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SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE



To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese-American Culture

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A New Way of Being Vietnamese

Nghia M. Vo

How does one define the South Vietnamese, their war, and their patriotism? Is there such a thing as southern patriotism? During the war, westerners have raised questions about the South Vietnamese's nationalism, which was thought to be at best soft or non-existent based on the simple fact that they did not fight as hard as they should have to protect their identity. To link battle losses to a lack of mental vigor or even patriotism is to make a superficial and erroneous assumption about the Vietnamese or worse, to know very little about the lengthy and convoluted Vietnamese history.

The Vietnamese have a long history of fighting against outsiders as well as insiders from 939 CE until today to preserve their freedom. They fought wars, but also built a new nation out of nothing because South Vietnam did not exist prior to 1600 CE. The land they called South Vietnam once belonged to the Chams and Khmers, Hinduized cultures that once flourished on the Indochinese peninsula. (1) And the year 1600 marked the date when the Vietnamese—mature enough—began splitting up into two nations: north and south that would rise and compete with each other until today. This is not to deny its ancient and rich root that took place in its legendary history some four millennia ago.

The Vietnamese came from a noble and supernatural union—that could not expect to last—of a man, a mortal and a *tiên*, a fairy. After laying off one hundred “eggs”—from which developed fifty boys and fifty girls—the couple split up. This union became the earliest documented marital divorce in the world. (2) Not acknowledging this Vietnamese duality—there are at least two groups of people living in Vietnam—(3) has led to mountains of historical errors and misinterpretations until Bernard Fall wrote *The Two Vietnams* in 1965.

The South Vietnamese are reserved people who like to keep their feelings and views private and rarely share intimate feelings, except with trusted friends. This does not mean they are heartless or secretive. Schooled under strict Confucian teachings for the last two millennia, they perceive the self as egocentric that needs to be suppressed in favor of the common interest of society. Like in any other Asian society, individualism—by extension self-promotion—is rarely viewed as a virtue, although the degree of individualism rises as one goes from North to South Vietnam.

Vietnam is a country built by wars so much that wars are in the blood of the Vietnamese. They live in wars, with wars, and by wars. It seems that no Vietnamese generation has been immune to wars. If there was no major warfare, there would be some type of revolt or uprising somewhere that required to be dealt with.

During the last four centuries (1600-2000), Vietnam was embroiled in four major wars that lasted a total of 105 years. The First internecine Vietnamese War (1627-1675) pitted the North (*đàng ngoài*) against the South (*đàng trong*). Without external influence, the war dragged on for forty-eight years until both sides could no longer afford to fight and finally settled for a truce that kept *đàng ngoài* and *đàng trong* separated and divided for almost two hundred years (1627-1800). The Second Vietnamese War (1773-1800), which lasted almost thirty years began as a civil war in the South pitting the southern Tây Sơn against the Nguyễn before involving the northern Lê/Trịnh regime. It became an Asian regional war as the Siamese (Thai) and Chinese jumped in to fight on side or another; it finally ended with a definitive victory of the southern Nguyễn over the Tây Sơn and northern Lê/Trịnh. Then came the Third (1945-1954) and Fourth (1954-1975) Vietnam Wars, wars between the communists and the French then the Vietnamese and Americans respectively. Besides these major wars, there were innumerable other battles that pitted one region against another, one sect against another, one minority against the other... All these wars destroyed properties, harvests, countryside, and economy leaving people poor and destitute. Not acknowledging these Vietnamese wars would also lead to major historical errors.

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A New Way of Being Vietnamese...

Without wars, Vietnam would not have been enslaved by foreigners or insiders. Without wars, it would not have been a free country. Defeat and humiliation are followed by victories and triumphs. And the link between these events is war and death. Safer commented that the fabric of Vietnam is “soaked in humiliation and triumph and the blood of millions.” (4)

Wars create their own heroes. And people love to recount the heroic tales that make them proud of their heritage. There is nothing like a war victory to boost people’s emotions and hormones and to make them feel like enrolling into the army to wage more wars. Victory is intoxicating. There is nothing like a victory to pull people together.

