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Understanding and Teaching the Vietnam War

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KEY RESOURCES

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The Vietnamese Sides of the "American" War

TUAN HOANG

I have taught the Vietnam War classes a half dozen times at three universities.[1] In the final exam, I have always included a variation of the following question, whether as a regular essay or an extra-credit mini-essay: "In your opinion, which of the following years was the most significant in the long Vietnam conflict: 1950, 1954, 1963, 1965, 1968, 1973, 1975, or 1979? First, describe what happened. Second, place the year in the context of the entire conflict and explain why you consider it the most important one."

This question is meant to stimulate undergraduate thinking and argument, and it has prompted some of the best undergraduate exam essays I have graded. Equally interesting is the distribution of the years chosen by students. In my first class, students showed overwhelming preferences for 1965 and 1968. They were virtually neck-to-neck as the first choice of over 60 percent of the class, if memory serves. They were followed by 1950, 1963, 1954, 1973, and 1975. No one chose to write about 1979, the year of the Third Indochina War, typically covered in the last week of the course. Over time, however, these choices have changed a good deal. In the records of a more recent class 1979 remained at the bottom. But neither 1965 nor 1968 stood at the top, replaced by 1963. The year that saw the assassinations of Ngo Dinh Diem and John Kennedy raked in twenty essays in a class of nearly fifty students, or about 40 percent. Next was 1950, which saw eight essays. It was followed by 1965 (seven essays), 1954 (six), 1968 (four), and finally 1973 and 1975 (two each).

There are several possible reasons for these changes, including a greater amount of content on international involvement, which made 1950 more significant in the judgment of my students. But I believe the most important reason has to do with the fact that since that first class I have placed more and more emphasis on Vietnamese perspectives and experiences. For this reason, both 1965 and 1968—the most American-centric years among the choices offered—have declined significantly among the votes of my students. Similarly, the rise of 1963 to the top spot has much to do with an emphasis on Vietnamese developments. It is true that my students are exposed to Washington's strained relationship with Diem and the critical role of the United States in the coup against him. On the other hand, they learn a good deal about major Vietnamese-centered subjects. These subjects include the competition in nation building between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN); Diem's consolidation of power, Personalist vision, and political repression of communist and non-communist Vietnamese; the roots and rise of the National Liberation Front (NLF); and Buddhist nationalism behind the protests in Hue and Saigon during the summer of 1963. Again, the United States was never far from this story. But the main focus remained Vietnamese politics and society. "Although 1963 was not filled with just one big event or even a large military victory on the scale of Dien Bien Phu," one student wrote in favor of this particular year, "it instead consisted of mostly political changes and events that were interrelated and influenced more than one country or battlefield." One might quarrel with the student and suggest that 1963 did have "one big event" or two in Diem's and John Kennedy's assassinations. But one is hard-pressed to deny his contention that 1963 saw consequential "political changes and events" rather than a major military event such as Dien Bien Phu, Rolling Thunder, the introduction of US combat troops, the Tet Offensive, or the Ho Chi Minh Campaign.

Moreover, the shift in emphasis can be found in the main texts I have used for my course. In my first class, I used the fourth edition of George C. Herring's venerable *America's Longest War* (2001). This classic textbook provides a solidly chronological and thematically middle-of-the-road interpretation of the war. It concerns primarily the American perspective, but it also integrates materials from new research on the Vietnamese sides. It has not, however, been updated for over ten years. Besides, its title no longer stood once the war in Afghanistan replaced

the Vietnam War as America's longest armed conflict. For the next class, I assigned Gerard J. DeGroot's arresting if underrated *A Noble Cause?* (2000). The book is meant as another synthesis of the war, and it has the additional virtue of individual chapters on South Vietnamese and communist soldiers. Its prose is breezy, it has many apt quotations from the war's participants, and it is generally a delight to read. Regrettably, it has never been updated. This prompted me to turn to Mark Philip Bradley's *Vietnam at War* (2009), which is based in part on Bradley's undergraduate teaching. It is the most Vietnamesecentric general textbook about the war since William J. Duiker's *Sacred War* (1995), which is perfectly appropriate for undergraduate reading but has not been updated either.[2]

The changes in my textbook adoption are suggestive of the broader scholarship about Vietnamese participants in the war. As late as the early 1990s there were hardly more than a handful of major memoirs by communist and noncommunist Vietnamese available in English, of which *A Vietcong Memoir* was easily the best known. Because of a general lack of research on the Vietnamese sides, textbooks necessarily and overwhelming focused on the United States at the expense of the RVN, DRV, and NLF. On the noncommunist side, popular accounts written by journalists—Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam* and Neil Sheehan's *A Bright, Shining Lie* were two best-selling examples—provided some of the best vignettes that instructors could appropriate for illustration in lectures about South Vietnam. Nonetheless, they came decidedly from a non-Vietnamese perspective and did not necessarily reflect those of the noncommunist South Vietnamese. On the communist side, students could watch clips of General Vo Nguyen Giap remembering the battles of Dien Bien Phu and the Tet Offensive from the PBS series *Vietnam: A Television History* or the Canadian series *Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Days War*. Giap's comments, however, were either short or repetitive in content. In short, accessible materials about the Vietnamese sides were lacking in quantity as well as quality.

