:

I knew that no one could forget what had happened during those years. But they were still young and whatever they had experienced only made them stronger.
They still had a long life in front of them. They still had to struggle, to build their families, and to attend to their work in many different places. (53)

The narrator’s conclusion in this story reflects a mature understanding of the postwar realities. At the same time, it shows a judgment implicitly based on the dividing line between participation and non-participation in the resistance war. In this way, the story reveals not only a deep and lasting bond of comradeship and mutual understanding among the now veterans in peace that we find in many of Hemingway’s stories, but also a conviction in the *dao lý* (morality) of the fighter for the *ly* and *công lý* of nationalism. This conviction and bond are the underlying themes of a previous story of Lê Minh Khue’s, “The Distant Stars,” which was written during the war and which draws on Khue’s experience as a Youth Brigade on the Hồ Chí Minh trail. The three young Hanoi girls defusing bombs on the trail feel bound to all other resistance fighters, the narrator tells us,

with a passionate love, a love beyond words that only someone who had stood on that hill in those moments, as I did, could understand fully. [. . .] That was the love of the people in smoke and fire, the people of war. It was a selfless, passionate, and carefree love, only found in the hearts of soldiers. I put my arm around Nho and squeezed her small, soft shoulder. We said nothing to each other. She was here, brave, gentle, from the same city as me and standing with me on this night on a hill covered by bomb craters near the front. We understood each other and felt completely happy. (20)
Through all the hardships, dangers, and fierce bombing, these young women fighters are sustained by visions of a life in peace and in revolutionary transformation, of the various career paths they would embark on:

Any of those careers would mean happiness. I would be as enthusiastic and creative as I was now, out here at our strategic hill, where wishes and desires were born.

But these things were for later. After the war. When the trail we were protecting here was evenly paved with asphalt. Electricity would flow on wires deep into the forest and timber mills would run all day and all night. All [. . .] of us understood this. We understood and believed it with a fierce faith. (4)

The realities of the peace are not as facile, however, as we have seen in “A Day on the Road.” For one thing, to expect instantaneous stability and improvement after independence would be naïve, considering the legacy of the war and the lack of coherent policies from an unprepared government in post-1975 Vietnam. More than that, the inevitable movement from the collective to the individual creates division even among people once bound together by the lý, tỉnh, công lý, and dao lý of the resistance war against foreign invaders. In “An Evening Away From the City,” one of Khuê’s later stories, Viên and Tấn are former communications soldiers in the resistance against the Americans, who used to share “rice porridge from a single ration box” and who “never wanted to be apart” (159). After the war, both go to the same university, but soon become separated by their different social standings. Viên quits her study, marries a poor doctor, moves to the countryside, and is abandoned by her husband, while Tấn lives the high life of a fashionable woman and society wife in Hanoi. On a trip to the country, Tấn decides
to visit her friend and is repelled by the squalor of Viên’s life. Out of guilt, she promises to help Viên get back to the capital and to her studies. But back in Hanoi, Tân’s promises fail to materialize amid her busy schedule of socializing and of deciding among her nice outfits and cosmetics which would be the most impressive for each occasion. “The problem was that she had so little time,” (177), Tân tells herself. Her intelligent husband, however, recognizes “her pure selfishness, her fondness for making friends with important people, and her contempt for the life [of wants] she had led during the war,” all of which make him “lose some of the respect he’d had for her when he first met her” (175). Viên is thus kept waiting in vain for a letter from Tân that never comes. “Shallowness could be a kind of crime,” Tân’s husband ruminates over the event. “Trouble was, this was difficult for people to see” (177).

Vietnamese literature thus proves that Vietnamese people responding to the revolutionary call are definitely not the Red devils pictured in the American imagination. Nor are their inevitable human mistakes evil or extraordinary the way Americans cashing in on the so-called “protest literature” have made them out to be. Commenting on the Vietnamese postwar mixed sentiments, Karlin perceptively wonders, “what society has lived up to its own youthful ideals?” (The Stars, xi). On the other hand, Bào Ninh has also recently cautioned against “the rut of thinking among writers—such that in writing about wartime, they only see the beauty of it, but when writing about peace it’s always ‘oh it’s so bad’” (Interview August 8, 2005, par. 10).

At this very moment, social transformation is going on in every aspect of Vietnamese life, a revolution that proves to be even more difficult than the completed nationalist revolution, for the enemy is now among and within us. In a recent interview,
Le Minh Khue identifies this enemy as the old-time “oshin [slave] mentality,” which occurs when people refuse to think, and instead “operate like unfeeling machines,” or are “dependent, irresponsible,” and corrupt.

That means turning ourselves into slaves to money and to the “live for the moment” attitude. What’s more, if people were self-respecting, they wouldn’t litter in public places. If only they would blush when they littered, it would have been different. But the problem is that each of us has not been able to overcome the slave mentality in ourselves. (Interview, par. 12)

But life is always full of surprises. The recent phenomenal success of two best-selling books, the newly published diaries of two war martyrs, Nguyễn Văn Thạc and Đặng Thùy Trâm, each selling 250,000 to 300,000 copies in only a few months, has certainly surprised many. On the one hand, the keen interest with which Vietnamese youths are reading the life and thoughts of revolutionaries three generations their senior has dispelled in even the most jaded the common judgment that the younger generations were interested only in “living it up.” On the other hand, this quite unexpected interest and the emotional discussions it has created in the Tuổi Trẻ (Youth) Newspaper under the “Forum of the Twenty-Year-Olds” (Điễn Đàn Tuổi 20) suggest that the martyrs’ sacrifices were not in vain, and that their honest dedication to the cause of nationalism has once again powerfully inspired, through their writing, the younger and future generations of Vietnam. Incidentally, the first Vietnamese to discover Đặng Thùy Trâm’s diary among the documents captured by the U.S. is none other than Bào Ninh, who said, “I was very moved. It [the resistance] is a part of my youth. Those years are the most beautiful of my life—the beauty of self-sacrifice. How simple it was, the self-sacrifice of
Brother Thać and Sister Trâm.” Ninh then offers these thoughts on Vietnamese younger generations, which may well summarize Vietnam’s present and future: “The youths these days and those in past years, they are in fact very similar. They are never completely spoiled. And when they encounter an honest story, a story written especially for them, it is only natural that they catch on the fever” (Interview August 8, 2005, par. 3).

