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## SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE



**To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese Culture**

NEWSLETTER # 84

OCTOBER 2015

## 2015 SACEI Man of the Year



**2015 SACEI MAN OF THE YEAR**

**PROFESSOR NGUYEN NGOC BICH**

An educator, lecturer, author, translator, Professor Bich received his B.A. in Political Science from Princeton University in 1958. He did graduate work in Asian studies at Columbia University (1959-65), Japanese literature at Kyoto University (1962-63) bilingual education and theoretical linguistics at Georgetown University (1980-85). He taught at Trinity College, George Mason University, and Georgetown University and was the Director of the Vietnamese Service at Free Asia in Washington DC.

Among his numerous publications, one could count:

- 1- *The Poetry of Vietnam* (New York: Asia Society, 1969)
- 2- *North Vietnam: Backtracking on Socialism* (1971)
- 3- *An Annotated Atlas of the Republic of Vietnam* (1972)
- 4- *A Thousand Years of Vietnamese Poetry* (Knopf, 1975).
- 5- *The Trung Sisters Revisited* (2015)

## The Battle of Hue 1968 as Seen From the Perspective of its NV Commander

*Nguyen Ngoc Bich*

Presented at the Vietnam Center Sixth Triennial Vietnam Symposium, March 13-15, 2008

Forty years ago, the Communists, in an attempt to reverse the fortune of war that was not going in their favor during 1966-67, launched the spectacular Tet Offensive (1) of January-February 1968 that became for them a military disaster of major proportions. By their very own admissions, the enormous losses incurred, over 48,000 (41,000 dead and 7,000 taken prisoner) out of an attacking force of 84,000, put their war efforts back by at least three (according to Tran Van Tra) to five years (Bui Tin). (2) In fact, the result of 1968, if one includes this first phase with the two subsequent ones, one in May and one in August, was even more telling: it effectively eliminated the southern military component of the communist war apparatus in South Vietnam. (3)

The only place where the Tet Offensive lasted more than a few days was in Hue, the old imperial capital, where the Communists managed to hold on for 25 days (4) against enormous odds thanks to their entrenched positions within the fortified walls of the Citadel. It was after a visit to Hue that Walter Cronkite, reporting from Vietnam, called the war "unwinnable." (5) "If I've lost Cronkite," lamented President L.B. Johnson, "I've lost middle America." (6) By March, he had made up his mind not to seek reelection as a presidential candidate for a second term; instead, he ordered a halt to the bombing north of the seven-

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teenth parallel, which led to the start of “peace” negotiations in Paris.

Thus, it can be said that a catastrophic military failure, their biggest during the entire Vietnam War, became by a combination of factors a turning point in the war in North Vietnam’s favor. After Tet 1968, the face of the Vietnam War changed completely: if before it, the fiction of the war being a guerrilla movement indigenous to the South could still be maintained, admittedly with some difficulty, after Tet, having wiped out the southern PLA (People’s Liberation Army), Hanoi showed its blatant face as the violator of the Geneva Agreement of 1954 which decreed a division of Vietnam into two zones pending a political settlement (originally contemplated as a reunification through the ballot box). (7)

### A Pivotal Year

Future historians will note, therefore, that 1968 was a pivotal year in the Vietnam War. And out of that year, the battle of Hue (8) will stand out as the one action that helped shape the misconceptions that became widely accepted, thanks to the U.S. media, (9) convinced hawks like Defense Secretary Clark Clifford to turn into doves, (10) and finally drove President Johnson into an irreversible course towards disengagement (11) and, in the end, defeat.

Yet what is most strange is that, important as it was, the battle of Hue hardly rates no more than passing mention in many of the standard histories of the Vietnam War. A review of even textbooks on the war reveals a shocking discrepancy between its actual importance as a defining moment of the Vietnam War and its cavalier treatment in these textbooks: Hue 1968 did not even appear in General Bruce Palmer, Jr.’s book, *The 25-Year War: America’s Military Role in Vietnam* (1984), it rated one line in General Phillip B. Davidson’s *Vietnam at War* (on page 475), (12) half a paragraph in Robert D. Schulzinger’s *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (on page 259), (13) one paragraph in William S. Turley’s “short political and military history, 1954-1975” of *The Second Indochina War* (on page 109), (14) one paragraph and four lines in George C. Herring’s standard *America’s Longest War* (on pages 186-187), (15) and one paragraph and a half in Neil Sheehan’s 861-page book on “John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam” entitled *A Bright Shining Lie* (on pages 719-720). (16) In only a couple of texts does the battle of Hue receive more than passing mention but even here, as in A.J. Languth’s *Our Vietnam*, the story focuses more on the massacre than on the battle itself (pages 475-478). (17) The one exception may be Dave R. Palmer’s *Summons of the Trumpet* where the Hue battle got two full pages (pages 192-193) but filled with inaccuracies. What is stranger still is that even in some Vietnamese books, including textbooks, the battle of Hue is somewhat neglected. For instance, in a standard “History of Vietnam, 1945-1975” (*Lịch sử Việt Nam, 1945-1975*, Tran Thuc Nga et al., Nha xb Giao Duc, 1987), (18) a text approved for all teachers colleges in present-day Vietnam, the Hue battle rates two paragraphs (page 145), one of which was almost pure propaganda. On the South Vietnamese side and by extension in the Diaspora, also, the battle itself receives at best a couple of pages (three exactly, pages 403-405, in probably the most detailed history of the War, Nguyen Duc Phuong’s *Chien tranh Viet Nam toan tap*, “The Complete History of the Vietnam War”) (19) as compared to the enormous attention given to the Hue massacres, an understanding of which cannot be arrived at unless one devotes more attention to the battle.