Fortunately, this situation later underwent a significant change, primarily due to new scholarship on the Vietnamese sides. Among diplomatic and military historians, who form the traditional core of Vietnam War scholars, a number of young historians have conducted research in Vietnamese archives in addition to American ones. They overlap with an older generation of historians whose more recent publications range from new biographies of Giap and Ho Chi Minh to

ocal histories of the NLF. There is also a new generation of historians of modern Vietnam whose training as Southeast Asianists naturally ocuses on the Vietnamese sides when they write about the war. Further supplementing these two groups are the Europeanists, whose focus on ate colonialism and the transition to independence carries strong mplications for our understanding of subsequent American involvement. Enriching this scholarly pot are specialists on postwar Vietnam—political scientists, sociologists, and especially anthropologists—whose works invariably address the war in myriad ways. Since its appearance n 2006, the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* has served as an informal home for research on Vietnamese involvement in and since the war. Beyond the academic halls, there has been a small but steady flow of memoirs and fiction (originals and translations) that present one or another of the Vietnamese points of view related to the conflict. A number of Vietnamese-language films on war-related themes have been shown in the United States and are available for classroom screening. There are also a number of oral histories by Vietnamese participants at the Vietnam Archives at Texas Tech University, which has made available through its website a large number of documents, photographs, and other materials related to all of the Vietnamese sides in the conflict. Finally, online media such as YouTube have made accessible audio and video clips, including many on the Vietnamese, that instructors could easily show in the classroom.

Given this relative profusion of materials, perhaps the most important decision instructors can make is how much of the Vietnamese perspective and experience they would like to incorporate into the content of their courses. Do they want to focus primarily on the United States but pay attention to a few aspects of the Vietnamese? Do they wish to give as much attention to the Vietnamese as they do to the Americans? Or do they aim to give equal value to American, Vietnamese, and international perspectives? To put it in a more quantitative way, do they want to devote less or more than 20 percent to reading materials on the Vietnamese? Or perhaps 30 or 40 percent, or even more? There are advantages to gain and sacrifices to make in these choices, and instructors will have to decide for themselves how much content about the Vietnamese is be sufficient for their classes. Below I will address some major thematic points and make suggestions on reading assignments that emphasize the Vietnamese perspectives. I will also focus on several particular readings that I have found to be very useful for student understandings of these perspectives.

Precolonial and Colonial Vietnam: Relationships with China and the West

Advantages and sacrifices aside, I believe that instructors of any pedagogical and ideological persuasion should give students some ideas about the historical relationship between Vietnam and China. The most obvious reason for this recommendation is the complex relationship between the DRV and the People's Republic of China (PRC). It moved from close ideological comradeship and tremendous material support (on the part of China) during the 1950s and 1960s to growing fracture and warfare against each other in the 1970s, then to rapprochement since the late 1980s. An instructor may address this period in the context of the Sino-Soviet conflict, Sino-American rapprochement, and other developments. Nevertheless, students will gain a deeper perspective about this "war period" if they receive some background on the long-standing and complex relationship between Vietnam and its neighbor to the north.

There are several strong and undergraduate-friendly secondary sources that address this relationship, and instructors are encouraged to utilize one or more of them to give students a taste of precolonial Vietnam. One of the best choices is the first two chapters of D. R. SarDesai's general history of Vietnam, *Vietnam: Past and Present*. The first chapter provides a solid background on Vietnamese antiquity.[3] The materials would be new to most students, and some may be overwhelmed by the large amount of information about a largely foreign subject. But the chapters also highlight multifaceted Chinese influences, as well as invasions and occupations, and should be an excellent way to introduce students to placing the Vietnam War in the broader context of the country's history of conflict and nationalism. In the first chapter, students would learn that the Vietnamese began to form their identity early in antiquity, but it was a millennium of Chinese direct rule that led to influences as varied as the widespread use of the water buffalo and the plow for agricultural purposes, the field system and construction techniques against flooding, the introduction of Indian Buddhism, and the adoption of the Confucian classics as the basis for entrance into the dynastic bureaucracy. At the same time, this direct rule prompted a number of rebellions, some of which are listed in the readings. The most vivid example is the rebellion of the Trung sisters in the first century. The reading includes the following famous quatrain from one of the sisters.

I swear, first, to avenge the nation;
Second, to restore the [dynastic] Hungs' former position;
Third, to have revenge for my husband;
Fourth, to carry through to the end our common task.

Instructors may wish to have students analyze the quatrain, especially the multiplicity of aims and motives in the rebellion. They should highlight the fact that the rebellion was supported by the peasantry, as well as the nobility, and could use this to point out the significance of the peasantry throughout Vietnamese history, up to the contest to win the hearts and minds of the rural population during the Second Indochina War. The second chapter of the reading provides another illustration of the power of the peasantry through the example of the emperor Le Loi in the fifteenth century. Leader of a successful rebellion against a brief Chinese occupation, Le Loi was a landowner who rallied the peasantry to the cause of independence, engaged in guerrilla warfare, and founded the Le dynasty. The importance of the peasantry is further suggested by the fact that one of Le's successors actively invaded the southern neighboring kingdom Champa in order to gain land for the growing peasant population. Students may appreciate the complexity of the Vietnamese experience, which saw defensive warfare against China on the one hand and gradual expansion into contemporary southern Vietnam by military and political means on the other.