The literature examined in this dissertation is far from being exhaustive. Regretfully, I have had to limit this study to a small number of primary RVN and NLF texts, while most of the DRV literature has been excluded. At the same time, due to availability problems, Vietnamese secondary texts, particularly the comparatively extensive body of literary criticism from the DRV, have hardly been explored. To further the study of the Vietnam War through Vietnamese literature, there are a number of directions future research studies could take. First, more wartime literary works from the RVN, NLF, and DRV need to be brought to Western/American attention. This could be accomplished through the translation of the texts, followed by in-depth criticisms of the translations (similar to what Lockhart and Lockhart, and Zinoman have done with some prewar texts). Although there has been an increasing number of translations of Vietnamese literary texts in recent years, so far most of the translations have been of classical, prewar, or postwar Vietnamese literature. Of all the works produced by Vietnamese writers of fiction during the war, only one RVN short story (Nhã Ca’s “A Story for Lovers”), and, besides a handful of war poems, three DRV/NLF short stories (Lê Minh Khuê’s “The Distant Stars,” Nguyễn Quang Sâng’s “The Ivory Comb,” and Cao Tiến Lê’s “The Sound of Night”) have been translated and anthologized by American scholars. Even so, the English version of Cao Tiến Lê’s short story, as it
appeared in Bowen and Weigl’s *Writing Between the Lines: An Anthology on War and Its Consequences*, has been oddly curtailed of its original ending. Meanwhile, those very few translated and printed by the DRV or NLF (e.g. *Hòn Đất*) are rarely available in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. A better exposure of Vietnamese war literature should certainly facilitate the study of the Vietnam War in the West.

Further, analysis of different major themes in Vietnamese war literature (for example, trauma and how people deal with it) should highlight other concerns that Vietnamese may have had during the war. Such analysis could be carried out either within a certain group of the population or across political lines, while taking into consideration the larger context of Vietnamese literature in general, and of the historiography of the Vietnam War in particular, especially from the points of view of the Vietnamese.

Lastly, literary analysis could also take place that compares and contrasts literary writings on the Vietnam War by Americans with those of the Vietnamese. Such dialectical projects should add an interesting comparative angle to the study of the literature and/or history of the longest war for both Americans and Vietnamese. More importantly, it is believed that such dialectical studies are essential in creating a real, democratic dialogue between two peoples of different cultures who were once at war, and whose current relations are still plagued with misunderstanding, fear, doubt and ambivalence. If social change is often the result of government policy, which in turn is influenced by social awareness, perhaps there is no better way to prevent unnecessary and unjust war than to encourage understanding of the self and of the Other through bicultural projects, so that the sorrows of war will forever be merely distant memories on the page.
NOTES

1 Trouin’s accusation is historically supported: Britain encouraged the French reconquest of Vietnam at the end of 1945. British troops not only freed and re-armed French soldiers imprisoned by the Japanese, but also brutally crushed Viet Minh resistance in Saigon.

2 For the consequences of the war to the United States, see, for example, Bowman.

3 See Westing for a detailed discussion on the effects of the war on Vietnam’s environment and ecosystem.

4 Trương Như Tăng (211).

5 For more reading on Vietnam’s history against foreign invaders, see Marr (Anticolonialism).

6 Vietnam historically referred to itself as “the South land” (mới Nam) in relation to its Northern neighbor China.

7 This hich is quoted in full in Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư (Vol. 4, 212-3).

8 See, for example, Steinberg, and Marr (Anticolonialism).

9 An average Vietnamese can be expected to remember by heart a fair amount of poems, especially those taught in school. Even as a child, I often heard people reciting lines of poems while doing everyday tasks such as hauling water from the common pump.

10 Huỳnh Sanh Thồng, ed. and trans. (110). I have taken liberties with a few words here and there in Thồng’s translation of this poem and others discussed in this chapter.

11 The word “kỳ” in this line has a double meaning: as “[time] period” and as “region” (Tonkin is “Bắc Kỳ”, Cochinchina is “Nam Kỳ”). Phan Bội Châu is clearly referring to the French acquisition of all the “kỳ” of Vietnam. The line could then be read as “Who knew you would go on and swallow up all the regions?”
Chinese character infamous for yielding to the enemy after the collapse of his kingdom.

Huỳnh Sanh Thông, ed. and trans. (117).

Huỳnh Sanh Thông, ed. and trans. (84)

The North was still under Vietnamese control, while the South had been under French rule since 1867.

Huỳnh Sanh Thông, ed. and trans. (105-6).

In her memoir, Lê Lý Hayslip recounts her NLF brother’s refusal to eat the American chocolate she offered at their family meeting when she went back to Vietnam for a visit. She explains away his refusal as an unfounded fear of poison; but it is obvious to me that her brother was simply refusing to eat something he considered (symbolically) contaminated by the Americans. This reaction is very typically Vietnamese.

Trần Mỹ-Vân’s *A Vietnamese Scholar in Anguish: Nguyễn Khuyên and the Decline of the Confucian Order, 1884-1909* is a fairly thorough study of Nguyễn Khuyên’s career and works.

Nguyễn Khuyên similarly attacks scholars who bent to the French by participating in the very same exam in the poem “Khóa Thi Đình Đấu” [The exam of the year of the Rooster]. This poem is recorded in Trần Mỹ Vân (47).

Huỳnh Sanh Thông, ed. and trans. (122).

Huỳnh Sanh Thông, ed. and trans. (88-9).

Vietnamese men in the late nineteenth century wore their hair long, tied up in a bun or wrapped in cloth around their heads. Short hair for men was associated with Westerners. Later, however, Phan Bội Châu was to espouse short hair as a symbol of modernization, a
kind of deliberate appropriation of Western advantages for the benefit of the Vietnamese while simultaneously stressing the power of choice by those who did it.