### What Made Hue Unique

What made Hue unique was not just because the Communists managed to hang on for 25 days whereas in the case of most other targets of the offensive, the attackers were repelled in a matter of hours to no more than a couple of days (nine days in the case of Saigon-Cholon). (20) It was unique because, together with Khe Sanh, it was the seasoned NVA troops, the so-called regulars, freshly sent from North Vietnam that were involved in the fighting. This was because, before launching the Tet Offensive, the Communists had redrawn their military zones around Saigon and Hue for maximum surprise and impact. (21) The battles for each city were assigned to two battlefield commands: in Saigon it was Tran Van Tra, Mai Chi Tho and Le Duc Anh, one southerner and two northern generals, who were put in charge of the northern front attacking the city and Vo Van Kiet and Tran Bach Dang put in charge of the attacks coming from south of the city. (22) In the case of Hue, General Tran Van Quang was in overall command of the Tri-Thien-Hue military zone but Colonel Le Minh was told before he set out: “As far as the campaign is concerned, you are the [battlefield] commander, and as far as Party matters are concerned, you are the chief leader in both the offensive and uprising for the entire zone.” (23) In actuality, as in the case of Saigon, Le Minh commanded the northern wing and Than Trong Mot the attacks from south of Hue. Mot, however, was subordinate to Minh, as we shall see.

Hue was unique also because if the Saigon attacks were a combined operation involving both PLA (People’s Liberation Army), i.e. southern units under the command of Tran Van Tra, Vo Van Kiet and Tran Bach Dang, and NVA elements under Le Duc Anh and Mai Chi Tho, the outcome of the Hue battle will redound entirely to the good or bad name of the NVA. This point is important when it came later as to the question who is responsible for the Hue massacres.

Hue is unique also in point of time because after Tet 1968, there were no longer any attempts by Hanoi to hide the fact that its big and regular divisions, some of which were legendary because they were credited with the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu, were now in the South—changing the entire character of the war from a guerrilla war (by southern insurgents) to a fully conventional and mechanized war (by outside forces coming from above the 17th Parallel). This became so blatant that when Hanoi tried once more to invade the South, at Easter 1972, they sent south the entire Vietnam People’s Army, practically all the regular troops it had at its disposal (with one division left in the North in December of that year). (24) That they failed again, after a 56-day siege of An Loc (April-June 1972) and especially after the Marines retook Quang Tri Citadel in September of the same year, gave convincing proof of the maturity of ARVN, four years after Tet, when face to face with the NVA and given adequate air and artillery support.

Finally, Hue is unique because it was the only place where the Communist presence was long enough for them to establish a civilian administration made up mostly of Hue citizens but stage-managed by the Communists, of course. The manipulators were Hoang Kim Loan (25) and Hoang Lanh, two moles hidden in the home of Nguyen Doa, a “supervisor” (like a hall monitor) at the Quoc Hoc High School. Two days after they came into town, on February 1, Radio Hanoi announced that a Coalition of National, Democratic and Peaceful Forces (Luc Luong Dan Toc, Dan Chu va Hoa Binh) was formed with Cultural anthropology Prof. Le Van Hao as its Chairman and Mrs. Tuan Chi, another educator, as his

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deputy. (26) Twelve days later, on February 14, Radio Hanoi again exulted in the fact that a local administration had been established with Le Van Hao as the Mayor, assisted by two deputies, Dao Thi Xuan Yen and Hoang Phuoc Thao. (27)

In actuality, the Communists came into town armed with lists of names (28) and addresses provided by local traitors (such as the brothers Hoang Phu Ngoc Tuong and Hoang Phu Ngoc Phan, the high school teacher Ton That Duong Tiem, the above-named Nguyen Doa and Mrs. Tuan Chi [so-called because she was married to Nguyen Dinh Chi], the Hue scholar Nguyen Dac Xuan, etc.) (29) and roundups began almost immediately.

### The Military Contest (30)

Led by local elements who were unhappy with the Government's repression of the Buddhist near-rebellion during the three years 1965-1967, the Communists achieved almost total surprise when they came down from the hills west of the city on the night of January 31, 1968. They achieved control of the city in a relatively short time (within 24 hours) with the exception of only a few pockets of resistance (the 81st Ordinance Company, Hue Radio Station, the Tay Loc Airfield, and especially Mang Ca Fort where the First Infantry Division was headquartered, under the command of General Ngo Quang Truong).

A separate and detailed chronology is provided with this article but one can sum up the battle of Hue in the following manner:

January 31: During the night, four NVA battalions under Colonel Le Minh, assisted by a sapper battalion, attacked Hue Citadel from the west and northwest and took large chunks of the city, favored by the element of surprise. Another four battalions, assisted by a second sapper battalion, under the command of Than Trong Mot, attacked from the South. The first group ran into resistance at Tay Loc Airfield while the second group encountered stiff resistance at Tam Thai (held by the 81st Ordinance Company). Meantime, another NVA battalion sent to An Hoa north of Hue tried to block ARVN reinforcements coming from Quang Tri. Finally, also another NVA force (two battalions) set up a blocking position in An Cuu and Phu Cam in anticipation of reinforcements coming from the South.

January 31-February 3: During the following four days, the Communists were in control of the city. Starting February 1, they rounded up people in areas under their control, gave them a lecture then let them go in an attempt to prove the "leniency" of the conquerors, encouraging the prisoners to persuade those in hiding to come out and report. Many fell into this trap. During this time, however, General Ngo Quang Truong succeeded in calling for reinforcements for his troops in Mang Ca Fort at the eastern corner of the Citadel.

February 4-5: There was a lull in the fighting because both sides were exhausted and especially because the Communist side was running out of ammunition (February 5 telegram to headquarters in Hanoi).

February 6-7: "On the seventh day [of the battle] the American entered the fight." With most of the targets originally aimed for in communist hands but with ammunition getting dangerously low, Le Minh called a meeting of his top officers to propose withdrawal since "a decisive victory" was not within reach. Le Minh ordered the removal of war booty to bases in the countryside and in the woods. Also, wounded and prisoners had to be evacuated from the city.

February 7-9: Fearing an American and ARVN counterattack, the Communists blew up the Truong Tien Bridge (night of Feb 7). Instead of withdrawing, however, General Tran Van Quang, the North Vietnamese zone commander, came to Hue and rearranged the disposition of units under Le Minh, then ordered an all-out attack on Mang Ca. After three hours of intense fighting (from 9 p.m. to midnight, Feb 9), this all-out effort came to naught and the attackers had to abandon the fight. A second cable to Headquarters in Hanoi urgently pleaded for more ammunition and reinforcements. Both were solemnly promised in reply cables from Hanoi, one even signed by three top generals (Vo Nguyen Giap, Van Tien Dung and Song Hao). Another cable from Hanoi promised reinforcements (signed by Dung).

