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To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese-American Culture

NEWSLETTER # 119

SEPTEMBER 2018

Vietnam's Catholics

Bennett Murray

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2160242/vietnams-catholics-cross-china-and-all-communists>

With his wizened brow, clerical collar and priestly air, Father Anton Le Ngoc Thanh seems an unlikely poster boy for political dissidence.

Yet the priest at the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer in Ho Chi Minh City pulls no punches when it comes to violating political taboos.

Father Anton Le Ngoc Thanh. Photo: Handout

He has been arrested 10 times, is banned from leaving the country and last year hosted a provocative rally that not only honored veterans of the defeated South Vietnamese US puppet state, but displayed its three-striped yellow flag – an act that has landed other activists lengthy prison terms. Yet, as Father Anton points out, being Catholic in a communist country involves suffering – plenty of it.



"[In Vietnam and China] Catholics face the same suppression: churches are demolished, priests and pastors get arrested, literary works smear Catholics," he says. As a politically active Catholic, Father Anton is far from alone. While Catholics make up just 7 per cent of Vietnam's population, they play an outside role in the nation's underground dissident movement.

Their numbers include some of the country's most recognizable

activists, including the imprisoned environmentalist blogger Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh, also known as Mother Mushroom, and Nguyen Van Dai, the founder of the Brotherhood for Democracy movement who went into exile in Germany in June after being convicted of sedition.

Le Dinh Luong, a pro-democracy activist and Catholic from Nghe An province, was sentenced to 20 years in prison and five years of house arrest on Thursday for attempting to "overthrow the people's administration" for, among other charges, inciting demonstrations that followed the 2016 chemical spill at the Formosa Ha Tinh Steel plant.

Catholics played a prominent part in those protests, which called for greater compensation for fishermen affected by the spill, and retaliatory attacks against them have been common, according to Luong's daughter-in-law, Nguyen Thi Xoan, who blames government agents for a string of attacks on Catholic places of worship.

"They infiltrate the churches, demolish statues of God and the Virgin Mary, they insult the Catholics by destroying what is sacred to us," she says.

In June, Catholics also took part in protests against a planned law on special economic zones that many Vietnamese feared would give China a territorial foothold in their country.

The demonstrations, deemed illegal, were ultimately suppressed by police – but the law has since been shelved.

The discontentment stemmed over a provision that would have, under certain circumstances, al-

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Vietnam's Catholics...

lowed foreign firms to take out 99-year leases within the special economic zones. But for many in Vietnam the 99-year provision sounded uncomfortably like Britain's lease on its former colony Hong Kong, and while the law did not specifically mention China, it was inferred that its large neighbor to the north would take advantage of the special economic zones. Further fueling the fire was Vietnam's deeply embedded anti-Chinese sentiment. In a country where every city has streets named after ancient warriors canonized as heroes for resisting Chinese expansion, fears of Beijing's regional ambitions run deep, and Catholics are no exception.

Indeed, Vietnam's Catholic dissidents hold a particular disdain for China, where laws surrounding the practice of religion are far more constrictive.

"Catholics know the communists are godless and they do things for their own benefit rather than the people's interest," says Nguyen Thi Minh Nguyet, 36, from Ho Chi Minh City suburb, who was among the thousands who took to the streets in June.

The 2007 trial of the dissident Catholic priest Nguyen Van Ly, 60. The court sentenced him to eight years in jail for spreading propaganda against the state. Photo: AFP

Her fellow protester, Nguyen Ngoc, 36, puts it in starker terms: "Jesus Christ said you must witness the truth. Commies hate the truth."

"Almost [all] Vietnamese hate China communists, but I don't hate the Chinese, I sympathize with them," Ngoc, adds. "I know that the true Catholic priests in China are trying so much to survive with commies."

Their attitudes appear to be at odds with the official line that relations are cordial between the church and Vietnam's Communist Party.

Unlike in China, where the only legal Catholic association rejects the authority of the Vatican, the Vietnamese government allows the church to be in full communion with the Holy See. Meanwhile, Vietnam's Law on Belief and Religion, passed in 2016 by the National Assembly, guarantees the right of the people to practice faiths recognized by the government, provided the religious organizations report their activities to the government.

Even so, the single party state is suspicious of any alternative power structures, says Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at the New York-based Human Rights Watch.



Vietnam Jails Two US Citizens for 14 Years for Trying to "Overthrow State"

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/vietnam-jails-two-americans-for-14-years-for-trying-to-overthrow-state/ar-BBMmpNJ?ocid=spartandhp>

A court in Vietnam has sentenced two Americans to 14 years in jail for to "attempting to overthrow the state", state media reported.

James Nguyen and Angle Phan were accused of plotting to hijack radio stations to broadcast anti-state messaging and of arranging anti-state protests, as members of the California-based Provisional National Government of Vietnam.

The pair had apparently been brought over from the US to "develop their force and direct other members in the country to conduct anti-state activities."



James Nguyen sentenced to 14 years in jail

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2 US Citizens Jailed in VN...

The previously unknown group had been declared a terrorist organisation by the Vietnamese government in January after 15 of its members were charged with an alleged failed plot to blow up the airport in Ho Chi Minh City.

In this week's trial, which lasted two days, 10 members of the group were convicted, including Nguyen and Angle – who are Americans of Vietnamese descent. They will be deported from Vietnam after the completion of their 14 year-jail terms.

