



# The Mass Media in Vietnam

Edited by David G. Marr

Political and Social Change Monograph 25

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**Mass Media in Vietnam**

David Marr  
Editor

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## Preface

In October 1998, Le Kha Phieu, General Secretary of the Vietnam Communist Party, warned a conference of publishers and other media executives that the profit motive was causing them to veer away from political issues, and general commercialisation of the mass media was threatening to undermine revolutionary cultural traditions.<sup>1</sup> Some of those present must have smiled ironically at this call for more politics, recalling the times when editors and journalists had been sacked or even imprisoned for expressing controversial political opinions. Of course, Mr Phieu was not calling for political disputation, but rather a return to extensive, enthusiastic propagation of the Party line, instead of devoting so much attention to violence, crime, sex, scandals and superstitions – all of which had been off limits to the Vietnamese mass media only a decade ago. Quite simply, the Party line was being ignored because it did not sell papers or air time.

This is the first book in English to describe the dramatic changes taking place in Vietnam's mass media. It is not so much about the specific content of newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, feature films or TV programs, but rather the transformations in organisation, financing, technology, work behaviour and audience expectations that have occurred over a remarkably short period of time. Much of today's mass media practice in Vietnam will be familiar to western readers – the intrusive advertising, tabloid style, chequebook journalism, bargain basement video movies, TV soap operas and live sports coverage. However, because all this is new to Vietnam, we have included some material about earlier mass media conditions, otherwise western readers will wonder what all the fuss is about.

Difficulties encountered in producing this book offer some measure of how sensitive the Vietnamese authorities remain on issues relating to the mass media. For most of 1996 it was uncertain whether or not Vietnamese editors, journalists, producers or media administrators would be permitted to take part in a conference scheduled for the end of the year in Canberra. Officials of Vietnam Television in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City seemed especially wary. Approaches to the Vietnamese ambassador and even a senior Communist Party official responsible for the mass media proved ineffective. In the end we did manage to secure the participation of a number of well-informed individuals from Vietnam, as well as closer to home. The conference proved a lively affair, participants eventually revised their papers, and editing for publication proceeded with the delays and complexities normally associated with such an academic endeavour. Three individuals unable to attend the conference were invited to submit additional chapters.

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1 As reported by Reuters, 9 October 1998.

I would like to thank Adam Fforde, Russell Heng, Peter Mares and Thaveeporn Vasavakul for timely advice and liaison with relevant Vietnamese institutions and prospective workshop participants. At the workshop we benefited from papers presented by Tran Thi Tam and Robert Templer which ultimately did not make their way into the book. Nguyen Dien and Pham Thu Thuy offered professional translation and interpreting assistance. Hoang Oanh Collins provided invaluable help with general correspondence, organising, and preparation of the book for publication. Maxine McArthur skilfully copy edited and indexed the final text. Kris Brown solved several computer problems and assisted with cover design. Beverley Fraser gave expert production advice and supervised final printing and distribution.

We are grateful to the Australian Agency for International Development, the Ford Foundation, and the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies for providing the financial and personnel resources without which it would have been impossible to put on the conference and produce this book.

David G. Marr

## INTRODUCTION

David G. Marr

In 1907, a song exhorting people to read daily newspapers circulated in Vietnam. According to the anonymous author each reader could thus find out what was happening in the world, tell others, change lives, and help the country become strong and prosperous. More fundamentally, the songwriter linked the printed page to veracity:<sup>1</sup>

Truth is the medicine that cures ignorance and darkness,

Truth is the remedy to overcome hunger and cowardice.

Within months, the patriotic literati who eagerly promoted such ideas were either in colonial jails or toning down their rhetoric drastically, but the Vietnamese love affair with the printing press had just begun.

Enthusiasm for typeset newspapers and books was provoked by the sheer novelty of the medium. For centuries, Vietnamese literati had been accustomed simply to the exchange of pen-and-ink manuscripts or the occasional woodblock compendium. *The Tale of Kieu*, Nguyen Du's extraordinary 23,000 character epic poem, written about 1810, was subsequently carved onto 180 woodblocks, printed on rice paper, bound and distributed during the early 1870s.<sup>2</sup> The nearest thing to a mass medium was the woodblock reproduction of drawings, featuring images of gods, fertility symbols, classical Chinese expressions, folk heroes, and key scenes from epic poems or popular dramas.<sup>3</sup> Far more commonly, however, information circulated by word-of-mouth. Poetry was memorised and recited as a form of popular education and entertainment. Itinerant theatre troops timed their arrival in particular towns and villages to the calendar of festivals and religious observances. From the early 17<sup>th</sup> century a few printed books carried in by western missionaries and merchants attracted attention at court, but it was the western cannons, muskets, navigation equipment and charts, and assorted luxury goods that Vietnamese rulers treasured most. The first modern printing press arrived with French occupation forces in 1861, being employed to publish an official gazette. A small number of books, pamphlets and serials were printed in subsequent decades. Not until the turn of the century, however, did Vietnamese establish a foothold in the colonial publishing business.

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1 'Bai hat khuyen nguoi xem nhac bao', in Vu Van Sach, et. al., compilers, *Van tho Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc* (Hanoi, 1997), pp. 132-3.

2 Other artisans produced three additional nom editions of *Kieu* in the 1870s, and a total of 32 woodblock editions had appeared by 1939. See Nguyen Khac Bay and Nguyen Huu Gioi, *Truyen Kieu chu Nom da xuat ban bao nhieu lan? Tap Chi Sach* (Hanoi) 6-1998, pp. 22-4.

3 A vivid collection of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century woodblock prints can be found in Maurice Durand, *Imagerie populaire Vietnamiennne* (Paris, 1960).



By the 1920s, scores of periodicals in Vietnamese and French were being published, leading people to joke that whenever three intellectuals got together in Saigon or Hanoi they were sure to start up another paper. Although low literacy levels kept most circulation rates below 10,000 copies per periodical, it was common for issues to be passed from hand to hand, and for literate individuals to read or summarise articles orally for friends and family members. Colonial censors were quick to shut down an offending newspaper, yet within a few months the same team of editors and writers often found a different publishing sponsor to be able to open up again under a new masthead. Meanwhile, hundreds of Vietnamese language books and pamphlets were appearing each year as well, with print runs averaging 1,500 copies, and school textbooks climbing to 50,000 copies per edition. Probably fifteen million book copies were printed, bound and distributed in the two decades or so before 1945 — an average of eight or nine books per literate individual.<sup>4</sup>

One might assume that the August 1945 Revolution and thirty years of war, dislocation and trauma which followed would put a serious dent in Vietnam's print media development, but this was not the case. A perusal of the Vietnam National Library catalog in Hanoi suggests that at least 4,000 books and booklets were published in zones loyal to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) government between late 1945 and 1954. Many of these titles were cranked out by provincial presses, on very poor paper, perhaps averaging only twenty or thirty pages per copy. During this period the same presses produced local periodicals and leaflets in abundance, although copies of most of these do not seem to have made their way into libraries or archival collections.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, zones controlled by French and State of Vietnam forces produced about 3,000 titles, if the catalogues of the Bibliothèque Nationale and Ho Chi Minh City's General Science Library (former National Library of the Republic of Vietnam) are a reliable indicator. Periodicals came out in French-occupied cities as well, with the Saigon press proving to be especially lively.

Returning to Hanoi victoriously in October 1954, the DRV government soon found that intellectuals who had served the revolutionary cause in various locations wished to revive the 1930s tradition of publishing, with small groups of writers and editors locating the means to produce periodicals and books aimed at stimulating discussion on a wide range of issues. From 1947, Truong Chinh and other Communist Party leaders had already insisted that all cultural activity serve the interests of the nation and the people, as defined by the proletarian vanguard. Matters came to a head in 1956-57, when a few writers and editors dared to declare that in peacetime it was neither desirable nor acceptable for the Party to exercise dictatorial control over cultural output, especially the print media. The resulting purge saw several hundred intellectuals being sent to prison or labour reform camps, others denouncing themselves and others in

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4 David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley, 1981), pp. 44-9.

5 The collections maintained by the Ministry of Defense and People's Army may provide some surprises in due course.

exchange for leniency. All publishing was nationalised, the number of periodicals reduced dramatically, and tight censorship rules enforced until they became second nature to journalists, a form of self-censorship that persisted for at least three decades. The reading public became used to perusing two daily newspapers, *Nhan Dan* (The People) and *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (People's Army), in search of something interesting, or at least well written.

Ironically, a similar trend could be seen in South Vietnam from 1954 to 1963, during the dictatorial rule of anti-communist President Ngo Dinh Diem. One by one the government closed down newspapers that dared to print embarrassing stories or question current policies, until only a couple of docile mouthpieces remained. Following Diem's demise, scores of newspapers hit the streets again, funded by different military, political, religious and commercial groups, and often attacking each other vigorously. Only demonstrable sympathy for the communist-led National Liberation Front was certain grounds for closure. Once Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu consolidated his rule in 1968, the weeding out of opposition papers resumed. In the early 1970s, however, as war weariness, inflation, rampant corruption and American withdrawals sapped non-communist morale in the South, opponents of the Thieu regime took more risks in publishing, to include printing of unauthorised papers, tracts and broadsides.

After reunification in 1975, the stern northern system of media controls was applied to the south, although a couple of privately-owned newspapers were allowed to continue for awhile with Party members added to the editorial staff. No one in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City dared to suggest that peacetime should bring a substantial relaxation of censorship, and in any event the growing conflict with China soon provided new security justifications. By the early 1980s, the quality of paper used to print most periodicals and books had declined dramatically, due to the Soviet Union and other allies refusing to continue donating stock. In a mammoth final fraternal endeavour, the complete works of Vladimir Lenin were translated into Vietnamese and published in 55-volumes, totalling 44,058 pages. Each volume had a print-run of 60,000 hard cover copies, the entire job consuming 3,500 tons of paper.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, researchers at the History Institute in Hanoi had to wait two or three years for a government committee to release paper to print books on a title-by-title basis. Ministries and departments nonetheless managed to continue publishing on crude domestic paper ninety different journals and bulletins, many of questionable utility or readership. A huge quantity of domestic paper was also expanded each year on official circulars, memos and forms to

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6 *Viet Nam* (Pictorial), 4-1982, inside front cover. The last volume came off the press in Moscow in August 1981.

be filled out in multiple copies. A few publications aimed at foreign readers continued to be printed on foreign paper, and Moscow still printed Vietnam's bank notes.<sup>7</sup>

Censorship and paper scarcity did not prevent a small number of writers during the early 1980s publishing novels, short stories and poetry that implicitly questioned the status quo. They were joined a few years later by journalists exposing specific cases of corruption and mismanagement, a move legitimised in the wake of the December 1986 Sixth Party Congress. Rampant inflation made a mockery of the entire state allocation system, compelling writers, editors, printers and distributors to find new ways to support their families. Not surprisingly, they often turned their talents to producing a variety of periodicals, manuals, guides, brochures and advertising copy linked to *doi moi* (renewal, renovation) economic initiatives and aspirations. A new spirit of experimentation and competition swept the print media, with provincial publishers often setting the pace. Between 1986 and 1989, local publishing enterprises printed an impressive average of 704 book titles and 8.6 million copies per year, compared to only 300 titles and 900,000 copies in 1980.<sup>8</sup> Up to one-third of all book titles published in the late 1980s were probably translations of popular fiction and non-fiction from English, French and Spanish into Vietnamese, meeting the pent-up demand among readers who had been fed translations from Russian for decades. Done quickly for payment by the word, many of these translations were mediocre. Provincial police bureaux discovered another money-making formula: the tabloid. While waiting for Can Tho ferry in 1988, for example, I came upon *Cong An Cuu Long*, filled with stories about killings, accidents, crime rings broken up, human foibles, grotesque babies – all material previously excluded from publication. Playing upon human emotions, combining the expected and unexpected, often possessing a simple moral punchline, *Cong An Cuu Long* was being purchased and consumed avidly by a dozen or more people around me.<sup>9</sup>

Efforts by some authors to give as much attention to political issues as to economic ones generated considerable public interest during the late 1980s. However, whenever a writer moved beyond pointing out specific weaknesses in the political system to questioning the continuing utility of Marxist-Leninist ideology, the authorities retaliated promptly, usually by sacking the editor of the offending periodical or closing down the publication entirely. External events then conspired to raise the stakes, with Vietnamese leaders being shocked by the violent confrontations in China in June 1989, then stunned by the collapse of several communist party regimes in eastern Europe. Regulation of

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7 Sometime in the late 1980s, Party General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh desperately requested Moscow to dispatch new supplies of paper currency to stave off state bankruptcy. *Tuoi Tre*, 6 May 98.

8 Tong Cuc Thong Ke, *So Lieu thong Ke Cong Hoa Xa Hoi Chu Nghia Viet Nam, 1976-1990* (Hanoi, 1991), p. 145.

9 Fieldwork diary, 22 March 1988.

information was the subject of heated discussion at the Vietnam Writer's Congress in October, then again during the end-of-year National Assembly debate over a new press law. From this point on, the Party moved relentlessly to restrict public political debate. Photocopied critiques of Party policies continued to circulate, and people still talked critically in a way they would not have dared only a few years prior, but the hopes of many intellectuals, including some Party members, that the print media would serve as a forum for increasingly open political discourse were dashed once again.

