

On Becoming a Student of Vietnamese History

Scholarly interests often have autobiographical origins. Mine have their roots not only in my own experiences but also in stories I heard from my parents and relatives as well as their acquaintances. In selecting topics of research, I have been influenced by developments within the discipline of history, in particular in social and cultural history.

When I began my graduate studies, there were very few works on Vietnam that did not focus on the War. David G. Marr and Alexander Woodside had not yet published their first book; that would come the following year. I felt a bit like a pioneer, albeit of a very different kind from those I chose to study for my dissertation, which was published as *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*.¹ My exploration of the Hòa Hảo sect (and of the Cao Đài sect about which I had written my senior thesis at Brandeis) was limited by the impossibility of doing fieldwork. Growing up in wartime Sài Gòn (after seven years spent in France) I had had no opportunity to travel outside Sài Gòn. Researchers frustrated by obstacles may consider that I had scheduled a research trip for summer 1975! I was lucky that my parents had sent me some documents produced by members of the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo sects to counter materials from the French colonial archives or by American analysts bemused by their sects' religious doctrines and focused primarily on

their politico-military activities. Still, I regret the lack of ethnographic detail and sense of place in that book. If I were to revise it, I would put much greater emphasis on the multiethnic and multicultural dimension of life on the border with Cambodia.

As a Saigonese, I knew rural life, aside from reading about it, mostly from listening to my parents. My father took pride in his peasant origins. He was the only man I knew who insisted on wearing an *áo bà ba* at home. He wrote fondly of his childhood in his first memoir, *Thằng Thuộc con nhà nông* [Thuộc, Son of Peasants].² But he was expelled at the age of sixteen from the Collège de Cần Thơ in 1926 for producing a clandestine newsheet. Three years later, my mother, who was then fifteen, left home (in Cà Mau, now Kiên Giang) to train for “the revolution.” They both moved to Sài Gòn between 1930 and 1931. Thus, both my parents’ memories of life in rural Vietnam dated from the 1920s, the time when the Cao Đài sect made its appearance. The village where my father had grown up in Cần Thơ was full of adherents of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương sect who would join the Hòa Hảo sect when it was formed in 1939. Delving into the history of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương sect, I noticed the connection between its development and that of the Vietnamese southwest. Its followers seemed to have more affinity with the Mormon pioneers in nineteenth-century America than the social bandits of Eric Hobsbawm’s *Primitive Rebels*.³ Still, I could not ignore the political dimensions of Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo.

Ironically, my interest in the nexus between religion and politics was nurtured by teachers at the ostensibly secular Lycée Marie Curie. In the 1960s, the Dreyfus affair was still a topic of dissension among the teachers. Although the curriculum was staunchly republican, it was clear that some were still monarchists as well as devout Catholics. The Buddhist crisis of 1963, which I followed closely, refocused my interest in the Vietnamese context. In the aftermath of the crisis, prominent Buddhists debated the extent to which they should engage in worldly affairs. Through my father, I was able to follow these debates over the next few years. My father had been arrested in 1955 in the aftermath of the showdown between the Ngô Đình Diệm regime and the Hòa Hảo and Cao Đài sects and the Bình Xuyên bandit group; he was released from Côn Sơn a few weeks after the Ngô Đình Diệm regime was overthrown. When Vạn Hạnh University was established in 1965, he was invited to serve as

its vice-rector. The rector, Thích Minh Châu, was a traditionalist who believed that monks should not involve themselves in worldly affairs except for educational activities that contributed to spreading the dharma. The young Thích Nhất Hạnh, however, successfully argued for the creation of the School of Social Work within the university. Instead of withdrawing from society, he declared, Buddhist monks should be socially engaged. This was a concept that was familiar to members of the Cao Đài or Hòa Hảo sects.