According to the state news agency, the judge said the defendant's acts were "particularly serious, violating national security, sabotaging the country's stability and development, causing instability in political and social order and going against the interests of the state."

In a statement, the US embassy said: "We will continue to monitor Mr Nguyen's welfare, advocate for him and provide consular services until his release." A spokesperson for the embassy said it was not authorised to speak on behalf of Phan.

Vietnam regularly jails bloggers, activists and anyone seen to be promoting anti-government messaging, but the crackdown has increased in recent months. In response to a rare street protest last month, when hundreds took to the streets to voice anger at growing Chinese influence in the country, the government jailed dozens who took part.

The Provisional Central Government of Vietnam organisation was formed in the 1990s by former soldiers who fought on the side of the US-sponsored south Vietnam, the side which lost in the Vietnam war.

The group is dedicated to bringing about "free and fair elections in Vietnam" and "to unify all the hope and desire of the freedom-loving Vietnamese to become a National Resolution to discharge the dictatorship of communist in Vietnam," according to their website.

Leadership & Vision *Tan Nguyen*

Oct. 2016

In the later months of each year, the Vietnamese community customarily holds a ceremony to commemorate the deaths of two brothers who created and led the First Republic of Vietnam (1954-1963). Their memorable and inspiring leadership vision has not yet been dealt with adequately. This essay considers the vision held by Ngo Dinh Diem (Mr Diem) for the future of the new Republic, tracing its development through the influence of traditional Vietnamese thought – *trung dung* - founded upon Proto-Confucianism, and discussing its advantages over Western models of government based in post-Cartesian rational thought – *logic*.

Leadership vision is considered to be the power of perceiving things to come, or a revelation or prophecy. A political vision would normally reveal a good or bad leadership to come. For example, before Mr Diem came to power, he predicted the failure of the two contemporary ideologies—Socialism with absolute dictatorship and Capitalism with Liberal Democracy—in their efforts to build a better world. Mr Diem's own political vision for the development of Vietnam's post-colonial society was distorted by the interests of the Cold War, and disappeared following his assassination in November 2, 1963.

In 2003, Professor Edward Miller of Harvard University, one of the Vietnam War revisionists, argued that historians had misunderstood Mr. Diem to be a conservative feudalist who was strongly against modernisation. Prof. Miller believed the influence of international politics arising from US interference into South Vietnamese politics hid the truth about Mr Diem's and his brother's vision of creating a genuine democracy in Vietnam. (*Dac San* 2014, p. 29)

However, aside from international politics, I would argue that the different habits of thinking between East and West have made this [controversy](#) more complicated to comprehend. On the 53rd anniversary of the deaths of the brothers, I will take this opportunity to search for the truth, firstly to pay tribute to all those who died for the noble cause of the country, and secondly to offer Vietnam's younger leadership generations a new paradigm of development for their own consideration.

A-The views of Ngo Dinh Diem on the viability of Communism and Capitalism

The Cold War which split the world into two rival zones in the last century was a fierce competition between two political ideologies or paradigms of development: **Socialism** (promoted by USSR and China) and **Capitalism** (led by the USA and Western industrial democracies). Mr Diem witnessed these two models of development at work, in Vietnam and around the world. At

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the end of the 1940s, he had predicted that neither would lead to a better world. He stated that: "Communist Democratic Centralism saddles their subjects with crushing working regimes and treats people like animals. Whereas, the Parliamentary Democracy and Capitalism attempts to place feudal capitalists above the working class and maintains colonialism to enslave and exploit the people of weaker nations." (*The Road to the Cause: Independence and Freedom*, 1955, volume 2, p.104) Mr Diem's criticism addressed the fundamental characteristics of both Communist Dictatorship and Capitalist Liberalism; He argued that both paradigms are focused only on the development of political and economic structures, at the expense of human happiness, this focus being a main cause of uneven development and a world in chaos.

Historical situations

In the period 1975 - 1995, the Vietnamese people saw Hanoi's Communist Government put into practice an imported model of development from the West, Socialism, and dramatically failed to deliver what they had promised.

In 1990, Former General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party (SCP), Russian President Yeltsin declared himself in favour of a market-oriented economy and a multiparty political system, stating that "Communism must be discarded because it is unrepairable."

In the aftermath of the Cold War, Mr M. Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1985 until 1991, put forward his idea of "calling for more co-operative instead of aggressive dealings in international relations." His ultimate goal was to save the SCP's ruling privilege in Russia. In reality, after the introduction of "glasnost and perestroika," Russia has fallen into the control of Western Industrial Democracies (G7), with endless crises arising from the application of Capitalist development.

In 1995, for the survival of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), Hanoi was forced to open the country to the West and adopted a Free Market Economy in the direction of Socialism. Thus, Mr Diem's prediction of the lack of viability of both Communist and Capitalist models became a prophecy.

Now, after more than 20 years of modernisation, Vietnamese society today has plunged into chaos. It has been driven perilously close to destruction, from environment to health, from politics to economy, to education etc. For instance, the living environment has been seriously damaged: deaths from cancer have been recorded at the highest rate in the world; people have been desperately seeking avenues to leave Vietnam.

A Vietnamese economic specialist, Mrs Pham Chi Lan looks at the question of why so many people have wished to leave Vietnam. She stated that: "It was expected that the improvement in living conditions would have made people have a second thought about leaving Vietnam. Conversely, apart from the improvement in living conditions and better incomes, there other issues that arise in daily life which have made people feel unhappy and insecure . . ." A member of Parliament, Mr Truong Trong Nghia, agreed with Mrs Chi Lan that: "Not because the country is poor, but because people feel unhappy and unsafe because of the laws."

