

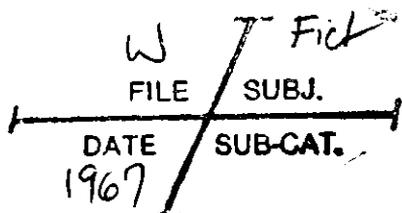
W. F. F.

1967

Literature and
national liberation
in South Vietnam

Vietnamese Studies

n° 14-1967



Literature and National Liberation in South Vietnam

Director : Nguyen Khac Vien

Contents

A National Literature

Tran Dinh Van : Artistic and Literary Life in
the Liberated Zones of South Vietnam.

Nguyen Van Muoi : Painting in the Liberated
Zones of South Vietnam.

Ca Van Thinh : Patriotic Literature in Nambo
in the 1860's.

Bôí Lan : Letters and Arts in American Times.

Poems

Giang Nam : My Native Land.
Crossing a Village at Night.

Vien Phuong : We Shall Be Wedded in the Spring.

Thanh Hai : The Song of the Fighter.
I Crossed the Demarcation Line.

Ngoc Anh : The Shadow of the K'nia Tree.

Fiction (extracts)

Anh Duc: Hon Dat.

Nguyen Trung Thanh: The Xanu Wood.

Nguyen Thi: The Departure.

Nguyen Chi Trung: A Letter from Muc Village.

Nguyen Duc Thuan: The Victor.

Editorial Office: 46, Tran Hung Dao Street — Hanoi

Distributor: X U N H A S A B A
32, Hai Ba Trung Street — Hanoi
Democratic Republic of Vietnam

and art are not mere epiphenomena, but part and parcel of the struggle; the people who fight need poems, novels, films and songs as well as arms and food. When you think of South Vietnam, do not picture to yourself only destroyed villages or napalmed children: wherever the people have been liberated, children and grown-ups sing and dance, recite poems, stage plays, visit exhibitions of photos and paintings.

Of this vigorously militant literature, we present below a few specimens: short stories, extracts from novels, poems. War conditions have made it impossible to draw up a complete list of all the works born during the struggle; many manuscripts must still be lying at the bottom of a knapsack or circulating only within small groups. Towards the end of 1965, when the Central Committee of the South Vietnam National Front for Liberation established the Nguyen Dinh Chieu Prize, prizes were awarded to 54 works of most diverse kinds. Some of those works, translated into several languages, have met with resounding successes in foreign countries. It is difficult for writers and artists working daily under the bombs to have the necessary conditions to produce masterpieces, but all the works coming to us from liberated South Vietnam bear the mark of the burning breath which animates a whole people rising up to conquer its freedom. They also carry the seeds of a literature in full development.

An article by Tran Dinh Van, of the Liberation Writers and Artists' Association, describes the conditions in which literature develops in the liberated

Foreword

There is only one Vietnamese literature, for both the North and the South, which proceeds from the same age-old traditions, is fed by the common aspirations of a single and indivisible people, and uses the same language. However, owing to historical circumstances, since 1954 the people of South Vietnam have had to wage an extremely arduous struggle against a ferocious enemy, U.S. imperialism and its lackeys, while the people of North Vietnam have enjoyed complete independence. The heroic struggle of the South has greatly inspired Northern writers and artists just as the socialist construction in the North has aroused profound echoes in South Vietnamese hearts, and the rapid progress of literature and art in the North has had great influence on the literary and artistic evolution of the South.

In the fierce struggle of the South Vietnamese people, a new literature and a new art have come into being in spite of very hard material conditions, carrying on a literary and artistic tradition born during the anti-French resistance war. Literature

zones. To shed more light on the problem, we will evoke the patriotic literature of Nam Bo a century ago, at the time when the first French troops invaded the country. A brief picture of the literature "in American times", as well as a few notes on various artistic activities in the liberated zones, completes this issue.

A National
Literature

Artistic and Literary Life in The Liberated Zones of South Vietnam

A Golden Public

On any place in South Vietnam, at any time, an American aerial bomb or artillery shell may fall without warning. But at any time, in the liberated zones, wherever there is an art performance, a play or a film show, a big crowd comes to watch.

Let us take for instance the district of Cuchi, not far from Saigon. There, during a mopping-up campaign, within a month, the Americans poured on a few villages about twenty kilometres from Saigon 180,000 shells of all calibers, from 105 mm. to 203 mm.; hundreds of planes including B.52s intensively bombed the area, and not a tree — let alone houses — remained unscathed. But the people, taking refuge underground, clung to the land, hit back hard at U.S. columns intruding into the area.

Meanwhile artistic activities were carried on. Almost at the same time as the U.S. raid began, there came groups of cinema projectionists, the Liberation Art Ensemble and with them such well-known artists and writers as Huynh Minh Sieng, President of the Liberation Artists' Association, and the poet Giang Nam.

Wherever a performance was to take place, people came in the day to dig trench-shelters; in the evening, whole families arrived and, settled in those shelters, watched the show. There was always a big crowd. Sometimes a shell fell, but those who were but slightly injured often refused to go and get medical care, preferring to stay till the end. In fact, a medical team was ready to take care of the wounded.

Now let us go to the banks of the river by which ships coming from the sea can reach Saigon. The Americans' daily patrols and frequent raids could not prevent attacks on their ships by the liberation forces. On both banks, lie practically uninterrupted swamps where people wade in the thick mud surrounded by swarms of mosquitoes. To serve the guerillas who lie in wait for American boats, art troupes set up makeshift stages, often on sampans fastened together. Spectators remain standing for hours in the mud, their bare legs and thighs coated with a layer of mud to protect them against mosquito bites.

Such is the South Vietnamese public in the liberated zones. They are so fond of art that they defy death and endure the greatest hardships. Whole families will travel ten or fifteen kilometres on foot, at the risk of

getting caught in an artillery shelling, to attend a theatrical performance.

