

Revolutionary Thought and the Politicization of the Forests in Vietnam

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WRITER'S COMMENT: The following is a highly condensed version of a research paper that I wrote for a history seminar. What I originally intended as a research paper about the effects of Agent Orange on Vietnam's forests matured into a highly theoretical paper about the interaction of national identity, politics, and the environment. I spent countless days and nights staring hopelessly at the computer screen trying to unravel the complexities of my argument. Deciphering Vietnamese poetry and translating it into English was equally slow and frustrating. The final product is the result of one of my most ambitious projects, and I consider it to be worthy of the travails of the writing process. In the process of writing this paper, I learned the nuances of the Vietnamese language, gained a heightened appreciation of my cultural origins, and acquired knowledge about the aspirations, hopes, and fears intimately embedded in Vietnamese culture. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Don Price for his excellent guidance. He was indispensable in helping me to crystallize my final argument, to organize my essay, and to make final revisions.



—Calvin Vu

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: This essay grew out of Calvin Vu's research paper for a seminar in environmental history addressing the exploitation, management, and mismanagement of resources. While the main example considered was China, students were encouraged to use the general perspectives developed in common readings and discussion to pursue case studies of their choice. An ideal topic in Vu's ancestral Vietnam would have been state policy regarding the forests, seriously impacted by the war and afterwards subjected to administration by a regime enthusiastically pursuing economic development. As Vu's research developed, available documents on forest policy were inadequate, but he discovered material for an even more

important investigation—into the cultural and political meaning of forests for Vietnamese revolutionary nationalism amidst the ecological and cultural diversity of its peoples. The topic, essential background for understanding state policy, is a complex one, and the paper does a great job of bringing together its many facets into a unifying framework.

—Don C. Price, *History*



Introduction

V IETNAM'S HISTORY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY are entangled in its forests. The people's relationship to the forests has been transformed in step with the periods of occupation which have afflicted Vietnam. Trees emerged as a transcendental motif in Vietnamese literature, poetry, and folksongs during the revolutionary period as proud symbols of its national conscience and ethnic identity, and of its resilience against the specter of cultural extermination. Beyond these abstractions are the forests' practical purpose as the guardians of the region's soil, watersheds, and energy supplies. This role has earned them reverence in many Vietnamese communities and entitles them to preservation and respect. Cultural biases and community structure are deeply rooted in how the Vietnamese experience themselves in relation to the forest.

In recent years, popular conceptions from overseas sources have depicted Vietnam's jungles and forests as inimical havens capable of rousing the most sinister elements of human nature—deceit, depravity, and blind fanaticism. This essay attempts to rectify these preconceptions and to highlight the intricate ways by which Vietnam's forests have shaped how the people conceived themselves spiritually during the revolutionary period (1930s–1975). It will also discuss how politics has selectively distorted this motif in order to stimulate national pride, bridge communal divisions, and alter the country's historical memory. It will conclude with an analysis of the growing pains of a fledgling industrial economy and of an increasingly diverse society amid conflict between Vietnam's cultural past and its tumultuous future.

The Forest as the Ecological Determinant of History

V IETNAM'S GRADED TOPOGRAPHY and abundant ecological diversity have created two distinct and divergent cultures. In the late Neolithic, about

2,000 years B.C.E., migrants from what is now southern China trickled into Vietnam and fanned outwards towards its densely forested northern highlands, or continued southwards towards its lightly forested lowland deltas. Adaptation to these drastically different environments resulted in conflicting cultural norms, cultivation methods, community structures, and mentalities. Highlanders, limited by scarce arable soil and mountainous terrain, tended towards nomadism and slash-and-burn cultivation in order to make ends meet, though these practices varied with terrain and ethnic group. Lowlanders, on the other hand, preferred sedentary communities to pool labor for wet rice farming and to coordinate commonly practiced rituals. Cultural biases and economic disparities which emerged from this divergence reinforced local identity while splintering cultural and political unity—consequences which would leave Vietnam fragmented and vulnerable to foreign exploitation.¹