February 10-15: The ammunition promised by Hanoi never came, and the troop reinforcements apparently were cut off and nearly destroyed by the U.S. Third Marine Division before they could reach Hue. By February 10, some mopping operations by ARVN were already possible as the regional troops replaced the Airbornes who went on the offensive.

February 12: Enter the Vietnamese Marines to replace the exhausted Airbornes. A U.S. Marine unit (Robert Thompson's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines) also crossed the Perfume River and made contact with Gen. Truong's troops at Mang Ca.

February 13-20: Fierce fighting, street by street and in some cases house by house, was engaged in by the U.S. Marines on the east and southeastern side of the Citadel. The Communists violently counterattacked as the Vietnamese Marines were trying to fight their way down towards the southwestern side of the Citadel, thus cutting off vital logistics lines of the enemy. On February 16, the ARVN broke through and two days later (Feb 18), reached the Chanh Tay Gate and the northwestern corner of the Citadel.

February 14: Radio Hanoi announced the formation of a local administration with Le Van Hao as the chairman (i.e. mayor), flanked by two woman deputies. He was also seconded by a number of well-known personalities who the Hue citizenry later believed to be the butchers of the Hue massacres (Hoang Phu Ngoc Tuong, Hoang Phu Ngoc Phan, Nguyen Dac Xuan, Ton That Duong Tiem, etc.).

February 21: Under intense pressure from three American battalions and three ARVN Marine brigades, not counting the First ARVN Division, the NVA "decided to withdraw because even if reinforcements came, they would not change one bit of the situation," especially as bombing runs from the B52s were raining on them.

February 22: The NVA mounted a desperate counterattack that temporarily threw chaos into the ARVN ranks. But Tran Ngoc Hue and his Hac Bao rallied the troops, charged forward with bayonets fixed and won the day.

February 24: A last assault on the Flag Tower brought down the VC flag and a volunteer managed to climb up (at 5 a.m.) and raise the three red-stripes and yellow flag of the Republic of Vietnam.

### Casualties

Hanoi has yet to reveal the number of casualties that the NVA incurred in Hue although a poem by Che Lan Vien (1920-1989) later confessed:

Two thousand men came down into the plain



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Only thirty returned...

Statistical estimates given by our side put the number of Communist troops dedicated to the Hue fighting at 7,500 troops (31) (the equivalent of 15 battalions), of which about 5,000 died in the actual fighting while another 3,000 are found buried in nearby areas. Incredible as this may seem, the North Vietnamese bodies found buried around or in the hills west of Hue may be part of the personnel that Hanoi had sent south thinking that their occupation of Hue was already a permanent one. Only this could explain this one last scene of the battle of Hue, as described in Andrew Wiest's *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*: "Advancing with his men, [Tran Ngoc] Hue could not believe his eyes; bodies, clad in new uniforms, were piled up as far as he could see, spilling forth from trenches and foxholes and festooning bushes. [. . . Finally, catching a live] NVA soldier in his dress uniform, [. . . Hue] asked why his unit wore dress uniforms and carried a flag. The dejected captive answered, 'We were told that Hue City had been liberated and that we were coming here for a victory parade.'" (page 116, emphasis added)

Le Minh's diary confirms this: "By February 26, 1968, all of us had cleared out of [Hue] city. Actually, we had started withdrawing since the 22nd and the withdrawal took five days to be completed. Because all the war booty that we had transported to the suburbs or into the forest had been retaken in the enemy's counterattacks, as soon as we were back in the woods we went hungry at once. After a feast at Khe Trai to celebrate the victory (sic), attended by intellectuals from Hue even, our whole [group in the] forest was reduced to eating salt. The difficulties that befell us after we left Hue were similar to the time when the whole frontline was in disarray."

"Tens of thousands of people, once in the woods, had to scrounge for anything edible," Le Minh continues, "yet people from out there [North Vietnam] kept coming, [including people from] security police, radio, television, the archival service, even traffic police... all of them asking for rice and salt. The center, in the meantime, kept tasking us with the second phase attacks on Hue [meant for May 1968]."

On the allied side, ARVN lost 384 killed in action and 1,800 wounded, and the U.S. Marine Corps reported 147 KIAs and 857 wounded seriously enough to warrant evacuation to a hospital.

The civilian casualties, however, were enormous. Nearly 7,000 went missing, while a number of known casualties were attributed to bombs and artillery (844 dead, 1,900 wounded). Of the missing a total of about 2,800 were later found in mass graves in various parts of the city, especially in Gia Hoi where many were executed, and some 18 sites outside of Hue, apparently killed indiscriminately (including old men, women, and children, babies even) because the enemy was afraid that if they were to be released, they would reveal the whereabouts of the fugitive remnants of the NVA units.

On this question, even Le Minh had a pang of conscience when he wrote in his diary: "There is a sad truth that I think must be touched upon. The widespread mourning resulting from the battle of Hue was something that the enemy did not cease to exaggerate in order to distort our record. [. . .] However, one must admit that there is another side to the issue, and that is, the punishment of those guilty of crimes towards the people. This may be inevitable in a war situation, especially in a mass uprising (sic), but it remains that in the end, there were those unjustly sentenced in the situation at hand. And no matter what the reason, the responsibility for such injustice must belong to the leadership, in which there was my part. The present task of the revolution is to render a just ruling in those cases, and to make amends to the children of those unjustly killed at the time. [. . .] If there was one man unjustly killed, one must still restore his honor; if there were a hundred, one must restore the honor to those hundred. That is only [the dictate of] reason and compassion, and the masses will understand us, never confusing black for white and vice versa."

### A Tentative Assessment

By the above exercise I hope I have been able to clarify a number of issues relating to one of the most important engagements during the Vietnam War, the battle of Hue at Tet 1968. The military battle, with all its miscalculations and moments of cowardice found on both sides, was nonetheless an epic battle in which all three participant armies, the U.S. Marines, the ARVN and the NVA in many instances outperformed themselves. The political battle, while clearly showing that the Communist side misread the sentiments of the people of Hue (32) who they had hoped to win over to their side, nonetheless turned out to be an unexpected bonanza when it helped change completely the direction of the war in Washington.