The second chapter of SarDesai's book also describes the emergence of a long partition of Vietnam that occurred in the sixteenth century, during which Le rulers were nominally in power. Instead, the real power rested with the Trinh family in the north and the Nguyen family in the south, and instructors may want to focus on this division to show students that national division during the Vietnam War was only the latest manifestation of the problem of unity for a country whose S-shaped geography does not yield easily to centralized political and military control. Attempts to unify the country resulted in civil warfare; aid from foreigners, including the Chinese and the French; the involvement of peasants; a famous victory of Vietnamese forces over China's Qing military in Hanoi (the so-called First Tet Offensive); and eventual unification under the Nguyen dynasty in the early nineteenth century. There is no question that all of this history looks very distant to the history of the Vietnam War, whose immediate causes were colonialism, nationalism, communism, and the Cold War. Nonetheless, students can

benefit tremendously from a *longue durée* perspective on Vietnamese history.[4]

Two last points about Vietnamese *longue durée* are the absorption of outside influences and the tendency for Vietnamese to seek help abroad. The first point is well illustrated through the influences of Chinese civilization—such as agriculture, language, the arts, ruling ideology, and governmental structure—but also western ones such as the modern script that was widely adopted by the early twentieth century. The second point is underscored by Nguyen Anh, the lone survivor of the Nguyen family, who sought help from Siamese and Frenchmen in order to unify Vietnam and establish the Nguyen dynasty in the early nineteenth century. His example foreshadows Ho Chi Minh's search for ideas and assistance in Paris, and ultimately Moscow, in the 1920s and 1930s or Ngo Dinh Diem's quest for American aid while living in New Jersey in the early 1950s.

The Colonial Experience: Modernization, Nationalism, and Communism

It is not uncommon that instructors of Vietnam War courses will gloss over the French threat and jump into discussing colonialism during the early part of a course. This is understandable for reasons of time. It is recommended, however, that they should at least note the shared experience between Vietnam and China of western domination, including military defeats such as those that occurred in the Sino-French War and the Tonkin Campaign. Students may appreciate learning, for instance, about Qing assistance (including the provision of soldiers) to help the Nguyen fight the French army in the latter conflict, a pattern displayed decades later in the PRC-DRV relationship. One useful reading is, again, chapter 7 of Brantly Womack's *China and Vietnam*, which is titled "The Brotherhood of Oppression."

There is, however, one somewhat atypical reading that I have found to be very helpful for student understanding of the colonial experience: the third chapter of William S. Logan's history of Hanoi.[5] The reading is atypical because it is somewhat beyond the common "oppression-resistance" trope, found in many narratives about the Vietnam War, which pays lip service to French colonialism. Entitled "Hanoi: Building a Capital for French Indochina," the reading is essentially a piece of urban history. It begins with a summary of the first years of colonial

occupation and helpfully points out the colonial preoccupation with military matters that led to the fortification of existing edifices for security purposes. In particular, students may be delighted to encounter the early Hanoi Hilton, which was used to house Vietnamese rebels against the colonial regime. (Its Vietnamese name was Hoa Lo, literally, "Hell's hole.") Supported by a copious amount of illustrations, the chapter then focuses on the reconstruction of the old city as a modern and Parisian-inspired metropolitan center. The reconstruction involved, among other things, drainage of swamps and marshes and rice fields; enlargement of roads and the construction of boulevards; demolition or removal of pagodas and even entire neighborhoods; and the erection of parks, palaces, churches, government buildings, museums, and the opera house that in 1946 became the meeting site of the National Assembly of the Viet Minh–led DRV. Special attention is paid to the designs of the architect Ernest Hébrard and the construction efforts of Governor-General Paul Doumer, whose name graced the famous bridge that was built under his rule and became a bombing target for the Americans during the 1960s. Created, too, were new quarters and neighborhoods for the Europeans, which existed apart from those of the Vietnamese masses and the ethnic Chinese who engaged in commercial activities.

There is more to the Logan reading than an architectural and urban history of colonial Hanoi. Not all pagodas, for example, were removed or demolished, and there was a measure of sensitivity to cultural heritage on the part of the colonial rulers. This reflected the European intellectual climate at the time, especially the "dual-city" concept, under which Hébrard sought to build a new, Western-style municipality alongside the old native city. For their part, the Vietnamese felt much awe at the massive and remarkable scale of construction. It is true that they felt a lot of resentment toward the deliberate and racist separation of neighborhoods. But they were clearly impressed by the colonial achievement, and many of them seized on opportunities to move to quarters that allowed for more opportunities. One such location was the Bay Mau Quarter, which "became a chief location of the middle-class Vietnamese working for the colonial administration and private enterprises."[6] In my teaching experience, students often are awed by the changes made by the French in Hanoi. (It does not hurt to find some photos of Old Hanoi on the Internet and show them in class.) This

reading helps them see that the relationship between the Vietnamese and French was more complex than is sometimes portrayed in a standard textbook. The Vietnamese wanted independence from colonialism. But the succession of military defeats and the draw of modernity, best symbolized by the reconstruction of Hanoi, pushed them toward finding new solutions for independence.