Wars, however, are destructive and its people usually lose when they get involved in them, winners included. Carnage and destruction ravage each party’s countryside. If wars enslave people, they also destroy society, justice, properties, impoverish everyone, and tear families apart, especially with the way, Hồ, Giáp and Lê Duẩn prosecuted the war. Safer writes that Giáp is “utterly brainwashed by ambition. Sending so many young men to die is never a matter of moral hesitation... Brave men are the tools for carving one’s initials in the pantheon.” (5)

Wars are a tragedy, especially in Vietnam where they are so common. This has to do with Vietnam being a nation or coalition of polarized people. The last civil war between communist North and nationalist South Vietnam represents a fight over the *nature* of the Vietnamese society. Vietnamese fought over whether the country should become a western democratic society or a totalitarian communist country. The fact that the South Vietnamese lost does not mean that their cause—freedom and independence from the communists—was wrong. It simply means that they have been outmaneuvered. (6) Their cause will stand and be picked up by other people for democracy to prevail.

Four decades after the fall of Saigon, Americans still talk about “The Unending Debate” (7) and the “War that Never Ends.” (8) They argue back and forth about the orthodox, revisionist, and anti-revisionist theories and wonder why the ghost of the Vietnam War is still around fifty years later. They simply forget that it was a three-way war: North and South Vietnamese and Americans, or a five-way war if we include the Chinese and the Russians, not two like some authors have written in the past. Take one party out of the equation and the war does not make sense. Second, the Americans just packed their bags in 1973 and decided that, “Mission was accomplished and we are heading home” while the war was still raging on. Third, it was not a usual type of war because its end has been negotiated on the backs of the South Vietnamese. It was a war that ended unjustly, suddenly, and in such incoherent a manner that it has left many South Vietnamese short for words. It was that injustice that has caused the war to be debated again and again. What if the Americans had remained until the end? We never know the answer because it did not happen that way.

The war ended as a violent and bloody military conquest of South Vietnam by the communists. If the South Vietnamese could not withstand the communist invasion, they still continue to fight today for the freedom and human rights of the Vietnamese people remaining under the communist regime.

In sum, the South Vietnamese have been at the forefront of Vietnamese culture and civilization:

- It was their forebears who promoted the *nam tiến* (southern expansion) vastly expanding the nation from north to south while carving out under Lord Nguyễn Hoàng and his successors a frontier region named “South Vietnam.” They were in Huế in 1400, Qui Nhơn (1471), Nha Trang (1653), Saigon (1698), and Hà Tiên (1780). Without them, there would be no South Vietnam (see map below).
- A southerner Lord Nguyễn Ánh (King Gia Long) reunified the northern and southern parts of the country in 1800 doubling its original size and renaming it Đại Việt.
- Southerners fought against communism from 1954 to 1975 and paid dearly as a result. They not only lost their country and identities, but were also sent to reeducation camps only to escape later from communist enslavement as refugees.
- From 1975 onward, those who could escape abroad (3 million people) built diasporic communities worldwide that stand in opposition to the Hanoi communist regime. Today, 44 years after the fall of Saigon, they stand proud under the yellow South Vietnamese flag, which is better known overseas than the red communist flag. No other exiled community has been able to fly its flag overseas as proudly as the South Vietnamese. Second, the Vietnamese are rather insular people. Despite having a long coastline, they have never ventured very far from their shores. But in 1975, they spearheaded a massive sea escape from Vietnam that transformed 3 million insular people into modern seafarers. This was the largest diaspora in world history of a people in search of freedom and away from Marxism-Leninism. They settled worldwide in Australia, Africa, Asia, Europe, and America.

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A New Way of Being Vietnamese...



NAM TIẾN and DIASPORA

It is time to acknowledge the existence of two Vietnams as there are two Koreas and two Chinas: a communist Vietnam as well as a democratic Vietnam. It was the pioneering spirit of the South Vietnamese that brought them to South Vietnam from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries where they flourished and prospered into an independent and vibrant *đàng trong* (South Vietnam). Through sheer military power, they reunited Vietnam in 1800 and fought in the late 1970's to preserve its independence from communist attack and oppression. By escaping overseas following the fall of Saigon, they reaffirmed their rights and freedom to live in a land free of communism.

The fighting spirit and the pioneering zeal of the South Vietnamese characterize their NEW WAY of being Vietnamese. What define the South Vietnamese are the *nam tiến* and the diaspora. By leaving Hanoi in 1600 CE, they founded South Vietnam, and through the diaspora, by abandoning Saigon to the invading communists in 1975, they found TRUE FREEDOM elsewhere in the world.