Politics aside, newspapers and magazines have experienced a complete face-lift since the early 1990s, from the dowdy old hand typeset, grey paper productions of yore, to new multi-coloured, computer designed, lavishly illustrated offerings on good paper. Primitive newsprint was banished when the Swedish-financed Bai Bang pulp and paper mill came on line. New printing presses were imported, journalists introduced to computer word processing, and young graphic designers allowed to experiment with state-of-the-art displays. Colour ads took over whole pages, much to the irritation of Party purists.<sup>10</sup> Reporters could access a variety of foreign news sources, rather than depend entirely on Vietnam News Agency as in the past. Photos of scantily-clad young women became standard fare. Ho Chi Minh City's police tabloid boasted the largest circulation in the country, while *Nhan Dan*, the Communist Party daily, limped along at sixth or seventh place, still heavily subsidised, occasionally making a grudging concession to current tastes.

Competition is intense between the major papers in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Within topical constraints monitored by the Party, reporters ferret out new stories and push them to the hilt, even if it sometimes means fudging the line between fact and fiction. When a particular high-flying entrepreneur or official becomes fair game for press charges of mismanagement, corruption or nepotism, basic rules of evidence are often ignored, no right of reply is offered, and libel or defamation charges have no opportunity of being heard in court. The individual being attacked can seek protection from the Party, but in all likelihood newspaper editors have already ascertained in advance that his/her 'umbrella' is tattered or removed entirely. Occasionally, editors mis-read the situation, for example not realising that the accused has more than one umbrella. This appears to explain the recent case of Nguyen Hoang Linh, editor of *Doanh Nghiep* (Enterprise) newspaper, who received and published inside information from one government agency pointing to serious fraud in the customs service when purchasing patrol boats from overseas, only to be arrested for revealing state secrets, subsequently reduced to 'abusing democracy'.<sup>11</sup>

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10 The current compromise for major papers involves ads being consolidated to the middle pages, where they are technically regarded as an insert.

11 In October 1998, after two postponed hearings, Nguyen Hoang Linh tried, convicted and given a jail term equivalent to time already spent in prison, hence released.

Newspapers routinely present themselves as defenders of truth and justice, yet many readers remain sceptical, and can cite numerous examples of papers being less than disinterested parties. They know that each publication functions under a particular Party, state, military or Fatherland Front supervisory organ. They know that some newspapers have substantial property investments and financial connections with big business enterprises, domestic or foreign. And they are aware that it is common practice for journalists and editors to receive gratuities for favourable reporting. Nonetheless, readers have come to identify with specific papers, buying copies regularly, enjoying certain columns or features, appreciating the style of one writer, the investigative skills of another. Editors have built on this reader affiliation by sponsoring scholarships for poor high school students, musical performances, public seminars, and a wide variety of contests. Thus, in 1998, to commemorate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City, *Tuoi Tre* (Young Age) organised a contest for the best old and recent photographs of the city, together with a serialised list of history questions, to which thousands of readers sent in answers in hopes of winning prizes. More ominously, when someone began slashing children riding on the back of motorbikes in Hanoi, and every newspaper in the city took up the story with heartfelt expressions of shock and comments about recent social degeneration, *Lao Dong* (Labour) went a further step by offering a reward for identification and capture of the culprit(s) responsible.<sup>12</sup>

Letters-to-the-editor columns have existed in Vietnamese newspapers since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the late 1950s, following Soviet precedent, DRV papers encouraged readers to mail in complaints and criticisms, a few of which were published, and all sent to government agencies for collation and possible action. This practice became very ritualised, but was given new credibility under the tenure of General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh (1986-1991). It has since functioned on an ad hoc basis, with editors sometimes passing letters to reporters to check out, sometimes dispatching them to officials for comment or action. Some newspapers periodically inform readers how many complaints have not been responded to by the authorities. If letter-writers report being harassed by local officials as the result of communicating with the press, this too can become news. Most major papers also contain 'Dien Dan' (Forum) columns, wherein a particular topic is declared open for discussion by readers, a selection of responses is published over several months, and a wrap-up editorial summarises opinion and gives the politically appropriate conclusion. Occasionally a particular letter provokes a big batch of rebuttals and supporters. Although one is left with the impression of serious two-way communication, readers are not unaware that the process remains vulnerable to manipulation or contrivance by the editors. Newspapers are seen as useful intermediaries, even the 'people's friend' on certain occasions, but few readers believe that editors can or will stand up to sustained pressure from above.

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12 *Lao Dong*, 8 April 1998. The amount of the reward was not specified.

## The Cinema

Moving pictures arrived in Indochina during the 1910s, for viewing by French residents needing amusement and anxious not to lose touch with the métropole. Within a decade, Vietnamese city folk were flocking to the cinema as well. No one appears to have researched the impact of film on Vietnamese society and culture, but we know from novels and short stories of the 1930s that writers frequented movie theatres often, talked among themselves about actors, plots and imagery, and appreciated the modernising implications of the medium. Charlie Chaplin's films, Tarzan offerings, *Les Misérables*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *Sinbad the Sailor* appear to have attracted almost anyone in Saigon, Hanoi, Haiphong or Can Tho who could afford the price of admission.

French cinematographers used Indochina as a setting for feature films, and documentaries were produced about the colony, during which occasions a few Vietnamese may have picked up technical skills, but it was not until the 1950s that a small domestic film industry grew up in Saigon. By the early 1960s, a modest but steady fare of melodramas, romances, adventure stories and adaptations of *cai luong* operettas was capturing audiences in provincial towns as well as the cities. The RVN government continued to subsidise feature film production in the face of hundreds of Hollywood imports, as well as cranking out propaganda documentaries.

Hanoi's first motion picture was produced in 1959, and henceforth the medium of film was utilised extensively for DRV propaganda purposes, specifically to help mobilise support for the two principal slogans of 'Liberate the South' and 'Build Socialism in the North'. Mobile projection teams reached even the most distant villages of North Vietnam, screening feature films, newsreels and documentaries to transfixed audiences. City theatres offered a steady diet of Soviet, eastern European and Chinese films in addition to local productions. Following unification in 1975, western films were banned from the South, and Chinese films soon disappeared throughout the country in the face of growing tensions between Hanoi and Beijing. Despite mounting financial stringencies, the state continued to allocate significant resources to domestic film-making. In 1980, ninety-five newsreels and documentaries and sixteen feature films were released, but by 1989 priorities had been reversed, with the former category falling to twenty-four and the latter rising to thirty-three. Reflecting the high cost of imported film stock, each production was only duplicated to the average number of three or four copies, then circulated to Vietnam's 345 movie theatres, 101 'open air' cinemas and 998 mobile projection teams. Imported films made the rounds in similar fashion, although the total number dropped from two hundred in 1980 to 133 in 1989, presumably reflecting a growing disinclination in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe to provide free copies.<sup>13</sup>

From the early 1980s, Vietnamese cinematographers had started to expand the envelope of permissible topics and to experiment with new techniques, only to encounter major production limitations as government funding was cut back and in some cases discontinued entirely. On the other hand, a few creative artists who managed to acquire video cameras and associated audio equipment chose to concentrate on whatever could be accomplished cheaply and sold on the open market. The Party's cultural czars and the Ministry of Interior were slow to realise how easy it was to video, duplicate and sell thousands of copies of a particular tape, unlike movie films. Popular singers, *cai luong* groups, dramatic troupes and musical ensembles soon went beyond face-to-face performances to marketing video (and audio) cassettes commercially. However, they quickly faced intense competition from foreign tapes, mostly smuggled into the country as single copies and then reproduced by private entrepreneurs. By 1990, not only the cities but also a number of provincial towns sported video shops for customers who boasted video machines at home, and video parlours for the less fortunate. Pirated feature films on video flooded the market from China, Hong Kong and Thailand. Movie theatres responded by screening Hollywood blockbusters acquired overseas without payment of royalties, yet still lost customers and money. In Hanoi, the number of operating cinemas dropped from sixteen down to only two in 1996.<sup>14</sup> Repeated campaigns mounted by the Party, Fatherland Front and local police to confiscate and destroy video tapes and other 'poisonous cultural commodities' imported illegally had the effect of disrupting the market for a month or two, after which business returned to normal.

Since December 1997, when the United States and Vietnam signed a copyright agreement, the state monopoly film distributor, Fafim, has been compelled to pay an average of US\$7000 for each American film imported for screening in the decreasing number of movie theatres around the country. In March 1998, Fafim reported earnings on average of only \$2000 per imported film.<sup>15</sup> Already by that time the number of foreign films being screened in theatres had dropped to only 20 per cent of pre-copyright figures, the remaining offerings coming mostly from studios in China, Hong Kong, Russia and India.<sup>16</sup> The number of legally imported American videos declined similarly, but illegal video copies of recent Hollywood releases continued to be sold or rented in even the most out-of-the-way district towns.

In recent years the three remaining state film production companies have lobbied the Party and government vigorously for increased financial subsidies. As one producer put it publicly:

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14 *Vietnam News* (Hanoi), 31 July 1996.

15 Ngo Ngoc Ngu Long, 'Phat hanh phim va chieu bong ...', *Saigon Giai Phong*, 22 March 1998.

16 N.L., 'Se con phai ban bao nhieu rap chieu bong nua?', *Thanh Nien*, 18 March 1998.

Why think that the state is ‘piggy-backing’ us? Maybe the state needs us and we are carrying on our shoulders the responsibility for elevating a good society, in line with our Party’s slogan: Build a society of wealthy citizens, a strong country that is just and civilised.<sup>17</sup>

In 1997, the government allocated 12 billion *dong* (US\$940,000) for domestic film productions, which unimpressed commentators pointed out was only 0.3 per cent of the amount spent by Hollywood on just one film – ‘Titanic’. It appears that one-quarter of that 1997 allocation was earmarked for one film about Ho Chi Minh, which drew lukewarm reviews and limited theatre audiences.<sup>18</sup> An average Vietnamese production can only afford to shoot about 10,000 meters of third-class Kodak film, compared to ten times that amount of first-class film in international productions. The Party has floated the idea of consolidating all film production and distribution, and possibly television as well, into one big state company, citing China as precedent. On the other hand, some cinematographers urge equitisation of relevant enterprises, which would take the bureaucrats out of the decision-making process, leaving producers, screen-writers, directors, actors and other professionals to sink-or-swim in the marketplace.<sup>19</sup>

## Music

The French introduced sheet music for sale in Indochina at the turn of the century, mostly for the *colon* community, but also for use in the schools, where Vietnamese as well as French pupils were introduced to musical notation. Published sheet music began to circulate more widely in the 1920s, and Vietnamese periodicals occasionally printed the scores of popular songs. Gramophone players appeared in the homes of bourgeois Vietnamese, using 78rpm vinyl records imported from France. Listeners of the 1930s were especially attracted to the songs of Tino Rossi, Mistinguett and other contemporary romantics. Youths who could afford a guitar, mandolin or harmonica were key members of singing groups formed at schools and offices. By the early 1940s, a few young Vietnamese were composing and publishing their own songs, at first mostly variations on sad European love themes, but then switching to a Western martial beat and creating lyrics that harkened back to ancient Vietnamese battles and heroes. Both tunes and words spread quickly throughout the country, becoming part of the extraordinary upsurge of patriotic fervour during the August 1945 Revolution and subsequent Anti-French Resistance.

Phonograph machines remained well beyond the means of most Vietnamese families throughout the 1950s, leaving government radio stations in Hanoi and Saigon to monopolise music output. During the 1960s, however, Japanese tape cassette

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17 Xuan Son, as quoted in Thu Ha, ‘Van dang tim mot loi ra’, *Tuoi Tre*, 7 March 1998.

18 Thu Ha, *Tuoi Tre*, 2 October 1997.

19 Ngo Ngoc Ngu Long, ‘Phat hanh ...’, *Saigon Giai Phong*, 22 March 1998. Thu Hà, ‘Van dang tim ...’, *Tuoi Tre*, 7 March 1998.



recorders entered the markets of South Vietnam in quantity, along with transistor radios and electric fans. After national unification in 1975, the Party mounted a major campaign in the South against 'neo-colonial culture', with Fatherland Front adherents confiscating offensive books, magazines, calendars, films, sheet music and especially cassette tapes. The mass media continued to rail against 'blue music' (depressing, defeatist) and 'yellow music' (licentious), yet pre-1975 music continued to be played in private in the south, and by the early 1980s had infiltrated the north as well. Meanwhile, students and workers returning from the Soviet Union and eastern Europe also carried home cassette recorders and tapes of punk rock, hard rock and other western music considered highly offensive by the Hanoi authorities. Viet Kieu from France, returning to visit relatives, smuggled in tapes by popular southern singers who had fled the country and continued to perform overseas. Many of these foreign cassettes were quickly reproduced by the thousands and sold on the street. From the early 1990s, CD players and CD disks joined cassettes, with most of the disks being pirate duplicates produced in China. The December 1997 US-Vietnam copyright agreement seems not to have put a dent in the marketing of illegal CDs.