The heart-spirit issues, such as *being unhappy and unsafe*, clearly expose how a Vietnamese person feels about his life in general. It is true that Vietnam has enjoyed a high rate of economic growth in the last twenty years, however there is a lack of balance. While the material lives of a number of people have improved significantly, the majority of people have experienced utter degradation, especially in terms of emotion and sentiment. In sum, Mr Diem's predictions about the un-viability of both Communism and Capitalism in building a better world have been borne out.

In 1989, the Deputy Director of the US Department of State, Policy Planning Staff, Dr Francis Fukuyama argued that Liberal Democracy is the best paradigm of government that humankind has ever achieved. In an article entitled *The end of history*, he argued that:

"There is a positive direction to current history, demonstrated by the collapse of authoritarian regimes of Right and Left, and their replacement (in many but not all cases) by liberal governments. A true culture has emerged, centring around technologically driven economic growth. And the capitalist social relations necessary to produce and sustain it, in the absence of a viable alternative to liberalism, history, conceived of as the clash of political ideologies, is at an end. The question remains of how to forge a rational global order that can accommodate humanity's restless desire for recognition without a return to chaos." (*Foreign Policy Journal: National Interests*, Summer 1989)

In terms of *logic*, Fukuyama is not wrong, because after the Cold War, Liberal Democracy became the only alternative. Many people would think it is the best form of government that they can have for modernisation. However, if Fukuyama is correct, why has the world, after more than twenty five years, become more and more chaotic? I believe his essay needs be reviewed for a number of reasons.

First, the evolution of human awareness has been divided into three stages, animism, ideologism and heart-spirit. (Kim

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Dinh, 1986, p.75) Heart-spirit is the highest stage of human awareness, whereas Communism and Liberalism are only at the stage of ideologism.

Secondly, according to Philosopher Kim Dinh, any philosophy or political doctrine based on concepts or ideologies will suffer constraints because it adopts scientific approaches and bases itself on the senses which can only extract images or concepts from sensible objects. Thus, a conceptual approach by necessity leaves out the entire domain of suitable and invisible things such as spiritual realities and human emotion—love for the country, happiness etc. Liberalism is an ideology, consisting exclusively of concepts, it is dry, soulless and lacks a great hope of unleashing energy (Kim Dinh 1986, p 75). Then how could it make a better world when it ignores people's happiness?

Thirdly, Parliamentary Democracy is based on the concept of "free elections." Those who have been elected are expected to represent people (majority) at the Parliament. However, in reality, they will vote under the instructions of a party, power groups, or interest groups. In other words, the system of Parliamentary Democracy is designed in theory to distribute "power" to people, but in practice the ruling class take it all back at the Parliament.

Similarly, the capitalist economic system is based on the concept of "supply and demand," which in theory, will develop into a state of equilibrium without any interference from a national government. This has not been seen to happen. Rather, we witness the ruling and wealthy classes acquire more and more power and wealth by means of the free right of private ownership. In a society, the gap between rich and poor tends to become unbridgeable.

This explains why economic theorists are interested in the development of economic structures or paradigms at the expense of human emotions and sentiments. An editorial in *The Atlantic* (2014) argued that "It's still not the end of history 25 years after Francis Fukuyama's landmark essay, liberal democracy is increasingly beset. Its defenders need to go back to the basics." Both Communist Absolutism and Capitalist Liberalism share the same ultimate goal: all are for "power and wealth." The only difference is that the Communists are more exposed while the Capitalists apply more subterfuges.

We are reminded that Mr Diem pointed out that: "Democratic Centralism of the Communists disregards the dignity of human beings and considers men as animals. Parliamentary Democracy and Capitalism on the other hand attempt to place feudal capitalists above the working class and maintain colonialism to exploit peoples of weaker nations."

Prof. Miller indicated that Mr Diem was misunderstood to be a conservative feudalist who was against modernisation because he denied the viability of the two current and influential paradigms of development and advocated for a third road. I do not believe this was a genuine misunderstanding: on the contrary, he was intentionally characterised as a reactionary for political reasons.

He had, in fact, argued that the backwardness of the country required his government to put the issue of *food and clothing for people* as the first priority on his government's agenda. Therefore, in order to increase the living standard of the post-colonial society of South Vietnam, he considered capitalist modernisation as the only tool that could help to achieve his goal of a genuine democracy—what he called a "moral regime." It was a regime in which everybody, from the ruling class to the people, must be aware of their duty to respect and develop the common interest. Naturally, the application of collective good sense must ultimately make things better, leading to the goal of a *moral regime*.

Without eat, Way is impossible

I believe Diem's idea of harmonising the best ideas from both East and West, material and spiritual, has its roots in Vietnam's traditional culture. Vietnam has a wise saying: "Without eat, Way is impossible." Mr Diem knew that Capitalist Liberalism based on *logic* has made much progress in technical affairs while it has made less progress in other areas, such as human affairs. He needed Capitalist Liberalism to help him modernise his country before he could embark on realising the plan of a *moral regime*. Capitalist Liberalism is needed for social development, even if it brings about uneven development. When three fourths of the world's population currently suffer malnutrition it is a choice we have to make. This is not to assert that liberalism and democracy are in the ascendant. Fukuyama has tried to confuse us by obscuring the truth.