23 The implication is, since wool and fur come from animals, the French, who wear those materials, are by extension beasts and barbarians.

24 Huỳnh Sanh Thông, ed. and trans. (92-3).

25 For more poems by some of the most famous patriots of this period in English, Huỳnh Sanh Thông’s *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems* is a good source.

26 Naturally, French colonialists needed indigenous speakers fluent in French. They also advocated *quốc ngữ* for two reasons. First, it facilitated the introduction of the French system of education in Vietnam. Second, French administrators viewed it as a weapon to eliminate Chinese characters together with the established Vietnamese civic patterns based on them. Among Vietnamese patriots, *quốc ngữ* was at first rejected as another Western manifestation. Eventually, however, they realized that modernization would benefit rather than harm the country. *Quốc ngữ* was then embraced and quickly became a weapon in the crusade to combat illiteracy and to conquer Western civilization (Woodside, *Community* 78-9).

27 Again, Phan Bội Châu was among the first to encourage a deliberate appropriation and popularization of Western civilization to empower the colonized Vietnamese through his Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục (Đông Kinh [Hanoi] Free School) movement.

28 For a look at the poetry of some noted revolutionaries of this period, such as Song Hồng (Trương Chinh), Trần Huy Liệu, Xuân Thủy, Tô Hữu, and Hồ Chí Minh, see *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems*, and *Mountain River: Vietnamese Poetry from the Wars 1948-1993*. 
In Vietnamese, "túy bút" means "a piece of writing in which the author writes freely about a subject of choice." Túy bút, therefore, can encompass a variety of styles, such as memoir, essay, or pastoral descriptive prose.

For a summary of Huong's life and contributions, see Maurice Durand and Nguyen Tran Huán (98-100). Many of the most famous poems by this aberrant poetess can be found in John Balaban.

Huỳnh Sanh Thống's The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry provides detailed information on classic Vietnamese poetic conventions.

In Vietnamese, personal pronouns always imply the relative positions of the persons in question. Instead of having only one term signalling "I" as English does, several role-based (pro)nouns can be used in Vietnamese by the I-speaker to refer to him/herself, depending on what kind of (perceived) relationship he/she has with his/her interlocutor. In its original meaning, the word "tôi" denotes "servant [to the king]." Out of this role-based meaning, the social evolution of the twentieth century created a modern "tôi," which could now be used as the equivalent of the Western "I"—although it did not replace the other, traditional forms of "I" in Vietnamese. Because it exists simultaneously alongside other forms of "I" which signal social relationships, this Western-influenced "I" has in practice acquired a certain attitude (e.g. of emotional neutrality, distance, or formality), which is not the case with the "I" in Western languages.

The poetry in this section is recited from my memory. Some of it can also be found in Durand and Huân, Jamieson, and Huỳnh Sanh Thống. The translation is primarily my own.
This tale also comes under the titles of *Kim-Vân-Kiều*, and *Doan Trương Tân Thanh*, or is often simply shortened to *Kiều*. For comments on this tale and a summary of the plot, see Durand and Huan (86-94).

For a summary of *Nửa Chìng Xuân*, see Durand and Huan (184-6).

In 1945, the Japanese, then taking power from the French, ordered Vietnamese peasants to uproot their growing rice and plant jute instead for Japan’s war consumption. The result was a famine like no Vietnamese had ever seen in centuries. In the 1970s, my grandmother still told us how, for months in mid-1945, every morning when she or other people in her family opened the front door of their Hanoi home, there would be a few dead bodies blocking the path.

For a thorough study of the rise of the Vietnamese communists, their initial problems in organizing the masses, and the ambiguities of familism as an organizing tool, see Woodside (*Community*). Woodside also confirms that Hồ Chí Minh’s alliance with the French Communist Party and later, with Lenin’s Russia, was almost a matter of coincidence, given that these two parties were the only ones in the world at the time to support, at least in theory, the liberation movement of Europe’s colonies that was Hồ’s primary goal.

Among those later published are Hồ Chí Minh’s *Duơng Kách Mênh* [The road of revolution], and his collection of poems *Nhất Ký Trong Tù* [Journals of life in prison].

Parts of “To Be a Poet” are quoted in Jamieson (188-9). The following translation is my own, albeit with some consideration for Nguyễn Khắc Viên’s version as used by Jamieson.
The above quotations from *Miss Minh—the Schoolteacher* can be found in Jamieson (152-3).

*Before the Revolution: the Vietnamese Peasants Under the French* also includes excerpts from *Tất Đenção* and other (documentary-)fiction works about the life of Vietnamese peasants in colonial times.

Under French rule, Vietnamese were not allowed to produce the traditional rice wine even for their own consumption. They were instead forced to buy wine monopolized by the government and sold at ridiculously high prices. Local officials took advantage of this law to punish anybody whom they did not like, or to illegally seize properties by leaving a bottle of rice wine on the person’s land.

Paul Warnke, John McNaughton’s successor as McNamara’s assistant for international security affairs, recalls his tour in Vietnam in summer 1967: “The people I talked to didn’t seem to have any feeling about South Vietnam as a country. We fought the war for a separate South Vietnam, but there wasn’t any South and there never was one. I think that was our big mistake” (Appy 279).

In her notes to *Even the Women Must Fight*, Karen Turner claims that *Understanding Vietnam* is “the single most useful cultural history of modern Vietnam for the nonspecialist and specialist alike” (194). *Fire in the Lake* was the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award and the Bancroft Prize for History in the US when it was first published in 1972. *Community and Revolution* is widely respected as a pioneering scholarly study of the conditions that gave rise to revolution in Vietnam, and the origins and nature of Vietnamese Communism. All have been extensively quoted by scholars on the Vietnam war.
In *Tradition and Revolution*, Nguyên Khắc Viên recounts how the Vietnamese national identity was sharpened as a result of repeated wars against foreign invasion long before the European arrival. Karnow offers a fairly comprehensive review of how nationalism became a most important element in the Vietnamese national identity in Chapter 3, “The Heritage of Vietnamese Nationalism,” of his book (89-127); see also Marr (*Anticolonialism*). The rise of modern Vietnamese nationalism is summed up in Marr (“Historical Reassessment”); McAlister; Hodgkin; and Woodside (*Community*), to cite but a few.