To reverse this proliferation of western recorded music, heard blasting day or night from coffee shops and karaoke bars in even the smallest towns of Vietnam, the authorities would have needed to confiscate privately owned cassette recorders and CD players. Hanoi's leaders may have considered this option on more than one occasion since the late 1970s, but never implemented it. Instead, campaigns have been instigated repeatedly against 'decadent', 'noxious', 'polluting' music, with well-publicised raids on shops and bars, and the ceremonial bull-dozing or burning of thousands of cassettes and CDs, along with the videos mentioned earlier, yet each time the public becomes more sceptical of government intentions, especially since customs officials and local police are believed to profit from the extensive trade in illegal commodities. Undoubtedly many Party members are sincerely disturbed by the cultural implications of so much 'alien' music being played, while 'traditional' and 'revolutionary' music is sidelined or forgotten. Perhaps most disconcerting, an ominous convergence can be observed recently between Vietnamese diaspora video music variety shows on the one hand, and domestic musical creations on the other. Not only do they offer similar content, but sometimes they share production facilities, funding, singers and musicians.<sup>20</sup>

## Radio

Radio arrived in Indochina at about the same time as the cinema, but for a couple of decades its function was primarily to facilitate colonial government and French business

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20 Ashley Carruthers, 'National identity, diasporic anxiety and music video culture in Vietnam', paper delivered at ASAA Conference, Sydney, 30 September 1998, Carruthers points out that older anti-communist émigré leaders are as troubled by this convergence as communist culture czars.

operations, as a backup to the telegraph and undersea cable system. Vietnamese working in bureaus, plantations or newspaper offices became familiar with radioed bulletins, price lists, shipping schedules and weather reports. Government transmitters in Saigon and Hanoi also broadcast news and music. Although mostly aimed at French residents, the small Vietnamese bourgeoisie purchased radio receivers as well, with neighbours sometimes gathering to listen. A few colonial officials toyed with the idea of employing radio to reach millions of farmers around Indochina, for example by setting up a single one-frequency receiver and loud-speaker at each village office, where everyone would be expected to convene at specified intervals to listen to government notices, news, and farming advice interspersed with entertaining music and drama. However, no one in authority was prepared to grapple with the various language, technical and logistical hurdles, much less allocate the necessary funding.<sup>21</sup>

As war clouds gathered in the late 1930s, alert, concerned Vietnamese sought out friends, relatives or work mates who possessed radio receivers with shortwave capacity, so that they could tune in to broadcasts from Tokyo, Nanking, Manila, Singapore or New Delhi. The power of the radio to reach millions of people in disparate locations could not have been demonstrated more vividly. After the French wartime administration confiscated many radios in native hands, attention quietly shifted to cultivating Vietnamese employed in the colonial PTT, where the international airwaves continued to be monitored assiduously.

Vietnamese revolutionaries understood the power of the radio, whether it was the American-supplied transmitter which linked Ho Chi Minh's mountain headquarters to Kunming in the summer of 1945, the Bach Mai (Hanoi) radio station released by the Japanese Army to provisional government control on 31 August, or the scores of receivers employed subsequently by local Viet Minh units and people's committees to keep in touch with 'the Centre' (*Trung Uong*). In late 1945, retreating in the face of French attacks, southern revolutionaries managed to lug several old transmitters from one jungle location to another, powering them with diesel generators, evading enemy air sorties, and seeking out precious replacement parts, especially vacuum tubes, on the Saigon black market or in Bangkok. When hostilities broke out in the north as well in December 1946, equipment from Bach Mai for the DRV's 'Voice of Vietnam' was carried into the hills, being relocated a total of 14 times during the next seven-and-one-half years.<sup>22</sup> During this period a network of transmitters and receivers was built up across Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, in the first instance used to communicate confidential orders and reports, and secondly to disseminate government propaganda. Because Morse code signals could travel much further than voice transmissions, it was common for higher echelon stations to key out edicts and newspaper articles in Morse,

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21 For intriguing British experiments along these lines, see Joselyn Zivin, 'The Imagined Reign of the Iron Lecturer: village broadcasting in colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies* 32, 3 (1998), pp. 717-38

22 *Nua the ky Tieng Noi Viet Nam* (Hanoi, 1995), p. 46.

to be copied down by numerous local operators, who then gave the texts to propaganda teams for use in printed bulletins and broadsides.

In October 1954, following the victory at Dien Bien Phu, the Geneva Accords, and the triumphant return of People's Army forces to Hanoi, 'Voice of Vietnam' broadcasts resumed from the capital of the DRV. Two 7.5 kilowatt transmitters and several smaller machines beamed programs live in Vietnamese, French, English, Cantonese, Mandarin, Lao and Khmer. A year later, big Soviet tape recorders arrived for the main station, and in 1958 Hungary donated smaller portable recorders, which enabled radio reporters for the first time to collect material in auditoriums, factories, cooperatives, laboratories and schools. About the same time, a new 150 kilowatt Soviet transmitter boosted medium-wave broadcasts, eventually replaced by 1000 kilowatt equipment in the early 1970s. U.S. bombers destroyed the central transmitters in December 1972, but programming was quickly re-routed to a backup transmitter in Kunming, as well as several smaller transmitters in the Vietnamese countryside. The Hanoi facilities were rebuilt with fraternal socialist help and capital service resumed in 1974.

Throughout these two decades very few families in the DRV possessed radio receivers. Instead, the state relied primarily on loudspeakers installed every few city blocks, or in front of village communal houses, to be able to relay Hanoi radio news, exhortations and patriotic music each morning and evening. Families were also encouraged to install small speakers in their homes, linking them to the local repeater stations. Anyone with direct access to a radio receiver who was caught listening to the BBC, VOA or other enemy stations was likely to be imprisoned. Still worried about reception of dangerous ideas and information, the DRV sometimes electronically jammed particular frequencies.

Radio operations in South Vietnam during the period 1954-1975 were less tightly controlled than in the North, although stations were state owned and RVN censors checked all programming in advance of broadcast. During the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem (1954-1963), locally manufactured receivers were devoid of shortwave bands capable of picking up Radio Hanoi, Radio Beijing or Radio Liberation (from early 1962). Imported receivers often evaded this wavelength restriction, yet anyone caught listening to communist stations risked arrest and jail. From the early 1960s, powerful transmitters belonging to U.S. Armed Forces Radio beamed western pop songs and news to GIs in South Vietnam, of course being picked up by Vietnamese as well. The news broadcasts in English were almost as carefully censored as Radio Saigon, but the pop music influenced a whole generation of young southern Vietnamese. Widespread acquisition of inexpensive battery-powered Japanese transistor radios, usually accompanied by a small earphone, meant that farmers, fishermen and soldiers at distant outposts could tune in to the station of their choice, domestic or foreign.

After 1975 unification, People's Army troops liberated tens of thousands of transistor radios in the South and shipped or carried them North. These were supplemented by radios transported from the Soviet Union and eastern Europe by Vietnamese students and workers. Radio listening patterns appear to have altered

dramatically in the North by the mid-1980s. Families turned off the speakers wired into their homes, the fear of being discovered listening to alien stations diminished, and the use of neighbourhood loudspeakers declined. Jamming became an unusual occurrence. By 1990, locally assembled radios which included shortwave bands were being sold in quantity at the main state department store in downtown Hanoi.<sup>23</sup> The BBC attracted listeners because of its respected Vietnamese language news programs and its well-crafted English language instruction for foreigners, while the Voice of America and Radio Australia were considered to possess the best popular music. Radio Beijing boasted the strongest signal, but only classical Chinese music and the occasional traditional theatre performance generated much interest.

Hanoi remained quick to condemn foreign radio stations for alleged interference in Vietnam's internal affairs. Thus, VCP commentators reacted furiously to the BBC's decision in December 1990 to broadcast repeatedly a long set of interviews with Bui Tin, former deputy editor of *Nhan Dan*, who had defected to the west. More recently, Vietnamese newspapers have routinely condemned the U.S. for establishing Radio Free Asia (subsequently renamed the Asia Pacific Network), along the lines of Radio Free Europe, which Hanoi analysts consider partly responsible for bringing down socialism in eastern Europe. Other than urging Vietnamese not to listen, however, the authorities do not seem to have taken concrete countermeasures.<sup>24</sup>

Partly in response to competition from foreign broadcasts, the Voice of Vietnam slowly began to diversify its domestic content, ameliorate the heavy didacticism of its news and commentary, and give some latitude to local stations when developing programming. Compared to the print media, however, radio broadcasters were far slower to take advantage of the relative relaxation of state controls from the mid-1980s onward. This reflected an institutional hardening of the arteries at Voice of Vietnam, with the top leadership remaining intact for almost half a century, very little authority being delegated to section heads, and directors of local stations reporting directly to Hanoi, unlike newspaper editors, who dealt mostly with diverse city-level supervisors. Over the decades, radio staff had come to believe they understood the medium intimately, with only technological upgrades being needed, not transformations in outlook.

The dramatic upsurge of television during the past five or six years has shaken radio broadcasters out of their complacency. Elder leaders have retired, new managers have travelled overseas and conducted listener surveys, younger staff members have been sent to western countries for training. Advertising has been introduced. To meet the perceived public demand for lively music, novelty, exposés, instant news and

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23 Dr Dean Forbes, then a colleague at the ANU, observed people buying these radios on one of his 1990 visits to Hanoi.

24 *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 26 August 1996, rebroadcast on Voice of Vietnam the same day. *Saigon Giai Phong*, 14 October 1996.

feedback, Voice of Vietnam stations are experimenting in a way that would have been unthinkable only a decade ago. On the other hand, the Communist Party continues to see radio as a vital means to transmit instructions, propaganda and 'authentic' culture to the countryside and upland regions, where more than 75 per cent of Vietnam's citizenry still live. Only a small fraction of people in distant villages read newspapers. For reasons of topography, radio reception remains far better than television in many localities, and poor families cannot yet afford a TV set in any case.<sup>25</sup> Party leaders who insist that farmers and minority peoples are not ready for the innovations in content and style that urban Vietnamese have come to expect continue to argue for restraint in radio programming.

### Television

Early television in South Vietnam was part of the aid package deposited by American experts in the name of development and integration to the Free World. While RVN TV transmissions during the 1960s did not reach beyond Saigon and several other cities, the U.S. Armed Forces Television station possessed a more powerful signal, and could afford to screen recently released Hollywood movies as well as weekly features like 'Dragnet', 'Batman', 'I Love Lucy' and 'The Ed Sullivan Show'. The rapidly expanding South Vietnamese urban middle class purchased Japanese black-and-white TV sets, along with other favoured consumer goods, thanks to the American-financed commodity import program, which heavily subsidised the sale of such products as a device to restrain wartime inflation. Television projected the American Dream to millions of South Vietnamese until April 1975.

The DRV set up a television studio in Hanoi in 1968 and broadcast its first program in 1970, although transmissions were infrequent and reception limited to a few hundred officially designated sites around the capital. Upon seizing TV facilities in Saigon on 30 April 1975, the People's Army renamed the main station Saigon Liberation Television and convinced some local technicians to remain on the job until they trained a new contingent arriving from Hanoi. Some TV equipment was shipped northward, where daily transmissions finally began in July 1976. After prolonged lobbying, television cadres finally convinced the government in 1984 to separate the Giang Vo TV station in Hanoi from the Voice of Vietnam radio establishment, although it took several more years to implement this decision. The main limitation on television during the 1980s was the extreme paucity of TV receivers, with most pre-1975 southern sets no longer functional, replacement sets not being imported, and most families having other, more pressing purchasing priorities in any event. Films from the Soviet Union and eastern Europe occupied much programming time.

In the late 1980s, consequent to the more general loosening of government controls, a few western films began to appear on television in Vietnam, news programs became

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25 Nguyen Truc Linh, 'Dua van hoa den mien nui, hai dao va vung nong thon sau', *Nhan Dan*, 2 November 1996.

more interesting, and reporters greatly expanded their interviewing of ordinary citizens on the street, in the marketplace, and in private homes. More spectacular, as it turned out, were the daily news feeds from a Soviet satellite, which increasingly offered scenes of parliamentary confrontation in the Duma, large anti-government demonstrations, and the eventual demise of communist regimes in a whole series of capital cities. By 1990, imported Samsung colour TV sets were available in state stores, selling for 450,000 *dong*. Buyers included farmers in villages surrounding Hanoi, and families in Ho Chi Minh City with remittance income from relatives overseas. Even more than radio receivers during the 1930s, TV sets acquired by relatively affluent Vietnamese families more than half a century later became magnets that attracted scores of fascinated neighbours during prime time in the evening. Samsung soon had negotiated with Vietnamese officials the establishment of a local TV assembly plant, and marketing shifted from state stores to numerous small private shopfronts in every city and town within range of a TV transmitter.

During the early 1990s, a number of western embassies and private companies approached television stations in Vietnam with free-to-air programs, in hopes of gaining an early edge over their foreign competitors. Some of these offers were taken up with alacrity, much to the delight of viewers eager for new entertainment experiences. The need to dub Vietnamese language over foreign soundtracks quickly expanded, providing employment for translators, narrators and technicians alike. The hugely successful Japanese serial 'Oshin' prompted Tokyo to donate state-of-the art laser dubbing equipment to VTV, yet it was seldom used. Between 1995 and mid-1998, using older equipment, VTV dubbed six hundred feature films, serials and documentaries, often coming under criticism from an increasingly sophisticated audience for improper translation, monotone narration or poor synchronisation.<sup>26</sup>

Also in the early 1990s, foreign companies starting to sell consumer products on the Vietnamese market made tantalising advertising offers to television stations, often quickly accepted. Many of these expensively produced, artistically slick, technically advanced foreign TV advertisements for soft drinks, cosmetics, condoms, motorbikes and CD players captivated Vietnamese viewers, especially adolescents and children, even more than accompanying serial productions like 'Charlie's Angels', 'Lost in Space', or 'Little House on the Prairie'. The Communist Party, beginning to worry that it was losing control of television, proceeded to rein in local stations, redirect advertising revenues, and scrutinise foreign program content and ads more rigorously. From about 1996, foreign program providers, losing patience with the glacial pace of contract negotiations, began to terminate their free-to-air 'donations'. At another level, the Party instructed local officials to enforce restrictions on satellite dishes being used by tens of thousands of people to access foreign TV transmissions directly.