During the 1966 Tet Festival, the art ensemble of Longan province played before some twenty thousand spectators, at places barely fifteen kilometres from Saigon; more than half of the audience came from the city and among them were many civil servants and soldiers of the puppet administration. Never had any art performance organised by the Saigon puppets drawn such a crowd, for the Saigon public was completely disgusted at the songs, dances and plays inspired by American psychowar services.

With the People, in the Van of the Fighting

In groups of five or seven, the artists move about with their musical instruments, personal outfits and weapons, go to every corner of the land, follow the marching troops, the guerillas to their combat positions and the people to their working places. They hide in underground shelters and move along communication trenches, go to the battlefield, perform before gunners at their gun emplacements. Between two performances, they lead the fighter's life, dig shelters, cook meals and mend clothes for the fighters and take care of the wounded. When circumstances permit, they move about in troupes of 50 to 70 persons with a varied repertory. Writers, playwrights, painters, cinematographers, singers, actors—all live that fighting life, trying to stick as close as possible to the realities of this multi-form and fierce combat.

It is often right on the battlefield that they find the inspiration to write their poems, songs, sketches, plays. It is at Cuchi that Huynh Minh Sieng composed the song "Let us go down to the streets", that Nguyen Vu wrote his three sketches "Land", "Water" and "Spring" which express so well the unbending resolution of the whole people to fight and to win. Lately, Nguyen Vu has finished his play "The Guerilla Girl", inspired by the story of a Cuchi woman fighter who took part in encircling a U.S. brigade together with the people of the region. Documents taken from the Americans and showing the terror caused to them by this girl, a crack sniper, have enabled him to add pungency to his play.

The cinema workers, at the risk of their lives, follow closely the operations and the fighters; the most celebrated exploits of elite fighters: Bay Ni, Vo Thi Mo, Nguyen Thi Gang, etc., have been filmed on the spot. They also sneak into enemy-held cities to film political or armed struggles of the people. A cameraman has even slipped into an enemy airfield to film the taking off and landing of planes. The conditions in which those films are made do not allow them to reach high technical standards, but their documentary and historical values have no equal. Some of those films have received medals at international festivals. "The Battle of Dongxoai" received a gold medal at the Leipzig festival.

During Operation Cedar Falls (January 1967), the Americans used bulldozers to raze to the ground the town of Bensuc which had about ten thousand inhabitants. But the liberation forces and the people fought



Mrs. Ba Hong, a volunteer supply
carrier at the battle of Binh Gia.

Sketch by Co Tan Long Chau



back fiercely, and the people of Bensuc soon came back to their town to rebuild their houses. Immediately, the Liberation art ensemble came and performed the play "Land", which aroused general enthusiasm and strengthened the people's determination to cling to their town.

The people are not satisfied with attending spectacles. Everywhere they set up art groups, which often compose themselves the items they play. A great movement in which large sections of the people have joined is developing throughout the liberated zones, so great is the need to express the feelings, hatred, hope and aspirations in their hearts. Art has become a need, a vital necessity; artistic expression is inseparable from the struggle for freedom.

Let us take as an example the village of M., in Long-an province. MacNamara has chosen this province, adjoining Saigon, as one of the key areas for "pacification". So the village has been subjected to frequent raids, bombings and shellings. Nonetheless it has three art groups: one made up of adults, the two others of children. The motto is: "earth stage, kerosene lamp", that is to say they are ready to perform everywhere, in a courtyard, on a highway, in the light of a kerosene lamp. Even when the enemy still controlled an important part of the province, and when nearly all the inhabitants of the village were in turn imprisoned, the art groups gave performances. Of the 164 items on the repertory, 76 have been composed by local authors.

When it is necessary to inform the people of a victory, to propagate a directive of the Front, to fan

up anger or enthusiasm, our artists just set about creating songs, sketches, dances, and after intensive collective efforts the groups play them before an enthusiastic audience. Rehearsals may take anywhere from a few days to a quarter of an hour. Once, a group came to a hamlet where on the previous night a shelling had killed a family of seven persons. After visiting the place and speaking to the people, the group set to work at once. A small play, "The Blood Debt", was soon staged before thousands of spectators trembling with hatred for the enemy. Fighters cried out: "Let's avenge our compatriots. Death to the Yankees!" The whole population watched the play with tears in their eyes. Festivals and wedding parties are also occasions for our artists to serve the people, who take a direct part in creating the works.

People's Writers and Artists.

It is from this great movement that have sprung the best writers and artists, now famous in the whole country; some, whose works have been translated into several languages, begin to be known even abroad.

Giang Nam was sixteen years old when the anti-French resistance began. He first worked in the information service of Khanhhoa province; there the land was most sterile, life was hard and food shortage was permanent. Then came U.S. control. In the cities under the puppet administration, he worked successively as a pedicab driver, a rubber plantation

worker, a book-keeper in a business firm. He participated in mass struggles and wrote poems. His wife and their five-year-old child were kept in jail while he took part in big battles. In 1965, the Americans undertook to clean up the Cuchi area in a big operation, as said above. Giang Nam came there to write an essay: "Land of Fire" Then he joined the fighters of Quang Nam province who were encircling the U.S. marine base at Da Nang, and wrote many poems and stories. Afterwards he returned to Longan province near Saigon where he worked for a local journal, while collecting poems of earlier times. In his story "At the Front", he exalted the heroism of Longan artists.

Once, a bomb exploded three metres from his shelter; an hour later, as he was having a meal with some artists from Longan, another bomb exploded on their house, which collapsed. Pots and pans were broken, clothes burnt. "Our comrades did not show the least emotion," wrote Giang Nam in a letter to his friends. "The women did not even take shelter. We criticized them for their carelessness. Tuyet, an actress and author, told me, 'We'll go to the shelter, when we want to take a good nap. The bombs cannot fall on us every time.' Tuyet and her friend Nhan, a journalist, once was in a shelter when napalm was dropped on it. 'Five days later,' said Nhan, 'we still felt as if our lungs were burning, and our breath smelt of petrol.' They had to be looked after for long months."

This is the way our writers and artists live. They are fighters like others. Since 1945, the South Vietnamese people have been struggling for liberation.