NOTES

1. The Chams and Khmers lived in central and south Vietnam respectively.
2. Vo, Nghia M. *Legends of Vietnam. An Analysis and Retelling of 88 Tales*. Jefferson, NC, McFarland, 2012: 59-60.
3. Vo, Nghia M. *Reflections About the Vietnam War*. Create Space, 2015: 59-67.
4. Safer, Morley. *Flashbacks*. New York, St Martin. 1990: 20.
5. Ibid, 19.
6. Fall Bernard. *Last Reflections on a War*. Mechanicsburg, Stackpole Books. 2000: 220. Fall wrote, "*When a country is being subverted, it is not outfought; it is being out-administered.*" Italics are in the text.
7. Hess, Gary R. The Unending Debate. *Diplomatic History*. Spring 1994.
8. Anderson, David L. *The War that never Ends*. Lexington, KY, Kentucky University Press. 2007

A Pale Smoke *David Gerstel*

MARCH 30, 2018

A month ago, I decided to go to my house in Vermont from my home in Canada. The house is near Island Pond, about 25 miles below the Quebec border, in the area called the Northeast Kingdom. The region used to be largely agrarian, scarcely populated, farms with cattle, smallish in acreage, poor in cash. A land of subsistence farming, a practice left over from an earlier century.

There are men I know there, damaged men who raise chickens for eggs and sell them in the town. I regard it as northern Appalachia, land covered with forest that once was open land back when the king needed ship's masts and timber and sheep were important. In the beginning there were a few families, fewer than 20 in the 1830s. It stayed like that until a few years ago. Now it is second homes, snowmobiling, four-wheelers and soft ice cream.

After crossing through immigration and customs I normally stop to pick up groceries at the Derby Village Store, an old-fashioned market with linoleum-covered wood floors, narrow aisles and seemingly pre-school-age cashiers. The choice is reasonable and the prices good. If you don't care for Walmart, Shop 'n Save or Shaw's, you go to the Derby Village Store. It's a human-size place, where the carts bump into one another and you have to maneuver around corners with apologies. It does not sell lattes or 12 kinds of salami. It offers an assortment of inexpensive wine and beer. It's a Kellogg's and Campbell's store, with a resident butcher and a polite staff.

I had picked up cheese, eggs, vegetables, chicken tenders and ice cream. I stopped by the deli counter for sliced meat when I noticed an older man, some would say very old, with a cap on his head above a checked wool jacket too light for the season. His pants were out of fashion, baggy, rolled up and stained with oil, cinched at the waist with a belt that was too long and hung down one leg.

He was slender and one shoulder was bent down, his face narrow, with stubble that showed the years and the tears of time. His hands were clawed with arthritis and spotted, misshapen nails with dirt under them that could not be scrubbed away. He was a man you would not notice, or if you did, not wish to touch as he shuffled behind the cart. He wore a cap that read in proud gold stitching, "Vietnam Veteran U.S.N."

It should be said that seeing Vietnam veterans is not unusual in Vermont or any other state, but the generation is declining in number and strength. About 400 die a day of the 2.7 million who served. It was a long time ago, and newer conflicts have taken the stage and headlines. Heroes and graves.

The veterans of Vietnam are opaque coming to transparent, like onion paper held to light. Soon they will be crippled relics in homes and memories, photos on a dusty mantel or side table with a yellowed doily. You have passed them unseen a hundred times. You never knew their stories, because they are mostly private and you did not want to ask or know. Beyond the cap or the coat with the same words, they do not share. They wear these things for themselves and to say, I am here, and I was there.

We stood by the counter waiting for our slices of pastrami and teriyaki chicken. The old man carried in his cart milk, ground coffee, a few cans of stew and soups. I could see that most of the food was ready to eat, or add water and stir. He likely lived by himself, wife dead or gone.

During the pause of commerce I asked him where he had served. He responded by telling me simply that he had been in Danang on helicopters, and on a warship off the coast. It was vague and intentional. When he said he had piloted a chopper, I thought most likely a Huey with that iconic whooping sound of the blades biting the air and announcing its flight path, a sound that you know for life and run for the tree line when you hear. He might have flown something larger, a workhorse Chinook, used to carry anything that would fit or be hung, from troops to supplies, small artillery. It went where it was needed; you did what was required.

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A Pale Smoke...