In the face of all this foreign programming, domestic television production has not been standing still. On the eve of *Tet* 1996, for example, VTV organised its first

simultaneous live coverage emanating from multiple locations inside the country, including a mobile station positioned for the occasion in the Spratly islands, a transparent diplomatic gambit and appeal to Vietnamese patriotism.<sup>27</sup> The first TV game show also appeared in 1996, featuring jeans-clad youngster competing against each other on the greased poll climb, balloon grab, wooden horse bronco buster, and other such contrivances – accompanied by the squeals and cheers of a live studio audience.<sup>28</sup> Live coverage of Vietnamese soccer matches is extremely popular, although viewers continue to disparage the level of play compared to foreign competitions screened as well. A current TV quiz show pitting teams from several high schools against each other is quite popular in Hanoi. Most surprising is the loud, barely controlled cheering, stomping and banner waving of high school support groups in the audience, totally contradicting the dull questions drawn from past official university entrance examinations.

For many years, domestically produced TV dramas were compared with the inedible soup sold at state shops (*pho mau dich, kich TV*). Recently, however, viewers have grudgingly complimented some dramas that manage to treat contemporary social issues in a non-doctrinaire manner. Sets remain primitive and re-filming is discouraged, due to meagre budgets, yet writers, directors and cameramen are learning from experience, and actors reach their unseen, increasingly demanding audience using less stylised mannerisms and presentation.<sup>29</sup> Soap operas from America, Brazil, Hong Kong and Japan featured on Vietnamese television over the past decade have been studied by teams in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, the basic formula then modified slightly to accord with local conditions. Early productions are being viewed with curiosity, if not outright enthusiasm. More ambitiously, VTV has joined several times with foreign funders and TV experts to try to create dramas of sufficient quality to be distributed overseas as well as screened locally. From late 1996, a thirty-part serial titled ‘Gio qua Mien Sang toi’ (‘Wind Blowing Through Light and Darkness’) appeared, the fruit of cooperation between the European Commission, CARE International, Australian screenwriters and technicians, and Vietnamese writers, directors and actors. Exploring family relationships amidst a troubled transition from village to city, from wartime stringency to peacetime consumerism, with a specific message about HIV/AIDs incorporated as well, the story may have proven too didactic for current audience tastes.<sup>30</sup>

Television daily news and current affairs programs remain subject to particular Communist Party surveillance, yet they have come a long way since the days of talking

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27 *Saigon Giai Phong*, 22 February 1996. Such live TV simulcasts had been accomplished between Moscow and Hanoi as early as 1980.

28 *Vietnam Nam Business Journal*, October 1996, p. 13.

29 *Tuoi Tre*, 28 March 1998.

30 So far as I know, the serial has not been picked up overseas.

heads merely reading newspaper articles or quoting provincial poultry statistics. When reporting foreign stories, the newly perceived need to be immediate, to pick up the latest satellite clip from CNN, BBC or NHK, often allows VTV only a few hours to make selections and prepare a script to accompany the foreign images. Under such time pressures the domestic political implications of a story receive less consideration than with the print media, the Party line is often forgotten as foreign narratives are translated and read confidently by VTV news presenters. Domestic news coverage is more predictable, with a continuing high proportion of excerpts from official speeches, of panning relentlessly across rows of stolid listeners at meetings, of farmers and workers expressing their undying gratitude for party and government leadership. To such longstanding political content, however, has recently been added 'human interest' news, with TV reports from traffic accident sites, police stations, flooded villages, beauty contests, soccer matches, local festivals and much more. An increasing proportion of such stories are being presented live, in frank imitation of CNN, which of course puts greater responsibility on individual reporters, some of whom clearly aspire to status as nationally recognised media personalities.

Aside from the 'fire engine chasing' tradition of journalism, TV reporters are also being assigned to investigate particular stories in depth and to pursue them over periods of weeks or months if necessary. New current affairs shows allocate fifteen minutes or more to a single topic, with the better segments amounting to mini-documentaries. Thus, an exposé of widespread pilferage of coal from Quang Yen mines, connecting freight trains and seaport stocks managed to conveyed to viewers an image of rough-and-ready, wild west style behaviour by a substantial portion of the local population, requiring forceful intervention from outside the region to be able to turn things around.<sup>31</sup> A thirty minute report on a government meeting in Da Nang skilfully employed techniques of editing and juxtaposition to argue that central Vietnam was being discriminated against compared to southern Vietnam when it came to foreign investment incentives, infrastructure priorities and transport charges.<sup>32</sup> Panel discussions which implicitly pit different interest groups and viewpoints against each other are increasingly acceptable. For example, ranking government officials, state enterprise managers and economists politely disagreed with each other on the topics of taxation policy and how to revive flagging foreign investment, during two VTV3 panels screened in mid-April 1998. No longer is it required that every participant present a national united front to the viewer.

Televised press conferences are rare in Vietnam, and highly stylised, carefully edited occasions when they do appear. It was thus quite a surprise to observe General Secretary Le Kha Phieu on television in early May 1988, facing a phalanx of foreign journalists not required to submit questions in advance, appearing relaxed, responding to each query with a wry smile and more-or-less cogent answer. When the Dow Jones

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31 Hanoi TV, evening of 28 March 1998.

32 Da Nang TV, 18 March 1998.



correspondent bluntly doubted that Vietnam could reach its end-of-year economic targets, the General Secretary stuck to his figures, but said he respected her position, the leadership checked developments every week, and was prepared to revise its calculations if new evidence warranted. Other pointed questions about conservative and reformist factions within the Party, and the lack of religious freedom in Vietnam, were handled by Phieu without apparent irritation, if not necessarily to the satisfaction of the interlocutor. More remarkably, VTV was authorised to rebroadcast the press conference only a few hours later, after some quick editing and dubbing, yet leaving a lot of the questions intact. The contrast with Lê Kha Phieu's dour, dull predecessor, Do Muoi, was striking and undoubtedly deliberate. A check of newspaper accounts of the press conference revealed that they had left out several of the more sensitive components of both questions and answers revealed on television.<sup>33</sup>

Aware that Vietnamese viewers are becoming more demanding and discriminating, television executives search for ways to upgrade domestic programming. When asked to name the biggest single difficulty currently facing Vietnam Television, Deputy Director Vu Van Hien responded:<sup>34</sup>

No opponents. We must try hard to create for reporters an atmosphere of healthy competition. Without competition it is not easy to advance.

Not wishing to increase the amount of direct challenge from foreign television stations, VTV has permitted some competition between its own channels. Since 1996, the national flag carrier, VTV1, has been compelled to look over its shoulder at experiments taking place at VTV3, where a number of entertaining cultural, social and sports features have been trialed. There is said to be more flexibility and esprit de corps at VTV3, attracting many of the brighter, more creative minds. From the end of March 1998, with considerable fanfare, VTV3 launched itself as an independent channel, at one stroke almost doubling the number of viewing hours provided by national-level VTV. Initial audience response was quite favourable. VTV1 felt the pressure, with Vu Van Hien predicting it could improve its performance as a result. However, he also admitted that VTV1 would continue to serve the Party and state as prime transmitter of information and propaganda, 'perhaps a bit heavy, but able to foster the general cares or concerns of society.'<sup>35</sup> Some VTV1 staff must feel the odds are stacked against them.

Television as an educational medium has long attracted Vietnam's leaders in principle, but without bothering to become acquainted with its specific strengths and weaknesses. Televised pre-school programs have been produced for many years, featuring little boys and girls dressed to the hilt, singing nursery songs, and answering their teachers with lilting voice and carefully memorised lines. The message is unchanged: motherly love, fatherly protection, teacher's ordering of the world beyond

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33 *Lao Dong*, 6 May 1998. *Tuoi Tre*, 7 May 1998.

34 Interviewed by Thu Ha, in *Tuoi Tre*, 2 April 1998.

35 Interviewed by Thu Ha, *Tuoi Tre*, 2 April 1998.

the family, and unquestioning obedience from children. In December 1996, VTV and the Ministry of Education and Training signed an agreement to develop a six-pronged TV curriculum aimed at: pre-school children; pre-school and primary school teachers; adult English language students; secondary school pupils preparing for exams; students of management and accounting; and general viewers.<sup>36</sup> Implementation has moved very slowly, however.

In a more diffuse manner, the state aims to educate and acculturate millions of clusters of parents and children sitting in front of TV sets throughout the country, especially in basic moral values, reverence for (selected) Vietnamese traditions, and respect for authority. Government mobile film projection teams and cultural troupes no longer make the rounds of villages, one writer pointed out, so it is up to television to not only fill those gaps but also provide basic training in, for example, 'how to prevent AIDs, how to use clean water, and how to overcome nutritional deficiencies in children.'<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, a substantial number of villages in Vietnam are still out of range of television transmissions, while others are within range but lack sufficient electricity, or contain a majority of families too poor to be able to purchase a TV set.<sup>38</sup> While television is undoubtedly transforming the lives of those who view it regularly, it is also helping to widen the gap between town and countryside in Vietnam. As if to symbolise this incongruity of modernisation, *Tuoi Tre* described how a television transmitter in the Mekong delta is pumping out so much power that impoverished squatters nearby have fashioned crude antennas to secure sufficient watts to drive several light bulbs each, while better off residents with TV sets worry about the health dangers, citing an article received from relatives in America.<sup>39</sup>

## The Internet

In the early 1990s, several teams of Vietnamese computer scientists linked up with colleagues overseas to experiment with email communication. Most successful was the project developed by Hanoi's Institute of Information Technology and the Australian National University's Coombs Computer Unit, which led to an explosion in international email traffic, the quantity of incoming and outgoing messages doubling every five months from 1994 onward. However, repeated proposals to upgrade the connection to 24-hour service and experiment with accessing databases and websites via the Internet met with rejection by the Hanoi government. The Ministry of Interior was concerned about the national security implications, while the Directorate General of

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36 *Lao Dong*, 7 January 1997.

37 To Hoang, 'Nam 1995 -- Nam van hoa truyen hinh', *Lao Dong*, 7 January 1996.

38 Nguyen Truc Linh, 'Dua van hoa den mien nui, hai dao, va vung nong thon sau', *Nhan Dan*, 2 November 1996. Most notably, the author revealed that only about ten percent of hamlets in the mountains could receive reliable TV signals.

39 *Tuoi Tre*, 7 May 1998.

Posts and Telecommunication wished to make sure that it monopolised whatever system was agreed upon.

Eventually in December 1997 Vietnam was declared open to the Internet. User fees were set high to discourage most current Vietnamese owners of computers from attempting to hook up. A crude firewall screened out much foreign information, while the Ministry of Interior also maintained a blacklist of overseas addresses that could not be accessed, focusing especially on the many Vietnamese diaspora list servers functioning across North America, Europe and Australia. Inside Vietnam, the Internet is accessed mainly by government agencies and commercial enterprises, plus a range of UN offices, foreign embassies and foreign NGOs. Outside the country, it is possible to access a slowly growing number of websites in Vietnam. In June 1998, *Nhan Dan* became the first periodical to place each current issue on a web page, hoping to attract overseas Vietnamese readers in particular. Vietnam News Agency also set up a website for its regular bulletins in Vietnamese, English, French and Spanish, then ended a 53-year tradition by closing down its shortwave broadcasting of these same bulletins. Proposals to establish a 'domestic Internet', complete with mirror sites of foreign data to reduce communication costs, have so far met with little success. For some years to come it seems likely that foreigners will gain more from Vietnam's Internet connection than the vast majority of Vietnamese, although one should not ignore the capacity of some institutional addresses to be used informally by large numbers of colleagues, friends, and relatives.

## Advertising

If a Vietnamese Rip Van Winkle were to wake up today after a fifteen-year sleep, one of the first things he would notice (after the motorbike explosion and the brightly coloured clothing) is the proliferation of advertisements in the mass media, whether newspapers, radio or television. True, if he were old enough he might remember the Nestlé condensed milk and Bastos cigarette ads in colonial period journals. If he came from Saigon, he would recall 1960s ads for Hynos toothpaste, National radios and Salem cigarettes. If he lived north of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, advertising would have been denounced as an insidious capitalist practice and eliminated by the end of the 1950s. This happened south of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel as well after April 1975.

Throughout the 1980s the 'advertising question' simmered inside the VCP, not because vital issues were deemed to be at stake, but because any concession would be visible immediately to the public at large. Amidst the ongoing, overarching debate about where to draw the line between socialism and capitalism, whether to permit advertising or not assumed a certain symbolic significance. In 1981, *Saigon Giai Phong* began to accept and print modest ads, undoubtedly with approval from then party secretary of the city, Nguyen Van Linh. Two years later *Tuoi Tre* was allowed to follow suit. In early 1984, an order from the Secretariat of the Party yielded considerable ideological ground, as it redefined advertisements to be economic news, hence acceptable, providing they helped to raise product quality, improved distribution

and promoted healthy lifestyles.<sup>40</sup> For the rest of the decade, however, ads remained few in number, small in size, discreet in content and amateur in style. The reasons by this time probably had as much to do with lack of money, domestic or foreign, to be able to fuel ad campaigns, than the continued sniping from within the Party.