Simple fighter or commander-in-chief, guerilla or writer, no one has a salary; all live with the people, take part in production work, share the people's joys and sorrows. Like everybody else, the artist or writer must divide his time into three roughly equal parts: one for digging shelters, one for producing food, and one for his professional occupation. Underground shelters are used as dwelling houses and places for conferences and meetings. A complex network of trenches connects them, and wherever you go, the first thing you must do is to dig shelters. Growing rice, maize, manioc, fishing and laying traps for game constitute the second occupation. If after having dug shelters and done production work, they still have time, our writers write. In regions where the land is sterile, or where the enemy controls a major part of the territory, food supply is quite a problem.

Nguyen Trung Thanh, author of the story "The Xanu Wood", Phan Tu, author of the story "Coming Back", Nguyen Chi Trung, who has written "A Letter from Muc Village", had to spend six months a year growing rice and sweet potatoes. In the years 1962-1965 the poet Phan Minh Dao, who was working in a difficult area, had to feed on leaves and wild tubers during long months. Works born in those circumstances express none the less a radiating optimism, an overwhelming love of life, for they reflect the feelings which animate the people and fighters.

In the High Plateaus, even salt runs short. This did not prevent Nguyen Chi Trung from writing "A Letter from Muc Village" in which he relates how a village

of highlanders overcame their fear of planes and brought them down with simple rifles. Published in January 1965, the story had resounding success in the High Plateaus villages which at once started a movement to emulate Muc village.

Productive labour, and the dangers and joys of fighting shared with the whole people have enabled our writers to penetrate into the heart of an infinitely rich reality. The novel "Hon Dat" which enjoys great success throughout the country, was written by Anh Duc after long years of militant life in the western part of the Mekong Delta. His daily work consisted in editing the regional literary bulletin, contributing articles to a local newspaper, managing a printing-house and transporting paper. His printing-house and the Bulletin office were constantly on the move to avoid bombings. Whenever he had some leisure time, he worked on his novel. Ever since he was ten years old, over twenty years ago, he has been used to living under bombs and shells. A first edition (100,000 copies) of his novel was soon sold out. Reprinted in Hanoi in many hundred thousand copies, this novel is now widely known.

Nguyen Duc Thuan spent six years in the Saigon regime's prisons and camps, where American "advisers" tested torture methods specially designed to undermine the morale of revolutionary fighters and get them to renounce their ideal. The torturers combined the most ferocious physical ill-treatments with refined moral torments. For long years, hundreds of men and women have resisted these trials.

The upheavals in the Saigon regime in 1963 enabled Nguyen Duc Thuan to get himself released. In his story "The Victor", he relates in detail those trials in several hundred pages of vivid prose. Describing how men came to lose all human conscience and became ferocious beasts and how on the other hand revolutionaries inspired by their noble ideal were able to resist atrocious trials, the story is to our knowledge unique in its kind.

Painting has developed in the same manner. One would have thought that under the bombs, in the jungle, in underground shelters, no painting is possible; yet the painters, knapsacks on their backs, cling to the marching columns, put up their easels wherever the people and fighters work and struggle. Besides, the fighters help them to carry their outfits, and dig comfortable shelters where they can paint. At every halt, painters hang their works on trees for the fighters to see and ask for their observations. Fighters and units often have each their favourite painter. Fighters also learn to draw with the help of painters.

Of late the Liberation publishing house has issued a collection of reproduced works of six painters: Co Tan Long Chau, Le Van Chuong, Huynh Phuong Dong, Thai Ha, Le Hong Hai and Nguyen Van Kinh. Each of those works—sketches, water-colours, crayon drawings, oil paintings—reflects the personality of each artist, and even more the combativeness and optimism of the people. The faces of fighters, guerillas, women and children

who take part in the fighting are astonishingly expressive and landscapes are painted with love; one feels a country and a people full of life.

An Inexhaustible Source.

One of our writers has said, "To meet heroes all you have to do is step out of your door". It is quite true that the South Vietnamese people's struggle against U.S. aggression requires great heroism not only from the armed forces, but from the whole people.

The writer has only to look around him to find personages worth praising, whose daily life is made up of remarkable deeds. Therefore themes are not lacking. Simple people relate what they have done to far-away parents and friends — that is enough to make such poignant texts as "Letters from South Vietnam" (translated into several languages); the story told by Nguyen Van Troi's widow about the last days she lived with her husband was to become a real literary work (under the title "As He Was" or "The Way He Lived", it has been translated into several languages). A writer has only to look into the lives of such heroines as Ut Tich, a mother of six and an outstanding guerilla, or Ta Thi Kieu, a young girl who has taken part in many guerilla actions, to have at once the subject of a beautiful work.

Here art takes root in life; sprung from life, it in turn impregnates the daily struggle.

Quoc Hanh, commander of a unit of Liberation forces which had annihilated an American battalion in the NhaDo - BongTrang battle, wrote to the Army art ensemble :

“ This victory was due to our fighters’ courage, but also to the contribution of the Army art ensemble, which helped strengthen our determination to avenge our dead and liberate the country. ”

Cao Chau, an artillery man, whose unit had scored many victories, wrote to the artists who had played before his unit :

“ After we parted, our unit received the order to attack the Phu Loi airfield, then came the Baubang and the Datcuoc battles. Most of our comrades have been commended by the High Command. We have been awarded the Military Medal. We have not forgotten you; we think that your songs and plays have strongly inspired us in the fighting. We are deeply grateful to you for them. ”

The finest reward for artists and writers is to receive such letters, which they frequently do. Guerillas, fighters of the Liberation Army, those who ensure supplies for the marching troops, those who live in the rear, all write to the writers and artists to thank them, and send them their remarks. Whenever they carry an enemy post, the fighters do not forget to take as trophy a guitar or an accordion to send to the artists; or with the remains of helicopters and parachutes they make musical instruments or settings for the art troupes. Young boys and girls of Saigon, after having listened over the radio or read in secret the works of such poets as Giang Nam, have joined the liberated zones; they

were anxious to meet the authors and tell them their admiration and gratitude.