On the ethical question, the Hue massacres will go down in history as one of the cruelest, meanest, and most senseless actions of the Vietnam Conflict aimed at the civilian population in which even Le Minh, the NVA battlefield commander, acknowledges his part of responsibility. Therefore, all the denials of guilt proffered by such twisted minded apologists like Gareth Porter (33) on behalf of the Communists will simply not hold water.

Neither will Keith Nolan's *Battle for Hue* make any sense when it denies the role of the ARVN in that particular battle, relegating them to a role of "mopping up behind the [U.S.] Marines" (page 87) and accusing them of "moving from house to house in organized looting parties." Certainly Andrew Wiest is more fair when he writes: "From the first efforts to relieve the MACV compound, the U.S. Marines demonstrated the individual bravery and the unit battle prowess that have marked the members of the U.S. Marine Corps as the finest infantry in the world. Certainly the Americans gave of themselves selflessly; the Marines singlehandedly liberated the New City south of the Perfume River and fought an epic battle in the Citadel, losing 147 killed in action. In a much less heralded battle, though, the ARVN forces had actually done the majority of the fighting in the Citadel, their understrength units besting the vaunted NVA and VC in a long and bitter struggle largely without the aid of organic heavy direct-fire weaponry. During the fighting, ARVN forces lost 357 killed in action and inflicted an astounding 2,642 battle deaths on the NVA and the VC forces." (34)

In the end, I believe the judgement of the U.S. commander in Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland, was probably better informed than Keith Nolan's: "Many an American got involved in the fighting during the Tet offensive. [. . .] Yet ... the only major attack against an American base was a strike by a VC regiment at the extensive perimeter of Long Binh. [. . . Thus,] in the main, the Tet offensive was a Vietnamese fight. To the ARVN, other members of the South Vietnamese armed forces, the militia, the National Police—to those belonged the major share of

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credit for turning back the offensive.” (35)

### For a Fuller Assessment

As every teacher knows, the fairest assessment of an action must be based on what the agent originally sets out to do. Only then can we truly measure the extent of his achievement or failure to do so.

In this connection, it would not be amiss to remind the reader that the full name of the Tet Offensive, as defined by Hanoi, was “General Offensive and General Uprising” (“Tong Cong Kich/Tong Noi Day” in Vietnamese). This was because Hanoi, in its peculiar way of thinking, was not content with simply a military victory (if one could be obtained) it had to be accompanied by—if not the result of—a general uprising (36) that would give that victory its legitimacy. In other words, Hanoi did not want just to be seen as a bellicose power, it had to be seen as a hero coming to the rescue of victims of injustice, of a people long suffering under a repressive and brutal regime, the so-called double yoke of imperialism (i.e. the U.S.) and its lackeys (Saigon).

By that measure, the Tet Offensive was not just a military failure on a vast scale, it was even more so a political failure of the first magnitude since in all the 25 cities and provinces that were attacked in that fateful year (out of a total of 44), nowhere was there a mass response in favor of the Communists. Not even in Hue where for three years before the offensive the place had been seething with Buddhist opposition to the government in Saigon. (37)

At first, the Communists tried to put on a benevolent face. Led by locals and with lists in hand, their agents went to specific homes and asked that the heads of the households reported for a meeting with the “new” authorities. (Read: We know precisely where everyone is.) Secondly, they were given a lecture about the “revolution” and forewarned that the revolution, while humane, would be pitiless towards anyone who opposed it. Then they were dismissed, allowed to go home and encouraged to call on others to come out of hiding. Not a few people fell into this trap: those who came out were immediately apprehended and sometimes shot right in front of their loved ones, as examples of “revolutionary justice.” (38) In a third phase, student-age youths were called up and ordered to dig what appeared to be like trenches for the “revolutionary forces” to take up positions in the city and avoid bombing and artillery shelling. They did not have to wait very long to find out: these trenches, as in the Gia Hoi area of Hue, were meant for nightly mass executions of people considered “enemies of the people.” (39) And because the Communists had to use their ammunition sparingly, many of these people were buried alive after being hit on the head with rifle butts or “clubbed to death with axes and shovels.” (40) This phase did not involve many old people, women or children, most of the victims being adult men associated, say, with the Saigon police or administration. But it lasted several nights and occurred in different parts of the city.

During the fighting, the Communists discovered others in hiding. At first, these were rounded up as prisoners but soon they were seen as burdens (not enough food to go around, no cooking or toilet facilities, the families had to follow the prisoners to feed and clothe them, thus becoming a big encumbrance besides possibly becoming an intelligence source for the allied side); thus, the decision was soon made to either move the prisoners out of the city, into the hills, or simply get rid of them. (41)

But the worse happened when, unable to resist the allied counterattacks in the final days of the battle, the Communists had to make the decision to discreetly withdraw into the hills. The operation, of course, had to be done in absolute secrecy. An attempt was first made to move the prisoners into the hills as an insurance against allied bombings and as a possible source of blackmail (or negotiations) later on. But there simply were too many, thus becoming an impossible encumbrance. (42) Furthermore, with no food in sight, how could one feed such a large number of prisoners? Moving them north was out of the question, there being no time. Releasing them was also a dangerous proposition as no doubt the prisoners would inform on the withdrawal routes of the Communists. Hence the decision to shut their mouths and eliminate their testimonies for good. This explains why many group graves were found later on, stringing along the paths of withdrawal of the retreating NVA.

Who was behind these decisions to kill the civilians?

Le Van Hao, the “mayor” of Hue during those days who has since fled to France, denied his culpability. (43) He claimed that he was a mere puppet with no voice in any big decision that the Communists made about Hue. Hoang Phu Ngoc Tuong, who since had become a big shot in Hue, also said he had no hands in these terrible tragedies—but at least, like Le Minh, he does not try to deny (like Gareth Porter or the anti-war photographer Philip Hones Griffith, who both wanted to blame it all on American bombings and allied artillery) the existence of these mass graves. (44) But at least, the people of Hue, even today, 40 years later, have vivid recollections of people like Hoang Phu Ngoc Phan (Tuong’s brother) and Ton That Duong Tiem or Nguyen Dac Xuan (45) seen leading the Communists from house to house to drag victims out, to proclaim their supposed “crimes against the people” and sometimes even to read death sentences against some of these victims. This, at least, applied to the first waves of killing inside the city.