Between the cutting of the meats and the wrapping of the cheese, each of us looked at the other. Maybe I had fewer scars in the open. Maybe I had more hair, a down winter coat and better boots, gloves, a wool scarf. It looked as if he had had a hard time after the war. The Kingdom offered a hard life, but easier than what he had done. His boots had uneven soles. His gait was off. He had probably been wounded.

I did not want to ask. Fate had treated me more kindly. But as we used to say, no one gets out of here alive. It could have been my imagination, but our eyes reflected back into ourselves. We were doubled. He did not smile.

He asked if I had been there. He asked because I had spoken first. He could not tell if I was a flatlander, from out of state, just curious or a fool. He wanted to know if he had to explain that place and the cap. His eyes saw the answer before I spoke. He asked if I knew Danang, Nha Trang, Dong Ha, the Highlands and the Delta. How many words did I use to reply? I said two or three, meaning years or tours. How many words do you need for the rainy season, fighting, the heat, humidity and the smell, fear?

I said yes, remembering the firefights over the hills and low mountains at dusk, surrounding the bay at Danang, the jets coming in and dropping bombs and tumbling napalm. Heard the artillery, a different sound and cadence for every caliber. Beautiful parts in a violent orchestra, with strings, wind instruments and drums.

I watched the earth explode and burn, green to black and dead. A Broadway show sitting on a folding aluminum chair for the afternoon matinee performance with a beer. He chuckled with his eyes, told me about rocket-propelled grenade attacks on the airport, running for cover, strafing runs on the riverbeds and trails, dancing to the music, killing men in the open. He told me about friends on the wall, the memorial we thought was going to be singular, unique, though we learned that was a lie.

I told him about flying supplies into fire bases, coming in hot, breaking hard, slowing and throwing off ammunition and water, grabbing the wounded, engines whining to full power and the aircraft shuddering, lifting off short and hoping that the enemy we hardly knew did not have the range or luck. Dust choking, blinding. Laughing as we gained altitude, at the odds beaten, and hoping to go back for another run. Until next time. Every time we did this, the bets went back to even, the clock unwound.

Our purchases were put on the glass counter top. He took his, tipped his head and cap and headed off, nothing else. I glanced as he turned, said, "So long," watched him walk to the cash register, pay with bills, and out of the store, leaving his cart at the door. He limped and did not look back. If he had said other than an acknowledgment with his nod, it would have been more than he wanted to say and more than I needed to hear.

What was it, two, three minutes of history? Meeting, touching and knowing that there had been a past and that the present was tinged with the gone before. Walking on. Shared survival and the pleasure of release with the conjugation of years. Nothing to be spoken or shared with clerks, cashiers or office workers. A diminishing private world with signals and symbols.

Two men, strangers, known from and for a thousand years in kind, history buried, burned into the circuits of the brain and whatever passes for the soul. Pushed far back and down, down deep as it is possible to go. For a second, I thought I saw a young man, looking out the door of an aircraft at the jungle and rising flashes of light, soaring, swooping and rocking, smiling, wind in his hair, wind so strong that it made the eyes water and distorted his cheeks.

What he saw was something else. Maybe nothing.

We had validated ourselves at the meat counter in a small rural town under a winter sky. For a day I thought about the man that I would never meet again, except in myself. A man said that in our youths our hearts were touched by fire, and fire is cleansing. I am not sure. Fire leaves ash and scar. And a pale smoke that rises into the heavens and is gone.

Revisiting Vietnam 50 Years After the Tet Offensive *Nguyen Quy Duc*

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/revisiting-vietnam-50-years-after-tet-offensive-180967501/>

A few years ago, a French-German TV crew visited my home in Hanoi for an interview on how Vietnam had changed since the end of the war with America. We talked of postwar problems, the people's achievements, the old and new generations of leaders, and the country's aspirations. We also talked of history, of course.

At one point, our conversation veered toward the events surrounding the Tet Offensive, in January 1968. It took but a few seconds for the government media minder, an official of the foreign ministry, to stop us. Agitated, she told me to stay inside while she took the producer and reporter out to my garden, where she threatened to shut down the production if the subject was broached again, or even if we returned to the general topic of 1968.

Later, I told her about all the information on the war that was freely available: books, documentary films, television shows, photographs, articles, essays. I showed her Google listings. I tried to point out that the more she tried to suppress the information, the more that journalists would dig deeper. I could barely hide my anger.

"You will not talk about that," she kept saying. "You will not."