A writer worthy of this name, one of our comrades has said, knows how to use his pen to strengthen his patriotic struggle. Just as a century ago, when the French troops began the conquest of Vietnam, patriotic scholars, of whom the greatest was Nguyen Dinh Chieu, considered that the noblest aim of literature was to appeal for struggle, the writers and artists of today are carrying on this fine tradition by enriching it with all the revolutionary content of our epoch.

The men of art and culture of South Vietnam have taken a clear stand for national independence, freedom, against treason and debasement by the dollar. The works born of the struggle hold out great promise for a brilliant future.

Nguyen Van Muoi

Painting in the Liberated Zones of South Vietnam

It wouldn't be right to speak of South Vietnamese painting in the liberated zones without evoking its patriotic traditions which developed during the anti-French resistance.

At the beginning of that resistance, most South Vietnamese painters exchanged their brushes for guns. Only a few thought of making sketches during military operations. But, with the appearance of solid guerilla bases and the needs for information and political education, short-term classes of drawing and painting were soon opened. Then, after every military campaign, it became a habit to organize exhibitions of sketches or pastels taken on the spot, in the midst of the battle, or of posters, satirical cartoons, typical

scenes of the resistance: enlistment in the army, bringing in paddy as taxes, propaganda work among the enemy, etc. The journals of all the provinces reproduced coloured drawings. Pictures of Tet (Lunar New Year) and new-style worship pictures were sold as festive occasions drew near.

Pictorial art developed quite vigorously though there were no great composition paintings, which the war conditions did not allow the artists to tackle. However works of value were produced and became famous in more than one respect. Let's mention for instance the sketches of Diep Minh Chau drawn with the artist's own blood: "The Battle of Giong Dua", "President Ho Chi Minh and the Children", "The Bentre Guerrillas"; the pastels of Nguyen Niem such as "The Battle of Tam Vu", "The Little Liaison Agent", "Building a Dam"; the tetralogy "Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter" by Huynh Van Gam. Young artists were revealed through lively sketches, among them Nguyen The Vinh, Huynh Cong Nhan, Nguyen Thanh Long, Hung Sanh, etc. One cannot look without emotion at those tokens of the Resistance, the more precious because they followed the latter step by step and through them one can see the face of victory day after day, not to mention their real artistic value.

After the 1954 peace, most of the painters came to the North. The talented young people who stayed in the South believed they could finally devote themselves wholly to their art. But it was but a false peace which was turned to account by Ngo Dinh Diem, shameless agent of U.S. imperialism, to savagely suppress all

opposition. Patriotic painting could only resume its march forward with the birth of the National Front for Liberation and the insurgent movement which eventually overthrew Ngo Dinh Diem's dictatorship in 1963. An impetuous development began, thanks to the people's participation and support. Again, training courses were opened under the guidance of veteran artists. The new talent were soon scattered on all the battlefronts, mingling with the people in arms, doing their jobs as propagandists, pressmen, war correspondents.

The huge U.S. war machine established in South Vietnam poses to our compatriots, in particular our painters, many a seemingly insoluble problem. They have however overcome the most arduous trials and taken a growing part in the resounding victories won by our armed forces. While fighting, they study, observe and reproduce the thousand aspects of the prodigiously heroic struggle of their people.

The sketches which come to us from South Vietnam bear witness to the success of their authors: Co Tan Long Chau, Le Van Chuong, Huynh Phuong Dong, Thai Ha, Le Hong Hai and Nguyen Van Kinh. Fruits of their peregrinations throughout the country, their 300 drawings in pencil, in Chinese ink, in charcoal, as well as their water-colours and oil paintings, give a living image of those who are growing up to the size of their titanesque struggle in the midst of a prodigal nature flooded with light. Those works, more than the reports, short stories, novels and even documentary films, enable us to see the inner light of the hero, the particular features of a region.

Let us mention these most successful portraits by Huynh Phuong Dong: "*Mrs Hai Do*", a fervent militant, who, when a child, was sold for 20 piasters to a landlord, has spent nearly all her life in the service of the people; "*Mother Hai from Xom Cham*" who has many a time planted herself in front of M. 113's to forbid them to bull-dozer the houses; "*Mother Muoi from Tan Phuoc Tay*" who has unfailingly ensured supplies for the troops under enemy fire; "*Mother Muoi from My Binh*" who saved resistance fighters 55 times during the dark years; "*Mr. Ba*" who has shown undaunted courage before the enemy; "*Mr. Hai Thung*" the intrepid father of a family; "*Mrs. Thanh from Ben Tre*" who has taken part in 425 political demonstrations; "*The Cu Chi guerilla girl*"; "*The demonstration*"; "*Mrs. Ba Hong*" who distinguished herself during the Binh Gia battle and "*Little Lai*". "*The order for attack*", "*Comrade Khuong at Binh Gia*", "*Fighting to the end*" by Co Tan Long Chau. "*Nguyen Van Ni*", an elite fighter, by Le Van Chuong. "*Writing to the family*" by Thai Ha, etc.

In the most various styles, these works deal with the multiple aspects of the new man, his undaunted spirit, his courage, his self-sacrifice, his implacable hatred for the invader, which can be seen through the light of his eyes, the expression on his lips. The artists have with lightning strokes, caught the striking particularities of their models, their deepest thoughts and feelings. Thus, in a few simple pencil strokes, Huynh Phuong Dong brushed a strikingly truthful portrait of Ma Hai: her head

held up, her eyes shining, her lips quivering with anger. In other sketches (*Mrs. Ba Hong, The Demonstration, The Cu Chi Guerilla Girl*), on the other hand he set out to translate sweetness of character, combined with great simplicity of the heart and admirable firmness of the mind. Co Tan Long Chau is also sober in manner in the fighting scenes. "*Fighting to the End*", "*The Order for Attack*" "*Comrade Khuong at Binh Gia*" have fixed the most touching minutes of a fierce combat, the proud and serene attitude of the fighters, their determination in charging as well as their assurance in shooting. A prolonged examination reveals new details which contribute to translate the South Vietnamese people's patriotism. One perfectly understands that those men and women have been able to face victoriously an enemy ten times stronger, that neither the bombs nor the massacres can drive them out of their villages, that the most cruel raids by the Yankees would end by confounding the aggressors. One enters right in the middle of this epic land with so many illustrious heroes, where a simple 50-year-old guerilla of Cu Chi has no other fear, when he hears of the enemy coming, than that they might take another route.