As foreign products finally began to penetrate the Vietnamese market in the early 1990s, advertising agents naturally followed, offering cash to anyone with the power to help promote their brand names, although they still encountered suspicions, ignorance of Madison Avenue marketing culture, and endless red tape. Local ad companies popped up, eager to represent foreign firms. Scores of market surveys were commissioned, the first time the Party had allowed others to evaluate citizen attitudes meticulously, much less use this knowledge for private profit. Most pervasive were the big billboards in the cities, advertising beer, softdrinks, motorbikes and cigarettes, followed by the brand name shop signs in almost every neighbourhood and small town. Sales agents usually bypassed higher level authorities to negotiate displays with local committees and property owners. Not surprisingly, disputes arose over who should approve and benefit from such public advertising. When the government discovered that only 8.5 per cent of billboards in Ho Chi Minh City had been properly licensed, for example, it stepped up pressure on interested parties.<sup>41</sup> Campaigns were also mounted to reduce the number of foreign words used in billboards and shop signs, or even to eliminate foreign language entirely along with foreign logos. While presented as a lofty defence of Vietnamese cultural values, these campaigns probably had more to do with assertions of authority and a desire to share the money flowing in from foreign advertisers. Much to the relief of the foreigners, internal understandings were reached and signs restored.

Foreign corporate allocations for advertising in Vietnam climbed to US\$67 million by 1996, with the biggest spenders being Tiger Beer, Coca Cola, Dunhill Cigarettes, and Pepsi Cola.<sup>42</sup> Television had become the driving force in advertising, as foreign executives tracked the rapid increase in viewers – a sizeable proportion being urban, youthful and possessed of disposable income. Major city newspapers earned considerable advertising revenue as well. With an impressive circulation of 180,000 copies, *Tuoi Tre* featured 20-page advertising ‘inserts’ which contained: full-page colour spreads by Sony, Philips, Daewoo and Sharp; smaller black-and-white ads for sports shoes, shampoos, watches, mobile phones, lubricants and pumps; four pages of

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40 *Nguoi Lam Bao* 5-1985, p. 60, as quoted in Russell Heng, ‘Discourse boundary, interactive mode, oppositional effect and individual effort: the dynamics of print and politic in Vietnam’, (PhD dissertation, Australian National University, forthcoming), chapter 5.

41 *Viet Nam News*, 23 May 1996.

42 David Kilburn, ‘Asia rising: the region’s surging economy brings sweeping change to media,’ *A dweek* (Eastern Edition), 19 August 1996, p. 24. *Asian Advertising and Marketing*, 25 March 1997.

ads for public and private school enrolment; and five pages of employment and classified ads.<sup>43</sup> Local radio stations were still experimenting with a variety of ad formats for both foreign and domestic products.

The Ministry of Culture and Information routinely fires off regulations about advertising quantity and quality. It often demands more balance between foreign and domestic product ads, more free space for state supplied information, elimination of all sexually suggestive advertising, and termination of unfair marketing techniques. There is a decree in force banning the use in advertising of the national flag, anthem and symbol, as well as any photographs of national leaders. Ads are not supposed to occupy more than ten percent of space in newspapers or five per cent of time on TV and radio.<sup>44</sup> A 1997 regulation specifies a maximum of five minutes per hour of TV advertising, yet any viewer of evening prime time can count ten or even fifteen minutes per hour. Occasional letters to the editor about TV ads reveal more concern about offensive content than time consumed. For example, one viewer complained about a soap flakes ad that showed one woman sneaking off with another's preferred brand, and a motorbike ad featuring a young man crashing through plate glass to reach his girl friend and invite her to climb aboard.<sup>45</sup>

Aware of continuing Vietnamese reservations about certain hard sell techniques, advertisers are prepared to spend liberally on contests, lotteries, sponsorships and donations to disaster relief and other worthy causes. One of the most successful promotions involved each purchaser of a Sony product becoming part of a lottery which awarded one Honda Dream II motorbike per day over a three month period, with winner's photo's being incorporated to full-page newspaper ads.<sup>46</sup> Advertisers compete vigorously for sponsorship of sporting events on TV, with Coca Cola covering the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, Dunhill regularly hosting the FA Premier League, and a consortium handling the 1998 World Cup. San Miguel Beer targeted soccer lovers with a campaign featuring a Vietnam team member catching a can of San Miguel. Local companies, not able to afford such big investments on sports programs, try to target popular TV serials, documentaries or musical events. Thus, the Phong Thanh company scored high with viewers when it sponsored the serialised 'Tale of Three Kingdoms' from China. With the help of new PR firms, companies are also eager to be seen fostering community projects. Several hotels built 'gratitude houses' for elderly mothers of deceased revolutionary heroes. The local makers of '333' Beer were less successful when photographed passing out gift satchels to these same mothers, obviously disoriented amidst the hullabaloo.<sup>47</sup>

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43 These examples are taken from *Tuoi Tre*, 18 January 1996 and 16 July 1996.

44 Reuters (Hanoi), 9 January 1995.

45 Tran Thi Thi, 'Te nan xa hoi da len vao quang cao', *Van Hoa*, 19 January 1997.

46 This campaign ran from November 1995 to January 1996.

47 Photo in *Saigon Times*, 16 December 1995, p. 13.

Amidst the recent Asian economic meltdown, foreign advertising budgets in Vietnam have been cut back, in some cases severely. Ambitious plans to advertise via satellite, cable and interactive media have been postponed indefinitely. This may be an opportunity for a return to lower-key forms of advertising, with local ad firms and marketing agencies factoring in Vietnamese cultural and psychological preferences, producers more concerned with building brand credibility, customer loyalty, and company good will. In any event, newspapers, TV stations and radio stations are having to learn how to operate with lower advertising revenues.

### **Chapters that follow**

In Chapter One, Russell Hiang-Khng Heng surveys the factors which fostered media reforms in Vietnam in the 1980s, then takes us below the day-to-day output of more recent times to examine media organisations, the ideological context, and the legal parameters, mainly as they relate to newspapers and journals. During the 1980s, new tabloids employed previously taboo techniques to build circulation, in the process demonstrating that the market was an acceptable force for altering society at large. As state subsidies became increasingly meaningless, the need for periodicals to compete for readership became ever more pressing. News had to be timely, the best journalists paid well, sensational stories printed ahead of other papers. The press was also an essential vehicle for growing intellectual discontent, eventually reined in by the Communist Party. Mr Heng then delineates skilfully the Party's methods for maintaining organisational control over the media, and suggests that the system is hardly free of ideological premises, especially the degree to which information should be regarded as a marketable commodity. He explains the legal regime in respect to journalists, editors and supervisory organs, also pointing out how the law helps the Party to remain exempt from press scrutiny. He concludes that, while determinations by the Party which involve the media can sometimes be delayed or resisted, if the Party insists then the decision will be enforced.

Chu Van Lam, in Chapter Two, introduces us to the category of economics-related periodicals, which number at least forty in Vietnam today. He points out how editors and writers enjoy access to a much wider range of economic data than was the case ten or fifteen years ago, and how they engage increasingly in economic commentary and forecasting. Dr Lam has no doubt that periodicals are a commodity, hence staff members must work hard to attract readers and increase market share. On the other hand, he acknowledges that the state considers the press as 'a tool to mobilise people's participation in implementing the political line and policies of the ruling Communist Party'. Within those restraints, economics-related journals still are able to address basic national problems, for example reform of the tortuous legal system, administrative red tape, inefficiencies in state-owned enterprises, and corruption.

The practice of Vietnamese writers moving back and forth between journalism and fiction is explored by Ho Anh Thai, in Chapter Three. From the 1930s, some of the best authors produced devastating fictional indictments of the colonial system, then joined

the anti-French Resistance and put their pens at the service of the revolution, reporting victories, drafting stirring manifestos, urging readers to sacrifice for the cause. This continued during the anti-American war, but after 1975 'the press seemed to drop out of view', according to Mr Thai. From 1985, however, some periodicals dared to publish specific accounts of totalitarian behaviour, gross mismanagement and corruption, which led creative writers to abandon thoughts of composing their magnum opus, instead entering the fray, producing a stream of articles about everyday problems. Under new open market conditions this journalistic regimen has also proven quite lucrative for some authors, as Mr Thai explains in detail. Investigative journalism and documentary fiction are sometimes hard to distinguish. Mr Thai concludes by urging the government, social organisations and generous sponsors to provide creative writers with the 'time, money and the small quiet places they need to write the works which haunt and torment them.'

Voice of Vietnam Radio is described by Nguyen Long, in Chapter Four. After outlining VOV's origins, internal structure and program offerings, Mr Long concentrates on the new challenges facing the radio medium both globally and inside his own country, making some especially interesting comparisons between public broadcasting in Australia and Vietnam. While he acknowledges that VOV is encountering increasingly stiff competition from television, the print media, foreign radio stations, satellite and wire services, Mr Long points out that VOV stations retain large daytime audiences, particularly in the countryside, and the government is committed to financing technological upgrades, overseas training of young staff, and a range of programming innovations.

One of those innovations, live radio, is recounted by Ngo Phuong Dung, in Chapter Five. From 1993, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency sponsored a pilot project at two provincial radio stations, in Hue and Can Tho, which resulted in 39 per cent to 57 per cent of total air time being produced live, rather than pre-recorded. As Ms Dung describes, the Swedes also encouraged all members of staff, from station manager to drivers, to participate in the training classes. Ironically, this represented a return to the heady days of Viet Minh radio broadcasting in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when sharing of tasks was essential and foreign tape recorders had yet to arrive. Hue and Can Tho stations also have interacted more often with the small district-level stations, in the process shifting the operational centre of gravity away from Voice of Vietnam headquarters in Hanoi. More recently the experiment has been extended to other provincial stations, although the central authorities appear determined to limit the amount of local program autonomy.

In Chapter Six, Jan Forrester offers us a lively, revealing account of television's burst to prominence in Vietnam during the past five or six years. All the major actors take the stage: the Communist Party, the Director-General of Vietnam Television, station staff, advertisers, and key foreign programme providers and satellite owners like Kerry Packer and Rupert Murdoch. The Party expects VTV to disseminate the current propaganda line and to generate ever more advertising revenue for government coffers,

whereas many staff members observe an increasingly demanding viewing audience wanting higher quality feature films, entertainment, sports competitions and critical investigative reporting. VTV hopes to finesse foreign satellite competitors with its own multi-channel Microwave Distribution System, featuring CNN, French TV5, Discovery, Star Sports, MTV and others, but its recent decision to encode the signals and charge everyone for decoders may not attract sufficient numbers of customer. Ms Forrester concludes that Party traditionalists are looking for ways to adapt without yielding any ground, and especially choosing to follow television developments in China, the source of so much cultural influence as well as geo-political angst for Vietnam over the centuries.

Ngo Phuong Lan, in Chapter Seven, introduces us to Hanoi film-making, which grew out of the 1960s propaganda cinema designed to boost wartime morale and foster national pride. From the mid-1980s cinematographers tackled such topics as bureaucratism, fraud, family tensions and personal alienation. After losing their state subsidies, established film companies gave way to scores of small, privately financed enterprises producing videos for the entertainment market. Since 1994, the government has reinstated subsidies for selected motion pictures, a trend supported by Ms Lan, who argues that the marketplace alone cannot possibly support artistic creations of redeeming social and cultural value. A new generation of young film directors has returned to the subject of the thirty-year war, exploring dimensions of horror, tragedy and moral ambiguity which would have been unthinkable two decades ago.

In Chapter Eight, Mark Sidel examines Vietnamese press coverage of an incident in January 1993 in which a police officer named Nguyen Tung Duong killed a motorbike courier crossing Hanoi's Chuong Duong bridge, with a satchel of 50 million *dong* (about US\$5000) going missing in the process. Three months later, two Hanoi newspapers published articles questioning the police investigation report of this episode. A flood of public commentary followed, the prosecution eventually raising the charges against the policeman to murder, crowds gathering repeatedly outside the court to listen to the proceedings over loudspeakers, and the accused being convicted and sentenced to death. In the appeal phase, other newspapers came to his defence, but the judgement was upheld and Lieutenant Duong executed by firing squad in March 1995. According to Mr Sidel, this case demonstrates how sometimes the press has taken the investigative and argumentative space allocated to it by the state and proceeded to nudge the parameters beyond what the authorities may have foreseen or wished – along the way bolstering its claims to represent public opinion. However, he admits that we still know little about how the system works internally when journalists, editors, supervisory organs and Party leaders are confronted with a story filled with potential for factual dispute, public agitation and protracted dispute.

A substantial number of translations into Vietnamese of foreign social science works have been distributed by Vietnam's publishing houses in recent years, a print media category surveyed by David Marr and Mark Sidel in Chapter Nine. As might be expected, English and French originals elicit the largest interest, and the discipline of



economics is most heavily represented. However, Chinese-language titles are being translated routinely as well, and beyond economics we find significant attention to history, international relations, 'futuology', law, management and 'understanding America'. Some translations are meant for upper and middle level cadres, others designed to serve as textbooks, still others aimed at the general reading public. As a new generation of Vietnamese returns from MA and PhD degree programs at western universities, such translations will be joined if not supplanted by original Vietnamese-language monographs on the same social sciences issues.

Finally, in Chapter Ten, by way of interesting comparison, we include an account by Peter Mares of his two years of reporting from Vietnam for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Actually, his extensive encounters with the Vietnamese authorities, his interactions with his press assistant, and his contrasting of television, radio and print media operations, tell us quite a bit about conditions under which Vietnamese journalists work, not just the foreigners. Mr Mares concludes that much of the sympathy and professional anticipation which foreign journalists brought into Vietnam in the early 1990s has now evaporated, as a result of tightened controls and the recent downturn in foreign investment. Although a more liberal government attitude would undoubtedly mean additional critical information finding its way into the international media, the benefits need to be weighed up by the authorities too, not just in terms of better overseas image, but thanks to improved two-way communication and substantive cooperation.

