

## Abstracts

### Beyond Dichotomies: Alternative Voices and Histories in Post-Colonial Viet Nam

#### Panel 3: Opposition and Dissidence

**Hoang Ngo (University of Washington)**

**"A Rising Tide: The Buddhist Movement in 1964"**

This paper examines the themes of the Vietnamese Buddhist weekly *Hải Triều Âm* (The Sound of the Rising Tide) during its circulation in 1964. The paper discusses the nature of the themes presented in *Hải Triều Âm* to shed light on the changes and development of the Buddhist Movement during 1964. It also compares the representation of the Buddhist Movement by *Hải Triều Âm* with those of scholars from both Việt Nam and the US in the postwar period. This paper has four parts: Engaging, Voicing, Responding, and Remembering. Each part corresponds to a theme presented in *Hải Triều Âm*. The underlying emphasis of the paper is to present a dissonance not only in the teleological interpretation of the war by scholars from Việt Nam, but also the predominant interpretation of the war with Cold War binary, such as Communists vs. Nationalists, by scholars in the US.

This paper primary engages with the conference's sub-theme of "so-called 'Third Force,' neutralist or peace forces on the margins of the Republic of Việt Nam." It precisely shows that many Vietnamese, especially Buddhists, from Central Việt Nam overwhelmingly wanted peace rather than the escalation of war. Besides the obvious sub-theme, the paper touches on an understudied topic of Vietnamese regionalism in two of its four parts, "Voicing" and "Responding." Through these two parts, the paper presents the frustration and anger that Central Vietnamese Buddhists had against the Nguyễn Khánh regime, which completely ignored the religious oppression against Central Vietnamese Buddhists by former bureaucrats of the Ngô Đình Diệm regime. Ultimately, the threat of Central Việt Nam seceding from the republic, which was perceived to embody the Buddhist Movement, forced the Nguyễn Khánh regime into responding, though haphazardly. I hope this paper will inspire others to study Vietnamese regionalism, so that modern Vietnamese history can one day break away from dichotomies.

**Sophie Quinn-Judge (Temple University)**

**"A Study of Local Women and Globalized War: The Revolutionary Women of Quang Nam and Quang Ngai Provinces"**

This is a preliminary report on interviews carried out over two years with ten women who joined the National Liberation Front and communist party between 1945 and 1968. The interviews were done by myself and Jane Griffith, a colleague who like me worked for the American Friends Service Committee in Quang Ngai province in the early 1970s. Our main goal was to examine the motivation of a variety of women, two of whom we have known since 1972, in choosing to resist the South Vietnamese government and its American allies. We also wanted to look at the way that the war had affected their lives over the long term.

U.S. historians have increasingly been devoting attention to narratives of the Government of Vietnam or GVN: its first leader, Ngo Dinh Diem; its armed forces; and the refugees who left in 1975 and the following years. We believe that it continues to be important to focus on a more detailed understanding of the "other side", in this case to explore issues connected to local culture and traditions, as well as gender. There is no resource for this part of Vietnam comparable to the Rand Corporations interviews with NLF/communist prisoners and defectors in the Mekong Delta, used so productively by David Elliott and David Hunt. This is inevitably a narrower, more subjective sample of the revolutionary population. Yet the trajectories of these women's lives are representative of an important sector of the local population, where support for the NLF was so high that the US military opted to "sterilize" or depopulate certain districts, rather than try to win hearts and minds. Our sample includes women who did everything from diplomatic work to logistics and guerilla warfare.

One of the conclusions that arise from these interviews is that class background had no effect on the women's commitment to the revolution; only two of our interviewees classified themselves as from

poor peasant families. Another is that a local tradition of resistance to the French, dating back to at least 1907, was a defining feature of the districts these women came from and of their family histories. Finally, they all identified strongly with the communist party, as the embodiment of this tradition of resistance. They shared an ideal of communal welfare and national self-determination, but did not share any precise goals in terms of a Marxist future for Vietnam.

This research looks at a sample of women who tend to be forgotten in recent histories of the American War, both in Vietnam and in the United States. These are middle-class and middle peasant women who internalized Vietnamese traditions of nationalism, yet who were strongly influenced by their local history. This was a history in which Vietnamese attempts at modern transformation, including modern education for women, were thwarted by the French desire for control. This history was marked by the Duy Tan movement led by Phan Chau Trinh from 1905 to 1908, and by the anti-tax rebellions that occurred in 1908, with disastrous results for the local scholars. (One of our interviewees is a grand-daughter of Phan Chau Trinh. Another is the grand-daughter of a large landowner, from the same district as Tran Quy Cap. The Quang Ngai women all come from Duc Pho district, another area where there was a strong anti-tax movement in 1908, as well as an organized uprising in 1930-1.) For this population the French did not represent modernity, but brutal oppression. The Diem period was also a time when their families were targeted, as all of them had relatives who had regrouped to the North. The resistance to the French and the Diem government in these areas led to fierce resistance to the US presence from 1965 on. Thus their colonial and post-colonial experiences blended into one long battle against foreign powers. But neither James Scott's view of a moral peasant wanting to return to a communal past, nor Cold War views of communists being stirred up by a foreign ideology account for the behavior of these women. They were open to change, but until 1975 this was only offered to them by force.