The landscapes proceed from the same spirit. "*The destruction of Linh Phung school*" shows a heap of ruins from which remains of desks and books emerge. "*The bomb crater*", "*The Yankees have been there...*" make one shudder with anger in face of these modern Huns' savagery. In "*Besieging the post*", on the contrary, the author emphasizes, by large red masses, the

avenging fire which devours the block-houses and the cannibals who take refuge in them. "*In the coco-tree orchard*", "*In the wood*," "*House under the shade of coco-trees*", "*On the river bank*", "*The Nhat Tao market*", "*Thom Ferry landing-place*", etc., sing the sweetness of South Vietnamese landscapes bathed in light. The surprisingly blue sky, a cloud of an unreal whiteness, coco-trees with light green tops, quivering golden lights reflected from a river busy with a host of boats, a little thatch hut mirrored in the waters of a stream, all is rendered artfully. The love for the native land transpires in each painting, each pencil stroke, each line of colour. It is the very life of fighting South Vietnam that appears before our eyes, a triumphant life which defies the atrocities of a ferocious enemy.

Born and grown up in the fire of war, South Vietnamese patriotic painting develops in the liberated zones by feeding from the very source of all art, the people. Brilliant prospects are opening before it and undoubtedly its contribution to the national art will be both varied and considerable.

**Patriotic Literature
in Nambo*
in the 1860's**

The year 1859 saw the first French troops launch attacks on Gia Dinh (now Saigon), and rapidly defeat the Vietnamese royal army. The capitulationist king and high dignitaries of the Court of Hue swiftly made "peace", and by the treaty of 1862, surrendered to France the three eastern provinces of Nambo (composed of six in all). For the French colonialists, the 1862 treaty was but a pause in which to digest the first conquests and prepare for others. In 1867, French troops attacked again and seized the three western provinces of Nambo, which was thus entirely conquered.

(1) Formerly Cochinchina, comprising the Mekong River delta and the Dong Nai River basin.

The Vietnamese monarchy, more anxious to preserve its privileges than to safeguard national independence, in the following years abandoned its sovereignty little by little and accepted French "protectorate" in 1884. This betrayal by the feudalists was bitterly resented by the Vietnamese people, for whom the monarchy had been, for centuries, the symbol of national unity and independence. As early as 1859, after the first defeats of the royal army, the people of Nambo had risen up to fight the aggressors, and defend national independence. The Court's order to "make peace" with the French was not obeyed; everywhere volunteers' corps were formed, patriotic organisations were established to carry on guerilla warfare against the aggressors, which was to last some twenty years.

French officers and historians themselves had to admit the general and persistent character of this patriotic and popular movement. The French officers, authors of "Military History of Indochina" wrote:

"The defeats of the Annamese (royal—Ed.) army had no effect on the insurgent situation in the occupied territory" (p.35).

Pallu de la Barrière, an eye-witness, noted in his "History of the Cochinchina Expedition of 1861":

"The fact is that the resistance centre was everywhere, subdivided to infinity, almost as many times as there were Annamese: It would be more correct to consider every peasant who was tying a bundle of rice as a resistance centre."

The leaders of those insurgent movements and groups were either patriotic mandarins who refused to obey the "peace" orders of the Court, commoners or

scholars. The latter constituted the intelligentsia of old Vietnam, whose advice was much heeded by the people and many of whom, throughout Vietnam's history, were spokesmen of the people. In the very first years of conquest, the French colonialists wanted to win them over and rig up a local administration which would enjoy popular confidence, but most of them refused to collaborate with the enemy, preferring a poor but dignified life to betrayal.

While there appeared anonymous patriotic songs among the resisting people, among the scholars there developed a real literature which exalted national honour, exhorted the people to fight, honoured the dead, vilified the traitors, and denounced enemy crimes. The writings passed from hand to hand, were recopied and circulated in different regions, and as most of them were poems, stories in verse, texts in rhymed prose, they were rapidly memorised by the people and transmitted orally from one village to another, from a generation to another.

To give the reader an idea of that literature, we shall reproduce below a few extracts.

*

First of all there were appeals to fight, often anonymous, written in rhymed prose, taking up the tradition of the famous appeal by General Tran Hung Dao (13th century) who exhorted his troops resolutely to defeat the Mongol invading armies, with the difference

that, this time, the exhortation no longer came from official authorities but from the people themselves. At the beginning of the French aggression, a widely-circulated appeal declared :

"Our way (1) illuminated by sun and moon, we shall not let it be dirtied by rats and ravens.

Our rivers and mountains shining in their sacred halo, we shall not let dogs and goats soil them.

We had king and parents, husbands and wives lived in peace, moral order prevailed to everybody's joy.

In our native land, where our forefathers lived, quiet were our homes, and fine our manners and customs.

*But here they come, cruel and truculent,
Sowing mourning and ruin everywhere.*

Whenever we look at a stick of burning incense, or sip a cup of tea,

Or set our eyes on an inch of land, or a sprig of vegetable,

Our hearts are rent by sorrows.

*.....
Alas, their double-barrelled guns bring such cruel destruction,*

Their tri-coloured flag is the sign of barbarity.
.....

In 1862, after the Court had capitulated and signed the treaty surrendering the three eastern provinces of Nambo to France, the people exhorted the mandarin Truong Dinh to disobey the king and take up the leadership of the insurgent movement against the aggressors. As a leader of the patriotic movement, Truong Dinh issued an appeal in which he severely denounced those who wanted to capitulate :

(1) The way : the Confucian ideal and doctrine.