The darkest aspects of the Vietnamese experience of French colonialism are well described in the book *Colonialism Experienced* edited by Truong Buu Lam. It contains a very nice selection of twenty political documents that represent a variety of Vietnamese responses to colonial rule: oppositional and collaborationist, violent and nonviolent, reformist and revolutionary. The editor also contributes three lucidly written chapters about, respectively, colonial administration, Vietnamese perceptions, and the Vietnamese experience of French rule.[7] Any of these chapters—and one or more of the documents—would enhance student knowledge about the drive among Vietnamese to adapt and endorse new ideas and proposals toward independence. The first two documents in Lam's book come from Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chau Trinh, two prominent early leaders of the Vietnamese nationalist movement. True to the spirit of this volume, the chosen documents present an eloquent combination of anger at the horrible political and economic conditions, on the one hand, and promotion of nationalist sentiments and language on the other. Alternatively, instructors can also choose selections from two translations by Vinh Sinh: Phan Boi Chau's famous autobiography and Phan Chau Trinh's political writings. Each of these volumes also contains a detailed introduction by the translator, which explicates the life and work of the author in the political context of oppressive colonialism and emergent nationalism.[8]

Instructors who wish to focus on early communist developments may want to pay special attention to "Document 18" in *Colonialism Experienced*. This is an article written by Ho Chi Minh in the late 1920s, when Ho was working in southern China as an agent for the Comintern.[9] There are at least three reasons for the significance of this document for teaching purposes. First, it was entitled "The Communists Must Organize Themselves into a Single Party," and it called for a united front among peasants and workers to fight against colonialism. "The Communist Party," it reads, "is the avant-garde of the proletariat, and the peasantry is the leader of the proletariat, so the peasantry will

overthrow the French imperialists, seize political power, and set up the dictatorship of peasants and workers in order to achieve a communist society."[10]

The call to arms was significant because the communists, at least those in Ho's vein, were deeply concerned with the question of the peasantry. This stood in contrast to major noncommunist, anticolonial movements, which focused squarely on urban people as the vanguard of the Vietnamese revolution. Elsewhere in the document, Ho refers to "workers and peasants who have had their consciousness raised." Second, the document showcases Ho's well-known skills in organization. Taking a page straight out of orthodox Leninist theory, Ho outlined three steps in the process of founding a communist party for all Vietnamese: creating a cell on the basis of a "unit of production"; expanding it into more cells; and organizing them into first a cell at the district level, then cells at the provincial, regional, and national levels. Last, the document highlights some of the tensions among the Vietnamese revolutionaries of different stripes. At one point, Ho demonized noncommunist political movements as "parties of landowners, capitalists, intellectuals, petit bourgeois" and "either false revolutionaries or antirevolutionaries." The stage was set, in theory if not yet in practice, for the civil dimension of the Vietnam conflict.

Those who wish to pursue these three points further should consult the next document in the same book. It was drafted as the "political theses of the Indochinese Communist Party" (ICP) and authored by Tran Phu, the first secretary general of the Comintern-approved organization that Ho helped to unite from several communist groups.[11] Three times longer than Ho's article, it placed the situation in Vietnam alongside developments in the world, including the appeal of the Soviet Union during the bleakness of the global economic depression. It offered an analysis of the conditions that would lead to a Vietnamese revolution and declared that capitalist and petit bourgeois Vietnamese would be ineffectual in leading it. An instructor can break down this analysis to explain to students how the concept of class struggle in Marxist orthodoxy became significant for a number of elite Vietnamese. In addition, the document reinforced Ho Chi Minh's point about the proletariat and peasantry and considered them the twin forces for the revolution to come, specifying that the "allies of the proletariat are the middle and poor peasants." At the same time, Tran Phu, a more orthodox Marxist than Ho, did not fail to stress the role of the workers as leaders and

educators of the peasants. The document went on at length to attack the "bourgeois-democratic" revolution, which was advocated by "bourgeois intellectuals" and had failed to consider the lives of Vietnamese peasants in the revolutionary scheme.

The document ends with a fascinating section on the use of slogans for drawing mass support for the ICP-led revolution. They include "minimum slogans" such as "Reduce working hours" and "Cut taxes" at the early stage, then "transitional slogans" like "Establish councils to confiscate lands" and "Arm the workers and peasants" at a later stage. Instructors should seize on these slogans to generate discussion in the classroom. What did the slogans say about the conditions in colonial Vietnam from a revolutionary perspective? Why were some particular slogans employed at the start and why other slogans later? Much can be deduced from these seemingly simple slogans, especially on the communist strategy of appealing to immediate interests before educating the masses toward momentous revolutionary changes.

The August Revolution and the First Indochina War

Of course the ICP hardly dominated the nationalist movement because it only had about five thousand members in early 1945. In addition it faced competition from a plurality of Vietnamese noncommunist political activists prior to the August Revolution, which saw the communists take over political power in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh deliver a declaration of independence. This political struggle among Vietnamese before the war period is demonstrated in two accessible articles. The first one comes from the French historian François Guillemot and suggests that the four Dai Viet (Great Viet) political parties were propagating a right-wing nationalist vision as a counter to the appeal of the communists among educated Vietnamese.[12] The second article, by the Vietnamese refugee historian Vu Ngu Chieu, details the limitations, as well as the accomplishments, of the short-lived Empire of Vietnam.[13] Instructors who want to highlight the noncommunist contribution to the revolution during the pivotal 1940s could do worse than introducing these readings to their students.