Fifty years after the fact, the Tet Offensive is recognized as the pivotal event in the pivotal year of the war—a military loss for North Vietnam but a political victory, as the shock of the attack began to turn American public opinion against the conflict. Breaking a truce that was supposed to allow the warring sides to celebrate Tet, or the Lunar New Year, communist leaders sent tens of thousands of soldiers and Vietcong guerrillas into cities and military bases all over South Vietnam, including Saigon, home of the U.S. Embassy. They believed they could take the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and its U.S. allies by surprise, and inspire a general uprising that would overthrow the government of the south. They succeeded in the first mission but failed in the second. They sustained heart-stopping losses—the U.S. reported 40,000 enemy casualties—and quickly ceded whatever ground they'd taken.

But not in Hue, the former imperial capital, in central Vietnam. The battle for Hue ground on for 26 days, and proved to be one of the bloodiest of the war. The dead among northern forces numbered 5,000 or more; the Americans and South Vietnamese suffered more than 600 dead and almost 3,200 wounded. In Vietnam today, this event is described in heroic terms, and the state propaganda machine still goes into overdrive to celebrate it every few years.

But of a massacre of thousands of Hue civilians? Not a word.

Shortly after the communists were driven out, people in Hue began to discover mass graves. South Vietnamese government television channels showed horrifying scenes of grieving families and unidentified corpses that had been hastily buried. Some were presumed to be the intellectuals and teachers, government cadres, civil servants and administrators who had gone missing during the communist occupation. Physical evidence showed that many of them had been tied, blindfolded and shot point-blank, or buried alive. No one knows exactly how many people were killed; several accounts put it at more than 3,000, most of them civilians. They died in a deliberate campaign by the communist forces to destroy Hue's government. This massacre is deeply embedded in Western accounts of the battle for Hue but little-discussed in Vietnam. And yet, in what was, for the Vietnamese people, a civil war, the fratricidal nature of this event could not have been more stark.

This is what I had begun to tell the journalists about when the government minder cut us off.

In January 1968, my family was living in Da Nang, but to celebrate Tet we made the hour's drive to my paternal grandparents' house in Hue.

My father was the region's civilian governor, and whenever we went to Hue we stayed in a gorgeous government guest-house—a mansion, really, immaculately kept, with Art Deco arches and curves. I loved running back and forth in the corridors, on the terrace or in the many gardens.

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Revisiting Vietnam 50 Years After the Tet Offensive...

On the first night of the Lunar New Year, January 30, we heard what we thought were firecrackers. The sound was actually gunfire. Bullets were flying in every direction. Flares occasionally lit the sky, but the grounds around our house were dark. We had no way of seeing that communist troops had surrounded us.

At two o'clock on the morning of January 31, they came into the house and took my father upstairs, along with other men they'd rounded up in the neighborhood.

They herded about a hundred of us, mostly women and children, into a neighboring basement. In the dark, my mother tried to keep my two sisters and me quiet. We were dazed and afraid. A communist soldier gave a lecture about coming as our "liberators," "securing our city" and "driving out imperialist invading forces." I was 9 years old; I could barely understand anything he said in his northern accent, but he seemed menacing. Until that night, the war had been something that happened in the forests and mountains or in villages far away.

It was two days before we were allowed to go back into the guesthouse. Mattresses and clothes littered the rooms, and the furniture had been thrown all over. Upstairs, my father was sitting on the floor with a number of other men. We huddled next to him, but we were so afraid we were unable to speak.

After just a few minutes, soldiers told us to leave. On the way out, we stole a look into my parents' room. My father's treasured books were on the floor, and the suitcases had been rifled through. Someone had cut a hole through my mother's traveling jewelry box. We left empty-handed and returned to our basement prison with no idea of what was in store. Two nights later, my mother motioned me toward the one tiny window in the basement. I climbed on the bed and strained to look out. The soldiers had lined up a row of men and tied their elbows behind their backs. After a while, they marched the men away. I saw my father among them.

A week later, the communist soldiers withdrew from the government house. South Vietnamese and American troops freed us and moved us to Hue University, by the bank of the Perfume River. The campus had been turned into a refugee center and makeshift hospital. From the sixth floor, I could see the fighting across the river. I also saw people with horrendous wounds brought into the various floors below. Most days we sat dazed on a straw mat while the adults gathered in corners for whispered conversations. After weeks of house-to-house fighting, the soldiers recaptured the Citadel, the heart of the old imperial city, on February 24.