Contrasting adaptations to forest cover played a large part in creating a divergence between lowland and highland cultural norms. In contrast to the mountainous uplands, where slash-and-burn forestry (swidden farming) compensated for unproductive soil, lowland soil was self-replenishing. Rerouted water from the delta substituted for forests as the primary soil nutrient provider in the lowlands. As a consequence, early settlers permanently converted lowland forests, wetlands, and grasslands to wet rice paddies and did not clear vast expanses of thick forestry on a rotational basis in order to increase soil fertility. This distinction heavily influenced how communities and cultural biases developed in these two regions.

Environmental restrictions in the lowland deltas encouraged cultural bias towards exclusive, sedentary communities. Ensuring a stable food supply entailed having to withstand sporadic flooding and droughts and incur the high-labor costs of “transplanting seedlings, controlling pests, regulating the water supply, and harvesting.”² Seasonal afforestation was important for protecting watersheds from erosion, mitigating flooding, and for energy use, but such projects were time-consuming and labor intensive.³ Overcoming these obstacles required complex social organization and cooperation. Exclusive, genealogically insulated communities

¹Jamieson, pp. 9–11

²Sterling et al., p. 25

³Adger et al., p. 38

emerged out of the need to coordinate rituals and to share resources with trusted members.

The aggregate consequence of this exclusivity was fragmentation at the national level and apathy towards nonregional issues. The famous proverb, “imperial rule yields to village custom” provided the political context for apathy towards national issues.⁴ The second consequence, closely linked to the first, initiated a deep ethnic divide which would impede future attempts to synthesize a unified national identity.

The Forest as a Source of Cultural Bias

THE KINH PEOPLE, DESCENDANTS of the lowland migrants and the beneficiaries of this sustainable landscape, historically have controlled most of the wealth, most of the industry, and most of the economic, political, and cultural influence in Vietnam. This group has traditionally seen its success as evidence of superior adaptation to the environment and therefore a justification for ethnocentrism. Physical distance—mountainous highlands were largely inaccessible to lowland central jurisdiction—undoubtedly contributed to this political rift. Inaccessibility to highlanders limited imperial power to collecting tributes and managing trade networks.⁵ However, historically negative preconceptions about the jungle environment contributed to generating cultural incompatibility between highlanders and lowlanders.⁶ One must examine the cultural context surrounding how the Vietnamese traditionally experience themselves spiritually in relation to the environment. Relating this perception to how the Kinh stereotyped ethnic minorities provides a foundation for understanding how cultural divisions prevented national unity.

Vietnamese legends portrayed Kinh Vietnamese and ethnic minorities as racial dipoles but traced them from the same ancestry. The former descended from Lac Long Quan, the King of Dragons, who lived in the Place of Waters off the South China Sea and taught the people how to live in harmony with the environment. He married Au Co, the Queen of Fairies. Of the one hundred sons who hatched from their eggs, fifty traveled with Lac Long Quan back to the ocean, where they became the ancestors of the Kinh people. The other fifty stayed with Au Co to live

⁴Voth, p. 10

⁵Mcleod, p. 357

⁶Ibid p.7 CHECK—MUST BE BETWEEN 353-389

in the mountain forests, where they became the ancestors of the ethnic minorities. When asked why Lac Long Quan and Au Co separated their children, Lac Long Quan replied:

I am of the Dragon race, you are of the Fairies. We cannot live together because we are as incompatible as water and fire. We must separate. I am going to leave for the coastal regions with fifty of our children and you will go with the other fifty to the country of the mountains and the forests. We still divide this country between us to run it as best we can.⁷

The mythical world-view is a useful paradigm for understanding how the Kinh people experienced themselves in their relationship to Vietnam's forests. Psychologically, this separation from the ethnic minorities was part of the world's natural order and served as an adaptable explanation for cultural diversity. Yet their common ancestry suggested that these two segments of society should have developed a commensal, if not fraternal, political relationship. Disdain for ethnic minorities among the Kinh stemmed in large part from the natural incompatibility of their philosophies and their exaggerated representations of Vietnam's forested environments.