I was intrigued by the ease with which each sect was able to attract followers by the tens and even hundreds of thousands. I did not think it right to dismiss religion as just a cover for politics or to portray the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo sects, in the words of Frances R. Hill, as just “millenarian machines.”⁴ A theme of my first book was the ambiguous relationship between Marxism and millenarianism. In France, where he had gone after his expulsion from the Collège de Cần Thơ, my father had become a Trotskyist in 1929 but renounced Marxism in 1939 over Stalin’s treatment of the Spanish anarchists and the Moscow trials. It turned out that others besides him had vacillated between Marxism and millenarianism. And this phenomenon was not confined to Vietnam, I would learn later. In China, Peng Pai, who established the Hailufeng soviet in 1927 (a model for the Nghệ-Tĩnh soviets of 1930), had had to jettison Marxist jargon in favor of more familiar millenarian elements of Chinese popular religion in order to attract peasants onto the Communist side.

In the aftermath of the Chinese Revolution and during the Vietnam War, many studies of peasant collective action had a teleological dimension, taking for granted that communism would triumph. My research into the 1920s suggested a far more diverse landscape. As so often is the case, I had accumulated materials that did not fit into my dissertation. But they cried out for a book of their own. My next book, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* was the result.⁵ Its urban focus was more familiar, as were many of the personalities it featured. Rooting in the French colonial archives, I was astonished to learn that “Uncle” Trịnh Hưng Ngẫu had once kicked the pro-assimilation Bùi Quang Chiêu so hard he had lost his shoe and that “Uncle” Bùi Đổng had organized for Vietnamese in France to go to Moscow via the Anti-Imperialist League in Berlin. In our house, Nguyễn An Ninh was a figure of veneration and affection. I recall in particular a scene in

the aftermath of the abortive coup of 1960. My mother had become worried after my father's monthly letters from prison had dried up (it turned out later that he had been put in an isolation cell). She held a séance with a Ouija board and tried to summon the spirit of Nguyễn An Ninh to ask him when her husband and Nguyễn An Ninh's old friend would be released. Somewhat to her disappointment, it was Tạ Thu Thâu who responded—and, as in most instances of soothsaying, his answer to her question was cryptic.

My parents' recollections imperfectly countered my inability to interview survivors of those heady decades. There is a definite lack of individual voices, especially of women's voices, even though a chapter is devoted to the "question of women." I cannot claim credit for launching the study of women in Vietnam; this belongs to David G. Marr, whose *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial* was published a full eleven years before my own *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*.⁶ As in Marr's case, my discussion focused on debates about women's expected roles rather than actual women's experiences. I was fascinated by the gap between gender ideology and gender practices. This was to a certain extent influenced by my mother's attempts to turn me into a proper Vietnamese. I was argumentative—an advantage in a scholar but a real flaw in a dutiful Vietnamese daughter. I was also a bookworm with access to a wide range of literature in Vietnamese and French. The depiction of women's lives I encountered in my readings often clashed with my mother's conservative views of proper feminine behavior. I also had two quite different role models in my two aunts: Second Aunt Bảo Lương and Seventh Aunt Vân Trang. Whereas Bảo Lương in her fifties was even more conservative than my mother, Vân Trang in her thirties was a feminist *avant la lettre*. Their conflicting advice on what I should read and how I should behave made me realize, before I had the vocabulary to express it, the constructed nature of gender identity as well as the representational role of women. As I was leaving for college in the United States, my mother said: "Remember you are a Vietnamese woman and do your country and family proud." I was not just myself, a young woman navigating her identity between her French childhood, Vietnamese adolescence, and yet-to-be-defined American adulthood, but Vietnamese Womanhood. The prospect was rather daunting.

My mother had been educated at home in a mixture of patriotic history and literature. She prided herself on her descent, as the family believed, from

the celebrated scholar Đào Duy Từ. She urged all her children, daughters as well as sons, to aim for the highest possible degree in their chosen field. She did not see anything strange in encouraging me to pursue a PhD while extolling the Four Virtues (good management, decorous behavior, harmonious speech, chaste conduct). At least she did not advocate that I adhere to the Three Submissions (to father, husband, and eldest son). However different their ideas were about the proper behavior of a young woman, my mother and her sisters all believed that women should engage in full-time work. As my father had been in and out of prison or involved in political activities throughout their marriage, my mother had always been the one supporting the family economically. I was therefore astounded when, in my first year of graduate school, a male fellow student, an American, said accusingly that, in pursuing a PhD and a career in academia, I would be taking away the means for a man to support his family. It had not occurred to me not to have a career. I cannot recall whether there were female university professors in Sài Gòn in the 1960s, but there were female doctors and lawyers. Some were related to us or were acquaintances and served as role models for me.