As for the other victims killed on the withdrawal routes of the Communists, the responsibility must rest upon leaders like Le Minh, who at least acknowledge part of his responsibility in it, or maybe lower officers on the totem pole, who went ahead and got rid of the prisoners, only reporting about them later on—as implied in Le Minh’s testimony. The practice, though, was quite widespread, which allowed for the discovery later on of at least some 19 mass graves, and this implies that the order may have come from even higher authorities than Le Minh himself, possibly General Tran Van Quang, the regional commander for Tri-Thien-Hue, or even directly from Hanoi. (46)

### Notes

1. “Tet Offensive” is only an abbreviated form of what Communist sources refer to as “the Total Offensive and General Uprising of Tet 1968” (“Tong Cong Kich/Tong Noi Day Tet Mau Than”), a long and awkward if fuller definition of what Hanoi had meant to accomplish.
2. Bui Tin, *From Enemy to Friend*, Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2002, page 64 (“We did not recover until 1972”). Tran Van Tra was the highest commander on the Communist side of southern extraction. His thoughts can be found in Nhung Chang Duong Lich Su cua B2 Thanh Dong – Ket Thuc Cuoc Chien 30 Nam (“Historical Stages of the B2 Copper-strong Front – Ending a Thirty-year War”), supposedly the fifth volume of a total account of the war in the South, which to this day has yet to be completed. This fifth and last volume, published by Nha

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- xb Van Nghe Thanh pho Ho Chi Minh, was rumored to be written in rebuttal of Van Tien Dung's Dai Thang Mua Xuan ("The Great Spring Victory"), an account of the Ho Chi Minh Campaign that ended in the capture of Saigon but which emphasized the role of the NVA and was somewhat dismissive of the role of the PLA, People's Liberation Army, the military arm of the NLF (National Liberation Front for South Vietnam).
3. Philip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History, 1946-1975*, Oxford University Press, 1988, page 475 ("the Tet offensive for all practical purposes destroyed the Viet Cong").
  4. The question of how many days the Communists did occupy Hue was also subject to a loose kind of arithmetic with some authors claiming as much as 28 days and others rounding it up to "a month." At least an official history in Vietnam, Lich Su Viet Nam, 1945-1975, a collective work by Tran Thuc Nga (chief editor), Bach Ngoc Anh, Tran Ba De, and Nguyen Xuan Minh, *Nha xb Giao Duc*, 1987, page 145, is correct when it dates the battle of Hue as lasting from 2:33 a.m. on January 31, 1968, to February 24, 1968, amounting to "25 consecutive days."
  5. Actually, in his "CBS Evening News" broadcast of February 27, 1968, Cronkite "called Tet an American defeat" and saying that "the only rational way out will be to negotiate, not as victors but as an honorable people." (See Edward J. Epstein, "Vietnam: What Happened vs. What We Saw: We Lose Our Innocence," *TV Guide*, October 6, 1973, page 13-F.)
  6. David Culbert, "Television's Vietnam, The Impact of Visual Images," (TV Documentary as reported in *The Monitor*, McAllen, TX, March 20, 1981).
  7. The Geneva Agreements consisted of a bilateral "Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Viet Nam," in other words, a military ceasefire agreement signed between France and the Vietminh on July 20, 1954, and an unsigned "Final Declaration" that spoke of eventual reunification of Vietnam through "general elections" under international supervision, tentatively projected for July 1956. However, consultations are to be held "between the competent representative authorities of the two zones from July 20, 1955, onwards." (See, for instance, George McT. Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, New York: The Dial Press, 1967, pages 48-54.) Since these consultations never took place, it stands to reason that the military ceasefire held pending a political solution. That this was also the understanding of both Hanoi and Washington can be seen in the fact that in 1959 the U.S. State Department issued a White Paper entitled *Aggression from the North* and that North Vietnam for the longest time claimed that it had nothing to do with the war in the South, holding out the fiction that it was an indigenous rebellion born out of the repressive policies of the Ngo Dinh Diem government.
  8. The only detailed account in English of the battle of Hue is by Keith W. Nolan, *Battle for Hue, Tet 1968*, Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1983, but it is essentially based on interviews with American veterans of that battle and hence, left out much of the Vietnamese part of that story altogether. But Nolan is correct when he started out his book by saying: "If it had been a popular war like our involvement in World War II, the Battle for Hue would today still be a familiar name. More importantly, the men who survived to return home would have been greeted as heroes; those who had fallen would have been remembered. But that was not to be." The Vietnamese on both sides have a longer memory than that but it may already be too late to tell a complete story of that battle since General Ngo Quang Truong, the undisputed hero of Hue, already passed away last year.
  9. See, among others, Peter Braestrup, *Big Story*, 2 volumes, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977. Epstein, op. cit., reported that in late 1968, a field producer for NBC suggested "... a three-part series showing that Tet had indeed been a decisive military victory for America and that the media had exaggerated greatly the view that it was a defeat for South Vietnam. After some consideration the idea was rejected because '... Tet was already established in the public's mind as a defeat, and therefore it was an American defeat.'" "In the never-never land of television," wrote Philip B. Davidson, op. cit., "fantasy had become reality."
  10. The conversion of Clark Clifford from hawk to dove and his subsequent influence on L.B. Johnson's March decision is dramatically retold in Chapter 10 of A.J. Languth, *Our Vietnam: The War, 1954-1975*, Simon & Schuster, 2000, pages 468-530.
  11. Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point, Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*, New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1971, page 435.
  12. Davidson, op. cit.
  13. Robert D. Schulzinger's *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975*, Oxford University Press, 1997.
  14. William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War, A Short Political and Military History, 1954-1975*, New American Library, 1986.
  15. George C. Herring's standard *America's Longest War, The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, John Wiley & Sons, 1979.
  16. Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, New York: Random House, 1988.
  17. Languth, op. cit.
  18. Tran Thuc Nga et al., op. cit.
  19. Nguyen Duc Phuong, *Chien tranh Viet Nam toan tap* ("The Complete History of the Vietnam War"), Toronto: Lang Van, 2001.
  20. Pham Van Son, "Tran Chien Tet Mau Than 1968" ("The Tet 1968 Battles"), in Pham Van Son and Le Van Duong, *Cuoc Tong Cong Kich - Tong Khoi Nghia cua Viet Cong Mau Than 1968* ("The Total Offensive and General Uprising of the Vietnamese Communists in 1968"), Saigon: Phong 5/BTTM, 1968. Reprinted in *Tuong Niem 40 Nam Tet Mau Than & 34 Nam Tran Hai Chien Hoang Sa cua Hai Quan Quan Luc VNCH* ("Reminiscences 40 Years Later of Tet 1968 and 34 Years Later of the Paracels Sea Battle Waged by the Republic of Vietnam Navy"), a publication of Trach Nhiem ("Duty"), organ of the Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association of Southern California, 2007, pages 87-128. (This important publication will hereafter be referred to in abbreviated form as *Tuong Niem*.)
  21. Nguyen Duc Phuong, op. cit., citing Pham Van Son and Le Van Duong.
  22. Ibid., citing a communist source (G. Son, *Gio G Ngay N va Yeu To Bat Ngo, Mau Than Sai Gon* ["Tet 1968 in Saigon: G Hour N Day and the Element of Surprise"], *Nha xb Tre*, TP-HCM, 1988).
  23. Le Minh's account of the battle of Hue is found in "Hue trong chien dich Mau Than" ("Hue in the Mau Than Campaign"), Song Huong ("Perfume River," a magazine then edited by Hoang Phu Ngoc Tuong) No. 29, Hue, Tet issue, 1988. This account is found in excerpts quoted by