.....
*All rivers have their sources, all trees have roots,
 Every man is born with body and limbs,
 Why deny one's father and one's king?
 Every man is born with home and family,
 Why fail in one's duty as son and subject?*

.....
*Why have ears and not hear, have eyes and not see?
 Where are our forefathers? where are our ancestors'
 graves?
 Why have hearts and not feel, have bowels and not
 suffer?
 Our land is violated, our people are in torment.*

.....
*You are running after riches and wealth,
 While westerners come to ravish wives and kill husbands.
 You are running after gold and money
 While Westerners come to skin and shear our people.
 How many of us have been insulted, killed?
 How many have been hanged, tortured?
 Words fail us to voice our anger.*

.....
*No one can avoid death, but to die for one's fatherland
 is glory,
 Everyone certainly wants to live, but let's live by hold-
 ing high the banner of struggle.*

.....
 In 1863, after the fall of Tan Hoa (province of Go-
 Cong) where his headquarters were located, Truong
 Dinh carried on the resistance in the forests, and
 issued another appeal:

Fighters!
*The peace treaty signed by the Court should not weaken
 your hatred for the enemy,
 The surrender of the three provinces should not lead
 you to give up the fight!*
Villagers!

Great are the blessings of our land, don't forget your duty as subjects.

Promote mutual assistance and protection, don't give ears to the enemy's words.

The fall of Go Cong should not induce you to turn your coats,

The evacuation of Ben Nghe (1) should not incite you to kneel before the barbarians.

How great is our hatred! let us avenge the affronts at any cost;

How durable is our cause! let us not resign ourselves to abandoning it.

.....

To live in honour, to die in honour; let us live and die for the honour of our country.

You may be the best of scholars, yet if you accepted to become (puppet) district or county chiefs, you would be only rubbish.

Don't say as an excuse that you are only humble commoners; if you agreed to be servants or hirelings, you would make scoundrels of yourselves.

.....

Toward the aggressor, Truong Dinh displayed an undaunted spirit. The proclamation which he had posted up along the banks of rivers said this to the French in particular:

"Losing our King's Government, we are as sad as a child who has lost his parents. Your country belongs to the Western seas, ours to the Eastern seas..."

Gratefulness attaches us to our King. We will avenge the wrong done to him and will die for him. If you persist in bringing us fire and flames, the disorder will last a long time, but we are acting according to Heaven's law and our cause will

(1) Ben Nghe: Saigon.

triumph in the end. If you want peace, give back to our King his territory. We are fighting for this aim.

...We respect your valour, but we fear Heaven more than your power. We swear to fight on to the end and relentlessly. When we run short of weapons, we will arm our soldiers with tree-branches. How can you live among us?"

The great figure of that epoch was undoubtedly Nguyen Dinh Chieu (1822-1888) (see his biography in *Vietnamese Studies* No 1). A blind man, he founded a school where he taught the classics to young people and sought to inculcate in them, first of all, the sense of justice and humanity. Before the French conquest, he had written a novel in verse, *Luc Van Tien*, of nearly 3,000 lines. In this work, courage, righteousness and loyalty are glorified, while vileness and treachery are vigorously flayed. *Luc Van Tien* rapidly became popular in Nambo; it was recited in evening meetings and long passages of it were learnt by heart by many people. Its popularity has not decreased in the least with the passing of the years.

After the French invasion, he put his pen in the service of the patriotic struggle during over twenty years. He wrote numerous appeals, poems, stories in verse to exalt patriotism, denounce foreign aggression, condemn the traitors. His funeral orations in honour of those who had died for the country are moving and impassioned poems.

Nguyen Dinh Chieu highlighted the popular character of the Resistance, the incomparable heroism of its fighters, simple peasants who had become soldiers for love of the Fatherland.

"They were not soldiers who made war their occupation; simple villagers, for love of the Fatherland, they became volunteers. They did not wait till they were drilled in the eighteen combat skills; they did not ask to be taught the ninety battle arrays. They had pieces of coarse cloth as uniforms and asked for neither cartridge bags nor powder-flasks; they were armed only with bamboo pikes and demanded neither combat knives nor battle helmets... Their officers did not have to order drum-beats for them to attack the enemy; by themselves, they broke through the fences and rushed into enemy posts as if the enemy were not there; fearing neither cannon balls nor bullets, they broke through the gates and assaulted enemy posts, at the risk of their lives.

(Extract from the Funeral Oration for Can Giuoc Volunteers, 1861. — Full translation in *Vietnamese Studies* No 1)

In another funeral oration, Nguyen Dinh Chieu wrote beautiful stanzas in which he mourned the dead and grieved over the country battered by foreign aggression:

"The sky of Gia Dinh (1) is gilded with sunset gleams; souls are wandering in the twilight,

The land of Bien Hoa (2) looks pale under the pallid moon, wills-o'-the-wisp are shivering in the night.

In broad daylight, in the province of An Ha (3) trees fall down, and the dust on the ramparts whirls up,

At sunset, on the river Long Tuong, the fog rises and ghosts light their fires on the brinks of abysses.

*.....
Spirits wander over rivers and seas, dazzled by the mirages of the depths, their fate ephemeral as the foam.*

(1) (2) Eastern provinces surrendered to the enemy.

(3) A Western province which the enemy began to invade.

*Souls ramble in mountains and forests, lost among
the ant-hills, their shadows and voices still present
among us.*

.....
*In the daytime, the wind sweeps over deserted plains,
comes, goes and disappears like banners of a num-
berless army,*

*At night, the cuckoo weeps in the moonlight, moans,
sobs and laments, crying out endless hatred and
rancour.*

.....
But Nguyen Dinh Chieu did not content himself with lamenting; for him tears were the expression of the sharp pain which struck him at the sight of the plundered fatherland, but he never ceased calling on all to struggle, reminding everybody of his sacred duties as a citizen and a man. He wrote many poems glorifying leaders of insurgent movements such as Truong Dinh, Phan Tong, and in spite of his blindness, in spite of the failure of various patriotic movements, he kept the hope that one day the fatherland would be liberated:

*"A pure rain will wash our rivers and mountains
clean."*

The insurgent movements succeeded each other for over twenty years, and as we have seen, their leaders were often scholars who left patriotic poems. Among them, let us mention in particular Nguyen Huu Huan. Captured, he remained undaunted in face of all blandishments and menaces, and was finally beheaded in 1875 by the enemy. Here are some of his verses:

*For our fatherland, for our families,
It does not matter if we must face wind and rain.*

.....