The fact that the Kinh majority traditionally conceptualized dense upland forests as mysterious, ominous, and untamed places has stereotyped Vietnam's ethnic minorities, a conglomerate of well over fifty groups comprising fifteen percent of the population, with the labels "backwards" and "primitive." The Kinh distinguished themselves physically and mentally from these minorities, and this representation related largely to how they represent jungles in their collective cultural consciousness. Malarial upland forests and jungles, commonly associated with malevolent spirits and beasts in Kinh folklore, made these regions undesirable places to live. The uplands' "poisonous waters," aside from containing vengeful forest spirits, was the most popular explanation for malaria. Thus, Kinh Vietnamese evacuated these densely forested regions in favor of the domesticable lowlands until as recently as the mid-twentieth century.⁸

Incompatibility between minority traditions and the cultural world-view of the lowland Kinh was an insurmountable obstacle to national unity until recent times. Commonly-held stereotypes which portrayed ethnic minorities as nomadic hunter-gatherers or wasteful shifting cultiva-

⁷Terada, pp. 8–10

⁸Hy, p. 141

tors seemed antithetical to lowland norms and challenged the Confucian ideals of natural harmony, patriarchal ethics, and permanent, communal villages. This divergence caused Kinh peasants to gravitate towards representations of domesticated nature, while shunning those which reminded them of the untamed uplands landscapes. Harmony stemmed from pragmatic usage of accessible fauna and observation from afar; the jungle, on the other hand, was insalubrious and wild.

Easily exploitable lightly-forested areas which bordered the lowland terrain and trees which housed benevolent spirits did not carry such negative connotations among the Kinh lowlanders. These areas and plants were accessible via rudimentary transport, and often these areas contained the origins of water sources or “forests relating to the belief of the family clan.” As intersections between water and forest, these areas were of both practical and spiritual significance and were subject to informal community preservation laws designed to protect them from excessive exploitation.⁹ Biological universals such as the regeneration of flora, the recycling of water, and the cycling of seasons formed a holistic model for both natural and cultural domains.¹⁰ In a world-view where ritual determined fortune and weather patterns, the idea that respecting nature kept the universe in balance contained practical, as well as spiritual connotations.

This union between cautious utilitarianism and natural harmony was concordant with the Confucian ethos. “The Banyan Tree,” by the Confucian scholar Nguyen Trai, showed the amalgamation of Confucian ethos with dignified respect for domesticated nature:

It finds a home amid the woods and brooks.
When springtime comes, it wears the green of spring.
Not good enough for pillars and for beams,
It shelters common folk beneath its shade.¹¹

Though of little practical importance, banyan trees existed as a target of folk worship because they housed gods and spirits. An alternative interpretation made by Thong Huynh was that the banyan tree was a “Confucian symbol for an old village schoolteacher who serves as a moral leader of his community.”¹² The melding of Confucian ritualism with

⁹Sterling et al., p. 25

¹⁰Bruun, p. 13

¹¹Hunyh, p. 30

¹²Ibid.

natural harmony showed that trees were a significant motivator of disciplined community management and unity. Local folklore among some communities identified tree, land, water, mountain, and river deities as “help country, help people” (*ho quoc, ho dan*), and communities often worshiped ficus trees.¹³ Local traditions undoubtedly attached these spirits to practical purposes. Some villages planted trees along river banks around Vietnamese New Year (Tet) as a means of protecting against erosion and for practical use after seven or eight years.¹⁴ Accustomed to these ecological norms and the spirits associated with particular environments, Kinh lowlanders showed affinity towards environments conducive to agriculture and health while staying away from those which seemed untamed. Seasonal festivals reinforced local unity but did so at the expense of unity at the national level.

