

Introduction

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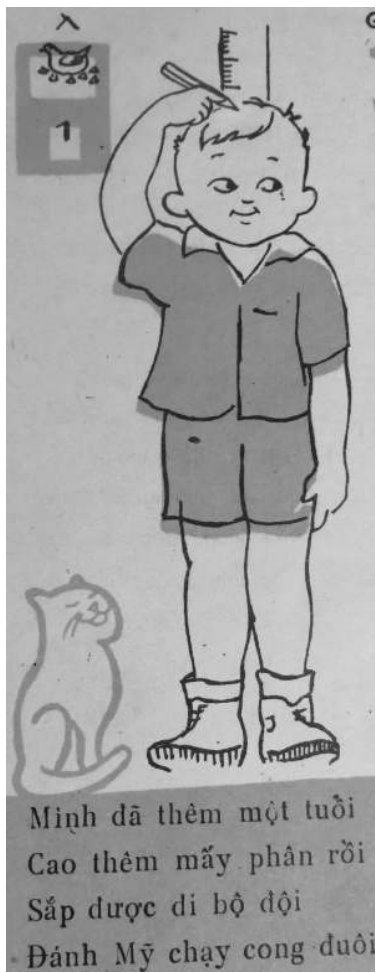


Figure 0.1 Picture of a Boy

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When you look at Figure 0.1 what does it make you think about? When I first saw it, I thought that it expressed a peaceful, happy childhood. In the presence of a feline companion, with a grin like a Cheshire cat, a cute little boy takes the measurement of his own height on the first day of the New Year. For a moment, the picture's peacefulness made me forget that I saw it in a Hanoi newspaper published during a fierce war. When I read the caption under the picture, I understood its connection with the wartime reality and its intended message. It reads: "I am a year older; already several centimeters taller; soon I will be able to join the army and to fight the Americans until they turn tail and flee."

This picture and its caption, published on the occasion of Tet, the Lunar New Year, by Kim Dong Publishing House in Hanoi in 1969, stands in stark contrast with a poem published in 1972 in a South Vietnamese children's magazine *Thang Bom* (Fellow Bom) in Saigon and titled "Dreaming of Being Little":

Spring has arrived to add green to the leaves  
 To make flowers blossom more . . .  
 But my heart is sad more and more,  
 As (it also) adds another year to my age . . .<sup>1</sup>

The picture and the poem both deal with growing up by a year but have the opposite root and the opposite effect: a boy's aspiration to grow fast to join the army to defend his country vs a girl's anxiety, as weird as it sounds, about the fleeting moments of her childhood or youth, without any hint at fighting for her country. It can be attributed to the gender differences of the central figures of these pieces, but the contrast still stands if we compare the aspiration of the North Vietnamese child, as shown in Figure 0.1, to a joke that appeared in the same Saigonese magazine: a student who was assigned to write about the armed forces branch in which he preferred to enlist turned in a blank sheet of paper and explained to his teacher: "I hear that in several years there will be peace, so I think by the age of eighteen I will be free from going into the army."<sup>2</sup>

The juxtaposition of these two attitudes toward growing up and serving in the military contrasts the states of minds of the younger generations in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) or North Vietnam and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) or South Vietnam.

<sup>1</sup> Respectively, *Tet nam Ga*, 48; Suong Nhat Sa, "Uoc mo tuoi nho." The name of the author is a pen name. The author is identified as a member of a poetry club (many of them existed in high schools). This one in particular was connected to *Thang Bom* magazine.

<sup>2</sup> Ly Hoan Phong, "Hoa binh."

Even more, it contrasts the two societies in which these young people were raised and the goals that these societies endeavored to set for their youth and the means through which they strove to achieve these goals.

Many shelves of books, more than thirty thousand, have been written about the war in Indochina between 1955 and 1975. They analyze different aspects of the military and sociopolitical realities of this war. Most of them center on the American role in the war. Most of the works that focus on the Vietnamese sides concentrate on the DRV. The RVN, until recently, has been left on the backburner of scholarship and consideration of the war as Americans are given the central role in most of the narratives of the war.<sup>3</sup> This approach turns the war solely into a conflict between the communist Vietnamese and the anti-communist, or imperialist, Americans.