When we managed to get back to Da Nang, our house was full of relatives who had also fled from Hue. We had no news about my father, and no way of finding any.

For the first year, we did not tell my grandfather that my father had been taken—we were afraid he would die of a heart attack. My mother went to the neighbors' houses to cry so he wouldn't find out. Months later, news came about the mass graves. My mother went to Hue to look for my father, but the sight of the decaying and maimed corpses horrified her. She never went back.

I grew up not quite an orphan: While other families buried their dead, set up an altar and had some kind of closure, ours had this open secret. Schoolmates didn't quite know what to do with me, and for years I was ostracized. I grew into a morose adolescent, but I found consolation in the antiwar songs of Trinh Cong Son, who lamented the bodies "floating in the river, drying out in rice fields, lying on city roofs, under the temple eaves, under cold rainy days, bodies of the aged next to the innocent...." Although the government banned his music, it seemed that all of South Vietnam listened to it.

In the months and then the years following the Tet Offensive, we were terrorized by the thought that a communist victory anywhere in the south would mean more massacres, more people buried alive. It would be even worse than Tet '68.

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Revisiting Vietnam 50 Years After the Tet Offensive...

That fear shaped my fate: As communist forces closed in on Saigon in 1975, my uncles arranged for me to go to the United States. Like my sister Dieu-Ha before me, I became one of millions of *Viet Kieu*—"overseas Vietnamese"—but my mother remained in Vietnam, stuck in the chaos that followed the communist victory that April.

While I spent my adolescence coming to grips with America's abundance and frenetic energy, she was stripped of her job as the principal of a school and reduced to poverty. After moving into her sister's house, in what had been renamed Ho Chi Minh City, she sometimes sold soup on the streets to support herself and my sister Dieu-Quynh, who proved to be mentally ill and would die too young.

In 1973, the leaders of the north and south signed the agreement that led to America's exit from the war and began a prisoner exchange. One of those exchanged prisoners managed to smuggle out a letter to my mother. "I am lucky to be alive," my father wrote. It was the first time in five years we'd had any word either from or about him. "I hope that you are able to take care of the children, a task that I am anxious to share with you." It took four more years of searching for her to find out that he was being held in a remote area near the Chinese border. She set out to visit him, and discovered that he had been reduced to a thin old man. But his spirits seemed high.

He was released in 1980, after 12 years' captivity without a trial. Four years later, the communist government allowed him and my mother to emigrate to the United States. I hadn't seen him for 16 years, during which I had come of age, gotten a fitful education and set out on a haphazard path that would lead to a career as a radio journalist. When I met my parents at the airport in San Francisco, he was astonishingly healthy and sane. She was less sure of herself than I had remembered.

We spent many months rediscovering each other, but we moved backward in time, taking the most recent years first. We never talked of 1968; it was too overwhelming. He wrote about his prison years and published a book of poems he had composed in captivity—and kept in his memory until he left the country. He used one phrase as a preface: *I suffer, therefore I am*. He read the books and saw the documentaries about the Tet Offensive, but he said no more about it until he died, in 2000.

Despite all that history, I began to consider moving back to Vietnam. It was still my country, after all, and Vietnamese traditionally have a strong sense of place. I finally moved in 2006—to the city where my fathers' captors had directed the war.

I've made many new friends in Hanoi, young and old, but their curiosity about a Viet Kieu who came back from the United States has not extended to the details of my experience of the war. Some of them have lived and heard enough of it, and many had an equally traumatic time of it. Plus, Vietnam is a youthful country—the median age is 30 years. The majority of the people were born after the war, and long after 1968. So they are forward-looking; "integrating with the globalized world" is a national mantra.

In nightclubs and cafés, the music of Trinh Cong Son is still popular—the love songs, not the ones about the destruction of war. Those are, once again, banned. My friend Tran Anh Quan, an artist in his 40s who is rather critical of the government, often tells me I am obsessed with the past. "You don't know what else the authorities hide," Quan tells me. "We don't even know the truth about what's happening in our society today. Forget the past."

Occasionally, I can. Then comes a moment like the time a real estate developer approached me with his business plan for Hue. "I want to redevelop the whole attitude there and change the tourist industry," he told me. Hue certainly attracts a lot of tourists. Many come for a past far removed: They visit ancient royal tombs, the refurbished Citadel and the temples from the Nguyen dynasty, which lasted from 1802 to 1945. The tour guides tell all about that past, but they ignore the bullet holes pocking the walls of the buildings within the Citadel and elsewhere. No tourists are taken to the massacre grave sites, the way tourists are taken to the Khmer Rouge's infamous "killing fields" in Cambodia.