The August Revolution, too, has been studied from the Vietnamese perspective, especially in David G. Marr's book on the year 1945.[14] It is shown to have been a very messy affair, and full of contingencies and

local initiatives rather than centralized directives. Supported by a wealth of archival and published materials, Marr's take largely confirms the conclusion of an older and handy article by the late émigré scholar Huynh Kim Khanh, which could be used as assigned reading on the subject.[15] Most other readings, however, tend to treat the revolution not separately but as one of a series of significant developments from 1945 to Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Conference in 1954. This is where Mark Bradley's general history could be used for the classroom. The book is not without problems on the whole. Its view of the RVN, for instance, is conventional and does not take into consideration recent research about Ngo Dinh Diem and South Vietnam. Its emphasis on the Vietnamese leaves little room for any detailed discussion of US policies. But Bradley's chapter on the First Indochina War presents short but fine-grained consideration of the Vietnamese perspectives on top of a solid summary of events during the August Revolution and the colonial war.

It points out, for instance, the killings and assassinations among Vietnamese during and after the August Revolution, a result of earlier intra-Vietnamese competition and a foreshadowing of the greater violence to come during the Second Indochina War. The chapter describes the colonial war as having two distinctive stages, and instructors may want to point out that the Second Indochina War would have two stages as well. In my experience, this parallel helps students to begin thinking about the Vietnam War as a series of contingencies and changes rather than a single block of experiences. Similar to American involvement later, the French War saw shifts in momentum, strategy, and involvement of outsiders. This particular reading does well in explicating each stage of the French War and the transition from a colonial conflict during the first stage (1946–49) to an international one in the second (1950–54). It gives more space to the internationalization of the war, as is the case in other textbooks. But there is a significant amount of information about the struggles of Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh during the first stage. It notes, for instance, that the Viet Minh did not receive direct support from Stalin or Mao but was not completely isolated because it sought ties and support from other Southeast Asian countries that shared its anticolonial perspective. It also highlights the Viet Minh's application of the Maoist three-stage strategy throughout the war, and instructors should point out that this was another instance of the Vietnamese tradition of borrowing from the successes of the Chinese.

Bradley's textbook is better than most in highlighting the roles of the Vietnamese during the Cold War–fueled internationalization of the war starting in 1950. Succinctly described are developments on the Vietnamese noncommunist side, centering around the person of the former emperor Bao Dai as the titular leader of the State of Vietnam. There are more details about the Viet Minh side, including land reform and greater state control over intellectual thought and artistic production. In particular, the relationship between the Viet Minh and the Chinese communists receives a strong analysis peppered with interesting anecdotes and insights. As an overview of the second period of the French War, this reading stands head and shoulders above any other single reading that this author has encountered. Instructors interested in more details about the Viet Minh's shift from a nationalism- to a socialism-based structure should consult two essays from the political scientist Tuong Vu. One essay discusses the start of the Viet Minh's shift from broad coalitionist politics and the goal of national independence, which characterized the early DRV in 1945–46, to a more explicit desire to construct a socialist state with close internationalist ties to the Soviet Union and other communist countries.[16] Vu's second essay further reveals the long trajectory of the ICP's internationalist tendencies, including antagonism toward the United States long before Washington provided aid to the French military in 1950. The armed conflict "between the DRV and the United States in the 1960s," he contends, "was not unimaginable in 1945 as many have argued."[17] Based on archival research in Hanoi, Vu's essays are both informative and thought provoking about the ideological and political aspects of the Viet Minh experience during the First Indochina War.

While the Geneva Conference formally concluded the war, the battle of Dien Bien Phu has remained its best-known event. The victor of the battle, General Vo Nguyen Giap, has offered his recollections of the event in Vietnamese, and these have been translated, abbreviated, and published in Hanoi. Instructors might like to assign an excerpt of this memoir to their students.[18] Finally, research on the Geneva Conference has been dominated by internationalization. The diplomatic historian Pierre Asselin, however, has offered a more Vietnamese-oriented perspective about the Viet Minh's decision to sign the peace accords by delving into the volumes of party documents published since 1998.[19] Asselin shows that Chinese and Soviet pressure was only one factor among many, such as war-weariness on the part of the DRV,

its desire for economic construction on a socialist model, and the expectation that it would win the national elections in two years. Whether it is used for lecture or classroom reading, this article would make a significant contribution to grasping an important Vietnamese perspective on the conference.

On the legacies of the war, it is once again Mark Bradley's textbook that shines. The last section of chapter 3 focuses on the problems of state building in the north that illustrated the broader problem of Vietnamese seeking answers to the question of modernization. The reading discusses the issues of land reform, agricultural cooperatives, and the relationship between the state and intellectuals. As with the three-stage strategy of guerrilla warfare, many of these practices derived from the Maoist model. Earlier in this chapter, Bradley points out some surface tension between Viet Minh leaders and their Chinese advisers, usually over the issue of Sino-Soviet relations. The tension eventually exploded into the Third Indochina War. For the most part, however, the Sino-Vietnamese relationship was strong during the 1950s and 1960s. An emphasis on this point would connect what occurred in the Vietnam conflict to what students learn about ancient Sino-Vietnamese relations from the SarDesai reading.