*Heavy are the duties common to all
Shame to those who do not pay their debts as men.*

.....

*I accept victory or defeat as Heaven imposes them
on me,*

Damned the traitors who mock at my loyalty!

Other scholars, without taking part in military action, fought with their pens. Thousands of poems, songs, "parallel sentences", often anonymous, sang the glory of heroes fallen on the battlefield. In the temple built in honour of the patriot Thien Ho Duong, in the Plain of Reeds, one can read these "parallel sentences":

*The hero is gone, his anger unquenched, but his name
remains honoured from north to south, and fire
and incense burn permanently in his temple.*

*His courage was matchless, so his glory will be per-
petuated for centuries to come, and the flame of
his sword will shine for ever.*

Nguyen Huu Huan's heroism was praised in these terms:

*Facing Heaven and Earth, his loyalty proved faultless.
To the hero, it did not matter whether the battle was
won or lost.*

*The enemy was frightened by his cries for justice,
His head fell under the executioner's sword, but he did
not surrender.*

*The waters of the river turned red with his blood.
On the islands, the autumn wind wailed mournfully.*

The peasant patriot Nguyen Trung Truc cried out before falling under the bullets of a French firing

squad: "As long as grass grows in this country, there will be men to fight the aggressors." To honour his memory, numerous poems were written. Here are a few extracts:

.....
*Of the dauntless hero, the good name shall remain for
 ever,
 As for those who have betrayed, they will die of
 shame.*

.....
*He took up arms when he was still a very young man,
 And sharpened his sword in the wind and dust.
 Alas, fate did not spare the hero.
 Seething with hatred, he had sworn
 Not to live under the same sky with the enemy.*

We must especially mention the anonymous *phu* (rhymed prose) entitled: "When the enemy comes, even the women must fight." Here are some extracts:

.....
*Drumbeats resound on their doorsteps, flags fly at
 their gates.
 Willows and peach-blossoms (1) start out on the paths
 of war.
 Formerly, they sewed and embroidered in the shadow
 of their husbands,
 Now, here they are, sword and shield in hand, compet-
 ing with all.
 Let us praise their courage, whatever their skill may be.
 Villains, take care lest your heads should fall, don't
 rely too much on your weapons.
 Sisters, look at them, aren't they true heroines?
 They ride on horses, brandish banners, row boats, and
 load guns,*

(1) Symbols of the woman, beautiful and delicate.

They destroy fortresses, climb up ramparts, force their way through fences and gates.

.....

What does it matter, victory or defeat? There is a share of each for everyone,

What does it matter, to die or to live? Our choice has been made.

Let it be known that they have women's bodies but soldiers' hearts ;

That women, they are none the less strategists ;

And that they are both good at keeping houses and conducting military operations.

.....

There were a few scholars who betrayed the country and worked for enemy propaganda. The patriotic scholars gave them no respite, harassing them with satires and sarcasms. One of the traitors, Ton Tho Tuong, sought to justify himself in a series of poems. By means of subtle allusions he now begged forgiveness, now threatened the patriots. There was a general protest by patriotic scholars. In particular Phan Van Tri, Bui Huu Nghia, Le Quang Chieu replied to Ton Tho Tuong in the classical way, that is by composing verses with the same metrical patterns and rhymes, but with an exactly opposite meaning. That poetical joust, followed with passion by the whole country, completely unmasked the traitors who could no longer cover their baseness. It is difficult to translate those poems into another language. We shall quote only a few verses as examples :

Ton Tho Tuong :

*It is not easy to penetrate into the den of a tiger,
Small children should keep away.*

Reply by Phan Van Tri:

*Don't try to "frighten monkeys by invoking tigers,"
Our heart is of steel, our will unshakable.*

Ton Tho Tuong:

*Who knows whether it was hap or mishap?
Let lizards smack their tongues, we'll just stop our ears.*

Reply by Phan Van Tri:

*Our debts towards family and fatherland remain unpaid
How could we close our eyes and stop our ears?*

Ton Tho Tuong:

*Ash covers the ancient "way" (doctrine),
Dust gathers at the doors of the great families.*

.....
*Buffaloes and horses swallow all insults,
One cannot save even one's life, why speak of honour?*

Reply by Phan Van Tri:

*How can you degrade yourself to this point and still
speak of the way?*

*How can you fall so low and keep evoking the great
families?*

.....
*When one has a body, one also has dignity,
Learn to defend both your life and honour.*

*

Among scholars of the North or those who had left Nambo for the North after the French occupation, many wrote poems and prose works in which they expressed their nostalgia of the South, hatred for the enemy and their desire to take part in the patriotic struggle. Let us mention in particular Nguyen Thong

(1825-1894) who had left Nambo in 1867 after the invasion of the western provinces, and left numerous works.

As for those who remained in Nambo, their attitude was either active resistance or non-collaboration with the occupant. This attitude was proudly defined by Nguyen Dinh Chieu, the blind poet :

*I'd rather see but darkness
Than traitors to their king and families.
I'd rather see no living soul
Than the homeland amputated.
I'd rather see only the night
Than the people drowned in miseries.
I'd rather suffer blindness and keep the family virtues
intact,
Than have sight and deny my ancestors.
I'd rather be blind and keep my name pure
Than have sight and feed on things impure.*

Now, a century later, the people of Nambo are splendidly carrying on this tradition, and the patriotic literature of today continues that of the 19th century, bringing it to new heights.

Letters and Arts in American Times

Riding at top speed on a motor-scooter making great noise along one of the busiest thoroughfares of Saigon, a young girl dressed in gaudy clothes attracted everybody's attention. Suddenly, she stopped, and jumped into the Saigon river. A big crowd gathered on the quay, the girl was drawn out of the water, people thronged around; the young girl, still dripping wet, put on airs and graces, and addressed the crowd: "Look at my lips; even after such a dive, the lipstick still holds. It's X. lipstick." This noisy advertisement is but one of the relatively benign aspects of the Americanization of life in Saigon. Other, much more pernicious forms do harm to the very moral health of the country. The U.S. psy-war services, since the beginning

of the neo-colonial regime, have tried to create a whole "literature", to inspire "artistic" works, in order to justify the U.S. seizure of the country and undermine the morale of the people.