Before the revolutionary period, internal community affairs and concerns functioned locally rather than on the national stage, fragmenting national identity. In retrospect, parochial interests and ethnic divisions within Vietnam aided French colonial interests by keeping the country culturally and politically fragmented.

Envisioning a Reconstructed Forested Landscape

FRENCH COLONIALISM DID MUCH MORE than seize political power from the Vietnamese; it uprooted and delegitimized the religious system and social structure which had given the country at least a minimal degree of national unity. Revolutionary writers sought to revitalize and modernize Vietnamese culture during the 1930s and onwards through the Second Indochina War. To do so, revolutionary thinkers reevaluated the traditional attitudes and power structures within Vietnam—between family and society, government and the people, and between minorities and the majority. Revolutionaries used the forest as a tool to contrive a glorified, revisionist history of Vietnamese unity and resistance as a means of integrating Vietnam’s diverse people into one national identity. Critical to these ends was rectifying traditional representations of upland forests as alien places and a source of national disunity. By the end of French colonialism, intellectuals would reconceive the forest as a positive metaphor for integration and for the resurgence of a once-subjugated nation.

¹³Cuu, p. 74 NOT IN WORKS CITED

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 71

A new breed of western-educated poets emerged in the 1930s. These poets elevated the forest motif from an element of localized culture onto the national stage, where revolutionaries could use it to inspire a new, integrated Vietnamese identity. A revitalized sense of ethnic identity could be an important component of national strength and unity. According to Pelley, “foreign aggressors had tried for centuries to destroy it, this bloc—unified in language, territory, economy, and culture,” in order to keep Vietnam divided and conquerable.¹⁵ The popular incantation among writers that “from the mountain passes in the North to the Ca Mau Peninsula in the South, Vietnam was a single unified domain” (*khoi trong nhât*) evidenced their early efforts to trace their origins back to the Vietnamese landscape.¹⁶ Revolutionary poets gave political voice to the traditional forest motif and redirected its meaning to reflect the resiliency of the Vietnamese identity amidst foreign influence.

Among these transformations was removing the jungle’s negative connotations and reinterpreting them as positive symbols of cultural resilience. Luu Trong Lu, who penned the bulk of his most famous poems during a seven-year period (1932–1939), associated Vietnamese ethnic identity with the transformed jungle motif, exploiting it as an allegory for the suppressed anger of the Vietnamese against French hegemony. In “Remember the Jungle: The Words of the Tiger in the Zoo,” Luu used a ferocious beast normally associated with the jungle in order to condemn racial servility and cultural extermination in colonial Vietnam:

Gnawing upon our resentment, we stretch out in an iron cage,
Watching the slow passage of days and months.
How we despise the insolent crowd outside,
Standing there foolishly, with tiny eyes bulging,
As they mock the stately spirit of the deep jungle
.
We now embrace the rancour of a thousand autumns,
Hating these never-changing scenes,
Scenes that are altered, commonplace, and false.
Flowers tended, grass trimmed, trees planted in tidy rows,
Trickles of black water with pretensions of being brooks,
Barely flowing down the crevices of these puny elevations.
A few leafy areas, meek, without mystery,
Seeking to imitate the wild visage

¹⁵Pelley, p. 374

¹⁶*Ibid.* p. 372

Of a realm steeped in a thousand years of nobility and darkness.

.
Oh stately soul, heroic land
Vast domain where yesteryear we freely roamed,
We see you no more,
But do you know that during days of frustration,
We follow a great dream, letting our souls race to be near you,
O formidable jungle of ours!