Indeed, Vietnamese were caught in the global struggle, the Cold War, between the communist camp(s) headed by the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the anti-communist world led by the United States. Vietnam was a burning part of that conflict. But it was also a civil war between the communist forces led by the DRV and the anti-communist forces led by the RVN. Unlike the Cold War between the camps of the superpowers, the war between the DRV and the RVN was an armed conflict between two polities identifying themselves as representing the same national ethnicity: Vietnamese. These two polities put this unifying identification aside and fought for the ideologies that set them apart. It was a struggle between different visions that Vietnamese had about the kind of society they wanted to live in and to bequeath to the next generation.

Ironically, it is exactly this group, the next generation, children and young adults, that has largely been ignored in academic analysis of the war.<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of this project, I call these two groups "youth,"

<sup>3</sup> Works that bring the RVN into the scholarship tend to focus on Ngo Dinh Diem and his period: Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*; Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*; Miller, *Misalliance*; Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*; Stewart, *Vietnam's Lost Revolution*; on the Army of the Republic of Vietnam: Brigham, *ARVN*; Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*; Nathalie Nguyen, *South Vietnamese Soldiers*.

<sup>4</sup> On the identity of young people/children during the war see Dror, "Raising Vietnamese," "Love, Hatred, and Heroism," "Education and Politics in Wartime." The works on older young people that to some extent include high school students are Marr, "Political Attitudes" and Nguyen-Marshall, "Student Activism." The study on the two Vietnamese educational systems is Vasavakul's unpublished doctoral dissertation "Schools and Politics in South and North Vietnam. Masur, Hearts and Minds: Cultural Nation-Building," also discusses school, 43–71.

On the French educational system G. Kelly, *Franco-Vietnamese Schools*, Altbach and G. Kelly, *Education and the Colonial Experience*, D. Kelley, *French Colonial Education*:

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including young people between the ages of six and seventeen, called in Vietnamese *thieu nien nhi dong* or in abbreviated form *thieu nhi*, a term that includes both “teens or adolescents” (*thieu nien*) and “children” (*nhi dong*). This is in contrast to the term *thanh nien* commonly translated into English as “youth” that is applied to an older group from the age of 17 up to the age of 35,<sup>5</sup> which would grossly misrepresent the age category of youth customary in the West.

The study of youth during the war is a critical lacuna, the filling of which will give an additional dimension for analysis of the war and for understanding the different identities of the two Vietnamese societies that contended for the future of the country. Youth are important for any society, but their role, even if unacknowledged, increases when a society is under duress. The creation of a cohesive society is especially important in wartime, particularly when a war is fought inside the country against an enemy ostensibly of the same language and nationality with the participation of foreign forces. In the DRV and the RVN, the younger generations had not only to maintain a certain social order but also to fight for it in the prolonged conflict. For this purpose, both societies had to reproduce people who would be willing to stand for their goals.

Although living under conditions created by their parents’ and grandparents’ generations, youth participate in what happens around them and will make the future. How adults understand the progression from “childhood” to “youth” to “adulthood” reveals how they think about what they want for their children’s future and how they dream about what they want for themselves. Consequently, bringing young people into historical analysis is a way to understand what is most important to adults in the present and what they see as important for the future.

In Western contexts, there has been a tendency to portray children and youth as victims whose suffering in political and military conflict is undeserved since children ideally symbolize purity and innocence.<sup>6</sup> But socialist discourses of the Cold War era often transformed the image of youth and children, as well as the children themselves, “into revolutionary warriors who were already implicated in the politics of class struggle,” as

*Essays on Vietnam and West Africa*, Trinh Van Thao, *L’école française*, Bezançon, “Un enseignement colonial,” Nguyen Thuy Phuong, *L’école française au Vietnam*.

On the Chinese educational system in Cho Lon, a Chinese part of Saigon, see Mok, “Negotiating Community and Nation in Cho Lon”; in Hanoi, see Han Xiaorong, “A Community between Two Nations.”

<sup>5</sup> Even in the publications in English, those in their thirties were included in the “youth” category. See, for example, “Vietnam’s Youth,” 3.

<sup>6</sup> Jenkins, “Introduction”; Stephens, “Nationalism, Nuclear Policy, and Children”; Gilligan, “Highly Vulnerable?”; Kirschenbaum, “Innocent Victims” and *Small Comrades*; Marten, *Children and War*.