This poem is very well known among Việt Minh supporters; it can be found in part in Jamieson (206). The poem was later turned into a popular song during the American war.

Ho’s teaching in Tằng’s account later formed another of “Uncle Hồ’s sayings,” known and extended to all young students of Vietnam:

*Nước Việt Nam có về vang hay không,*

*Đàn tộc Việt Nam có được về vang sánh vai cù các cường quốc năm châu hay không,*

*Đó chính là nhờ công học tập của các cháu.*

(If Vietnam and our Vietnamese people are to achieve an honorable place among the peoples of the world, it will depend largely on your efforts to study and learn.)

The French, recognizing his influence on both intellectuals and the common people, invited him to work for them. Чиểu repeatedly refused the offer, which no doubt would have brought him some authority under the colonial regime and great financial rewards. See Marr (“Vietnamese Historical Reassessment” 327), and Durand and Huấn (96) for
more discussion on the popularity of Luc Văn Tiên and its message; and Jamieson (44-45, 60-61) and Woodside (Community 29) for more of Chiều’s anticolonial antics.

49 FitzGerald argues that the NLF “had the disadvantage that the nationalist component of their struggle was not at all as obvious as that of the Viet Minh. Apart from racial or cultural opposition, ‘nationalism’ is, after all, a most difficult abstraction. It took a certain amount of political and economic theory to demonstrate that the American role in Vietnam was in many ways equivalent to that of the French—particularly in the early years when there was no American presence in the countryside” (188). FitzGerald’s presumption of the peasants’ total ignorance, I think, is unjustified. While nationalism in the abstract may be difficult to grasp for the politically uneducated peasants, they must have felt it long before American presence was actually seen in the countryside, and not only through the unpopular rule of Diệm, who was widely known to be supported by the Americans and not by the Vietnamese population. American interference was first felt as the United States’ sabotage of the Geneva Accords resulted in many South Vietnamese families being separated after the regroupment. The common understanding that their family would remain separated as long as the Americans stood behind the Diệm regime, which opposed all possibilities of a general election to unify the country, created more nationalist sentiments among the peasants than Americans could have realized, such that the American intention to dominate Vietnamese politics in a similar fashion to the French effort to dominate Vietnam became very real indeed in the peasants’ minds.

50 The first version of Kỳ’s memoir mentions only his failed attempt to join the Việt Minh. His second, revised version, published twenty six years after the first, tells of his actual apprenticeship with the Việt Minh (Buddha’s Child 20-1). If we are to believe this
cursory, late-added account of his time with the Việt Minh, the reason he deserted was chiefly because he could not bear the hardships of life in the jungle. FitzGerald also tells of other RVN Young Turks who joined the U.S.-backed regime after being rejected by the Việt Minh for laziness and lack of discipline (315). Kỳ’s other reason to desert, that “the Resistance leaders and those who enforced their will [. . .] were coarse, stupid, and ignorant” (19) is somewhat ironic, considering that many Americans have commented on the lack of talent that in part explained the RVN’s notorious ineptitude (see the next note regarding this matter). It is even more ironic that those “stupid, ignorant” people eventually prevailed and triumphed over Kỳ’s own RVN regime, even with the weight of the mighty Americans behind it.

FitzGerald notes the “total divorce between knowledge and power” in the governments headed by the Young Turks, of which Kỳ was a member. Apparently, the RVN’s educated, high-ranking civilians “despised the young officers as ignorant upstarts” (314). Even Douglas Pike, who is most critical of the Vietnamese “communists,” considers the lack of talent among the RVN leadership a critical weakness. He reasons that during the Resistance against the French, “the more dedicated, enterprising, and efficient Vietnamese had joined the Viet Minh, left the country, or become a member of that special class of Vietnamese, the attentisme, the permanent bystander. [. . .] A large number of talented Southerners had gone North to serve, leaving the less talented or less experienced to man the Southern positions not occupied by the French” (58). On a side note, Pike is oddly ambiguous in this explanation due to his unwillingness to admit the appeal of the Việt Minh. Logically, the first sentence quoted above should have just ended with “joined the Việt Minh,” since the Vietnamese who had left the country or
become the *attentisme* could not plausibly be called "dedicated, enterprising, and efficient." Likewise, the second sentence speaking of the movement of the more talented Southerners to the North is deliberately ambiguous and potentially problematic. If those talented Southerners had rallied to serve in the DRV, it would then be proof of the DRV’s ability to attract such talents. If, on the other hand, the Southern talents had gone North to serve the French, Pike would have a hard time explaining why they did not return South under the regrouping agreement in 1954. In either case, a full explanation obviously would have run counter to Pike’s anti-Communist stance, hence the deliberate ambiguity.

52 Cochinchina is the French designation of South Vietnam as a separate colony, together with Annam (Central Vietnam), Tonkin (North Vietnam), Laos and Cambodia in the French Union.

53 FitzGerald comments ironically on this continuity: "What was most strange was that Diem, this proud nationalist, did not even symbolically dissociate his regime from the government he so despised as a 'French puppet.' The Republic of Vietnam had the same flag and the same anthem as the Bao Dai government, and Diem himself lived in the governor’s palace” (116). In this context, Dön’s discussion of the anthem as proof of the RVN’s supposedly nationalist stance shows the fallacy of his argument. Bảo Đại’s and subsequently Diệm’s government’s appropriated (without permission) a song by Lưu Hữu Phước, who wrote it to inspire Vietnamese to fight foreign invaders. Lưu Hữu Phước was a Việt Minh Southerner who later regrouped to the North in 1954 and was a highly regarded artist in the DRV. According to Dön, since the RVN used a resistance song which coincidentally was also the anthem for Hồ’s government, it is proof enough
that “the Viet Minh did not have a monopoly on the fight for independence, despite the fact that we [Đôn and this camp] cooperated with the French to the same end” (Đôn 39).