This poem marked a departure from the traditional representation of the jungle as a source of division between ethnic minorities and the Kinh people. The natural landscape, signified by Vietnam's forests, had been transformed into an integrative force. French imperialists had desecrated the landscape by modeling it along their own cultural standards, thereby disrupting the natural equilibrium which the Vietnamese had maintained for millennia. European encroachment represented a humiliating insult to the ancestors and the spirits which inhabited the land. The forest as a political motif emerged in lockstep with these nationalistic yearnings, and other revolutionary poets would seize upon this momentum to glorify the independence movement and to channel it into hermetic anti-imperial nationalism.

Poetry and intellectual output took on a socialist and nationalist tinge during the brief period of intellectual freedom after the August Revolution in 1945 as Viet Minh leaders attempted to find ways to integrate the diverse aspects of Vietnam's culture into a single, inspirational vision. With Vietnamese and French relations collapsing in 1946 and conventional warfare against France seemingly impossible, grassroots support for national unity became an imperative for the Viet Minh. Many of the socialist leaders of the Viet Minh, namely To Huu, Truong Chinh, and Ho Chi Minh, acknowledged that controlling intellectual output was an important asset in creating sustained support for the revolution. In a letter addressed to the Second National Congress of Culture in 1948, Ho vouched for the potential emotional significance that revolutionary literature could have on the public, insisting that one of the responsibilities of culture was to "inspire the people's spirit and nation-building resistance forces . . . to pass on the heroic examples of nation building resistance to future generations." Another report presented by To Huu, the "poet of the revolution" and Party administrator for issues related to culture and literature, said that amongst the Party's goals in its cultural

policy was “generating more influence and prestige for the Party.” The Party, the political entity whose main objective was to unite the country in resistance, needed to search Vietnam’s history for metaphors for cultural integration and unity. Many of the socialist theorists chose to take such matters into their own hands.

Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam’s avuncular national hero and socialist theorist, used the politicized forest motif in creating the perception of a shared heritage and a united front towards independence. His 1947 poem entitled “The Landscape in Viet Bac Forest” presented jungles positively relative to the traditionalist world-view.

The Viet Bac forest is splendid,
Bird songs and gibbon cries fill the day
Our guests eat fresh corn roasted with rice,
And after the hunt we toast our roasted forest meats,
Green mountains, blue waters, we stroll til contentment,
Sweet spirits, fresh tea, we drink til we’re sated,
When the resistance has triumphed we’ll return,
the moon becomes old this spring.

The jungle was a convenient political symbol by virtue of its spiritual connection to the Kinh Vietnamese and for their utility in military operations. In contrast to traditional folklore, Ho drained the mountainous Viet Bac forest of its mystical elements, its intimidations, and its inhospitability. This sudden reversal in connotation from the traditionalist, negative interpretation of the jungle represented a temporary bridge in the rift between the delta-dwelling Vietnamese and the purportedly barbarous and backwards mountain minorities. In contrast to the old world-view, this romanticized depiction of the Viet Bac forest mythologized the mountain forests as a place of national heritage and salubrity, notwithstanding the fact that the poem’s radiant depiction of the Viet Bac forest in no way reflected wartime realities. Rather, to survive, soldiers “were often forced to forage for food such as corn, rice or wild banana flowers.” Moreover, in celebrating the mountain forest as a symbol for spirited patriotism, Ho’s vision of Viet Bac is that it has reverted to its original beauty, far removed from the artificial, Europeanized landscape despised by Lu. Implied in this message was that guerrilla fighters, who had heroically mobilized against the French on a grassroots basis, were responsible for restoring the landscape for the sake of an autonomous Vietnam.

Who is Vietnamese?

FOR ANTI-IMPERIAL NATIONALISM TO SUCCEED, revolutionaries would have to tap patriotic sentiment across the wide spectrum of Vietnamese culture. The aforementioned traditionalist relationship between the relatively prosperous lowlanders and the “backwards” minorities had been testimony to how Vietnam’s continuing fragmentation increased vulnerability to exploitation. Colonel Joseph Gallieni of France, the “pacifier of Tonkin,” admitted that “hatreds and rivalries exist [in Vietnam] that we must be able to unravel and use to our advantage by turning some against others, by relying on one to defeat the other more easily.” Finding common ground with highlanders was an imperative if the Kinh Vietnamese were to drive the French out of Vietnam. Only by coming to terms with this historical divide and portraying Vietnam as having a unified identity could Vietnam overcome this political weakness.