The issue here is that the West has successfully achieved the stage of "Eat," by clinging onto the *logic* civilisation of technical affairs for almost two thousand years, yet has not advanced to the next stage, which is "Way." Fritjof Capra, in his book, *The Turning Point*, wrote: "Our clinging to the mechanistic world view of Newton and Descartes has brought us perilously close to destruction" (1992, Ch. I). My answer is that at this stage of technical progress or *logic* civilisation, the powerful and the rich have benefitted most. From this arises the generalisation that any modernisation which overlooks human emotions and happiness is ultimately meaningless.

Professor Trinh Thi Lam, who has been living under Vietnam's Marxist Capitalism, tells us about how much human dignity is worth in this system:

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"Isn't our country so ironical? After 4,000 years, the people have still refused to grow. After 4,000 years the people have still asked for feeding." And under a Free Market Economy in the direction of Socialism, "There are unusually huge sticky-rice cakes" and "Projects and memorial monuments worth thousands of billions, whereas the value of the human life worth only a finger nail."

Is it possible that the current Western models of development based on *logic* have reached their limit and are now unable to cope with the problem?

"Đạo" is the alternative that Diem chose and advocated. If we already have a life of abundance, then the next step should be a life of joy, which Mr Diem attempted and considered to be the highest stage of human development. In this approach, he advocated for an additional habit of thinking in conjunction with the traditional *logic* of the West.

Dr Edward de Bono says in his book, *I am Right - You are Wrong: From this to the New Renaissance: From rock logic to water logic*:

"There are those who see a real need for a sort of New Renaissance. They are tired of arguments, polemics, confrontations, conflicts and problems that cannot be solved. They see serious threat to the environment; third world debt and poverty; . . . and from the innate defects of human nature, which will always be short-sighted, selfish, greedy and aggressive." (1990, p. 2) Vietnam ceased to be a French colony 60 years ago, yet the habit of thinking of *logic* is still the one that decides what is right and what is wrong in Vietnamese daily life. For instance, the civil war between Vietnamese Nationalists and Communists was stopped by the Americans 40 years ago. However, the Vietnamese in general are still in constant conflict with one another, each defending what he believes in: he knows he is right. Anyone who disagrees with him must be wrong, indicating that the state of enslaved thinking still dominates their reasoning.

Mr Diem knew and planned to liberate the Vietnamese from this state of mental slavery by advocating for a new habit of thinking. His plan was an exceptionally sound vision which deserves special attention from Vietnam's younger leaders.

Mr Diem also diagnosed and offered a purely Vietnamese "cure" to the two Western models, which was directed towards revitalizing the traditional democratic and humane values of Vietnam. Mr Diem believed that these values would assist him to realise his vision of making the post-colonial society of South Vietnam into a better world.

B Ngo Dinh Diem and the Renaissance of Vietnamese traditional values

Which traditional values were re-discovered?

Mr Diem revealed to historian Marguerite Higgins that:

We have a traditional democracy and a system of autonomous villages. That is a part of our tradition of Nho Giao (Proto-Confucianism) with customs, habits and duty of the people in the society. . . . are handed down by our ancestors via the cult of ancestors. We plan to re-discover these roots for the modernisation of our country." (Higgins, 1962, tr.166)

What are those habits and duties? They are the habit of traditional thinking of "**Trung Dung**" and the **duty** of loving communal interests (or collective good will). Mr Diem believed that the habit of thinking *trung dung* can neutralise the extreme, constrained, conflicting and inhumane nature of ideology or *logic*.

The Vietnamese traditional habit of thinking *Trung Dung*

According to the book of *trung dung*, "trung" means in the middle which is neither extreme nor too close. Anything which is within two opposite poles and does not closely lean toward either pole, is depicted as "trung." "Dung" means normal and usable. Anything which is morally acceptable and usable, is called "dung". "Trung and dung" come together to make the meaning of *trung dung*. (Phan Bội Châu, p. 320)

Under the concept of structuralism, *trung dung* is in the middle and is capable of creating a relationship between two opposite poles. Similarly, it is like the state of equilibrium between "demand and supply" in economics. In general, it is a heart-spirit reality which is considered to be the deepest and highest stage of the evolution of human awareness. *Trung dung* can offer a great prospect of unleashing spiritual energy with power to overcome all the negative characteristics of ideologies. The meaning of the habit of thinking *trung dung* can be compared with the "Middle Way" in Buddhism.

Therefore, *trung dung* itself can be seen as a cohesive system of thinking. It can perceive things with both heart and mind, whereas the habit of thinking *logic* can only see things with either mind or heart. Mr Diem strongly believed he could use the traditional habit of *trung dung* to neutralise the harshness and stiffness of the ideologies and reasoning of the West. In short, *trung dung* is not extreme but natural, and hence pro-humanity and intensely practical.

Mr Diem planned to make the post-colonial society of South Vietnam a better world, based on the re-discovery, from Vietnam-

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ese tradition, of the duty of people in the respect and development of collective interests which would make political, social and economic structures more viable, and lead to the realisation of an even modernisation. In fact, his plan to establish a regime of moral democracy can alleviate the negative implications of the role of science in current materialist civilisation. The power of the scientific system based on the “logic of causality” has now been questioned fundamentally: “Our science however is based upon the principles of causality, and causality is considered to be an axiomatic truth.” (*The I Ching or Book of Changes*, p.xxii). And more than half a century later, billionaire Steve Jobs (Microsoft) stated: “Blind devotion to a material life cannot bring about happiness because everything in the end (success and wealth) only levels with death. Spare some time in your life to develop and respect the duty of “the collective good.”