Divided Vietnam and the American War

The Second Indochina War is of course at the heart of all courses on the Vietnam War. How did the Vietnamese on each side experience the war? What had the greatest impact on the decision making of the Hanoi and Saigon leaderships? How did they counter the pressures exerted by their foreign allies? How did the NLF mobilize and overcome the challenges posed by Saigon and the United States? Indeed, why did the Vietnamese fight in the first place? These are some of the questions appropriate to consider when discussing Vietnamese perspectives on the war.

There are many readings that help instructors answer these questions—for a nonspecialist on the Vietnamese sides, probably too many. Most, after all, are quite specific in content and too specialized for general use. In the final analysis, this writer believes that chapter 5 of Neil L. Jamieson's now classic *Understanding Vietnam* remains one of the most useful readings for the classroom.[20] At over seventy pages, this chapter is not short. Instructors could also do without the simplistic

"yin-yang" scheme that underlies this chapter and most of the remainder of the book. But there are several reasons to have it on the reading list. First, it covers the period 1955–70, which of course means the bulk of US involvement. (The next chapter discusses the last years of the war.) Second, it encompasses both of the northern and southern experiences. Third, it moves gracefully among historical research, literary analysis, and anecdotes drawn from personal experience and fieldwork (Jamieson is an anthropologist by training). Last, and perhaps best of all, it includes some of the best translations of Vietnamese poetry and prose (done by the author himself), which should be handy for analysis and classroom discussion. It carries many insights about Vietnamese politics and societies in the two regions, such as remarkable foresight about Ngo Dinh Diem and his nation-building vision almost a decade before archival research about Diem during the 2000s.

Instructors, indeed, are encouraged to begin the exposition of the Vietnamese perspectives on the war with Ngo Dinh Diem. Personalities played a large role in the competition for the hearts and minds of Vietnamese. While far more understanding of Diem's vision for postcolonial Vietnam than most scholars of his generation, Jamieson skillfully contrasts Diem's personality with that of Ho Chi Minh. He shows that the latter had a huge advantage in the competition for the affection and revolutionary support of Vietnamese. Instructors may seize on this contrast to expand student thinking about how leaders connect with the masses, and how these connections might explain the different resolutions to the turbulences in the north and the south. More particularly, they may want to compare Ho's deft dealings in the aftermath of the disastrous land reform on the one hand and Diem's heavy-handedness toward the renowned writer Nguyen Tuong Tam and other urban intellectuals on the other. (Tam's background is well conveyed in an earlier chapter of the book.) How did Ho's adoption of the informal salutation "Uncle" make him accessible to a society governed by intimate familial relationships? How did his willingness to appease the peasantry after the excesses of the land reform help and hinder the socialist cause advanced by Hanoi? Conversely, how did Diem's dealings with the anticommunist Tam reflect the lack of mass support for his regime? These are among the questions that could be pressed among students to generate debate and understanding.[21]

Jamieson's discussion of the Buddhists whose protests led to Diem's eventual demise is cursory. It is better on the rise of the NLF and,

through extended literary translation, excellent on three main currents of thought: individualism and distrust of ideologies in urban South Vietnam (246–54), revolutionary fervor among the communist insurgents in the south (254–57), and collectivism and Marxist-Leninism in North Vietnam (257–84). Opportunities for analysis abound, and instructors should pick one or more translated passages from each section for discussion in the classroom. One example is the individual versus the collective. In passages from South Vietnamese writers, for instance, the first person appears often and war-related images of death and weaponry are personalized. In contrast, the collective "we" figures strongly in passages written by NLF members. Instructors should encourage students to find contrasting images and words in these two sections and ask what they might have suggested about different mind-sets among Vietnamese in the south during the 1950s and 1960s. But Jamieson's greatest service in chapter 5 may be the section on developments in the north. As he points out with another round of strong selections of prose and poetry, the desire for artistic freedom and dissatisfaction with state policies led a number of intellectuals, including the prominent poet and essayist Phan Khoi, speak out and publish protest literature in the second half of the 1950s. The Hanoi government, however, did not tolerate such protest and utilized an array of resources, especially other prominent writers, to attack the protesters and defend socialism as the goal of literary and cultural works in the DRV. Instructors could single out a particular passage from the poet Xuan Dieu (266), which reveals the outcome desired and expected by the North Vietnamese regime. Why were poets and writers referred to as "technicians"? Dedicated communist writers were described as "red" and "completely red"; who, then, were the ones with a "pinkish tinge"? Moreover, the state encouraged and enabled writers to seek solidarity with and learn from socialist internationalism. Students should be asked to look at pages 267–68 and 281–83 and dissect the passages on those pages. For example, the phrases "the Soviet homeland," "face looks at face," and "hand clasps hand" (268) point to a transnational imagination that extended beyond the Vietnamese nation, while "millions and millions of laboring people" suggests the fundamental commonality among Vietnamese and Russians. Or, on the poem about Walt Whitman starting on page 281, students could be called on to discuss the criticism of the old that hindered progress and the universalist and internationalist belief in the power of "the people." Given

what they knew about the Vietnamese peasantry, how might this poem have reflected the enthusiasm for socialism and, consequently, an anti-capitalist, and ultimately anti-American, credo?