However, enlisting the help of these minorities to fight against the French in Viet Bac’s densely forested mountains betrayed the Marxist-Leninist schematic of social evolution that emerged during the revolutionary era. Emerging socialists such as Ho Chi Minh redefined causality; they rejected superstitions and adhered to reductionist science as explainers of all natural phenomena; ethnic minorities, long considered by Kinh Vietnamese as primitive forest dwellers, did not seem to fit the socialist ideal. Cultural domination in the light of foreign encroachment, however, seemed a horrific alternative to reaching out to ethnic minorities. Weaning the population away from parochial and local interests and towards a unified state required integrating these minorities into the same cultural scaffolding as the Kinh Vietnamese.

The Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), the group responsible for turning ethnic minorities into a formidable anti-French political weapon, knew that propagandizing Vietnam’s storied history of resilience would do little to sway ethnic minorities towards aligning with the independence movement. Convincing ethnic minorities to support the military operations of the ICP required that its leaders promise them political self-determination (*đan toc tu quyet*) in the context of a single, multi-Kinh Vietnamese nation; such promises occurred in ICP writing as early as 1930, in its “Program of Action” Finding a common cultural ground between ethnic minorities and the Kinh required that socialist intellectuals reevaluate their origins. The forested, mountainous landscape became

deeply entwined in a renewed effort by Ho Chi Minh to synthesize a unique, multiethnic national identity. In order to unite the country, Ho Chi Minh used folklore which had once linked cultural divergence to the ecological rift between delta and mountainous forests. In his pamphlet, “The History of Our Country,” Ho Chi Minh drew upon Vietnam’s famous creation legend in order to encourage Kinh and ethnic minorities to work together for national autonomy:

It is essential for our people to be unanimous in our obligation
Ask anyone, who are the children of the Fairy!
Hurry, hurry, unite together around the lagoon
Regardless if you are man or woman, poor or rich
Regardless if you are old or young, unite together
People contribute your energy, individuals help with money
Together we are taking back our sovereignty
Above for our country, below for our home

Universality characterized Ho’s writing. His appeal to all sexes, classes, ages, and races gave the independence movement a sense of cohesion and moralistic inevitability. His evocation of the Fairy, the mother of the ethnic minorities, was a conciliatory measure to include them in any visions of a unified Vietnam. He repudiated traditionalist interpretations about race in suggesting that patriotism and national unity was a moral goal which transcended divisions between the people. The “nationalities policy” (*chinh sach dan toc*) advocated tolerance towards minority practices, language, and custom in order to secure their political allegiance.

Romantic writings such as these did not contain the didacticism of later socialist literature. In Ho Chi Minh’s “Twelve Recommendations” to the National Party Congress in 1948, he urged that party members respect the cultural autonomy of the ethnic minorities while including them in the independence movement. These recommendations included six forbiddances and six permissibles, one of which included “to study the customs of each region so as to be acquainted with them in order to create an atmosphere of sympathy.” His injunction that officials not “give offence to people’s faith and customs” marched much along the same conciliatory lines. Ho had appeared to look past the reductionist science ideal for the sake of the independence movement. A man who valued unity above all else, he used the forest motif to galvanize support for national unity in fighting for independence.

Government rhetoric during anticolonial resistance boasted the unity of all the Vietnamese people against a single oppressor and minimized the amount of socialist rhetoric. Trees traditionally represented local unity, village ritual, and exclusive and powerful communities before the revolutionary period. The reinterpreted symbol, on the other hand, promoted contrived national unity, disdained superstitions, and advocated an integrated state run by Vietnamese people with a singular identity. What appeared before Vietnam at this point in history was an opportunity to defeat all of the cultural barriers to true integration, but what cultural sacrifices did achieving this unity entail?