On this topic, FitzGerald writes: “Like Ky, most of these younger officers turned against the French, but only after the French stopped paying their salaries. Their change of heart neither cleared their reputations with other Vietnamese nor gave them another kind of education. The French had not taught them Descartes or Pascal, but instead had occupied their formative years with instruction on how to serve a European army fighting a European war. The French trained them—trained them badly. And the Americans took up where the French left off” (315).

Ironically, many American military leaders responsible for the Vietnam War later blamed their problems on either the U.S. government (as if it were an alien and sinister entity), the press, the American anti-war movement, and of course the RVN itself. See Susan Jeffords’ *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* for a comprehensive analysis of this blame game.

See Woodside (*Community* 95-102) for a discussion of familism and the problem of organization for revolution in Vietnam.

This dual goal is reiterated in many of Hồ writings and is to be what he called “the compass for revolutionary action.”

Hồ’s himself tells us in *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution* that his decision to join the French Socialist Party was instigated by the sympathy its members showed to his cause of national independence (6). Hồ’s *Đường Kách Mênh* [The road to revolution], according to Woodside, reveals that the “prime virtue of Leninism [. . .] was that it provided remedies for the weakness of ‘organized communities’ in Vietnamese life” (*Community*
Hồ’s core principles of nationalism and patriotism underlie his internationalism, and explain why, for example, during the resistance against the French Vichy administration in Vietnam, Hồ did not find it out of line to enlist the assistance of the OSS, the predecessor of the CIA. Documents such as *The Pentagon Papers* also confirm what Tăng explains as Hồ Chí Minh’s use of “Chinese and Soviet support in pursuit of his own goals [. . .] without relinquishing his stature as a nationalist [i.e. independent of his supporters’ political intentions]” (34).

Interestingly, FitzGerald quotes Douglas Pike (the CIA expert on the NLF) and Zasloff (from the RAND Corporation) that the northern as well as the southern Party cadres seemed to know very little about Marxist doctrine. Pike himself pronounces that the People’s Revolutionary Party was not Marxist-Leninist in any philosophical sense at all (FitzGerald 274). The lack of understanding on the RVN side, on the other hand, approaches the ludicrous. In *The South Vietnamese Point of View*, an official issue in 1969 from the RVN’s Office of the Permanent Observer to the United Nations, the RVN ambassador at the time claims that the Marxist doctrine of dialectical materialism would necessarily fail in Vietnam, simply because Vietnamese had had a long tradition of “spiritual and human values” and “contempt for temporal and earthly contingencies” (1).

Quoted in Jamieson (153).

Quoted by Jamieson (153).

See FitzGerald (e.g. 325, 342, 352, 361).

Quoted in Jamieson (242).

FitzGerald and Sheehan have both argued that the one-man rule type of “democracy” was as necessary to the Diệm regime as to Thiệu’s. Tellingly, Ngô Đình Nhu was also an
unashamed "admirer of Hitler" and Nhu’s Republic Youth organization was very much patterned on Hitler’s Brown Shirts organization of storm troopers (Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie* 179-80).

65 See also FitzGerald (312). DRV and NLF leaders, by contrast, consciously eschewed even verbal vestiges of this kind of mental colonialism. In fact, the DRV school curriculum in the 1980s included Hồ Chí Minh’s article entitled “To preserve the purity of the Vietnamese language,” in which Hồ encouraged the use of Vietnamese words over borrowed foreign terminology.

66 Durand and Huán (130-7). Durand and Huán’s *An Introduction to Vietnamese Literature* contains some useful information about the 1945-54 period, and about the RVN literature (1954-75), but is perfunctory about the DRV and NLF literatures.

67 Some of the most influential writers of the pre-war period had by 1954 died for the revolutionary cause, such as Thâm Tâm (Nguyễn Tuấn Trinh), the first editor of *Tiền Phong* (the official newspaper of the Association of Arts and Letters), who died on a mission in Việt Bắc (a resistance base in the northernmost area); Nam Cao, author of the enduring *Chi Phèo*, who was killed in an ambush in Ninh Bình in 1951; and Ngô Tất Tố, author of *Tất Đèn*, who died in Yên Thế, Bắc Giang (a resistance base) in 1954 (*Dictionary of Writers*). Nam Cao and Ngô Tất Tố have been discussed in Chapter II of this study.

68 See Notes on the Poets in *Mountain River*, and particularly Phan Cự Đức and Hà Minh Đức (Vol. 1, 1-311).

69 Phan Cự Đức and Hà Minh Đức (Vol. 1, 46).
The biographical information about the four authors is taken from the Notes on the Poets in Mountain River.

I have no information on whether the poem is based on a real experience, but Hồ’s characteristic informality, simplicity, and affectionate manners are well-known and have been numerously recounted. In Chapter III, I have mentioned Trương Như Tăng’s story of how Hồ went through the back door, with no security guards in tow, for a surprise visit to the delegate of NLF nationalists, just as a close relative would, and how touching, according to Tăng, Hồ’s simple gestures of friendship were to the NLF nationalists.

I have modified the translation in Mountain River somewhat in the last three lines to reflect the metaphor used in the original Vietnamese verse.

For further information on the land policies and other social reforms, together with the challenges, corrective measures, and achievements in the DRV between 1950s-1960s, see Kolko (especially 56-71), and Woodside (Community). In summary, the land reform achieved a great deal in overturning the exploitative system of landlordism previously encouraged under the colonial regime. Thanks to the new land policies, general equity was established among the peasantry, and the rural poor had land to till on for the first time since colonialism. However, the movement also occasioned serious abuse of power by both the revengeful peasantry and the overzealous (and occasionally corrupt) cadres in the Land Reform Tribunal, resulting in the death of some thousand people and the imprisonment of thousands more. In 1956, Hồ Chí Minh took it upon himself to publicly apologize for the abuse committed during the land reform. Trương Chinh, who had been in charge of the movement, was relieved of his position as Party Secretary General, and a campaign was launched to correct the errors and rehabilitate those unjustly prosecuted. It
was a traumatic time in the history of the DRV, but in the end, the DRV leaders’ honesty and their capacity to learn from these errors went a long way in restoring, by 1959, much of the popular confidence in the DRV government that the land reform had shaken.