It is easy to talk about the habit of *trung dung*, but very few people can practice it. Mr Diem and his brother were exceptional leaders who dared to advocate *trung dung* and promote it to their people.

In 1957, the First Republic of Vietnam introduced the concept of “Personalism” to its people as a guide—a compass, to direct the nation onto the road of *trung dung*. Personalism was a philosophy that re-asserted and exalted human values, and their position in relationship to the universe and community. Importantly, it was also a political doctrine that advocated the establishment of institutions to encourage the widest development of human values. Personalism placed the emphasis on “man” as the basis for a solution to all human conflicts.

Personalism should not be mistaken for Mr Diem’s leadership vision. It was a torch that led the government and its people on the right course. It was also guidance for man’s life, reminding people about their duty and self-improvement, educating people of both the ruling and the ruled classes. At the superstructure, it assured that the regime would base its revolution of modernisation on *trung dung* (between 1954 and 1963) and directed it towards the service of the ultimate goal of people’s happiness.

In order to elucidate Mr Diem’s vision further, the following concepts mentioned by the brothers themselves may help to highlight the difference in thinking between East and West.

Thinking *trung dung* and the logic “independence vs. slavery”

Independence vs. Slavery

In terms of *logic*, independence means *no longer in a state of slavery*. However, with *trung dung* there is no such ideal independence in real life. For example, after Mr Diem had ordered the French out of Vietnam, did that mean the nation and its people were genuinely liberated? Or there were still many other forms of slavery in place? Mr Diem himself argued: “Though the nation has reclaimed its independence, if our people are still dependent upon food and clothing, then that national independence does not mean anything to me.” In other words, *food and clothing for 90% of the people* was the economic independence that Mr Diem really intended to achieve for his people.

After the French had left Vietnam, the intellectual class and high ranking military officers, who had been trained by the French in Vietnam or in France, were still dependent upon French culture and interests and on French ways of life. In particular, the habit of French thinking *logic* has still decided what is right and what is wrong in Vietnamese daily life. In daily life slavery continues to exist and we should concentrate on alleviating the intensity of the slavery state. And that is the way of thinking *trung dung*.

Logic “Totalitarianism vs. Democratic Liberalism”

According to *logic*, *Totalitarianism or Absolute Dictatorship* means there is no freedom in any form. But to *trung dung*, the absolute dictatorship advocated by the Communists is unreal and utopian. It does not exist in real life. Even Mao Tse Tung admitted that, “If I could do it, I would have made everybody look exactly alike.” The Communists planned to build a utopian society without classes and private ownership; yet they thoroughly failed in practice. Ironically, in its superstructure of absolute dictatorship there is still an institution called democratic centralism. The First Republic of Vietnam, for example, was accused of family dictatorship, but there were still rights to free speech and free organisations.

Mr Diem even argued that: “In order to get out of the situation of backwardness quickly, not in centuries, one had to take certain coercive measures. Then the issue of democratisation lies in the device of an acceptable limitation to coercion.” Such a device is nothing but a form of dictatorship.

In simpler terms, the difference between the two habits of thinking lies in *logic* of the West and *trung dung* of the East. *Logic* pays attention to only one of the two opposite poles—either democracy or dictatorship. Whereas *trung dung* places emphasis on the relationships between two opposite poles—within dictatorship there already is democracy; without eat [material], the

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Way (spiritual) is impossible. *Trung dung* was really the root from which sprang Mr. Diem's inspired leadership vision of a regime of morality or a moral democracy.

C- What is a moral democracy?

Mr Diem once said that: "Democracy is a moral system and workable only when the concept of common good is upheld by the people and public servants." The morality mentioned by Mr. Diem was really the spirit of love for communal welfare, the spirit of honour and national dignity, the spirit of honesty and righteousness. It implies a sense of its being voluntary, a result of self-improvement. In the traditional Viet Nho Culture, it was considered to be man's duty in the community.

How did Mr Diem translate this traditional spirit into practice? The core of his strategy was to create a moral democracy at the grass-roots level and use it as a strong, dynamic democratic basis for the eventual establishment of a substantive democracy at the top.

The political, economic and social structures of the First Republic of Vietnam (1954-1963) were in fact a prototype based on the spirit of Vietnam's traditional democracy values and a system of autonomous villages.

Vietnam's traditional democracy

Traditionally, Vietnam was an agricultural civilisation which first existed in around 4,000 BC in the gulf of Tonkin. According to historian William Durant, the history of civilisation extols it as "the most effective moral system ever found in peoples of any era." (1950, vol. I, p. 640) According to Kim Dinh, "The society living under that system has the greatest population, the most stable form of government and enjoys the greatest degree of happiness ever known by man. Slavery if such exists, is eliminated at a very early stage" (1980, p.79) Indeed, a popular saying among modern Vietnamese: *In peacetime, people slept without having to lock their doors*, reveals Viet Nho was really a moral society. Sleeping without locking the doors because everybody in the society respected the collective welfare and communal good sense. These are the kind of traditional values Mr Diem wished to revitalise for the purpose of establishing a moral democracy.

Formal Democracy at the level of Superstructure

The first vital step in transforming a monarchy into a republic and establishing a democratic framework started with the superstructure. The constitution planned to have an elected President with national power distributed between three agents: Legislative, Judiciary, and Executive. The constitution allocated more power to the President, allowing him limited coercive measures: these were intended to harmonize democratic theories with the complicated political reality of South Vietnam.