## ONE

### MEDIA IN VIETNAM AND THE STRUCTURE OF ITS MANAGEMENT

Russell Hiang-Khng Heng

Media in Vietnam is based on a Marxist-Leninist prototype developed in the erstwhile Soviet Union, derived largely from the writings of Lenin, and then moulded by the practice of Stalin. Its ideological essence can be summed up with the following tenets (Khoa Bao Chi 1978:38-39): media is a weapon for class struggle and should first and foremost represent the interest of the proletariat. Borrowing the terminology originated by Lenin and later affirmed by Resolution 60 of the Vietnam Communist Party (then known as the Workers Party) on 8 Dec 1958, the press was seen as 'the collective agitator, propagandist and organiser, an instrument of the Party to lead the masses, a sharp weapon in the class struggle against the enemy, and to construct a new life'. Such ideological text continues to mark Vietnamese media literature whether it is in the form of a training manual for journalists or historical narratives about the development of the press. There is also a paucity of scholarly research which was acknowledged by the Party-run Media and Propaganda School (Ta Ngoc Tan et. al. 1993:11):

In our country, it is almost certain that nothing significant has been achieved in developing a theoretical approach to the media. There are still few materials on the press or any publicised research programs. In the past few decades only the course material for the Propaganda Training College at the end of the 1970s, a few historical accounts of the press by Hong Chuong and Nguyen Thanh, plus a few memoirs of journalists such as Huu Tho, Vu Bang, etc have been published. There have also been some articles scattered in newspapers, journals and magazines.

With the advent of political and economic liberalisation beginning in the 1980s, a critical perspective on how the press system operates can be found in the pages of newspapers or the trade journal of the Vietnam Journalists Association (VJA). This is popularly known as the *doi moi* (renovation) of the media, the Vietnamese term itself being the namesake of the general reform policy endorsed by the Party's Sixth Congress at the end of 1986. In addition, recently published memoirs of Vietnamese exiles who used to be journalists have been useful in providing hitherto unknown details. (Thanh Tin 1991, 1993; Tran Thu 1996; Vu Thu Hien 1997.)

Literature on this topic, written in languages other than Vietnamese, is even more sparse, comprising reports, journal articles or monographs (Pike 1973; Ungar 1991; Nguyen Xuan Tho 1992; Kennedy 1993; Beaulieu 1994; Pamos 1995; and Smollar 1995) plus a few post-graduate theses by Vietnamese students in the Soviet bloc, beginning in the 1980s. A few works dealing with the larger topic of society and politics in Vietnam have also mentioned media or media-related issues (Thayer 1992a:39-43; Marr 1993; Porter 1993:167-69; Tonneson 1993:18-30; Wurfel 1993:34-

35; and Wurfel 1989:34-39). Among these works, only Douglas Pike(1973) attempted to theorise the Vietnamese mass communication system. He observed that the communication of ideas under that kind of system was considered an ideological task and that the theoretical basis and practical form had many things in common with other Communist states. Pike identified five features defining such a mass communication system:

- a) It is a device for social control managed exclusively by Party and State; pervasive and monopolistic; intrudes into all areas of life at all times and does not allow non-participation.
- b) It is motivation-oriented and not information-oriented: seeks to inform only to a degree necessary for motivation and mobilisation of the population.
- c) It introduces its own exclusive semantic base, providing new words and new definitions of old words; it is high in value judgment and also its emphasis on codification, precedence and hair-splitting legalism.
- d) The basic medium of communication is the social organisation or social movement although the system makes use of the mass media. This system of communication rests on a simple claim to truth and thereafter employs passionate emotional appeals. Fundamental Marxist concepts may be present, e.g., class consciousness, proletarian internationalism, etc., but are of lesser importance. The system relies on group situations to make people accept emotional, irrational argument more readily.
- e) It does not regard the individual as a passive recipient of information. He is expected to struggle with himself to absorb the information provided and help propagate the message. Dissemination of information under such a system is very reliant on the social movements tasked to carry out this job under the guidance of agitprop cadres. Therefore depending on the ability of the agitprop cadres, communication can be very good or very bad. Due to the difficulties in finding and training large numbers of good cadres in this field in Vietnam, communications tend to be badly done.

Pike's observations parallel what other Western scholars had said about Marxist media elsewhere such as in the Soviet Union or China: (Inkeles 1950; Schramm 1956; Yu 1963; Buzek 1964; and Lendvai 1981 to name just a few). This collection of works tend to perceive the media system largely as an appendage of the totalitarian regime running these societies, resulting in controls so extensive that very little room is left for editors, journalists and readers to react freely and independently to information. Where Vietnam is concerned, Pike was also describing a system at war, where mobilisation and propaganda were intensified by military needs. Many such features of regimentation have since been visibly reduced in the wake of the VCP's *doi moi* policy, thus warranting a key question to be posed when any study is made of the Vietnamese media system: Just how much has it changed? The literature in non-Vietnamese languages has acknowledged the fact of change with *doi moi* but almost all have also qualified the

observation with cautionary statements. These range from a prediction of oscillation between relaxation and crackdowns in the future which would still broaden the sphere of public debate (Ungar 1991:52-3) to an indictment that the liberalisation was cosmetic and after August 1989, it was a 'return to the old ways of strictly controlling both personnel and their published words' (Palmos 1995:40)

This paper will first look at the forces which contributed to the media reforms in the 1980s and then delve below the empirical top layer of media content to look at the underlying structures which have a role in determining content: organisational control, ideology and legal regime. A more integrated picture of the Vietnamese media would have to include an examination of how these not-so-easily-observable structures have also undergone *doi moi*.

### The *Doi Moi* Media

My description of the *doi moi* media is based on the printed press because it is more readily available, although the liberalisation policy extended to television, radio, films, literature, drama and music as well. That the Vietnamese press has changed can no longer be disputed by anybody who picks up a newspaper today and compares it with an edition published before 1980. A much-cited (although some also deem it regrettable) illustration of how much the Vietnamese press has been liberalised is the emergence and success of tabloids. The most prominent example would be *Cong An Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh* (Ho Chi Minh City Police). In the guise of running stories on the problems of law and order, it provides readers with a steady diet of the perverse and the violent in Vietnamese society today. Each issue of the publication has an imprint of 600,000 copies, considerably more than the 150,000 to 180,000 print run of each issue of *Nhan Dan*, the Communist Party daily.<sup>1</sup> The tabloids were not the only ones peddling sensationalism; in October 1996 when a young movie actor Le Cong Tuan committed suicide in Ho Chi Minh City after breaking up with his fashion model girlfriend, major newspapers based in the city like *Tuoi Tre*, *Thanh Nien* and *Nguoi Lao Dong* ran extensive stories on the private lives of the couple. Circulation was clearly on the mind of editors as *Nguoi Lao Dong* increased its print run from the usual 25,000 to beyond 50,000 and *Tuoi Tre*, which usually sold around 200,000 copies, raised it to 250,000 (Le Hong Minh. 1996). Such journalistic practice underlines the legitimacy of entertainment as media content which in the earlier pre-reform period that Pike was theorising about would be considered ideologically incorrect. Newspapers are also using significantly less of the old ideologically-driven semantics and Marxist terminology.

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1 Circulation rates can be inflated but estimates for *Cong An Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh* have consistently been cited as 600,000 or more by several sources such as Vietnam Journalist Association and Ringier's Vietnam Media Guide 1995. The figure for *Nhan Dan* was provided by the newspaper itself in October 1993 but estimates provided by other sources have placed it around the 100,000 mark with Ringier's Media Guide going as low as 38,000.

A deeper ideological significance underlay the proliferation of tabloids and other recreational publications: the acceptance of the market as a legitimate force in shaping society. Media played a role in pushing such a market reforms agenda which, in turn, won for the media more space, of both the economic and journalistic kind. The imperative for market reforms is frequently traced to the late 1970s, the beginning of grim economic shortages. This was to affect newspaper production directly. Free newsprint which was supposed to be provided by the State was irregularly supplied. Deprivation intensified into the 1980s and, under those circumstances, the Party allowed rudimentary market reforms at the local level within the over-arching socialist central-planning model. Newspapers, like all other organisations, started to fend for themselves by engaging in a range of economic activities other than their official roles/what they were supposed to be doing. But it was not just an economic crisis that the press had to grapple with. It was also a crisis of faith as the media realised that it was fast losing credibility with its readers by presenting a predominantly Party-sanctioned rosy picture greatly at odds with harsh reality. The world outside Vietnam was also changing: China was launching its economic reforms under Deng Xiao-Ping; Eastern Europe was also liberalising and the NIEs were recording impressive growth in contrast to the problems of Vietnam. Newspapers started to ask questions of themselves: Can they survive without State subsidy? Can the press as the voice of the Party also not reflect different opinions coming from the masses? Can the press criticise policy if it is wrong or cadres of whatever level if they are corrupt? Arising from all these questions was a mounting realisation that the top-down information flow which so dominated media content was no longer legitimate or effective in this new set of circumstances.<sup>2</sup> In that frame of mind, media tended to support the experimental market reforms and did this by highlighting their positive outcomes. The press climate of that period was starting to soften and allowed for that level of editorial flexibility and initiative. Ngoc Dan (1995:81-83) described how Party daily *Nhan Dan's* pro-active coverage of the 1979 experimental program with the 'contract' system in agricultural cooperatives in Haiphong contributed to the landmark Directive 100 (Chi thi 100) of the Central Committee in January 1981. The 'contract' system returned some private incentive to cooperative agriculture by allowing families to keep the surplus once they have produced the contracted amount for the State, a practice which was hitherto carried out surreptitiously. In Ho Chi Minh City, where the local authorities were initiating even bolder market reforms, the city's papers were also providing supportive publicity, although they had to do it carefully so as not to provoke censure from Party central that liberalisation had gone too far.

Besides reporting the benefits of reforms, the media was also implementing and testing the limits of market reforms on its own. In his memoir (1994:41-42), Do

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2 This reconstruction of the mood in the press from 1978-1985 is based on interviews/conversations with journalists in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City during the writer's two field trips in 1993 and 1996.

Phuong, General Director of Vietnam News Agency, described his 1982 effort to publish a daily four-page bulletin *Espana 82* as there was a great demand for news about the World Cup soccer competition. Unlike other publications, this was sold at a market price which could cover production cost as well as make a small profit. This publication went ahead without a proper permit but Phuong argued that, given the bureaucracy in Vietnam, the World Cup would be over by the time a permit was granted. Although he had to write a self-criticism for it, he was vindicated when the Agency decided officially to publish a weekly sports magazine a few months later and appointed him the editor. So despite the overall economic hardship, the relaxation of overbearing authority still enabled the media to grow. Besides the sports weekly, Vietnam News Agency was to publish two more weekly titles in 1983 – *Tuan Tin Tuc* which provided general news and *Tuan Tin Khoa Hoc – Ky Thuat – Kinh Te The Gioi* which covered economics, science and technology. In Ho Chi Minh City, *Tuoi Tre* started *Tuoi Tre Cuoi*, a magazine for satirical cartoons in January 1984. The weekly *Tuoi Tre* itself grew to two issues per week in 1981 and three issues in 1982. But the concept of allowing market forces full play was still far from being readily accepted and more liberal reforms had to wait till after the Sixth Party Congress to pick up momentum.

Statistics from the Office of Information and Culture (*So Van Hoa Thong Tin*) of Ho Chi Minh City underline the media boom after 1986. In 1985, the city had 15 different regular newspapers (including the weekly, half-monthly and monthly publications) but this figure rose to 57 by 1991, which was an increase of four times. Generally, media reports have referred to a similar emergence of publications throughout the country. Part of the economic reform process had also involved the State abandoning much of its subsidy policy, which pushed newspapers to adopt market-rationalised practices in how they run their newsrooms and produce the news. Revenue was now linked more closely with circulation and the desire to raise circulation would mean putting out a competitive product. Once the need to compete was established, a corollary of other neglected concepts followed and became absorbed into the changing media culture; concepts such as news having to be timely; raised information content, and paying journalists differentially according to productivity and quality of work. All these can be termed a regularisation of the Vietnamese media but market reforms have also brought in their wake a slew of other professional problems. As sensational stories sell, some journalists are using a style which fudges creative fiction with investigative reporting (Dang Nguyen Truong 1996) Cheque book journalism has arrived in Vietnam. There have also been cases of journalists or people masquerading as journalists attempting to blackmail newsmakers with exposure of financial scandals. (Vu Anh 1996; Lao Dong 5/10/96:2; Pham Viet Hai 1996; and Tuan Minh 1993)

The economic hard-times of the late 1970s, besides providing the impetus for market reforms, also fomented intellectual discontent which found public expression in literature and media. At the height of the *doi moi* policy in 1987 and 1988, efforts were

made within the media establishment to sanctify some of the newfound liberties from new ideological perspectives. At the second meeting held by the Vietnam Journalists Association in early 1988 to prepare for the association's 5th Congress, two senior journalists Phan Quang and Huu Tho argued that the three duties of journalists – 'ngươi tuyen truyen tap the (collective propagandist), ngươi co dong tap the (collective agitator), and ngươi to chuc tap the (collective organiser)' – were proposed by Lenin in 1901 at a time when the Communist Party of Russia was not yet set up. The situation in Vietnam where the Communist Party was already in power was fundamentally different and the media should keep step with this new reality. They proposed that the foremost task of the press should instead be to 'inform' (thong tin) and, together with that, to 'educate' (giao duc) and 'manage' (quan ly), and where the broadcast media was concerned, to 'entertain' (giai tri) as well (Nguoi Lam Bao No 15. 3/1988:2-4.).