By the time I returned to Sài Gòn (now renamed Hồ Chí Minh City) in the 1990s, the country was experiencing the effects of Đổi Mới. The new acceptance of trade and foreign exchange was reflected in gendered representations of the country's immediate past and of its present. In the 1920s, debates around the question of women had focused largely on young women—unmarried daughters chafing under patriarchal authority, idealized wives of up-and-coming men, or representatives of the Westernized “New Woman.” In 1995, the women portrayed in museums and exhibitions that extolled their sacrifices were mothers and more specifically peasant women wearing the countrified *áo bà ba*. But on my way to the airport, I saw a billboard that featured a young woman wearing an *áo dài*, the sign of urban, middle class status. The billboard advertised the arrival of VISA, the international credit card company.⁷ That same year, the monthly magazine *Phụ Nữ* published in Hồ Chí Minh City echoed the Indo-chic fashion trend by featuring on its cover a young woman wearing a sleeveless black blouse with mandarin collar and frog closings (figure 1). On her head was a military helmet painted shocking pink. Military garb had been turned into fashion accessory.



FIGURE 1: Cover of *Phụ Nữ* Magazine, June 1995.

During my 1995 trip, I visited museums and cemeteries, temples to national heroes and local deities. Everywhere I saw an attempt to present a unified national history at the expense of regional variations and personal experiences. And I talked to my relatives as well as chance acquaintances.

Heonik Kwon and Shaun Malarney have written on the tensions between the state cult of heroes and martyrs—those who died on the Communist side in the fight against French colonial rule and in what Americans call the Vietnam War—and families' worship of their dead.⁸ Kwon, in particular, has written that ancestor worship reconciles in the other world relatives who had taken different sides in the conflict. In other words, lineage trumps politics. I noticed the tensions between public commemoration and private memories, official adulation and personal grief. My family's experience is

more complex. As in so many families, my various relatives had taken different sides in the war. In 1993, during a very brief visit to Vietnam, I met my mother's only brother for the only time; he died the following year. Third Uncle had joined the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930 and had gone north in 1954. Bảo Lương, whose memoir I would later publish, had died in 1976, but Vân Trang, a member of the National Liberation Front, was still alive. She had fled Sài Gòn when it became clear that the Tết Offensive was failing. There is a group photograph with her sitting in a hammock in Trương Như Tảng's *A Vietcong Memoir*.⁹ Fifth Aunt Hàn Xuân learned in 1975 that her eldest son, who had also gone north in 1954, had died during the war with the rank of colonel in the People's Army of Viet Nam (PAVN). Her younger son, who had been drafted into the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN) and had risen to the rank of major in the last days of the Communist advance onto Sài Gòn, had been sent to reeducation camp. Eighth Aunt was married to a civil engineer in the ARVN with the rank of major. After April 1975, he was sent by the new authorities to repair the roads and bridges damaged during the war. While he was away, the officers' compound where his family was housed was being cleared by the new military authorities. The officer in charge of evicting the ARVN families turned out to be the brother of my uncle by marriage. He turned a deaf ear to his sister-in-law's pleas that she was to be rendered homeless with very young children. When I was growing up and my mother's mother lived with us, the death anniversary of my grandfather had been a time for members of our extended family to get together at our home and exchange news and memories. It was a happy occasion, with my mother and her sisters reminiscing about their adored father. In the postwar period, memories had become a minefield. I am reminded of Ernest Renan's statement about the importance of forgetting to sustain a nation.¹⁰ The same applies to families, both nuclear and extended. The now painful annual get-togethers were abandoned so silence could cover divergent experiences and emotions.