74 The incident is so called because the opposition was voiced in two journals edited by Phan Khôi, the *Humanities*, and the *Literary Selections*.

75 From Chê Lan Viên’s poem “Creation,” quoted in Jamieson (164).

76 *Văn Nghệ* (Arts and Letters), no. 9, March 1958, quoted in Jamieson (266-7).

77 *Văn Nghệ*, no. 12, quoted in Jamieson (270-1).

78 Western intellectuals often regard this “living with the people” as either forced labor or hypocrisy, mostly due to their perception of the grim Chinese cultural revolution. In truth, it was neither as far as Vietnam is concerned. The Vietnamese writers and artists on the whole enjoyed the exercise thoroughly for the change of scenery and enrichment of experience, and quality works about the life of the common people would not have resulted if not for these organized trips. Later, in the 1980s, I was among the university students going to the countryside every summer when school was out to help the peasants (students from the Polytechnic University sometimes work in factories), and we the students enjoyed the time as much as the writers and artists did, despite the girls’ fear of leeches, and occasional inevitable grumblings about the bothersome mosquitoes, unfamiliar manual work, or the comparative lack of comforts during such trips. As far as I know, my friends and family members have always looked back at those times with great fondness and something akin to gratitude. Thanks to these trips, we the future engineers and intellectuals of Vietnam grew up with first-hand knowledge of life outside the city, and sympathy and understanding for the peasantry and manual labor—all of
which were credited for making deeper, more well-rounded people out of the otherwise ivory tower intellectuals of the cities. Most of all, the affection and care we received from the peasants and workers, together with the deepening friendships (not to mention romances that developed) among ourselves made these trips very memorable experiences indeed.

Information about DRV writers noted in this section has been gleaned from works by Bowen, Chung, and Weigl; Phan Cự Đệ and Hà Minh Đức, and from my own knowledge and reading. So is the forthcoming information on NLF writers and their literature.

DRV artist Vũ Hy Thiều tells of his experience in South Vietnam in Christian Appy’s very informative Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides (190-4).

See, for example, the editors’ note on Dương Thị Xuân Quy in The Hồ Chí Minh Trail. Xuân Quý was a female journalist from Hanoi, whose notes were published in The Hồ Chí Minh Trail and who was killed in a raid by South Korean troops in Quảng Nam province.

Quoted by Bowen, Chung, and Weigl from the Dictionary of Writers.

The translation of this poem and of the others in this section is mostly taken from, or with consideration of Bowen, Chung, and Weigl. In the quotes from “Ngon Đen Đúng Gác,” modifications have been made to better reflect the sense of currency and urgency of the struggle for independence and unification.

Quan ho is an ancient form of singing contests originating from Bắc Ninh province in the North. For the whole month of January (lunar calendar), teams of young men (lien anh) and women (lien chi) from the villages in the province gather at night to improvise
exchanges in melodic tunes and rhymes. This time-honored form of socialization and courting is still popular today in Bắc Ninh.

85 "Three ready" was a motto to incite revolutionary youth in the sixties: ready to fight, ready to work, ready to go to the front.

86 This is mostly my own translation from the original poem taken from yet another carefully edited, bilingual collection of Vietnamese poems from the war by Nguyễn Bá Chung and Kevin Bowen, entitled *6 Vietnamese Poets*.

87 Jamieson (241-5).

88 Durand and Huân (138). An explanation of the doctrine and Nhu's own ambiguous understanding of it can be found in FitzGerald (119-20). The Cấn Lao Party and its essentially secret intelligence service within the RVN organizations are discussed in Sheehan (179-80).

89 For a look at Vietnamese literature in French, see Yeager's *The Vietnamese Novel in French* and *Vietnamese Voices: Gender and Cultural Identity in the Vietnamese Francophone Novel* by Natalie Huỳnh Châu Nguyễn.

90 Information on RVN literature (1954-75) came from Durand and Huân; Công Huyên Tôn Nữ Nha Trang; Yeager; and from my own knowledge and reading while growing up in Hồ Chí Minh City (formerly Saigon).

91 For some information on antiwar sentiments in the RVN in 1968-1975, see Jamieson (250-4; and 318-29), although only a small fraction of the antiwar literature is covered, and the impact not discussed in full.
From handbooks published by the Liberation Association of Literature and Arts and from a letter by the Association to Nhân Dân ("The People"—the official newspaper of the Workers’ Party in the DRV) on July 27, 1962, quoted in Pike (190).

Pike (190-2), Tằng (83).

Durand and Huân (140). Nguyễn Đình Chiểu is the patriotic author of the popular and influential Luc Văn Tiến already discussed in Chapters II and III.

Bowen, Chung, and Weigl (Notes on the Poets); Phan Cự Đệ and Hà Minh Đức; Tạp Chi Văn Học (Literature Magazine).

See, for example, interviews with NLF writer Nguyễn Quang Sang and artist Dương Thanh Phong in Appy’s Patriots (215-6; 247-9).

This was a popular practice in both the DRV of North Vietnam and in NLF areas in South Vietnam, in civilian life as well as among the troops. The walls of our classrooms at schools in Hanoi in the 1960s and 1970s, from elementary to highschool, were also adorned with these gazettes composed by the pupils. Among the documents captured by the ARVN and Americans, many were these pieces of writing by individual PAVN or NLF soldiers (see, for example, Thanh Nguyễn and Bruce Weigl’s bilingual and highly informative Poems From Captured Documents).