Media restiveness coincided with and was promoted by the Party leadership's need to boost its flagging legitimacy. The corruption, irregularities and excessive bureaucracy which plagued the system required some form of redress and delegating the press to oppose such 'negativism' helped to some extent. Be that as it may, press censure of officialdom before 1986 still tended to proceed no further than publicising low-level municipal issues and did not mention names of senior cadres. The emphasis was still on using the more discreet and controllable mobilisation channel to address the 'negativism' problem. This took the form of seminars held by respective departments or organisations in the years 1983/84, but they became ritualistic sessions where people made general *pro forma* statements and recommended broad ineffectual solutions, with the findings finally published by the Party for internal circulation. (*Nhan Dan* 2/12/88:3).

A benchmark was set in media campaign against corruption in the months leading to the Sixth Party Congress. This was a series of press exposes on the abuse of power in Thanh Hoa province which implicated the province Party Secretary, Ha Trong Hoa, who was also a Central Committee member. The case was outstanding for the seniority of the target (possibly the highest ever up till that point) and the eventual success of the press in removing him from power. That the media campaign was paralleled by an intense struggle within the Party as Hoa called upon his mentors and allies in the leadership to counter the press campaign (Dinh Van Nam 1988; and Thai Duy 1988) would also remove any suggestion that this was a cosmetic affair entirely orchestrated from the top. Nevertheless, the whole episode was also an indication that media's freedom to tackle sensitive issues was dependent on elite patronage as the newspapers could not have won the struggle if they had nobody contending on their behalf in the Party machinery against Hoa's powerful protector. This question of media controversy as a function of intra-elite contention is too large and complex to be dealt with adequately here; suffice it to say that a consensus exists in many studies and articles that the 1980s was a decade of contestation between different groups and individuals within the Party elite (Stern 1993; Bui Tin 1995:137-163; and Vu Thu Hien 1997:293-294), and it is within this larger climate of contention at the top that media could be more diverse;

the leadership could not agree on the kind of uniformity to impose or different leaders and interest groups sought to use media to further their political objectives. The last was clearly illustrated by the appearance of Party General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh's regular column in the *Nhan Dan* daily beginning in May 1987, just five months after he attained the top Party position. Linh also encouraged writers to write more truthfully which led to a string of controversial works in the years 1987/1988 and the weekly magazine *Van Nghe* of the Vietnam Writers Association came to symbolise the *doi moi* media in its most outspoken phase.

The dynamics for liberal reforms were not only derived from home-grown forces. During this period, those pushing the liberalisation agenda drew moral support from Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* in the Soviet Union. (Huynh Kim Khanh 1988:2; Nguyen Khac Vien 1988; and Porter 1993:98). However, the centrifugal impact of radical liberal reforms in the Soviet bloc countries also startled the Vietnamese leadership in 1989 and the conservative backlash began with the Seventh Plenum of the Party Central Committee in August 1989. As part of an overall tightening of control, liberal tendencies in the media were also reined in (Nguyen Xuan Tho 1992:28-32; Thayer 1992:40-42; and Palmos 1995).

The official policy of *doi moi* has continued despite some backpedalling on political liberalisation, with the emphasis now centred on economic reforms. Market growth in the media sector has continued. According to Vietnam Journalists Association figures, in 1990 there were 240 newspapers throughout the country using 7,000 tons of paper a year but by 1993 there were 350 titles using 12,000 tons of paper a year (Hoi Nha Bao Viet Nam. 1994). As for the tightening of control, while almost everybody can agree that it has taken place, it is harder to define the extent of the reimposed restrictions and what they mean in the totality of the media. The number of tabloids has been reduced but tabloids and sensational reporting continue to keep a high profile. One benchmark frequently used has been to observe whether the press continued to report corruption among the powerful. This had not ceased; for instance, in February 1990, *Tuoi Tre* rocked Ho Chi Minh City with its exposure of Duong Son Quan, a brothel in the suburbs patronised by senior cadres and abetted by the city's police. In 1992/1993, the media reported the corruption involving Central Committee member and Energy Minister Vu Ngoc Hai which led to his imprisonment. However the scale of corruption has grown steadily, e.g., the embezzlement in the Tamexco trial reported in March 1997, amounting to 40 million US dollars, which has in turn prompted both media and the public to query how such huge sums of money could have been misappropriated without the endorsement of leaders far more senior than those brought to trial. The exercise of exposing corruption has become difficult, with almost all journalists interviewed lamenting that the investigative journalism involved was no longer as professionally rigorous as it used to be, being too reliant on police reports; which in turn begs the sensitive question of how the police decide which case to release to the media. Beaulieu's essay (1994) on the media climate captured the flux and ambiguity of the post-1990 situation by identifying the following features:



- a) There was a feeling of constraints on what they could write but 30 journalists and editors spoken to could not identify where the line was drawn except for some obvious taboo issues like advocating multi-party democracy.
- b) Constraints were not uniform and varied from paper to paper, province to province. Within one newsroom, it could also depend on who was the editor on duty for the day.
- c) Between the newspaper and the censorship authority, constraints could be negotiated.
- d) Journalists were also aware that they could be used by political elites to advance sectorial interest when writing critical articles and that it was not a simple paradigm of bargaining for more journalistic space by testing the limits of censorship.

### Organisational Control

Hewing to its Stalinist proto-type, the media organisational structure in Vietnam ensures that all lines of control can be traced upwards to a common authority which is the Party Central. This involves a network of criss-crossing horizontal and vertical lines of control. The core feature of this system is that all media come under the leadership and ownership of the Party and State or a Party-approved mass organisation. Another feature of this system is sectorial content where, for instance, a paper *Phu Nu* belonging to the women's organisation will focus on women's issues and the army daily *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* will cover military matters. Regulation of sectorial coverage has become far more relaxed under *doi moi*, and major papers like *Lao Dong* and *Tuoi Tre* which represent trade unions and youth respectively have become general interest newspapers catering for all readers rather than just their original constituencies. *Tuoi Tre*, which is a Ho Chi Minh City paper, has also transcended the regional focus expected of it to provide coverage of national issues of a quality which can surpass that of many central-level newspapers. In administrative terms, such a pattern of ownership means each newspaper comes under the charge of a mass organisation or some Party and State organ, which the official terminology calls the *co quan chu quan* (supervisory organisation). Besides that, all media come under the control of two organs, the Party's *Ban Van Hoa Tu Tuong* (Culture and Ideology Department or Ideology Department for short) and the *Bo Van Hoa Thong Tin* (Ministry of Culture and Information) of the government. Both these bodies are known collectively as *co quan quan ly* (control organisations) and are the authorities which approve publication permits, vet the content of the press and mete out penalties when editors err. The Ideology Department is the more powerful of the two, although the Ministry's functions and prerogatives have increased in recent years in line with a more earnest attempt after the 1991 Seventh Party Congress to have government ministries handle the details of governance while the Party restricts itself to setting down general policy guidelines. However, the Ideology Department is still regarded as the foremost authority in matters concerning the press and is far more involved in the task of vetting media content than the Ministry.

The latter concerns itself with administrative tasks ranging from policing the technicalities of media-related laws to setting down the salary structure for all journalists or issuing permits for newspapers after the Ideology Department has so decided. Viewed in simple terms, a newspaper has to report to three authorities: the Ideology Department, the Ministry of Culture and Information and its own supervisory organisation.<sup>3</sup> All of these come under the Party Central with the ultimate authority vested in the Politburo (see chart).

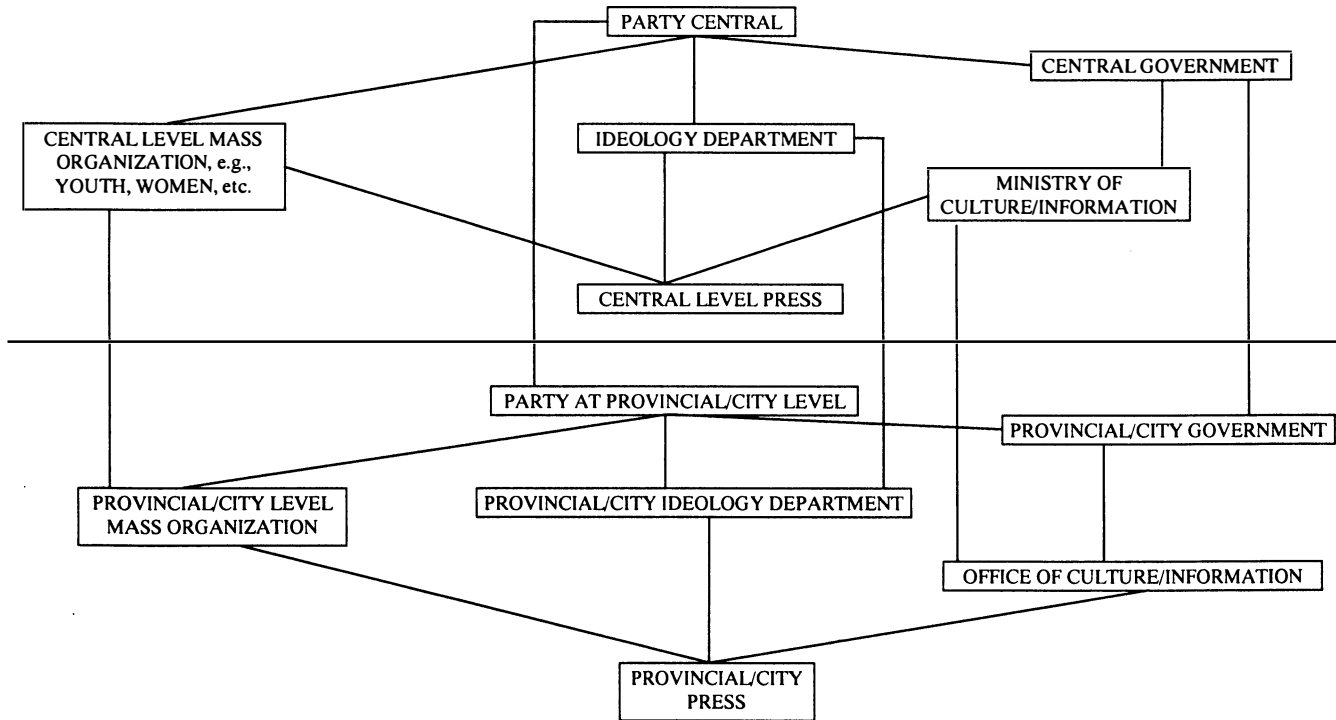
This pattern gets replicated at the provincial level as well as for those cities with the comparable status of a province like Hanoi, Haiphong and Ho Chi Minh City (see chart). Here there is also a regional Party authority known as the Thanh Uy (for city) or Tinh Uy (for province) which also has its own Ideology Department; similarly, a regional government, known as the Uy Ban Nhan Dan (People's Committee), also has its equivalent of a ministry in charge of culture and information, the So Van Hoa Thong Tin (Culture and Information Office). Supervisory organisations which own the newspapers are also part of this multi-layered bureaucratic pattern. For instance, the labour movement at the Central level will run its national paper for workers while regional branches may also have their own publications. In principle, regional organs, whether they are of the Party, the State or mass organisations, will have to defer to their national level body but in practice the chain of command is complicated. Major decisions travelling down from Central to regional level (e.g., from the central Ministry to the Culture and Information Office of Ho Chi Minh City) must be referred to the city's People's Committee before the local office can implement it. Major decisions made by the People's Committee for its Culture and Information Office will be referred upwards to the central Ministry before the decision is implemented. (Vo Ngoc An, 1996:11). Manifested as a media-vetting bureaucracy, it means newspapers, particularly regional ones, have to deal with too many sources of instructions at any one time (The Thanh, 1991:7). This breeds a cautious attitude with the press generally wary of taking initiatives or only acting after written official instructions are issued. This complicated bureaucratic structure has remained physically unchanged even with *doi moi*.

During meetings I had with the Ideology Department, the Ministry of Culture and Information and the Vietnam Journalists' Association at the end of 1993, all the interviewees stressed that pre-publication censorship was not practised in Vietnam. In broad terms, this was correct because the Ideology Department did not have to approve every page before it went off to the printers and much was left to editorial boards to self-censor. However post-publication disapproval of any editorial indiscretion would be prompt. Such censorious feedback is also regular and institutionalised. The

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3 In reality, editors have to contend with more sources of possible interference. These include powerful individuals seeking to prevent embarrassing stories, the security organs, and individual Ministry for case-specific reasons, e.g., the Foreign Ministry may object to a story on grounds that it damages foreign policy.