The tension I perceived between history and memory, public and private, exaltation and grief, inspired me to organize a double panel at the Association for Asian Studies in 1996 around that theme. I take particular satisfaction in having brought together a group of young scholars, some still in graduate school. They are all tenured professors now. The panel resulted in

the edited volume *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*. My own chapter drew on my visits to museums and cemeteries and viewing exhibitions of photographs of heroic mothers.¹¹

The relationship between history and memory was not just one of tension; nor was memory the first draft of history. In many cases, I saw how official history organized which events would be recollected and narrated and the language used to do so. I was concerned about the paucity of sources on the daily life of ordinary Vietnamese in any period of history, including the recent past. Peter Zinoman's chapter in *The Country of Memory* showed clearly how formulaic were revolutionary memoirs ostensibly penned by ordinary individuals.¹² There was nothing to put alongside Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* about "heretical" shepherds in fourteenth-century France;¹³ Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worm* about a sixteenth-century Florentine flour merchant;¹⁴ my colleague Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *The Midwife's Tale* about an eighteenth-century midwife in Augusta, Maine;¹⁵ or E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* about nineteenth-century England.¹⁶ I decided to explore the social history of the famine of 1944–1945. When *Vietnam: A Television History* aired in 1986, some southerners had expressed skepticism that it had happened at all. But my father had traveled from Sài Gòn to Hà Nội in May 1945 and had vivid memories of the corpses he saw along the way and the food shortages in Hà Nội. In 1995, Professor Văn Tạo published an oral history of the famine.¹⁷ He graciously arranged for me to meet some of the staff of the Institute of History who had participated in the project. Alas, they had not kept any of the notes they had taken, explaining how difficult it had been to bicycle every day to distant villages in all kinds of weather. No measure had been taken to preserve their notes. There were audiocassettes, but I was warned that respondents spoke in an often impenetrable accent. In fact, the audio quality was so bad as to be unintelligible. I did talk to a few survivors. One was an elderly man who had been entrusted with interviewing his fellow villagers. Since members of the research team could not conduct all interviews themselves, they distributed questionnaires to leading figures in the target villages. My informant had joined the Việt Minh as a teenager, so he did not have personal experience of the famine. He wrote down the information he collected in language that was more appropriate to official documents than

unvarnished memories. And once he had produced this narrative of the famine, he was unable to deviate from it. In the same village, I met an even older woman who had not been interviewed for the project but had vivid memories of living through the famine and its aftermath. I speculated that her exclusion from the oral history project was because she was illiterate and unused to talking about herself.

My research on the famine of 1944–1945 did not lead to a publication but it pushed me to reconsider my reluctance to write directly about my family. While doing research for my dissertation in 1976, I had come across a thick file on “le Crime de la rue Barbier.” Natalie Zemon Davis had written *Fiction in the Archives*, using as her sources accounts of trials in sixteenth-century France.¹⁸ Bảo Lương, a main protagonist in the crime on Barbier Street, was closer to me in time than the people Davis had written about—and she happened to be my mother’s sister. In 1995, my aunt Vân Trang gave me a pack of newspaper clippings that she was going to use as the basis for a book (it was published in 1996);¹⁹ these were the serialized memoir of her older sister Bảo Lương. Reading the Sûreté file and my aunt’s memoir in manuscript, newspaper serial, and book form was a bit like reading a novel. Originally, I had thought of merely translating this memoir into English and offering it as a primary source on life in southern Vietnam in the early decades of the twentieth century and as a useful addition to my chapter, “Daughters of Annam” in *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*. To make the memoir intelligible to readers, however, I needed to supplement it with information from other sources, in particular the Sûreté file from the French colonial archives. Still, I wanted to hew as closely as possible to the perspective of Bảo Lương and to preserve her voice. Doing so meant that I had to leave intact some major gaps in her memoir. If Bảo Lương was not present at the scene of the crime as she claimed, where was she? What was she doing? This and other unanswered questions continue to bother me, but solving them would require a different book.

The knowledge that my first book suffers from a lack of ethnographic richness and a sense of place is behind my current ethnographically driven research in a new millenarian cult, that of Hồ Chí Minh. This new project, which I am conducting with Tâm Ngô of the Max Planck Institute for Religious and Ethnic Diversity and Professor Nguyễn Văn Huy, has taken

me to many different sites in both northern and southern Vietnam and has put me in contact with sect leaders as well as ordinary followers. Gender plays an important role in the cult of Hồ Chí Minh. In both the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo sects, all the highest positions were occupied by men. In the cult of Hồ Chí Minh, the overwhelming majority of spirit mediums who channel Hồ Chí Minh are women, but they enjoy the support of leading male figures in academia or politics.