Orna Naftali, for example, demonstrated with children of the Cultural Revolution in China between 1966 and 1976.<sup>7</sup>

Different societies see youth's position and their role differently and thus treat them differently. While in some societies "at decisive moments in social history children have been at the center of ideological activity,"<sup>8</sup> in others, they were not considered to be as important as the adult population in terms of ideological formation. But in any society, ideas about children and youth and their role involve a wide spectrum of concerns: social, communal, cultural, moral, legal, and political. Thus, while focusing on youth, I engage with the broader discourse of the Vietnamese adult societies.

This book also poses questions about the nature of the societies in the DRV and the RVN, focusing on the cultural and political constructions of ideas about childhood and youth in these two societies. The distinction between "flesh and blood human beings of a certain age" and the cultural constructions of ideas surrounding childhood is particularly useful, as demonstrated by a historian of the Soviet Union, Lisa Kirschenbaum, in her book about children between the ages of three and seven in the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1932. In her words, such study is useful "in sorting out the complex interaction of ideology and practice that accompanied efforts to re-envision and remake everyday life."<sup>9</sup>

It is commonly thought that a government must unify the people around a single vision of the future in order to assert its authority and to prevail in wartime.<sup>10</sup> According to Benedict Anderson, such a vision of unity is identified with the nation and is built upon deep sensations of horizontal comradeship for which people are willing to die.<sup>11</sup> In times of war, the need to unify the nation behind a single vision of the future is vital to any group or government seeking to assert its authority.<sup>12</sup> The unity, fictional or real, is indispensable to mobilize people to fight and die for "their" country. This unity, embedded in the idea of a Nation, conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship, creates a fraternity, which allows people to willingly die for it.<sup>13</sup> An authoritarian government's use of coercion to mobilize people can appear to be more efficient than efforts to mobilize people without coercion. Indeed, the authoritarian Germany

<sup>7</sup> Naftali, "Chinese Childhood" and "Marketing War." See also, Xu, "Chairman," Peacock, "Broadcasting Benevolence."

<sup>8</sup> Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature*.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Steedman, *Strange Dislocations*; Cunningham, "Histories of Childhood"; Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*.

<sup>10</sup> Proud, *Children and Propaganda*, 10. <sup>11</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Proud, *Children and Propaganda*, 10. <sup>13</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

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of the late 1930s and early 1940s was more effective in its war efforts than any of its democratic victims – Czechoslovakia, France, Belgium, Netherlands, and other countries – and it took a mobilization of the Soviet people by an equally authoritarian Soviet government to mount a response that eventually destroyed the fascist state.

French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser suggested that, to exist, a state must reproduce labor, which requires not only the reproduction of workers' skills but also of workers' submission to the ruling ideology. He believed that it is the educational system that enables a dominant ideological state apparatus to reproduce labor power and to form citizens in the desired mold.<sup>14</sup> Publications, education systems, and socialization systems are three important venues in which to achieve this goal. The consideration of these venues with the measure of their failure and success in achieving this goal, as employed by the DRV and the RVN are the focus of my analysis.

This book endeavors to bring youth into the picture of the raging war years, considering it against the backdrop of the adult societies. Given the great depth and breadth of available materials, I focus on three main spheres of raising young people: education, social organizations, and publications. Chronologically, I concentrate on the years from 1965 to 1975, from the start of direct American involvement to the end of the war. While I provide some germane information from previous years, I focus on that decade since these were the most intense and complicated years of the conflict. The book is based on archival sources, newspapers, textbooks, books (that is, texts produced by adults and by youth), and interviews.

### **Vietnamese Societies as Frameworks for Considering Youth**

The issues that separated the Hanoi and Saigon governments during the civil war between 1955 and 1975 were not unrelated to the sense of difference that had emerged in the attitudes of northerners and southerners toward each other since the sixteenth century.<sup>15</sup> One obstacle to understanding the differences between the two Vietnams during the wartime years is that propaganda from both sides emphasized the unity of the Vietnamese people and of their history and culture. This ignores the two-and-a-half centuries (from the mid-sixteenth to beginning of the nineteenth centuries) during which northerners and southerners lived in separate countries, divided between ruling clans, often at war with each other, with different economies, material cultures, forms of government,

<sup>14</sup> Althusser, "Ideology," 132–3, 154. <sup>15</sup> Taylor, "Surface Orientations."

legal systems, educational practices, military organizations, varieties of social hierarchy, village morphologies, languages, and relations with non-Vietnamese/the outside world. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the differences between northerners and southerners were sufficiently palpable that the assertion of a unified “national identity” was purely ideological and not an objective description of real life. Culture and society in the South were more diverse and less susceptible to authority than in the North because of the characteristics of their separate historical development since the sixteenth century. While the North remained closely connected to China, people in the South came from encounters with a variety of peoples and cultures along the southern coast. The unification of North and South for the first time in the nineteenth century by the Nguyen dynasty had been brief and unsuccessful. The French conquered the South thirty years before it conquered the North and governed it differently throughout the colonial period.