Building towards the Future: The Forest and the Modern Socialist State

HO CHI MINH'S PASSING in 1975 left the Communist government with a grievous dilemma and forced it to navigate through a sea of contradictions. Ho, whose catering to ethnic minorities famously helped Vietnamese nationalists overthrow French colonial rule, vouched while he was still living that the people of Vietnam should practice "ethnic solidarity" (*doan ket dan toc*) and should form a multiethnic national state. On the other hand, with the fledgling nation just beginning to rebuild after a disastrous war with the United States, iconicizing Ho Chi Minh and immortalizing his words seemed to be an appropriate motivator of national policy and cultural unity.

After Ho Chi Minh's death, the new national government faced a difficult choice in easing national culture towards ethnic nationalism, where national identity diffused across all of Vietnam's ethnic groups, or towards civic nationalism, where national culture iconicized the country's heroes, its landmarks, and its shared historical memory. The new national government privately balked at the idea of forging a multiethnic national identity because ethnic minority traditions were outmoded and contradicted the reductionist science ideal. Vietnam's approach to finding a political common ground between the majority and the "national minority" was not unlike the Soviet Union's policy of giving the nationalities of the former czarist empire self-determination. Minorities were free to possess self-determination "on the condition that they refrain from making use of it."

Instead, civic nationalism took precedence over multiethnic nationalism. Heroes and natural landmarks relevant to a shared national heri-

tage took on greater significance in national culture than the cultural diversity within Vietnam. This segment from the folk song “A Song from the Middle of Pac Bo Forest” indicated how Ho’s political achievements in the dense mountain forests during the war period have mythologized the Pac Bo Forest and glorified ethnic minorities in the national heritage:

Living in Pac Bo, my native place over many seasons I heard the
People’s language,
Cassava stretch across ancient hills, flooded rice fields with golden
edges,
People come home from the noble path, follow these people tomorrow
in the jubilant morning
Bowls of rice wait for people like a dream...
The capital loves these tall mountains in the spring
Khuoi Nam still echoes your lost word...People

Propaganda songs such as these often suggested the unity of all people in shared, ebullient sacrifice for the sake of defending the homeland. Universalities characterized Ho’s writing. In this case, Ho’s achievements in the Pac Bo Forest integrated ethnic minorities into national folklore by glorifying their support for independence. Even today, ethnic minorities take great pride in playing a pivotal role in defeating the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

Building a “new culture” was not a concept unique to the postwar era; in fact, the Northern Vietnamese government regularly spoke about creating a “new person,” “new society,” and “new culture family,” after it established itself in 1954. However, not until Ho’s death in 1975 did songs such as these open the door for the government to try to create a new national culture centered about the cult of Ho Chi Minh. Ho had used such tactics to create nationalistic fervor in Vietnam, and the government took advantage of these axioms to indoctrinate the people after Ho’s death. Moralistic messages served as guiding principles to the government’s expectations of the people. Many of these messages used trees as a Marxian metaphor for a cultivable and virtuosic national conscience.

This distinction as a cultivable conscience was an important one because it implied that the public consciousness was malleable, and it justified purging superstitious customs, particularly those of the ethnic minorities. Ethnocentrism among Kinh Vietnamese motivated the

government to try to integrate minorities into a broad national culture. While the new government attempted to adhere to Ho's request to allow minorities to participate fully in their native cultures, "these exotic features of national unity—the unreserved portrayal of ethnic minorities as members of a new multicultural nation—did not last long." The government allows some symbolic traditional practices to continue out of pride for the country's many ethnic groups; these include allowing minorities to continue wearing their native dress, to sing their own folk songs, and to perform their folk dances. In retrospect, however, allowing them to do so represented more of a political concession for participating in the conflict rather than a step towards conciliation.