* * *

The Supreme Weapon

Few people know that in Vietnam, anti-communism came even before the appearance of communism. In the years following the October 1917 Revolution, the French colonialists, who had a flair for these matters, felt that this event was to be of capital importance to the national liberation movements of the colonial peoples. Soon, through a series of booklets, and the Nam Phong review, they launched a big campaign against communism, accusing the communists of being people "with neither religion, fatherland nor family". They clamoured that the greatest danger which threatened Vietnam was not colonialism, but communism, which would destroy all, consider women and children common property, persecute religious believers and put an end to all spiritual, national and family life. And the Vietnamese feudalists quickly chimed in.

Thirty years later, the Yankee neo-colonialists have found nothing better. Anti-communism remains the supreme ideological weapon. Only, the situation was much more desperate for the foreign imperialists and the native feudalists in 1965, when the Americans laid hands on South Vietnam. The northern half of



Mrs Sau Ngan, a standard-bearer in
political struggles at Thanh Thoi.

Sketch by Huynh Phuong Dong.

Vietnam had been completely liberated and there, land reform had abolished feudalism for good. The anti-communism preached by the Americans and the feudalists was therefore more virulent, more hateful, in proportion to the anguish that seized the exploiters in face of the near and ineluctable collapse of their system.

The order was thus given to all "journalists and writers" to emulate each other in vilifying communism and the communists. Everything that the West had distilled in the field of anti-communism was duly imported — from Koestlerian or Camusian subtleties to coarse products of MacCarthyism, all manipulated, redistilled by local pen hirelings, in the form of poems, novels, films, essays... Renegades from the anti-French Resistance were especially employed for this job, for having taken part in revolutionary struggle at a certain time, they could confer some degree of veracity to their concoctions.

Such a "writer" as Chu Tu is typical of this stable. In many of his novels, he tries to depict the Communists as cruel beings, nearer to animality than to humans. But after many years of efforts, Chu Tu has failed to give the slightest appearance of life to his "communists", while for other characters, he has been praised as capable of unveiling the deepest-seated secret meanders of the "human personality, unique and multiform".

Why this failure? The question is by no means one of talent. The difficulty for the anti-communist writers

in Vietnam is to find in the national reality even tiny bits which might help them create the illusion of the real. For over a century the Vietnamese people have waged a relentless patriotic struggle against colonialism, during which the finest moral values — heroism, abnegation, fraternity, righteousness, internationalism — have been brought into full relief. In that struggle, the communists have always stood at the forefront, a fact recognized by the whole nation, and the first Vietnamese communist, Ho Chi Minh, is also the best-loved and most respected patriot in the country, by Marxists and by believers or partisans of other doctrines or religions alike.

On the contrary, anti-communism has for decades been linked with colonialism, handled by the vilest and most corrupt hands, so that in Vietnam it is very difficult, nay, impossible to besmear communism and the communists and to sing the praise of anti-communism. The extreme cruelty of U.S. policy in South Vietnam, the monstrous corruption prevailing in Saigon, contrasting with the sublime heroism of the fighters of the National Front for Liberation, have removed the last shreds of chance for anti-communism to find an audience. Some have tried to revive a kind of warlike fervour, by singing the “march on the North” or the “fight against communism”, but their efforts have found no response.

As early as 1958, the newspaper *Thoi Luan*, edited by Phan Quang Dan, a notorious anti-communist who was an opponent of Diem, admitted :

"Suppose you want to observe the slogan of anti-colonialism (1). You write about the Resistance. Alas, you risk being accused of singing the praise of the Communists. If you make up for it by writing on the trade-unions' struggle in French enterprises (2) then you will be accused of promoting class struggle. Suppose you want to attack feudalism (3). You describe the hatred of farm girls for the landowners who have dishonoured them. This, too, is incitation to class struggle. Finally there remains anti-Communism. There, you face two obstacles: on the one hand your work will have few readers, and on the other, having had no opportunity to observe the misdoings of the communists you are unable to describe them and made them hateful."

(*Thoi Luan*, Feb. 2, 1958)

It is so difficult to make the readers swallow anti-communist fabrications that their authors, even when they are supposed to relate personal reminiscences, are obliged to insist in their introduction that

"These are real stories, not a sensational novel; the author does nothing but tell a moment of his life, relate things he had seen and heard, and report them as they were."

(Preface to "Recollections" by Hoang Dat)

(1) (3) The Diem regime put forth 3 slogans: anti-colonialism, anti-feudalism, anti-communism, to camouflage U.S. neo-colonialism and national treason by the Saigon men.

(2) Many Saigon enterprises are French-owned.

"Here are things that have been seen, heard and are 100% real. It is a document guaranteed to be conform to reality, without any thing added or withdrawn.

(Preface to "Camp No.5" by Thanh Tu).

Some do not bother to offer any excuses. The "writer" Nguyen Manh Con, in an interview with the review *Bach Khoa* bluntly stated his conception of literary creation :

"I am paid 20,000 piasters a month by an organ of political and social studies for writing anti-communist stuff. I don't write at all for love of art, simply to earn my living."

(*Bach Khoa* Feb. 2, 1962)

Nguyen Manh Con's job is not only to write such "works", but also to incite others to write in the same direction.

Pornography, violence and evasion.

Having failed to inculcate in the South Vietnamese youth a militant anti-communism, the "arts and letters" of the Saigon regime try at least to demoralize them, to break all idealistic impulse and destroy all respect for moral values in them. For corrupted and amoral young men will more easily hire themselves out as mercenaries, and be persuaded to commit the worst crimes.

U.S. domination is at once accompanied by a large-scale dissemination of novels, films, magazines which incite people to debauchery and violence. It is true