#### **Jason Gibbs (San Francisco Public Libraries)**

##### **"Capitalist Music Brings Jail: Love Songs in Ha Noi During Viet Nam's American War"**

On February 4, 1971 the New York Times printed a short wire service story entitled "Capitalist Music Brings Jail." This article concerned eight men in Hanoi who had been imprisoned in 1968 and brought to trial and sentenced in 1971 for disseminating "yellow music" (nhac vang). Yellow music was a term that Vietnamese imported from The Peoples Republic of China denoting music that was variously described degenerate, pessimistic, illusory, or reactionary, but, in fact, referred to any music that did not extol the mission of the state, its revolution, and its struggles.

This paper closely will look at this case focusing on the case of Nguyen Van Loc, one of the eight men imprisoned for performing this criminalized music. I will examine at the motivations of these musicians and their listeners in their defying the cultural directive of the North Vietnamese government. I will also discuss the Vietnamese songs that led to their imprisonment in the context of Hanoi's musical environment in the 1960s. Finally I will consider the reception of this music and these musicians in contemporary Vietnam.

This paper is about Hanoians who resisted the uniformity of North Vietnamese song of that time. They were concerned that the music they had enjoyed and learned before the 1954 liberation of Hanoi would be lost and forgotten. They also wanted their country to remain current with international popular music culture. While only these eight musicians were imprisoned many other Vietnamese secretly shared their interests and secretly listened to, played, and sang banned music.

#### **Wynn Wilcox (Western Connecticut State University)**

##### **"Existentialism in Saigon Intellectual Culture"**

Among the eclecticism and diversity of the intellectual marketplace in 1960s Saigon, an interest in existentialism—both in literature and in philosophy—is a common theme that stands out. In the writings of Bùi Giáng, Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, Thế Phong, and Tam Ích and in popular scholarly journals and literary reviews such as *Bách Khoa*, *Văn Học*, *Thứ Tư* and *Văn*, one finds analysis and excerpts of the works of Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and especially Jean-Paul Sartre and André Malraux. This paper considers the reception of these figures in detail, and suggests

three main reasons for their appeal. First (and perhaps less important), an endorsement of existentialism offered Saigon intellectuals a way to reject the totalizing ideological systems provided by Marxism-Leninism, anticommunism, or modernization theory, since the existential project allowed them to reject the primacy of rational systems for explaining the world. Existentialism allowed them to define themselves against a received vision of northern intellectuals and also against the prevailing political winds in Republic of Vietnam and the United States. Secondly, the emphasis on existentialism reflected the continuing orientation of Saigon writers toward political and intellectual developments in France, in particular during and after the student revolution strikes of the summer of 1968. Finally, existentialism offered Saigon intellectuals a way of explaining their chaotic and ambiguous wartime situation by offering the satisfying potential that their good faith actions might make meaning out of the seemingly random and occasionally unspeakably violent events of South Vietnam in the 1960s.

This paper engages with at least two of the themes suggested in the workshop's description: "varieties of dissidence under authoritarian, violent regimes, from organized protests, intellectual, literary and artistic expressions, to 'every-day resistance,'" as well as "the range of revolutionary-nationalist visions, particularly in the southern part of Viet Nam, pre- and post-1975." Existentialism was at least indirectly a form of dissent against prevailing labels of "communist" and "anticommunist" ideology. And though existentialism failed to offer any revolutionary nationalist vision, the fact that the vision of existentialists rejected a kind of revolutionary nationalism is significant for a discussion of this theme. It is also of note that intellectuals and artists with neutralist inclinations were sometimes also existentialists.

**Duy Lap Nguyen (University of California, Irvine)**

**"Over-consuming Imperialism: South Vietnamese Urban Resistance to American Occupation during the War in Viet Nam"**

This paper argues that, during the Vietnam War, the formation of a national, Republican subjectivity was undermined by the very techniques of nation-building deployed by the American government, in order to create the conditions for a new nation-state in the South. Rather than winning over the rural and urban populations in the South to the Republican cause, American military assistance and economic aid created a mass of new urban consumers, dispossessed from the war-torn countryside, who resisted American neo-imperialism on its own terms, so to speak – through the useless consumption of ever-greater quantities of consumer durables, in the form of theft, incompetence and official corruption.

Recent scholarship on the Vietnam War has emphasized the need to re-evaluate the assumption that the Republic of Vietnam was simply a political puppet of the American government. Philip Catton, in his recent study of the nation-building techniques employed by the Diem regime, for instance, argues that the RVN was a far more autonomous political actor that historians have generally recognized. This argument, I would argue, however, simply reverses the prevailing prejudices, while remaining squarely within the bounds of the dichotomous framing in which the question of the political sovereignty of the RVN has usually been posed: was the Republic a puppet or a political agent? This paper seeks to call this dichotomy into question by examining official corruption, political apathy and urban crime in South Vietnam as apparently non-political forms of political agency, in which the American occupation was opposed by the over-consumption of its economic assistance, practices which, as Gabriel Kolko has argued, played a far larger role in the final American withdraw than the rural insurgency lead by the National Liberation Front.