Substantive Democracy: A System of Strategic Hamlets

The second revolution took place at the grass-roots level in order to supplement the "formal and flimsy institutional democracy" at the top. The government attempted to establish a substantive democracy at the base.

The government launched a campaign of "the rural revolution or a true democracy at infra-structure level—called the National Program of Strategic Hamlets. A system of Strategic Hamlets, Agrovilles, and Densely-Populated Settlement Centres were erected throughout the South Vietnam countryside, embodying the traditional democratic spirit of Vietnam's autonomous villages.

According to Professor Nguyễn Đăng Thục of the Saigon State University, this kind of democracy was very popular in Asia and especially in Vietnam:

"At the infra-structure was a parliamentary democracy, autonomous and generally public; at the superstructure was a monarchy, national power was in the hands of a class (system) of mandarins. These two institutions were basically different but they co-existed in many centuries with so many historical changes, in peace time with prosperity and even in civil wars and foreign invasions." (1958, p.14)

This special kind of democracy could only be understood by thinking *trung dung*. Politically speaking, Monarchy and Democracy were two opposing institutions yet they did co-exist in the Vietnamese political structure.

Under the Diem regime, the System of Strategic Hamlets should be rightly seen as the resurrection of the spirit of Vietnam's traditional system of autonomous villages. The revolution at the base built each hamlet into a model of true democracy. Mr Nhu explained:

"The construction of the system of Strategic Hamlets is aimed at building a political, economic and social, revolution suitable

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for less-developed nations to fight three enemies: backwardness, disunity and Communists. Strategic Hamlets offer security and sustain the intimate bonds among people as well as the spirit of autonomy. It was truly a rule-by-the-law democracy which is capable of promoting communal advancement and social justice. The hamlet is therefore a place for self-improvement. Its ultimate goal is to rescue and liberate man totally from backwardness of Asian and African nations.” (1962, Vol 8, pp.118-119)

And to Ambassador E. Maneli from Poland, Mr Nhu re-asserted that:

“Both Americans and the Viet Cong have mistaken the Strategic Hamlets for a military institution which will be destroyed right after we have defeated the Viet Cong. They are wrong because their arguments base on *logic* and material theses (anti *trung dung*). The Strategic Hamlets are fundamental institutions of a direct democracy. When these institutions have developed to their highest and strongest extent, they become the seeds of national structures; until then the role of the Central Government will no longer be required.” (Maneli, p.145)

Under the leadership of President Ngo Dinh Diem, the ultimate goal of the construction of Strategic Hamlets was to turn the countryside into a zone of prosperity in which every family was given a house with a piece of land which was large enough to produce a decent income to cover each family’s basic needs. The Government attempted to assure the majority of the population a free life and participation in the management of public affairs in their own hamlets. Colonel Ted Serong, Head of the Australian Training Team in Vietnam, in an address in Washington said that: “The system of Strategic Hamlets was the greatest success in the Vietnam War and this has not been dealt with properly.” (M. Moyer, 2006, p.107)

Why did Mr Diem not import the essentially similar system of social welfare and healthcare from Australia instead of advocating for a third road which brought him political problems? When Mr Diem took the premiership, the national Bank was empty and he was faced with political and economic dangers which threatened to dismantle his government within two or three months. These included General Hinh’s revolt, General Bay Vien of Binh Xuyen gangster, and religious Sects challenging Mr Diem’s power, the need for quick re-settlement for nearly a million refugees from the North, the backwardness and disunity of a post-colonial society, and especially the Communist invasion from the North.

Instead, Mr Diem envisioned that he could turn South Vietnam into a better world by resurrecting the spirit of the traditional system of autonomous villages and developing the duty of the collective interests among the people. This really casts a light into Mr Diem’s courageous leadership vision. Historian Douglas Pike honoured his fight, calling it “the political miracle in South Vietnam.”

Unfortunately, the brothers’ viable vision with such political, economic and social successes was unfairly distorted and demonized by the school of “Diem-must-Go” within the US Department of State. This school was created to undermine the Diem Government and replace its leadership with Hanoi Communists for the purpose of persuading Peking to open China to the West, ultimately to serve the US interests of achieving final victory against the USSR in the Cold War. More information on the “Diem-must-go-School” and its policies and tactics, can be found in my books, *Mot Nuoc Co Doc* (2011) and *The Vietnam War Revisited: A Revolutionary View of US Foreign Policy* (2013).

Conclusion

In summary, Mr Diem’s vision is about the creation a Democracy of Morality by means of an even-handed development, an East-West consensus of capitalist liberalism with a system of autonomous strategic hamlets which was based on the spirit of Viet Nho society, arguably the most effective moral system ever found in peoples of any era.

In theory, to cope with the backwardness and complicated political reality of South Vietnam, Diem attempted to revitalize

- a. Vietnamese traditional habit of thinking *trung dung* and the duty of the collective interests among people;
- b. The spirit of the special traditional Vietnamese system of democracy with two opposing political institutions: At the superstructure was a monarchy and at the supra-structure was a parliamentary democracy.

In practice, the Government launched two revolutions at the same time, the first one was in the spirit of a monarchy, to establish at the top a “formal” parliamentary democracy and the second one, in the spirit of the system of autonomous villages of Viet Nho, to erect at the grass-roots level a direct democracy with a system of strategic hamlets.