On September 2, 1945, at Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as a sovereign state independent of French colonial rule. However, as France refused to recognize this, the DRV remained a state without any significant territory, the situation that in 1946 led to the beginning of the First Indochina War, in which the communist-led Viet Minh forces, a coalition formed by Ho Chi Minh in the mountains of North Vietnam in 1941, fought against the French. In 1954, after the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Accords, the First Indochina War ended. The defeat of European colonialism led to the emergence in 1954 of two Vietnams, the North, or the Democratic Republic of Vietnam with its capital in Hanoi, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, and the South, or the Republic of Vietnam with its capital in Saigon, under the leadership of Ngo Dinh Diem. The DRV and the RVN aimed to follow opposing paths into the future. Almost one million northerners, most of them Catholics, fled their homes to resettle in the South.

In the North, the DRV's government proclaimed as its first goal the formation of a socialist state and as its ultimate goal a communist state that would eventually encompass the South. Establishing a vast system of government control and propaganda, diversity and pluralism among people was eliminated in favor of achieving these goals and unifying the country under the authority of the Communist Party, called at the time the Workers Party.

In the South, anti-communists saw the goal of the RVN as the creation of a state that would be an antipode to the communist North. In the South, diversity was embedded in society and culture. South Vietnamese society was fractured and stratified during the



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French colonial period and the Japanese occupation. In the absence of a strong propaganda machine and a rigid societal structure, political ideas remained abstract for many in the South. As Le Ly Hayslip, who lived in the South during part of the war, pointed out in her book *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, “We [Vietnamese in the South] knew little of democracy and even less about communism.”<sup>16</sup>

Those who took an interest in politics held views that varied enormously, including supporters of RVN governments, shifting agglomerations of diverse religious and political groups, communists with ties to the North, and dissenters of various persuasions. Unlike the North, the RVN chose to inherit and maintain the tradition of what historian of colonial Vietnam Christopher Goscha calls Vietnamese republicanism, which was an adaptation and elaboration of French-championed republicanism that penetrated Vietnam along with French colonialism and was adopted by intellectuals and politicians.<sup>17</sup> As a result, efforts to govern such a diverse society required that it be accommodated. The South did not have, and perhaps could hardly have, a policy developed to such an extent and as strictly enforced as was the case in the North because, among other reasons, the southern state’s *raison d’être* was to establish an antipode to the state in the North.

From the late 1950s until 1975, the war between the Vietnams evolved to become one of the most prolonged and tragic confrontations of the Cold War era. While initially the DRV aimed at building socialism on its own territory, starting from 1959 it shifted its focus to bring the RVN under its sway. In the late 1950s, the Communist Party came under new leadership. Le Duan, originally from the South, became Secretary-General of the Party, supported by Le Duc Tho, a member of the Politburo and the Head of the Party’s Organizational Department. Under Le Duan’s leadership, the DRV quickly regeared its agenda towards the unification of the North and the South as a socialist country; according to Hanoi propaganda, there was “no other road to take.”<sup>18</sup> The communists threw all their efforts into achieving this goal. In 1960, in the South, the National Liberation Front was established, which united Southern communists and communist sympathizers in the struggle against the RVN government. The military arm of the front was called the People’s Liberation Armed Forces of South Vietnam, commonly known to their enemies as Viet Cong, an abbreviation meaning Vietnamese communists. The Front existed under the aegis of the DRV

<sup>16</sup> Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth*, xv. <sup>17</sup> Goscha, *Vietnam*, 105, 108, 112, *passim*.

<sup>18</sup> From the title of the Hanoi wartime propaganda book *No Other Road to Take*, by Nguyen Thi Binh, a leader among southern communists.



government, receiving directives and supplies from Hanoi. Moreover, it was constantly expanded and reinforced by people from the North, both those who regrouped to the North after 1954, were retrained there and sent back, and by northerners. They infiltrated into the South through what became known as the Ho Chi Minh trail.