**Chuong-Dai Vo (University of California, San Diego)**

**"The Politics of Literary Criticism and the Making of Modern Viet Nam: The Transition from a Command Economy to Globalization"**

My paper will present the first chapter of my dissertation, "The Politics of Literary Criticism and the Making of Modern Vietnam: The Transition from a Command Economy to Globalization." Overall, the project analyzes the discourse of literary criticism in post-1975 Vietnam up to the beginning years of

Đổi Mới as a site for debates about the relevance of socialist realism as a mode of knowledge production and the search among writers and intellectuals for other ways of generating critical and creative work. As the country began the process of reconstruction, some Vietnamese writers and intellectuals pushed for an active and concerted engagement with new forms of literary criticism and creative production, including influences from foreign countries other than the Soviet Bloc. Others, however, fiercely fought to hold onto established understandings of intellectual and creative work. I argue that these various positions speak to power struggles for institutional support at home and mixed responses to the cultural currents that came with the transnational flow of capital, labor and ideas and their effects on the methodologies and arenas of knowledge production.

This project offers insight into how writers and intellectuals in Vietnam repositioned themselves and their institutions in the struggle for knowledge production as the country began re-integration into a global world order. I analyze the political maneuverings, discursive strategies and deployments of metaphoric language in Vietnamese literary criticism written from the mid 1970s to 1990s, during the transition period from war-time revolutionary mobilization to nation-building and the official announcement of Đổi Mới in 1986.

In my paper, I show that the discourse of contemporary Vietnamese literary criticism was established through the reiteration of personal attacks, the language of “sin” [toi loi] and the selective historicizing of the Party’s successes. This created a discourse of literary criticism that writers and intellectuals in the post-1975 era would have to contest and appropriate as they tested and pushed the boundaries of literary creativity and intellectual debate. I argue that these debates were about the right to narrate the truth and anxieties about images of national integrity as the country’s move toward globalization was picking up speed.

This paper is concerned with the production of epistemologies and how they are always already interconnected with political, social and economic forces, in this case the reconstruction of Vietnam and the move to integrate into the global world order. I suggest that the relationship between writers and intellectuals associated with the state’s definition of the role of literary criticism and those opposing it was a complicated, overlapping one rather than a clear-cut opposition.

**Khai-Thu Nguyen (University of California, Berkeley)**  
**"Luu Quang Vu and the Performance of Reform in Doi Moi Vietnam"**

This paper focuses on Luu Quang Vu, one of the most famous playwrights of 20th century Vietnamese spoken drama who has come to represent a relatively explosive period of Vietnamese theater during doi moi. The state policy of Doi moi, or "renovation," began in 1986 when political, diplomatic, and economic transformations in Viet Nam accompanied changes in the cultural arena; the December 1987 Resolution 5 of the Central Committee's Cultural Commission accompanied the cultural policy of socialist realism with a policy of "creative freedom" and "free circulation" of works that are not "reactionary." In this period, Luu Quang Vu’s plays dominated the theaters with direct and bold social critique, leading many to designate him as an emblem of doi moi itself. This paper explores the artist’s relationship to the state’s policy of doi moi to analyze the nature of dissent in the doi moi era. Was Luu a spokesperson for the state’s policy, a rebel against government policy (who was allegedly killed in a government conspiracy in the form of a car accident), a playwright who was “politicized” as an “example” of state renovation, or a visionary with his unique views of change? Luu’s ambivalent relationship to the communist party (as a soldier in the anti-American war, who was then kicked out of the army, who became the only playwright of the period to be given the Ho Chi Minh Prize), contributes to a body of work representing a mixture of rebelliousness against, critique of, and advocacy for state policy. At the same time, the state’s negotiation with Luu Quang Vu simultaneously as dissident and state model reflects a doi moi project struggling between memory, self-critique, radical change, preservation, socialism, capitalism, and democratization. The paper shows the ambivalent nature of dissent in doi moi in which to survive the artist dances in different performative costumes between state advocate and rebel (or model dissenter), while the state wavers between disapproval, disavowal, and appropriation of the artist, through a doi moi policy that strengthens state power with the very performance of dissension.

This paper is the result of my fieldwork in 2006-2007 on postcolonial performance in Vietnam as a Fulbright-Hays and Pacrim Research Fellow.

This paper will engage the larger themes of the conference by exploring the varieties of dissidence under an authoritarian system that loosens binaries between dissent and authority by showing that one often performs by relying on the other. By exploring Luu Quang Vu's plays in detail, the paper will also offer insight into the experience of postcoloniality in doi moi Viet Nam in which a collapse of anticolonial and socialist paradigms result in a condition of ideological uncertainty and mistrust that Luu attempts to resolve through a call towards morality.