This credo was strongest in North Vietnam, but it was also essential to the strategy of the NLF in the south. On this subject, instructors may wish to introduce students to the document "Program of the National Liberation Front of South-Vietnam," which was helpfully translated by Robert Brigham and stored at the website of his Vietnam War course.[22] As was common in communist political documents at the time, the "Program" was a mix of anti-American propaganda, anti-Saigon propaganda, and appeals for a continuation of the socialist revolution in Vietnam. There are ten major headings in this document, and one useful exercise would have students sort out these three elements from it. A more challenging exercise is to focus on one heading at a time and determine which group(s) of southern Vietnamese it might appeal to the most—and which the least. Heading IV, for instance, would have drawn the interest of peasants and owners of small farms because it advocated reduction of land rent and redistribution of land. Heading VI would likely have found support among families with sons that were drafted into the South Vietnamese army, and the next heading would have appealed to ethnic minorities and educated women. As a political document, the "Program" was designed to gain as much support for the NLF as possible. The fact that the organization could survive and thrive until at least the Tet Offensive indicates that this document played a significant role in laying the ideological foundation of antiforeign nationalism mixed with a strong dose of socialism.[23]

As for the experience of noncommunist South Vietnamese, students can return to chapter 5 of Jamieson's book: a section called "The War, the Americans, and Vietnamese Society." Among other things, the author gives an array of cold numbers and statistics, which illustrate the influx of materials that accompanied the Americanization of the war. In the next sections, "Continuity and Change in Values in the South" and "Patterns in Chaos," he shifts gears to provide a combination of anecdotes, stories, and generalizations in anthropological fashion. Together these sections describe the South Vietnamese experience of the war perhaps better than any similar amount of pages in other books about the Vietnam War. They provide a vivid portrayal of the impact of the American presence in cities and countryside in material and social terms. But they also point out the complexity of the experience, which

varied from one segment of South Vietnamese society to another but at times cut across the socioeconomic spectrum and even enemy lines.

Finally, for a North Vietnamese perspective on the war, this writer recommends the book *From Enemy to Friend* by Col. Bui Tin.[24] A longtime journalist and soldier of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), which fought the French and the Americans, Tin defected to the West in the early 1990s and became a critic of the postwar regime. This book consists of a series of interviews conducted after the defection. It touches on some postwar subjects, including prisoners of war and soldiers missing in action (the POW-MIA issue), but the focus is on the war period. Given the nature of the interview format, there is a good deal of content along the lines of "hindsight" throughout the book. Nonetheless, it is well organized and easy to follow and should not take students a lot of time to read. It also covers a nice swath of military history, which should delight students with a disposition toward the genre. The author is frank in tone and alternates between praise and criticism of Hanoi's conduct during the war. For these reasons, this writer encourages instructors to assign students most of the book, if not all.

Some of Bui Tin's views were undoubtedly colored by his defection to the West near the end of the Cold War. He is not strong either when explaining the American experience. But this is not the main reason to read the book, whose value lies instead in Tin's description of North Vietnamese perceptions, tactics, and strategies. He does this by explaining and citing communist documents. Take, for instance, Hanoi's analysis of the first two major battles after Americanization (including the Battle of Ia Drang), which resulted in a "lesson learned" document that was widely disseminated. The document noted the "overwhelming firepower and technological superiority" of the United States, but also the disadvantage of having to announce "their presence ahead of time" by advance firepower before movement of ground troops. This practice took away "the elements of surprise and secrecy crucial to success in a military engagement."[25] This was the opposite of the strategy employed by communist soldiers, exemplified by another document that Tin cites in the book. According to General Nguyen Chi Thanh, the military commander in the south until his death in 1967, PAVN and NLF troops were to "keep your moves secret and unpredictable, giving special attention to creating diversions and dissimulation to throw off the enemy's calculations."[26] Along with General Vo Nguyen Giap's assessment of "search-and-destroy" (p. 23), these two documents could be

utilized for a discussion about communist approach in combating the more materially powerful American and South Vietnamese enemy.

Another valuable resource from Bui Tin's book is his explanation of the Ho Chi Minh Trail (74–80). As is true of most subjects in the book, there are longer and more scholarly publications about the trail. Tin's take, however, is as arresting as it is succinct and should provide students a glimpse into Hanoi's fascinating mobilization of resources and the masses toward the war effort. Furthermore, it could be used in conjunction with video clips about the trail that can be found on YouTube or another media source. Last, some of the information given here reveals the extent of foreign aid to Hanoi, especially from the Soviet Union and China. It is a subject treated with more attention later in the book, which provides an opportunity to discuss the international aspects of the conflict from the North Vietnamese perspective. In particular, the relationship between Hanoi and Beijing is shown to have been very strong, especially on the battlefield. With some justice, Bui Tin insists in the book that Chinese troops were not involved on the battlefield. Nonetheless, Tin's recollections of the French War and Dien Bien Phu (96–99) illustrate the fact that Mao's China was intimately involved in the Indochinese theater long before the introduction of American troops to South Vietnam.[27]

NOTES

1. The following instructors of the Vietnam War have taught their courses from a Vietnamese perspective, and I wish to thank them for providing me with the syllabi of their courses: David Biggs, Robert Brigham, Diane Fox, Charles Keith, and Wynn Wilcox.

2. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001); Gerard J. DeGroot, *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 2000); Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); William J. Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995). Another text that pays considerable attention to the Vietnamese side is William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Concise Political and Military History*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009).