I am also involved in another collaborative project with Dr. Nguyễn Tô Lan of the Sino-Nôm Institute. It explores the role of popular religion but with a quite different focus from the Hồ Chí Minh cult project. We are studying the annual Guan Gong procession in Sam Mountain and the respective roles of Guan Gong and his two acolytes, Guan Ping and Zhou Cang. All three figures, who have been deified and also indigenized, are characters from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a work that is as popular in southern Vietnam as in China. I had acquired a smattering of knowledge of Chinese popular culture by reading aloud to my grandmother works of historical fiction that had been translated into Vietnamese in her youth, so I became somewhat familiar with the story and characters of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. As for Sam Mountain, it is an important site in the history of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương sect. I find the conjunction between these two elements of my various interests fascinating.

My forays into ethnographic fieldwork have been enjoyable and informative. But at heart, I remain a historian. Writing the introduction to *The Country of Memory* allowed me to muse about the uses of the past and how later events shape the way it is remembered in both written history and in personal recollections. Keith Taylor, in 1998, wrote about regionalism as a motor in Vietnamese history, focusing on the tension between the highlands and the deltas.²⁰ This was a significant step toward challenging the nationalist narrative of a country unified from time immemorial. In the post-Đổi Mới era, history, like the economy, is becoming “southernized.” The acceptance of trade and exchanges with foreign countries has led to a new interest in coastal Vietnam rather than in the country’s agrarian villages; this has been reinforced by both growing urbanization and by the conflict over islands in the Eastern Sea. Dismantling the nationalist historical narrative of a unified (and homogeneous) Vietnam enables us to see the

country as a project always in progress, to rethink the role of war and revolution in this process of national becoming. It also allows us to engage in social and cultural history that is fully contextualized in space and time and thus diverse and, at times, divergent. Freed from the demands of teleology and nationalist sentiment, the Vietnamese past is more alive than ever before. This is a good time to be a historian.

HUE-TAM HO TAI is Kenneth T. Young Professor of Sino-Vietnamese History, Emerita at Harvard University, where she began teaching in 1980. Her areas of interest include social and cultural history. She is the author of *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam* (Harvard University Press, 1983), *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 1992), and *Passion, Betrayal, and Revolution in Colonial Saigon* (University of California Press, 2010). A complete list of her publications is provided at the end of this special collection. Her current research is on popular religion in Vietnam, specifically the cult of Hồ Chí Minh and the Guan Gong procession in Sam Mountain.

Notes

1. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).
2. Hồ Hữu Tường, *Thằng Thuộc con nhà nông* [Thuộc, Son of Peasants] (Sài Gòn: An Tiêm, 1966).
3. E.J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1959).
4. Frances R. Hill, "Millenarian Machines in South Vietnam," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13, no. 3 (1971): 325–250.
5. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).
6. David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
7. See Ann Marie Leshkovich, figure 1, in this issue.
8. Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Shaun Kingsley Malarney, "'The Fatherland Remembers your Sacrifice': Commemorating War Dead in North Vietnam," in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late*

- Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 46–76.
9. Trương Như Tảng, *A Vietcong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and its Aftermath* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985).
 10. Ernest Renan, “Qu’est ce qu’une nation?,” conference at the Sorbonne, March 11, 1882.
 11. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Faces of Remembrance and Forgetting,” in *The Country of Memory*, 167–195.
 12. Peter Zinoman, “Reading Revolutionary Prison Memoirs,” in *The Country of Memory*, 21–45.
 13. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Village Occitan de 1293 à 1324* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1975).
 14. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).
 15. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life Of Martha Ballard, Based on her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).
 16. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963).
 17. Văn Tạo and Furuta Moto, *Nạn đói năm 1945 ở Việt Nam: Những chứng tích lịch sử* [The 1945 Famine in Vietnam: The Historical Evidence] (Hà Nội: Viện Sử Học Việt Nam, 1995).
 18. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).
 19. Bảo Lương Nguyễn Trung Nguyệt and Vân Trang, *Người con gái nam bộ: truyện* [Southern Girl: Tales] (Hà Nội: Phụ Nữ, 1996).
 20. Keith W. Taylor, “Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 4 (1998): 949–978.