And, the viability and the practicality of Mr Diem’s leadership vision could be highlighted by

- a. the attempt to add a humane face into the model of capitalist development is a positive direction to make this world a better place;

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Leadership & Vision...

- b. the core strategy of democratisation, to create a moral democracy at the grass-roots level and use it as a strong, dynamic basis for the national establishment of a substantive democracy at the top, is considered workable and suitable for the less-developed countries of Asia and Africa.

Vietnam today has a great opportunity to improve its national development and quality of life by quickly integrating itself into the international community, as a result of the US attempt to re-adjust the geo-political balance in the region following China's modernisation. This essay about Mr Diem's leadership vision perceives a positive evolutionary direction for Vietnam and this may be of interest to Vietnam's younger generation of leaders:

- a. In terms of the habit of thinking, it is imperative to cast off certain prejudices of the Western mind and familiarize yourselves with the Vietnamese traditional habit of thinking *trung dung*;
- b. As far as political structures are concerned, any particular model, whether authoritarian or democratic, is not the issue. The importance is that it is viable and practical and ultimately helps achieve the national goal of people's happiness. The strength of a structure will certainly come from exercising the duty of the collective good, by people (in the structure as well as in the society);
- c. On the development of national structures:
 - Vietnam's anti-Chinese literature is no longer effective in the new world order of Globalisation, however an arms race should be considered as a last resort;
 - There is a great chance to develop an anti-Chinese economy in the future, primarily focused on the development of tertiary industry. Eventually, change in the regional geo-political environment will put Vietnam in a similar position to Singapore when the latter was separated from Malaysia.

A proper and decent preparation for development is critical to making Vietnam a better place in the early part of the 21st Century. Again, responsibility for this lies with Vietnam's younger generation of leaders.

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Obituary: Bui Tin *Mike Ives*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/13/obituaries/bui-tin-vietnam-dead.html>

August 13, 2018

Bui Tin, a North Vietnamese colonel who had a prominent role in the Vietnam War's final moments but later fled the country and became an unlikely critic of its ruling Communist Party, died on Saturday in France. He was 90.



Bui Tin, second from right, with an unidentified United States Air Force sergeant, as American troops evacuated Saigon in 1973. Bethmann Archive/Getty Images

His death, in the Parisian suburb Montreuil, went unacknowledged by Vietnam's state-run news media but was confirmed on Monday by his longtime friend Nguyen Van Huy, a fellow Vietnamese dissident who lives in France.

Mr. Huy said in a telephone interview that the exact cause of death was unknown but that Colonel Tin had been in a coma and had received kidney dialysis.

Colonel Tin personally accepted the surrender of South Vietnam in 1975. He was also present at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, when Vietnamese revolutionaries defeated French troops to secure their country's independence.

Though Colonel Tin was a high-ranking army officer and a onetime disciple of [Ho Chi Minh](#), the country's founding president, he went into exile in France in 1990. For years afterward he urged his former party comrades to embrace democracy and abandon what he saw as their moribund economic and political ideology.

"His exile embodies the tragedy of Vietnam, and Vietnamese intellectuals in particular," said Tuong Vu, the author of "[Vietnam's Com-](#)

[munist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology](#)," "as they found themselves in the stranglehold of a corrupt and violent regime that at one point appeared to represent their aspirations."

When Colonel Tin awoke on April 30, 1975, he probably did not expect to play a direct role in a pivotal moment in Vietnamese history. Later that morning, he rode aboard a North Vietnamese tank to the presidential palace in Saigon. There, he walked inside to find Gen. Duong Van Minh, the last president of South Vietnam, sitting in a conference room.

Colonel Tin was not a commander but the deputy editor of an army newspaper, Quan Doi Nhan Dan. Because he was the highest-ranking North Vietnamese officer in the room, however, it made sense for him to formally represent the winning side.

"I have been waiting since early this morning to transfer power to you," General Minh told Colonel Tin, according to a description of the scene in the 2002 book "[Our Vietnam: The War 1954-1975](#)," by A. J. Langguth.

"There is no question of your transferring power," was the colonel's tart reply. "Your power has crumbled. You cannot give up what you do not have."

Colonel Tin then reassured General Minh that he had nothing to fear; it was only the Americans who had been beaten, he said.

"If you are a patriot, consider this a moment of joy," he said, before making small talk about the general's tennis game and orchid collection. "The war for our country is over," he added.

April 30 is now celebrated as Reunification Day in Vietnam. The day commemorates the end of the war as well as the change of Saigon's name to Ho Chi Minh City.

Many South Vietnamese officials would be imprisoned for years after the war in what the Communist Party called "re-education camps." Nevertheless, debates within the party would rage for decades over the role that Marxist-Leninist dogma should play in the country's postwar development.

During a trip to France in 1990 — just as Vietnam's main patron, the Soviet Union, was crumbling — Colonel Tin [declared himself a political dissident](#) and complained that his country was troubled by "bureaucracy, irresponsibility, egoism, corruption and fraud."

But Mr. Vu, the historian, said that if Colonel Tin had hoped his defection would bring broad political change in Vietnam, he miscalculated. "He underestimated the resilience of Vietnamese Communism and the regime's tight control over its officials through a combination of fear and rewards for compliance," Mr. Vu said.

Bui Tin was born on Dec. 29, 1927, in Nam Dinh, a northern Vietnamese city about 50 miles south of Hanoi.