## Battle of Hue 1968...

Tran Pho Minh, "Mau Than 68, mat trai cua 30.4.1975" ("Tet 1968, the Reverse Side of April 30, 1975"), Que Me, Tet issue of 1998 (Mau Dan), Gennevilliers, France, pages 9-11, 16. All the quotations representing the other side's version, as recalled by Le Minh, both in this article and in the accompanying Chronology, come from this source.

24. G.H. Turley, *The Easter Offensive*, Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1985.

25. The crucial role of Hoang Kim Loan and other Communist moles in Hue behind the Buddhist disturbances of 1966-67 leading to the Tet Offensive in Central Vietnam has been detailed in a nine-part series authored by the former police chief of Thua Thien-Hue, Major Lien Thanh, in Tap San Biet Dong Quan ("The Ranger Magazine") and reprinted by permission in Tuong Niem, pages 176-243.

26. Nguyen Ly Tuong, "Mau Than o Hue" ("Tet 1968 in Hue"), Toi Ac Dang CSVN trong bien co Tet Mau Than 1968 ("Crimes of the CPV during Tet 1968 in Hue"), Tran Trong An Son, editor, 2008, page 50. (This publication will henceforth be referred to in abbreviated form as Toi Ac.) Mrs. Tuan Chi, also referred to as Mrs. Nguyen Dinh Chi, was a former principal of the famous Dong Khanh girls high school in Hue.

27. Ho Dinh, "Hoang Phu Ngoc Tuong, Ke hai phu du sau tham sat Tet Mau Than 1968 tai Hue" ("HPNT, the Gatherer of Ephemera After the Tet 1968 Massacres in Hue"), Toi Ac, pages 37-39. In 1968 Hoang Phu Ngoc Tuong was a student at the Hue Faculty of Letters but he also was teaching philosophy in a private high school.

28. Languth, op. cit., page 477. See also Nguoi linh gia Seattle ("Old Soldier from Seattle," obviously a nickname), "Hoi Ky ve Tet Mau Than tai Hue" ("Memoirs of Tet 1968 in Hue"), Toi Ac, pages 35-36.

29. *Infra*, Toi Ac. Practically all the articles in Toi Ac mention at one point or another these names and many more, lesser known, who collaborated with the Communists and thereafter earned the eternal opprobrium reserved for traitors and butchers by Hue inhabitants.

30. The information used to draw up the "Chronology of the Battle of Hue" and to describe the military contest in Hue during Tet 1968 was culled from a great variety of sources, including some oral interviews of participants and after action reports, too numerous to cite here. However, I would like to point to some difficulties in trying to reconcile them all. For instance, the Communists have more than one way of referring to their units, probably in an attempt to confuse the enemy or at least to hide the actual identity of units involved. A battalion may be referred to by its nickname, like the Song Lo Battalion means that it had participated in the famous Song Lo battle of 1948, the first victory over the French during the French Resistance War (1945-1954). Or a unit can be also nicknamed after one of its heroes, like the Cu Chinh Lan Regiment (Ninth NVA Brigade), led by a Lt. Colonel named Di. Then some units are identified in one source as battalions and in another as regiments, for instance the 800th, 802nd, 804th and 806th. I have tried my best to make sense of original documents, whenever available. On the question of who were the NVA commanders leading the Hue attacks there is also some confusion: some sources, like Hong Linh writing in Toi Ac (page 58), identify Nguyen Van as leading the Fifth Brigade (D.R. Palmer, in *Summons of the Trumpet*, identified him as a Lt. Colonel; however, according to Chinh Dao, in Toi Ac, page 45, this brigade was under the command of Than Trong Mot) and Lt. Colonel Nguyen Trong Dan (Nguyen Trong Dau, according to Chinh Dao, Toi Ac, page 44, but Colonel Nguyen Trong Tan, according to John Prados, page 155) as leading the Sixth Brigade attacking Hue while many authors believe otherwise. Leaving those issues aside, the question of who among at least three different ARVN units should be credited with the raising of the South Vietnamese flag on the Imperial Citadel after 25 days of bitter fighting is enough to make one go nuts: one source says that it was the Vietnamese Marines and First ARVN troops who raised the flag on the morning of February 23 (Tuong Niem, page 85), another says that it was a volunteer from Pham Van Dinh's 2/3 battalion (i.e. First ARVN Division) who climbed the flag tower and raised the South Vietnamese flag "in the predawn hours of 24 February" (Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, page 118), a third source claimed that it was the Hac Bao ("Black Panthers") Company of Tran Ngoc Hue who had that honor (Keith Nolan, *Battle for Hue*, page 172; Wikipedia article on the "Battle of Hue": "On February 24, 1968 the Imperial Palace in the center of the Citadel was secured and the elite Black Panther Company of the First South Vietnamese Division tore down the NVA's flag"), a claim disputed by U.S. Marines Major Robert H. Thompson ("The MACV records will reflect that the ARVN, assisted by the [U.S. Marines] 1/5, took the Citadel. That was strictly public relations hogwash . . . The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines took the Citadel. The ARVN were spectators."). In *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* John Prados seems a bit unsure when he wrote: "The Vietnamese marines . . . launched a surprise night attack of their own on February 23/24. At about 5 a.m. on February 24, soldiers of the ARVN Third Regiment put their flag in place of the North Vietnamese flag on the Citadel wall. Later ARVN and [U.S. Marines] 1/5 troops captured the Imperial Palace [ . . . ]. Fittingly, it was the Hac Bao (Black Panther) Company of the ARVN First Division that finally raised the South Vietnamese flag over the palace." Thus, everyone had his share of glory: the Vietnamese Marines, ARVN's Third Regiment, the U.S. Marines, and the Hac Bao. Finally, Don Oberdorfer, who wrote the standard account of Tet (New York: Doubleday, 1971), probably took a leaf from General Westmoreland's *A Soldier Reports* (page 434) when he wrongfully credited the pulling down of the North Vietnamese flag to a small fifty-man South Vietnamese unit known as "Tiger Force," which a Vietnamese author recently re-translates, probably mistakenly, as the "Loi Ho" (Toi Ac, page 34).