I asked the developer about the ghosts in Hue—about the feelings among the people there who are living with the memories of the dead from 1968, about their feelings toward northerners like him. He had no idea what I was talking about.

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Revisiting Vietnam 50 Years After the Tet Offensive...

After 50 years, I know my memories from that era will last my lifetime, but I wonder whether the national silence about 1968 will ever be lifted, and the anger I felt when I was negotiating with the government's media minder still burns. Ultimately, she relented and allowed me to resume my conversation with the French-German team on camera. But I can find no record that the interview ever aired in Vietnam.

Recently an acquaintance of mine, the writer Bao Ninh, famed for his novel *The Sorrow of War*, pointed a finger at me and said: "You will. Write about it. You and me. We survived that Tet." Sure, it was the American war, as Vietnamese remember it, and the Cold War was a big part of it. But the Tet Offensive and 1968 was us: We Vietnamese killed one another.

So now I think of the media minder: "You will not." And I think of Bao Ninh: "You will." One wanted me to honor a version of history written by the living, the winners. The other wishes me to honor the dead and their memories.

1968: A war, a year, a memory forever being buried and resurrected.

Hue Prepared for the Holiday, Then the War Came *Nguyen Diu Huong*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/02/opinion/hue-prepared-for-a-holiday-then-the-war-came.html>

During the early days of January 1968, the 150,000 residents of Hue, like all Vietnamese, began preparations for their biggest event of the year, the three-day lunar new year festival of Tet. Markets were filled with once-a-year treats. Men decorated gardens with flowers and bonsai. Women gathered ingredients for holiday dishes and styled fresh designs for their ao dai tunic dresses. Vendors packed the streets in the hope of making extra money before the holiday arrived.

Life in the city looked settled and as quiet as could be. Beneath the surface, though, Hue was beginning to boil.

The seat of modern Vietnam's founding dynasty, the Nguyen, Hue was regarded by all as the national center of culture, religion and education. The imperial Citadel, the elaborate tombs of the emperors and turn-of-the-century French architecture created a tranquil and nostalgic appeal, even as American civilian complexes sprouted in a district across the Perfume River. With all of its persistent and strict norms and customs, imperial tradition and cultural heritage, Hue in the 1960s was the most characteristically Vietnamese city.

But Hue was not stuck in the past. The University of Hue and the intellectual communities that gathered around it within a few years of its founding in 1957 became agents of social change rather than simply institutionalizing loyalty to the national government. The Buddhist mobilization of 1963 against the anti-Buddhist policies of the South Vietnamese government was ignited in Hue. Discontent and urban movements against the government and the perception of American intervention in Vietnamese affairs resulted in increasing turmoil: In January 1965 protesters set the American cultural center on fire. Instability and protests roiled the city again in spring 1966.

By 1967, Hue was a center of urban opposition to successive South Vietnamese administrations, the graceful, tranquil city shaken by demonstrations, self-immolations, hunger strikes and other expressions of struggle against the government.

With no American military base in town and no army-to-army battle before 1968, the city did not feel the war as immediately as the surrounding countryside. Samuel Thomsen, the American consul from 1964 to 1966, would bicycle around Hue with his wife and daughter and "see dive bombers dropping their payloads in the far west towards the mountains." The continuing flow of war victims arriving at the National Hospital of Hue, the sounds of helicopters and distant artillery resounding night after night, all intensified the concerns of the people.

Still, the metamorphoses that were underway manifested themselves subtly, shaping the daily rhythms of human activity at home and in the workplace. The social atmosphere was now sown with frustration, skepticism and ambivalence, intermingled with growing anxieties over the war and uncertainty regarding the future of the nation.

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Hue Prepared for the Holiday, Then the War Came...

"I've been here five years, and the situation has never been this bad," a university student told The Washington Post in April 1967.

The deteriorating situation in Hue's environs added to the city's tensions. Local officials in outlying districts increasingly chose to spend nights in town, returning to their villages each morning. Rural populations moved toward the city to escape growing violence. Middle-class families in Hue, particularly those of government officials, headed south to Danang or Saigon, which seemed safer.