The government mobilized draconian policies which targeted "superstitious" customs. Following Communist victory in 1975, the Central Highlands communist cadre burned down multifamily long-houses because they viewed this practice as backwards. The government sponsored Kinh migration to the uplands in the late '70s as a means of smoothing the cultural gradient with the intention of integrating unacculturated minorities; it intended to replicate this effect in recent decades by creating artificially mixed-group villages composed of Kinhs and members from various minority groups. Similar policies included the Fixed Settlement and Cultivation campaign, a sedentarization policy for minority highlanders, and a continuing effort to impinge upon outmoded and purportedly backwards techniques such as shifting cultivation. In actuality, shifting cultivation was much better adapted to the steep terrain in the highlands; historical stereotypes, rather than pragmatism, often motivated efforts to curtail minority practices. Symbolically, these policies represented the evolutionary domination of "rationalist" Marxism in the delta regions over the last vestiges of Vietnam's primitive spiritual past.

Seasonal festivals, once a method by which communities supplicated to natural spirits, also had to be reworked according to arbitrary atheistic and practical lines in order to create this new, integrative national culture. One government document which referenced the educational possibilities of new civic rituals stated, "All the commemorative holidays for our people's heroes must be organized with new meaning . . . [according to our] ancestors' tradition of heroic struggle." The government streamlined New Year's (Tet) along its own philosophical lines, introducing new contradictions and national projects while removing much of its

mystical elements. The Tet holiday needed to exhibit characteristics such as “unity, enthusiasm, labor, and thrift” while remaining “fun” (*vui ve*) and devoid of “backwards customs” such as “gambling, time wasting, profligate spending, and superstitions.” These goals abated the spiritual elements of cultural holidays and “improved” them to serve the interests of the state.

One way the government fulfilled these requirements was to revitalize a tradition which Ho Chi Minh himself suggested in 1959. In an article in *Nhan Dan* entitled “New Year’s Tree Planting,” (*Tet Trong Cay*) he set annual targets for restoration because “this work costs little but profits very well” in terms of “beautifying the homeland” and building national unity. He made beautifying the landscape a matter of national pride: “Spring is the New Year for planting trees, because the homeland will look like Spring.” Seizing upon the motivating power of Ho’s words, the national government continued this tradition long after his death, citing the need “to bring into play the traditions of ‘New Year’s Tree Planting’ which Uncle Ho mobilized” and to “follow [his] last instructions.” It named the festival “New Year’s Tree Planting Festival to Honor the Memory of Ho Chi Minh” and holds it yearly. Campaigns to promote the government’s forestry policies usually contained short slogans from Ho himself alongside poems and short stories. “Forest is gold,” a slogan developed by Ho in 1962 when he commemorated the opening of Cuc Phuong National Park, continues to appear alongside many forestry policies. A government-promoted folk song entitled “When I Plant Trees, I will Remember You” celebrated Ho’s request as a patriotic duty:

Oh! Planting a tree, I remember how much it means to the people when it grows! Remember uncle planted trees long ago. Uncle was old, but he was strong and healthy! For the love of the people uncle carefully advised: hope for a great green motherland. A long life for a country with green crops! A long life for a country with green crops! Uncle still listens, he is immortal and wise. Love the rivers, love the hills, mountains, forests and our Uncle will sleep peacefully . . .

Weaning the population away from parochial interests and integrating into national culture required that the government find a way to encourage widespread voluntary participation. Post-war afforestation projects emerged as national projects designed to integrate people with the affairs of the state. Attempts to afforest Vietnam usually involved civic rituals or collective management. Whereas community forestry

and localized regulation constituted the primary means of managing the nation's forests, the government attempted to nationalize the forests to collectivize forestry. Such attempts failed, however, and since the 1986 Renovation (*doi moi*) policies, individual households have been managing forested plots as they had for millennia beforehand.



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