The South went through an assassination of its first president Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, a series of governments with oppositional street demonstrations, insurgencies, military coups, and multi-party electoral exercises. This was not an ideal democracy, perhaps not even a democracy; there were political persecutions and numerous impediments for those who disagreed with the government and who tried to subvert its goals and policies, but it was a far cry from the authoritarian state in the North, and it was a more open system allowing many more challenges to state authority than was possible in the North. While persecuting a significant number of those perceived as enemies of the state, the South Vietnamese governments did not shut all the doors for the expression of different, often polar, views, including in print. This resulted in an incredible diversity of publications, including those for children, which, instead of supporting government policies, expressed a variety of dissenting opinions and even openly advocated for ending the war.

The anti-communists in the South struggled to stave off the invasion from the North and the communist attempts to destroy their country; with few exceptions, after the rule of Ngo Dinh Diem, they did not claim as their goal, nor did they attempt, an invasion of the North. The conflict intensified with the introduction of American ground troops in 1965 and continued for another ten years. In 1973, the Americans withdrew and the Vietnamese continued to fight until April 30, 1975, when Saigon fell and the RVN government surrendered to the North. Millions of Vietnamese were dead and both the DRV and the RVN had suffered great destruction.

Despite a history of division and conflict going back to the beginning of the seventeenth century, not only the North but also the South traced their history to common ancestors, and the governments both in Hanoi and in Saigon claimed to speak on behalf of all Vietnamese. Textbooks in both the North and the South affirmed the territorial and linguistic unity of “Vietnam” as “one country.”<sup>19</sup> Youth in both the DRV and the RVN were taught that their country was inhabited by more than sixty different ethnic groups from the northernmost Ha Giang province on the border with China to the southernmost Ca Mau region on the Gulf of Thailand.<sup>20</sup> Northern youth were taught that the Vietnamese homeland

<sup>19</sup> Bui and Bui, *Viet-Su. Lop nhi*, 9, 11; <sup>20</sup> Pham and Pham, *Quoc su. Lop nhât*, 11.

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is a unity that had been built by their ancestors from one generation to another.<sup>21</sup> Southern youth were taught that “ancestors” had “consolidated” the country for “descendants to gather in a community for a long time.”<sup>22</sup> Likewise, linguistic unity was affirmed. According to a Southern textbook for fourth graders: “despite local dialects, which usually have their phonetic particularities, essentially this is the same language. This is an important factor to maintain for the unity of the entire people each time it is needed against foreign aggression.”<sup>23</sup>

With the “one country” concept, the communists had an advantage in promulgating their cause in conjunction with the appeals for independence and deliverance from foreign aggression. American military forces, contractors, and advisory personnel were much more numerous, visible, and discussed in the South than were Chinese and Soviet Bloc personnel in the North. In the communist narratives, the North and the South were united against the foreign “other” for national independence. Referring to anti-communist Vietnamese, the communists labeled them “lackeys” or “puppets” of the Americans, depriving them of agency and equating them with the foreign “other,” who were to be expelled or destroyed in order to unify the country. This was their way of ascertaining Vietnamese-ness, though their Vietnamese-ness was always qualified as “socialist” as they saw only one path for the development of Vietnam after unification – under the rule of the DRV and following the socialist pattern.

For the anti-communists in the South, maintaining a commonality in “Vietnamese-ness” with the North was complicated. The North’s reliance on its foreign allies was less obvious than was the South’s reliance upon the United States, but anti-communists in the South proclaimed themselves as defenders of democracy against authoritarian communist rule and the foreign doctrine for which it stood, which was the enemy of all Vietnamese. People in the South developed a range of ideas about what it meant to be a “true” Vietnamese and about the unity of the country. These ideas and the ideas driving DRV policy will reveal the different experiences of youth in the North and the South during the war.

### Book’s Structure

The book consists of five chapters. Chapter One explores educational systems in the North and the South. Education plays an important role in creating and reproducing a society, especially with a unified system that creates a common educational background. Hue-Tam Ho Tai argued

<sup>21</sup> *Lịch sử. Lớp nam phổ thông*, 6–8. <sup>22</sup> Bui and Bui, *Viet-Su. Lớp nhì*, 9. <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.