In May, a nighttime attack on the Huong Giang Hotel on Hue's main thoroughfare aggravated the fear of terrorism. Rumors increased anxieties. One story had the government yielding South Vietnam's two northernmost provinces to Hanoi as part of a deal, putting Hue on the new front line.

By late 1967, Communist infiltrators had developed networks of agents and sympathizers within the city. No one knew exactly how many of Hue's people were part of these networks; members worked independently and met their direct contacts only by appointment. And few people had information on what would happen to the town during the Tet holiday. Plans for the coming attacks were being made in Hanoi and carefully communicated to forward North Vietnamese units gathering in the mountains north and west of the city.

Among the sympathizers who had been radicalized by the urban movements was Ho Tan Phan, whose father and grandfather had been killed fighting the French. He had become a respected high school teacher with strong anti-foreign instincts. In 1965 he began work as a liaison to Communist forces, moving easily among the town's communities of students, teachers and merchants. In the months before Tet, he was ordered to map out the locations of Hue's rice stores and pharmacies, at the same time sending medical supplies and transistor radios to his comrades in the hills. Meanwhile, the reverse flow of weapons from his comrades found its way into town.

But by the final days before the holiday, Hue's populace had set its anxieties aside, temporarily disregarding ominous signs to embrace the arrival of a new and hopefully better year. Train and bus stations were packed with passengers carting fresh flowers and festival cakes and candies made of glutinous rice, beans and ginger or lotus seeds, all wrapped in banana leaves or colorful translucent plastic wrap. With the annual Tet cease-fire, about half of South Vietnamese military personnel were off duty, their families welcoming them home for a time, at least, fathers and sons, brothers and nephews and uncles.

Among these hurried travelers was Tran Thi Thu Van, who had left her husband and children in Saigon to rush home for her father's funeral on the eve of the lunar new year, Jan. 29, 1968. Seeing out the old year with death and mourning, Ms. Thu Van and her family adorned their heads with traditional white crepe mourning bands.

There were warnings of a surprise attack, but it was expected to be just the usual small guerrilla force striking quickly in the night and disappearing before dawn.

The Year of the Earthen Monkey was ushered in with the customary "giao thua" family altar rites at midnight on the new day of Jan. 30, 1968; those with Communist sympathies tuned their radios north to hear Ho Chi Minh reading his annual "Spring Poem." First Day passed with food and family and visits to friends and temples, and card games at night. Rich, poor, Buddhist, Christian — all believed the events of First Day foreshadowed the year to come, so they were grateful when the day passed in peace.

That night, Ho Tan Phan attended a meeting at a comrade's house; back home by 11, he turned on his radio and, in his room full of books, waited for what he knew was coming as the day turned.

Shortly after midnight on Jan. 31, 1968, waves of Communist troops converged from multiple locations around Hue. Around 2:30 a.m. automatic weapons and artillery rained hellfire on the town. South Vietnamese soldiers visiting home recognized the sound of Soviet B-40 rockets and the clack-clack of AK-47s, all of them so close.

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Ms. Thu Van woke up in her family's ancestor-worshipping house. "I do not know when was the first gunfire," she says. "In the middle of the night I was suddenly awake with explosions shredding my fragmentary dream. As soon as I rolled off of the wooden plank bed, my ears were ringing with the sounds of guns firing from all directions. What was this?"

After the initial moments of surprise, it was quickly understood that this was something unforeseen. The attackers shouted out commands in the rough tones of North Vietnamese.

The Tet offensive had begun, in Hue and throughout South Vietnam.

Before the day was far gone, the city had become one of the war's deadliest fronts and, after 25 days of struggle, would become the offensive's longest, bloodiest battle.

The abundance of food prepared for feasting allowed the people of Hue to feed themselves through four weeks of siege. But thousands, mainly civilians, were killed, and the great pride of the Viet empire — the royal Citadel — was in ruins.

The city of kings had become a city of ghosts, its bloody metamorphosis immortalized forever by Tran Thi Thu Van, using her pen name, Nha Ca, in her novel "Mourning Headband for Hue" and in a pair of songs composed by Hue's native son Trinh Cong Son, "Sing Upon the Corpses" and "A Song for the Corpses," whose haunting words and melodies ring even today like wind over bones:

Corpses lie all around here, in this cold rain/Next to corpses of the old and weak, corpses of the still innocent

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HAPPY NEW YEAR!

2019