Colonel Tin, whose father had been a mandarin in Vietnam's last royal court, became one of a small number of educated Vietnamese who rallied to Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary cause, Mr. Vu said.

Many of those intellectuals later turned against the Communist Party, which dragged a unified Vietnam through disastrous postwar experiments in collectivized agriculture.

Colonel Tin saw the Soviet bloc's disintegration as the right moment for his own political about-face. The Communist Party's leadership "failed to bring liberty and prosperity to Vietnam," he [wrote in The Washington Post in October 1991](#).

"Rather than improve the abysmal condition of the population, they have blindly pursued sectarian policies designed to maintain their

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Obituary: Bui Tin...

power," he added.

Even before his defection, Colonel Tin was known as something of a maverick. Notably, he discovered and published Ho Chi Minh's last will and testament, proving that Ho had wanted his ashes scattered around Vietnam. The discovery exposed what Colonel Tin said was the fraud behind the party's decision to build a mausoleum in Hanoi for the country's founder.

Colonel Tin might someday have become chief of the Communist Party "if he had only thought about himself," said Vo Van Tao, a Vietnamese political activist in the southern city of Nha Trang. "But he was an independent thinker with a democratic outlook who disagreed strongly with the regime."

Mr. Huy, the colonel's friend, said that Colonel Tin is survived by his wife, Le Thi Kim Chung; a daughter, Bui Bach Lien; a son, Bui Xuan Vinh; four siblings; and five grandchildren.

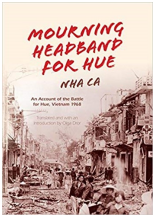
Today, Vietnam is a haven for foreign investors seeking a place with cheap labor and a relatively stable political environment. And despite steady waves of online dissent from the Vietnamese public, the party has maintained its grip on power.

It apparently never forgave Colonel Tin, who forged a friendly relationship with the United States soon after going into exile.

In 1991, Colonel Tin traveled to Washington and [testified before a Senate committee](#) that dealt with American prisoners of war. He also met with Senator John McCain of Arizona, a former prisoner of war in Hanoi, to discuss what the senator later described as their "mutual interest in promoting democracy in Vietnam."

After Colonel Tin spoke to the committee, Mr. McCain approached him and stretched out his palm for a handshake. He got a hug instead.

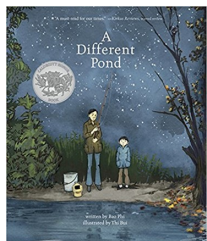
Mourning Headband for Hue: *Nha Ca*



Vietnam, January, 1968. As the citizens of Hue are preparing to celebrate Tet, the start of the Lunar New Year, Nha Ca arrives in the city to attend her father's funeral. Without warning, war erupts all around them, drastically changing or cutting short their lives. After a month of fighting, their beautiful city lies in ruins and thousands of people are dead. Mourning Headband for Hue tells the story of what happened during the fierce North Vietnamese offensive and is an unvarnished and riveting account of war as experienced by ordinary people caught up in the violence.

Available on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Mourning-Headband-Hue-Account-Vietnam/dp/0253021642/>

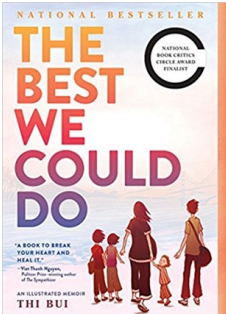
A Different Pond: *Bao Phi*



A 2018 Caldecott Honor Book that Kirkus Reviews calls "a must-read for our times," A Different Pond is an unforgettable story about a simple event—a long-ago fishing trip. Graphic novelist Thi Bui and acclaimed poet Bao Phi deliver a powerful, honest glimpse into a relationship between father and son—and between cultures, old and new. As a young boy, Bao and his father awoke early, hours before his father's long workday began, to fish on the shores of a small pond in Minneapolis. Unlike many other anglers, Bao and his father fished for food, not recreation. A successful catch meant a fed family. Between hope-filled casts, Bao's father told him about a different pond in their homeland of Vietnam. Thi Bui's striking, evocative art paired with Phi's expertly crafted prose has earned this powerful picture books six starred reviews and numerous awards.

Available on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Different-Pond-Bao-Phi/dp/1623708036/>

The Best We Could Do: *Thi Bui*



Thi Bui was born in Vietnam three months before the end of the Vietnam War, and came to the United States in 1978 as part of the "boat people" wave of refugees from Southeast Asia. Her debut graphic memoir, *The Best We Could Do* (Abrams ComicArts, 2017), has been selected as UCLA's Common Book for 2017, a National Book Critics Circle finalist in autobiography, an Eisner Award finalist in Reality Based Comics, and made several Best of 2017 book lists, including Bill Gates's top five picks. Bui is also the Caldecott Honor-winning illustrator of *A Different Pond*, a picture book by the poet Bao Phi (Capstone, 2017). Her short comics can be found online at the Nib, PEN America, and BOOM California. She is currently researching and drawing a work of graphic nonfiction about how Asian American Pacific Islanders are impacted by detention and deportation, to be published by One World, Random House.

Bui taught high school in New York City and was a founding teacher of Oakland International High School, the first public high school in California for recent immigrants and English learners. Since 2015, she has been a faculty member of the MFA in Comics program at the California College of the Arts. Thi Bui lives in the Bay Area.

Available on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Best-We-Could-Do-Illustrated/dp/1419718789/>