“Thương hoài ngàn năm” [Love for a thousand years] has been translated into English and anthologized in James Banerian’s Vietnamese Short Stories. So is Nhà Ca’s “A Story for Lovers” discussed below.

Information on Duyên Anh is collected from two exile Vietnamese websites in the U.S., Dac Trung (dactrung.net) and Thoir Van (vietbay.com). The novella Áo Vong Tuoi Trẻ in Vietnamese is taken from www.dactrung.net.
For a different, American view of this story, see William Searle ("Women, Vietnamese").

For further discussion of Nhà Ca and Thụy Vụ, as well as of other RVN female writers from 1954 to 1975, see the RVN critic Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha Trang’s summary of the lives and works of female RVN writers between 1954-1975.

For a glimpse of RVN antiwar literature, albeit as seen through an American, RVN-favored point of view, see Jamieson’s Understanding Vietnam (246-54; 318-28).

From the Dictionary of Writers, quoted by Bowen, Chung, and Weigl (234-5).

In the jungle, each revolutionary fighter carried a long tube of rolled cotton, often called “ruột tửng” (elephant’s intestines), that could be filled with rice and other supplies and slung across the back.

The importance of this supply line is discussed by Bùi Tấn, a PAVN defector, in From Enemy to Friend: A North Vietnamese Perspective on the War (74-82).

From the Dictionary of Writers, quoted in Bowen, Chung, and Weigl (238).

The mountain range running North-South, along which the Hồ Chí Minh Trail runs, is a symbol of assistance, unification and resistance during the American war.

For a discussion of the history of classic Vietnamese women fighters and resisters in both military and literary arenas, see Chapter 2, “Riding the Tempest,” in Arlene Bergman’s Women of Vietnam, 30-37; see also Karen Turner’s Even the Women Must Fight. Suffice it to say that Vietnamese history and culture have always honored feminine attributes, both in women who chose passive resistance (like Kiều, the heroine of the Vietnamese equivalent of Romeo and Juliet, and Tố Tâm in the novel of the same name)
and in the more militant female combatants (such as Trương Vương, Bà Triệu, and Bùi Thị Xuân).

109 *Song of a Soldier’s Wife* has been translated into English by Huỳnh Sanh Thống and published bilingually.

110 Some of Hồ Xuân Hương’s poetry has been translated by John Balaban and published bilingually.

111 See, for example, Mai Thị Tứ and Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết, Ngọc Vinh Long (*Vietnamese Women*), and Huệ Tâm Hồ Tài (*Radicalism*).

112 The rare tasks a few RVN women did included some office work in the ARVN and some involvement in the Phoenix program. There has been no recorded literary work, fiction or non-fiction, on these ARVN women.

113 Mary Ann Tetreault suggests that Vietnamese male admiration for women’s war service might be double-edged in “Women and Revolution in Vietnam.” On a tangential note, Cynthia Enloe’s *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives* has also identified the strategies military officials and their civilian supporters around the world use to ensure support from the female population.

114 Two American books that shed some light on the contribution of Vietnamese women to the national struggle against the Americans and their RVN ally are Sandra Taylor’s *Vietnamese Women at War*, and Kathleen Turner’s *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam*. For a Vietnamese revolutionary point of view, see Mai Thị Tứ and Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết’s *Women in Vietnam*.

115 For all his information about the NLF, the CIA expert Douglas Pike professes “doubt that the second in command of the Liberation Army is a woman” (428). Even thorough
scholars such as Neil Sheehan, the author of *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann in Vietnam*, a Pulitzer-winning history of the Vietnam War told in the form of the biography of an American Colonel who fought in the Mekong Delta from 1964 to 1972, notably omitted any mention of the famous General Nguyễn Thị Định, Deputy Commander of the People’s Liberation Armed Forces at the time. In response, Mme. Định reportedly put this neglect down to male chauvinism, which existed even in Vietnam, a country with a long history of women generals (quoted in Taylor 47).

Kali Tal points out that this definition of Asian women as nothing more than accessories to American men is not limited to Vietnamese women alone. She argues that the flat female characters in American Vietnam war stories indicate male veteran writers’ unwillingness to deal with the dehumanizing effects of the war, as these “fictional relationships with Asian women, whether mistresses or prostitutes, do not indicate any feeling on the part of either character or author that women are human beings deserving of respect” (82).

The picture can be found in both Turner (7) and Taylor.

“Khoi” has been translated into English and included in a collection of short stories by NLF and DRV writers entitled *The Fire Blazes*.

Information on Anh Đức is taken from the *Dictionary of Writers* (11-14).

Excerpts from *Hòn Đất* in this study are mostly my own translations, although with some consideration of the 1969 English version translated and published by Hanoi’s Foreign Languages Publishing House.

The villagers and guerrillas address one another by their place in the family. Mẹ Sâu, for example, means “Mother Six,” indicating her place in her blood family in the
Southern style. Similarly, the leader of the guerrillas is called Anh Hai Thép, or "Brother Two Thép." This practice is described as the "Children of the People" strategy in Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake*.

122 To quote Karen Turner, "if one were to argue that the women who lived in tunnels operating communication equipment, or tended the wounded in jungle hospitals, or defused bombs on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, did not really face combat and were therefore not 'real' soldiers, then we must accept that most American men who served [in Vietnam] were not combatants either" ("North Vietnamese Women" 195).

123 On this point, a good comparison would be Nguyễn Thị’s *Nữ Ý Mê Cầm Súng* (The mother who holds a gun). Ứt Tịch is remembered for her very simple, honest, and straightforward statements like "I’d fight till the last hem of my trousers." While such sayings are characteristic of Southern manners and are unimpeachable coming from a real woman-hero, they might not befit a literary character like Sứ.