31. On this question also, the information could be quite contradictory. D.R. Palmer, in *Summons*, on page 193, also mentioned 7,500 men but said that "in all, [there were] eight battalions" involved belonging to two regiments (the NVA Fifth and Sixth). Other sources mentioned many more than eight battalions, which is the more likely case. Keith Nolan, in *Battle for Hue*, on pages 28-29, has this to say: "To augment the nine enemy battalions which invaded Hue on the first day, an additional five were able to move in: the 416th Battalion, 5th NVA Regiment; the 4th and 6th Battalions, 24th NVA Regiment; the 7th and 8th Battalions, 90th NVA Regiment." This last-mentioned regiment is probably a mistake for the 9th NVA Regiment, but Nolan continues: "Around six thousand NVA were facing the [U.S.] Marines and ARVN." But this is an understatement because if 14 battalions come to only 6,000, they would have to be very much understrength (6,000: 14 = 428 each). I have therefore chosen to accept the higher figure (7,500), admitting that there may have been some confusion as to which units are counted in this overall figure.

32. "Nowhere did anything remotely resembling an uprising of the people against the Saigon government occur." (Bernard G. Nalty, *The Vietnam War*, Barnes & Noble, 2000, page 191)

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33. D. Gareth Porter, "The 1968 'Hue Massacre'," *Indochina Chronicle* No. 33 (June 24, 1974). Another crazy attempt to deny the Hue massacres was made by the photographer Philip Hones-Griffith, who in *Vietnam, Inc.*, New York: McMillan, 1971, could say that the Americans had invented the whole massacre scenario as a "propaganda campaign to present the [civilian] casualties of the fighting in Hue, most of whom were killed by the most hysterical use of American firepower ever seen, as the victims of a communist massacre."
34. Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN*, New York University Press, 2008, page 121.
35. William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, New York: Dell, 1976, pages 435-436.
36. Le Duan, in *Thu vao Nam* ("Letters to the South"), Hanoi: Nha xb Su That, 1985, defined the objectives of the Tet Offensive as follows: "One, to dismantle a major part of the puppet army, overthrow their administration at various levels, and wrest power back into the hands of the people; two, to eliminate an important part of the American war efforts and means, making it impossible for them to carry out their political and military tasks; three, on that basis to smash the Americans' will at aggression, forcing them to a defeat . . . to eventually bring about the reunification of the country." To that end, Le Duan envisioned "the engineering of a general uprising together with our general offensive; as we use enough force and firepower to crush the enemy's main force . . . we also motivate millions of people in the cities and in the countryside under enemy occupation to rise up in rebellion." (Emphasis added) It is obvious that none of that happened. Phillip B. Davidson, in *Vietnam at War*, page 447, wrote: "The overwhelming weakness of Giap's plan was to base [the Tet Offensive] on assumptions which turned out to be not just invalid, but dead wrong. ARVN did not defect, desert, or dissolve under the hammer blows of the Communists at Tet. ARVN, as a whole, fought with more courage and effectiveness than it had ever done before or would do again. The people did not join the Vietcong attackers; they did not revolt against the Thieu government; and they did not turn against the Americans."
37. Truong Nhu Tang, minister of Justice for the southern Communist "government" at the time of Tet 1968, later wrote in *Journal of a Vietcong*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1986: "Tet and the subsequent counterattacks (sic) during the Spring and Summer of 1968 brought about untold losses to both the NLF and the NVA." Dr. Duong Quynh Hoa, another NLF celebrity, billed the offensive "an egregious mistake." And Hoang Van Hoan, a Politburo member who later fled to China, avowed in his memoirs, *Giot Nuoc Trong Bien Ca* ("A Drop in the Ocean"), Beijing, 1980: "Le Duan miscalculated both our capabilities and the enemy's during the Tet 1968 campaign. Our forces had to retreat with extremely serious losses in men, military power and weaponry."
38. Pham Van Son and Le Van Duong, "Co Do Trong Bien Co" ("The Former Imperial Capital During the [Tet 1968] Affair," *Toi Ac*, page 83.
39. *Ibid.*, pages 83-84. Recently, Nam Dao in Australia had an extremely emotional interview with one of the students dragooned into chain gangs to dig trenches in preparation for mass executions during Tet 1968.
40. Languth, *op. cit.*, page 477.