3. D. R. SarDesai, *Vietnam: Past and Present*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2005), chapters 1 and 2. Another suggestion is David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885–1925* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), chapter 1; it gives a concise and lucid description of precolonial

Vietnam, focusing also on the topic of Vietnamese ethnic and national identity. A third choice is Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chapters 5, 6, and 7. These chapters are chronologically arranged and offer conceptually arresting discussions of the relationship from antiquity to 1950.

4. With time and desire, instructors might also like to highlight the growth of regionalism and the autonomous village in the period before the establishment of the Nguyen dynasty. These highlights, in turn, would prepare students to understand the challenges that communist and noncommunist revolutionaries later faced in winning over the rural masses. A recommended reading on this matter is Li Tana's short study of southern Vietnam under the Nguyen lords. Its fifth chapter describes "a new way of being Vietnamese" during this period in the south, including the state's patronage and promotion of Mahayana Buddhism. This development helped to make the south a fertile ground for eclectic religious movements subsequently, including the Hao Hao and the Cao Dai, which figured significantly before and during the First Indochina War. Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998), chapter 5.

5. William S. Logan, *Hanoi: Biography of a City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 67–111.

6. Ibid., 108.

7. Truong Buu Lam, *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism, 1900–1931* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

8. Phan Boi Chau, *Overturned Chariot: The Autobiography of Phan Bội Châu*, trans. Vinh Sinh and Nicholas Wickenden (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999); Phan Châu Trinh, *Phan Châu Trinh and His Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Vinh Sinh (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2009).

9. "Document 18: *Do* [Red] Newsletter," in Lam, *Colonialism Experienced*, 275–79.

10. Ibid., 276.

11. "Document 19: Tran Phu (1904–31)," in Lam, *Colonialism Experienced*, 280–91.

12. François Guillemot, "Vietnamese Nationalist Revolutionaries and the Japanese Occupation: The Case of the Dai Viet Parties (1936–1946)," in *Imperial Japan and National Identities in Asia, 1895–1945*, ed. Li Narangoa and R. B. Cribb (London: Routledge, 2003), 221–48.

13. Vu Ngu Chieu, "The Other Side of the 1945 Vietnamese Revolution: The Empire of Viet-Nam (March–August 1945)," *Journal of Asian Studies* 45 (February 1986): 293–328.

14. David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

15. Huynh Kim Khanh, "The Vietnamese August Revolution Reinterpreted," *Journal of Asian Studies* 30 (August 1971): 761–88.

16. Tuong Vu, "'It's Time for the Indochinese Revolution to Show Its True Colours': The Radical Turn of Vietnamese Politics in 1948," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40 (October 2009): 519–42.

17. Tuong Vu, "From Cheering to Volunteering: Vietnamese Communists and the Coming of the Cold War, 1940–1951," in *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945–1962*, ed. Christopher E. Goscha and Christian F. Ostermann (Washington, DC, and Stanford: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2009), 172–204. The quotation is on 174.

18. Vo Nguyen Giap, *Dien Bien Phu* (Hanoi: The Gioi, 2000).

19. Pierre Asselin, "Choosing Peace: Hanoi and the Geneva Agreement on Vietnam, 1954–1955," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9:2 (Spring 2007): 95–126.

20. Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

21. A benighted view of Diem's regime is found in Ronald B. Frankum Jr., "Vietnam during the Rule of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1954–63," in David L. Anderson and John Ernst, eds., *The War That Never Ends: New Perspectives on the Vietnam War* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 121–42. A more sophisticated analysis of his nation-building project is Philip C. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), chapter 2.

22. Robert Brigham, trans., "Program of the National Liberation Front of South-Vietnam," http://vietnam.vassar.edu/overview/docnlf.html.

23. For a memoir by an NLF insider, Truong Nhu Tang, *A Vietcong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), remains most accessible in content and availability.

24. Bui Tin, *From Enemy to Friend: A North Vietnamese Perspective on the War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2002).

25. Ibid., 16–17.

26. Ibid., 19–20.

27. There are many articles about Sino-Vietnamese relations during the Vietnam War. Perhaps the most accessible for classroom use is Xiaoming Zhang, "The Vietnam War, 1964–1969: A Chinese Perspective," *Journal of Military History* 60:4 (October 1996): 731–62.

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"America's Most Loyal Allies"

The Hmong and the War

CHIA YOUYEE VANG

The first time I taught a course on the Vietnam War it was to a class of two hundred students at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Similar to all first-day classes, I briefly introduced myself by highlighting my educational background, then my research and teaching interests before moving on to the syllabus. At a meeting with my teaching assistants the following week, one of them asked if it would be all right to tell students that I was Hmong. The teaching assistant shared that a couple of the students were wondering if I were Vietnamese since I was teaching about the Vietnam War. My initial reaction was that hundreds of other Americans teach about the Vietnam War and they are not Vietnamese, so what difference does my ethnicity make? I was certain that if I had been a person of any racial background but Asian, my ethnic identity would never be questioned. At the beginning of the next lecture, I decided to use their curiosity as a teaching moment by informing the class that I was indeed not Vietnamese. I told the students that the reason I was standing in front of them teaching about this war was an unintended consequence of the war itself. I further explained that in other classes about the Vietnam War, they might not get the chance to understand how a Hmong individual like me could end up in the United States. I reassured them that before the end of the semester they would be able to understand the impact of the war beyond the American and Vietnamese experiences.