124 The stress on femininity is found in another of Anh Đức’s war stories. Quê of "Smoke" aids the revolution in concrete and feminine ways, such as hiding revolutionaries, treating their wounds, providing them with necessities, and preparing for their escape route after an attack. Her tears of compassion and the way she bears up under a bayonet wound to her shoulder so that the underground shelter in which he is hiding remains undiscovered encourage Hữu to fight even more determinedly. Her feminine virtues of self-sacrifice and gentleness emphasize the magnitude of the enemy’s cruelty and evoke the instinctive male protectiveness in the young revolutionary—to the benefit of the national cause. Her courage and quick mind in the face of danger, on the other hand, challenge him as a man to outperform in his revolutionary duties.
In *Even the Women Must Fight*, Turner quoted Nguyễn Quốc Dũng, a DRV military historian and veteran, that women’s active participation after 1965 tipped the balance between victory and defeat for the Vietnamese in the fiercest period of the 30-year-long war (38).

Út Tịch, a guerrilla leader famous in both North and South Vietnam during the war, was celebrated in Nguyễn Thị’s *Người Mẹ Cảm Súng* [The Mother Who Holds a Gun], arguably the best known documentary narratives of the war, which unfortunately is not available in English. A mother of six, she organized political struggles in which large groups of women confronted ARVN soldiers and police and demanded compensation for their dead, reduction of taxes, and an end to the draft. In addition, months into her pregnancy, she still led guerrilla attacks and ambushes. Út Tịch is mentioned in various documents and reports by the NLF’s People’s Liberation Army. She tells her own story in the English version of *Heroes and Heroines of the Liberation Armed Forces of South Vietnam*. I am indebted to Sandra Taylor for the American source of this story.

About General Đinh, Lưu Trọng Lư, a well-known male poet (see Chapter II of this study), praises both her martial and maternal sides thus:

*Nguyễn Thị Đính:*

In the assault you command a hundred squads.

Night returns, you sit mending fighters’ clothes.

Woman general of the South

You’ve shaken the brass and steel of the White House. (Christine White 180)
In her memoir, she tells us how, as a mother about to be jailed by the RVN, she was so anguished she broke into tears when forced to turn over her seven-month-old son to her mother. Imprisoned and tortured, she kept her spirits up by embroidering pillow cases for her family while at the same time persuading male prisoners to kill a particularly nasty guard to set an example for the others.

The recognition of femininity alongside encouragement for feminism by the NLF and DRV has prompted American scholars such as Kathleen Barry to declare in the introduction to *Vietnam's Women in Transition* that Vietnamese feminism is not "radical," but closely linked with "family happiness" and framed in terms of national liberation (10). What Barry means is that the same virtues praised in the traditionally ideal woman continued to be extolled in post-1945 revolutionary literature, since those virtues served the cause of national liberation and socialist construction. Furthermore, Margaret R. Higgonet argues in "Civil Wars and Sexual Territories" that "nationalist wars against an external enemy repress internal political divisions and with them feminist movements." Karen Turner, on the other hand, recognizes that motherhood, family and overall feminine qualities are favored by Vietnamese women over what she calls "full gender equality," since, as she explains, “the family still stands as their only bulwark in a very uncertain political and economic system" (185-204).

Joining an artillery battalion in the second wave of NLF attack in Saigon, Nguyễn Thị died in May 1968, the same year the heroine of his most famous documentary, Út Tich, did.

In Vietnam, children are supposed to care for their parents in their old age, which is a part of their filial piety. “Traveling on lumps of pre-cooked rice and pickled seafood” is
the literal translation of a common expression among the peasants of the South, who live on such kinds of food when away from home on a long trip. Regrettably, much of the local color, illustrated in the different accents and manners of speaking of Southern Vietnamese people (in this case, of an elderly Southern woman), is inevitably lost in translation.

132 In her own words, “hiện thực [... ] có vẻ hơi tròn trĩnh,” (45), literally, a reality that seems slightly rounded off.

133 In Đức Hạnh’s opinion, “những cảm xúc nóng bong, mạnh liệt hoặc tươi mới cần được tăng cường hơn nữa” (45), literally, the burning, intense or fresh emotions need to be enhanced.

134 Đức Hạnh writes, “cái hướng dẫn ngồi butt nhà văn [... ] là văn đề, là sự kiên, là phong trào chứ không phải là cuộc sống của bản thân nhân vật” (46), literally, what guides the author’s pen seems to be the issues, events, movements, and not the lives of the characters.

135 Just as during Tết 1968, official policies might occasionally fail in curbing the possible settling of long-time blood vendetta by individual locals, but it was by no means regular or instigated by policy (Sheehan, After the War 117).

136 To illustrate the meagre allowances in the 1980s, we university students were given the highest ration of rice (17kg), the same amount as those working in state divisions of heavy manual labor. The other necessities, which were dealt out in strict rations, included, per month per person, some stationery, a bottle of fish sauce, a bar of soap for cleaning, 500g detergent for washing, 200g pork, 300g sugar and a can of condensed milk, all of very low quality.
At the same time, Kolko suggests that, in some cases where defunct RVN’s talents were utilized, it ended up as a misjudgement rather than wisdom for the SRV. A case in point is Nguyễn Xuân Oanh, RVN vice premier in charge of the economy since 1964, who was later invited to work in the SRV as then-Chairman Võ Văn Kiệt’s assistant in the crucial State Planning Commission. According to Kolko, Oánh had an important part in the hodgepodge of disastrous economic policies spun by the SRV in the renovation (đổi mới) attempt—policies that, moreover, deserted the socialistic orientation the SRV claimed to be adherent to, and likely to result in the worst of both capitalism and socialism (25-6; 32-3).

Sheehan (After the War 84-5).

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of unification, Nguyễn Văn Linh expressed regret over the treatment of ex-RVN personnel in an interview by Tin Nhanh (vnexpress.net). Under his tenure, the cooperation between Vietnam and the United States on MIA Americans also improved, which eventually helped to ease U.S. sanctions on Vietnam in the 1990s.

From Mountain River (137). The translation is my own.

From Nguyễn Minh Chau’s essay “Writing on the War,” published in the Văn Nghệ (Literature and Arts) weekly in 1978, quoted by Bowen, Chung, and Weigl (xxi).
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