41. Thanh Tin (pen-name of former NVA Colonel Bui Tin), in *Mat That* ("The Real Face [of Vietnamese Communism]"), Orange County, CA: Saigon Press, 1993, gives a chilling and detailed explanation of why the massacres happened in Hue 1968. However, he seems to try to disculpate higher authorities in the chain of command, attributing these erratic actions (like the killing, shooting, or burying alive of even old people, women and children, babies even) to local military commanders acting in panic situations. This explanation is hardly plausible as the massacres happened in many different spots and carried out by different military units: they could not possibly all act as one if there was no policy dictated from above. At least, Le Minh accepted his part of responsibility at his level and, according to Bui Tin himself, General Tran Van Quang and his political commissar, Le Chuong, were later recalled to Hanoi for reprimand. This may be an indication that, if the policy did not come from Hanoi, it could still have come from the regional Tri-Thien-Hue command and the massacres could not simply be individual initiatives.
42. This seems to be alluded to by Le Minh in his memoirs as he described the impossible situation that his troops found themselves after retreating from Hue.
43. Tran Ngoc, "Phong van Giao su Le Van Hao" ("An Interview with Prof. Le Van Hao"), *Que Me* ("Motherland") Nos. 105 & 106, Paris, 1990.
44. While denying his part of responsibility in the massacres, Hoang Phu Ngoc Tuong, both in *Vietnam, A Television History* (13-part PBS series) and in his answers to Thuy Khue, a RFI (Radio France Internationale) reporter, in an interview later published in *Chuyen Luan* ("The Rolling Wheel," a Buddhist magazine published in France), acknowledged that there were many people killed in Hue during Tet 1968. He divided them into three categories: (1) people "punished by the Liberation Army for real crimes against the people," whatever that was; (2) "innocent people" killed by mistake (how many, he did not say); and (3) people killed by American bombing or caught in the crossfire when the ARVN counterattacked. The transparent glibness of this explanation can be seen right away in such deaths as those of five German doctors who came to help in Vietnam or teach at Hue Medical School, the killing of Catholics in Phu Cam or foreign missionaries, the deliberate (not by mishap) killing of old people, women and children found later in mass graves, etc.
45. A gleaning of the publication *Toi Ac* alone would yield dozens of other names, possibly less well-known, but nonetheless all contributing to the mass horror of the Hue massacres. What is disconcerting is that many of those names are names of well-known educators, from Le Van Hao to Mrs. Tuan Chi, Hoang Phu Ngoc Tuong, to Ton That Duong Tiem, Nguyen Dac Xuan, Nguyen Doa, people who are supposed to be teaching the values of humanity and kindness to their students. But it is sometimes non-entities like Tong Hoang Nguyen and Nguyen Dinh Bay (Bay Khiem) who went out and systematically carried out mass arrests that eventually ended in mass executions.
46. The battle of Hue at Tet 1968 was probably one of the best-documented actions on film of the Vietnam War. An Embassy of Viet-Nam 1970-71 Film List published in Washington, DC, in 1971, lists five titles related to this battle and its aftermath: *The Battle of Hue* (February 1968, 20 minutes long), *Hue, A City in February* (February 1968, 13 minutes), *Communist Massacre in Hue* (March-April 1969, 15 minutes), *Toi Ac Viet Cong Tai Hue* (March-April 1969, Vietnamese version of the previous title), *Hue, A Martyrized City* (March-April 1969, 25 minutes), and *Da Mai Valley* (name of the site where some of the largest mass graves were found, September 1969, 20 minutes). What is interesting about these films is that they were documentary news films with relatively little editing. A couple of them shows lengthy footage of the Communist



troops when they first came into town, taken by a South Vietnamese cameraman when things were still very much in confusion (the communist troops thought that he was one of their television crews). He subsequently went into hiding and managed to keep these footages to show them later on when the ARVN came back into town. On this note, one may add also that the best fiction, or rather non-fiction, written on the Tet 1968 in Hue was written by a woman writer, Nha Ca, whose *Giai khan so cho Hue* ("A Mourning Band for Hue"), received a presidential award in 1969 when it first came out, and Nguyen Mong Giac, *Mua Bien Dong* ("Season of Oceanic Waves," 1984-89), a 1,800-page tetralogy that amounts to an epic account of the 1963-1975 period in South Vietnam, one volume of which is almost entirely devoted to the battle of Hue.

## Battle of Hue 1968...



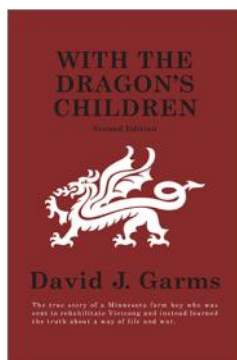
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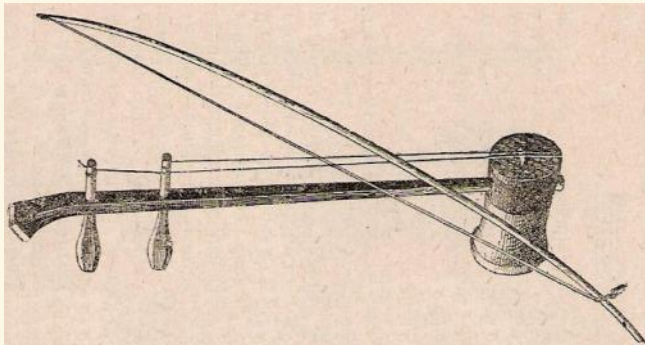
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**Long Me - Y-Van**

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**Lòng Mẹ, Thanh Giang, Hạ Uy Cầm, Hawaiian Guitar**



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*LÒNG MẸ - Võ Tá Hân Hòa âm - Minh Ngọc Piano -TNP & BP*

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*Lòng mẹ organ Happyeo 3.0 organ khang*

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*Phương Mỹ Chi - Lòng Mẹ*

*Lòng mẹ Hương lan*



*Lòng mẹ (tân cổ) - Hương Lan*

*Phương Mỹ Chi & Hương Lan - Lòng mẹ*

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## VIDEO

*Chung kết xếp hạng]: Giao Linh - Phương Mỹ Chi -*

*Hoàng Châu - Uyên Trang: Lòng Mẹ*