VIETNAM'S MEDIA: ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF MANAGEMENT FROM CENTRAL TO PROVINCIAL/CITY LEVEL\*



\* Below the provincial/city level, there is also local media but of a very rudimentary form and limited circulation.

department meets all the press once a week and individual editors can also be called up as and when necessary. Chief editors can only be appointed with the endorsement of the Ideology Department. This pattern has not been altered by *doi moi* but, in their substance, the department's weekly briefings and other meetings have become less didactic and give editors more leeway to defend their positions. Nevertheless, this mandatory routine of frequent contact, regardless of its content, still serves as a salutary check on any over-vigorous desire to test censorship limits. By dint of its official role, the Ideology Department also labours under two susceptibilities, one old and one new. Its permanent duty of upholding ideological rectitude had always incorporated a tendency to be suspicious of innovations. Almost all editors and journalists interviewed saw the Ideology Department as conservative. Some also pointed out that even in the most liberal years of *doi moi*, 1987 and 1988, the Ideology Department was not credited with any enthusiasm for reforms and it was the Culture Department of the Party (in those years separate from the Ideology Department) which was instrumental in promoting a more tolerant intellectual climate. This was a key reason leading to its absorption into the Ideology Department in 1989. The second susceptibility of the Ideology Department is a derivative of *doi moi* and comes with having to uphold doctrines which are increasingly viewed as irrelevant in Vietnam. Ideological uncertainty sometimes translates into confused and uneven censorship standards and a double-edged impact on editorial initiative: those editors who lack self-confidence or powerful mentors would err even more on the side of caution while others who are themselves influential or well-protected would see the confusion as room for manoeuvre. That is to say patronage is essential when editors seek to contend with the Ideology Department on more equal terms, which means censorship can be highly discretionary and a function of personality politics. As one writer said, 'When no agreement can be reached in an argument, it becomes a question of whether my boss is stronger than your boss. Or else it is the notion that my boss does not want to meddle with your boss and if the issue can be ignored, let's ignore it. But in the well-practised nature of give-and-take in Vietnamese politics, the party who started the problem will not do it again too quickly.' Finally, public discussion of the relationship between the Ideology Department and the press has always been taboo and even during the most liberal years of *doi moi* before 1989, when journalists were frequently criticising their profession, nothing was ever published about this. Since this relationship is quarantined from public scrutiny of any sort, it is likely to be more resistant to change than most other features of the media culture.

The other key relationship is between a publication and its supervisory organisation. Market reforms have changed this in significant ways. A newspaper can no longer count on its supervisory organisation for ample financial subsidy (Ha Thi Hong 1995). Being responsible for its own financial well-being increases a publication's independence. There have even been situations where the supervisory organisation looked away while its publication engaged itself in dubious money-making publishing projects such as putting out tabloids. The organisation then expected a share of the earnings. The practice was criticised in the Seventh Plenum Resolution of the

Sixth Party Congress in August 1989 (Nghị Quyết Hội Nghị Lan Thu Bay Ban Chấp Hành Trung Ương – Khoa VI. 1989) as well as the Secretariat Resolution 63 in July 1990 (Chi thi 63. 1990:138), in which the Party leadership sought to introduce measures aimed at controlling the media more effectively. Both documents accused supervisory organisations of giving ‘khoan trang’ meaning *carte blanche* to the publications under their charge.

However, in reality, the relationship between a supervisory organisation and its newspaper is more complex than just a top-down money-oriented attitude. Senior journalist Tuan Minh<sup>4</sup> (1992a) provided a fuller account of this relationship by identifying three broad types of supervisory organisation management style:

- The supervisory organisation sees its function as just providing information about the broader political environment, usually in the form of the resolutions and decisions passed down by the Party; the paper's Chief Editor should be guided by this information and take the initiative to do what is right and proper. This is the most lax form of control.
- Some supervisory organisations take a more formal approach and meet regularly to issue official directives to the newspaper and also suggest topics for the newspapers, but generally do not interfere in the work of the Chief Editor.
- Some supervisory organisations are highly interventionist and would issue orders specifying how topics should be treated, including asking to vet articles or entire issues of the newspaper.

The management style of a supervisory organisation has an impact on the quality of its publication; where the organisation is dominant, it tends to stifle initiative and creativity and would breed an editorial style which is frightened of responsibility. An ideologically safe-and-sound publication was not a liability before *doi moi* because low circulation did not really matter financially, but as market reforms proceed in Vietnam, supervisory organisations have become more sensitised to market needs, which means allowing their publications more scope to cater to readers' interest. In many instances that also would mean allowing a Chief Editor to differ quite substantively from the prescribed model of the press as an ideological weapon of the Party. Therein is the dilemma which has made relationship between a supervisory organisation and its newspaper more complicated: should a newspaper give priority to its readers or its supervisory organisation?

The 1988 sacking of Nguyen Ngoc, the Chief Editor of the weekly *Van Nghe* (Literature and Arts) whose supervisory organisation is the Vietnam Writers' Association, illustrated this problem. *Van Nghe* under Nguyen Ngoc, who assumed

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4 Tuan Minh is the pen-name of Tran Cong Man who was editor of the important army daily *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* in the *doi moi* years until he retired in 1989.

editorship in mid-1987, was a vehicle for some of the more radical views of that time and it became unprecedentedly popular in a market where readers relished something different.<sup>5</sup> In the wake of the political mood starting to turn against liberal reforms at the Party 5th Plenum in June 1988, the Writers' Association attempted to reassert its control of Nguyen Ngoc and *Van Nghe*. The political intricacies behind that struggle need not be dealt with in this study; what is pertinent are the steps taken by the Writers' Association that illustrated the complexities in the relationship between a supervisory organisation and the Chief Editor of its newspaper. On 9 September 1988, the Executive Committee of the Writers' Association met to consider the failings of *Van Nghe* to represent adequately the literary concerns of the time and, with that, the matter of removing Chief Editor Nguyen Ngoc. The latter, who was present at the meeting, left town after that on an assignment for three weeks. During that time, the Writers' Association Secretariat sent one of its officials to serve as a liaison officer between *Van Nghe* and the Secretariat. In fact, his role was to read every article and exercise the right of veto. When Ngoc got back, he protested and the liaison officer was withdrawn. Ngoc's relationship with his supervisory organisation had been a difficult one. For example, when the Association's Vice General Secretary Huu Chinh rang too often to request publication or withdrawal of certain pieces, Ngoc asked that henceforth such requests from the supervisory organisation should be in written form (Nguyen Ngoc. 1989). At the end of November, a meeting was held between the Writers' Association and *Van Nghe*'s editorial board whereby Nguyen Dinh Thi, the General Secretary of the association, proposed a compromise under which an editorial council would be set up to advise Ngoc, who would also sit on the body, but the Council would make the final decision on what to publish. Ngoc rejected this on the ground that it was the chief editor who was ultimately responsible for what was published. Thi then offered that the Advisory Council would run on a decision-by-majority format. When Ngoc rejected this, Thi proposed a third option which was to transfer Ngoc to perform other duties while, at the same time, occupy a permanent seat in a newly set-up supervisory council for *Van Nghe*. Ngoc also turned that down. (*Van Nghe* 6/5/89:3&7) Nevertheless, by the end of December, Ngoc was, in practice, no longer the Chief Editor although no formal written notification was served on him nor on his replacement (Nguyen Duy. 1988).

Articles drawing attention to the sacking of an editor for political reasons was not something readers expect to find in the Vietnamese press. Yet Nguyen Ngoc's removal received unprecedented exposure, thereby distinguishing the event as one of the big struggles for press freedom. The press coverage also demonstrated the ability to give equal space to the various contending parties rather than skew publicity to side with officialdom, in the course of which the press laid bare aspects of the sensitive issue of

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5 Nguyen Ngoc was not only chasing high circulation rates; he also had an aggressive liberal agenda aimed at rallying writers to challenge the many ideological constraints on literature.

ideological censorship. The press reports also brought home the fact that a supervisory organisation's authority was not always readily accepted and that the Chief Editor might have political resources to negotiate for a compromise solution.<sup>6</sup> All these represented the impact of *doi moi*, but the Nguyen Ngoc affair and its aftermath also brought into focus an enduring authoritarian feature of the media system; that a supervisory organisation seeking to discipline an editor would ultimately have its way. Since 1989 when the Party decided to rein in liberal reforms, supervisory organisations have been enjoined to tighten control on their publications and this has broadly been the trend in media management since. In the Secretariat Directive 63 of 25 July 1990 aimed at strengthening the leadership of the Party in newspaper and publication work (Nang Cao Chat Luong Hieu Qua Cong Tac Bao Chi, Xuat Ban. 1992:136-43), several clauses stated that supervisory organisations should be totally in charge of their newspapers and the head of the organisation should meet regularly with editors and cadres in charge of the press to see that they did not stray from the official objectives. It carried precise instructions on the occasions on which a Chief Editor must consult his paper's supervisory organisation:

“Tuy theo trinh do, nang luc thuc te cua dong chi phu trach bao, dai, nha xuat ban ma cap uy Dang quy dinh nhung van de gi dong chi do khong duoc tu y quyet dinh, nhât thiet phai tinh thi cap uy dong chi dai dien co quan chu quan nhât la nhung van de co quan he den viec giu gin bi mat cua Dang va Nha nuoc, tinh hinh an ninh chinh tri va quan he doi ngoai.”

‘Depending on the standard and ability of the comrade who is running the newspaper, broadcast station or publishing house, the Party branch within the supervisory organisation shall stipulate which problems he should not decide for himself and must consult with the comrade who represents the supervisory organisation especially concerning those issues which are about keeping State secrets, political and security situations and foreign relations’.

Since Nguyen Ngoc, a series of Chief Editors of other newspapers have been retired or replaced but the one which has been most frequently remarked was the removal of Kim Hanh as Chief Editor of *Tuoi Tre* in 1991 by the paper's supervisory organisation, the Communist Youth League of Ho Chi Minh City. Kim Hanh was a well-respected editor who gave *Tuoi Tre* its reputation as a major critical voice in the country. Her removal caused much unhappiness at the newspaper and was resisted by journalists but never had any publicity. A more recent example of another Chief Editor removed for her daring to test editorial limits was The Thanh of *Phu Nu Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh* (*Women of Ho Chi Minh City*) who was transferred in May 1996 to work in the paper's supervisory organisation, the Ho Chi Minh City's Women's Association. Again nothing was said in the press, thus underlining the fact that if Nguyen Ngoc's dismissal was able to generate a high level of public controversy, it was an exception made possible by a

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6 Nguyen Ngoc was backed by Tran Do, the head of the Party's Culture Department (Ban Van Hoa) but the political implications of that relationship need not be unpacked here.

window of opportunity in the early years of *doi moi*. The rule, as it has always been, is to keep away from public scrutiny the issue of how supervisory organisations (as well as the control organisations mentioned above) manage the media under their charge. For want of such an engagement with the public, the potential for change in this area is going to be much less than what has been observed in the area of media content.

### **Ideology**

Since ideology aims to guide media, there is an aspect of it which has to be open for all to see and heed. This is manifest in the official pronouncements on media which continue to use doctrinaire language and codified terms to remind media of its ideological duties, e.g. 'Information should 'bear the Party's standards' (*mang tinh Đang*), newspapers should be a vanguard for class struggle, and the media, besides providing information, should fulfil the demands of propaganda, agitation and organisation'. (Nguyen Tri Dung 1990) (Ta Ngoc Tan 1993) (Trinh Dinh Thang 1993) (Do Muoi 1997). Newsmen interviewed said that ideological exhortations tend to be too broad to mean anything concrete, and the finer points of Marxist semantics no longer direct the professional day-to-day activities of a newsroom. Some even claim that the advocates of orthodoxy no longer believe in what they themselves are saying any more. That raises the question of why the charade is maintained. This cannot be answered with any certainty as yet but Thomas F. Remington (1988) addressed a similar phenomenon when he studied the 'ideology complex' behind the Soviet media system and he provided a useful insight to the problem. Remington found plenty of evidence that even as ideological indoctrination was falling on deaf ears, the propaganda machinery dispensing it was growing. His answer was that the content of the message was not as important as the structure of its organised dissemination. Even if they did not believe in what they were doing, members of the intellectual and managerial elite who made up this ideological machinery persisted because they were drawn into a nexus of power and privilege. This was important for promoting elite solidarity and doctrinal cohesion. It was not that ideology was no longer important; rather that the system should be seen as increasingly not dependent on what ideology had to say, but neither was it free of ideology.

Can parallels be found in the situation of Vietnam? An 'ideology complex' which has co-opted the managerial and intellectual elites does exist in Vietnam although its scale may vary from that which obtained in the Soviet Union of the 1980s. The Vietnamese run a routine of instructional courses and discussion sessions for Party branches and cells with the aim of familiarising the rank and file with the latest ideological deliberations. Propagation of some important Party resolutions may even include non-Party members at such gatherings. While such mobilisation reaches out to a large number of people, it is also privileged in the sense that direct knowledge is kept within the confines of each small group. In the context of what is observable, this mechanism does not get the same ubiquity of public attention as ideological text published in the media, but the intimacy of small group discussion enhances the admonition effect of the communication. Hence there is a paradox to ideology as



control. What is visible as so much propaganda text is what creates the least impact because very few would bother to read such anodyne and turgid tracts. But there is a manifestation of ideological control, more amorphous and intangible, and kept away from public scrutiny, and these conditions render the control more effective and also resistant to change.

Remington's second premise is that while the system was increasingly not dependent on what ideology had to say, it was also not free of ideology. Vietnam's media system does labour under such an amorphous situation and the extent of market reforms that media could embrace provides an illustration. A better understanding of this problem would begin with an appreciation of what has been happening in the larger economic arena. The policy stance of the late 1980s aimed at creating a 'multi-sectoral' economy in which the private sector would play a central role. Yet through the 1990s, industrial policy increasingly gave priority to the state sector so much so that by the late 1990s, no privatisation drive was visible; and at the Eighth Party Congress in 1996, the 'leading role' of the State sector was strongly asserted (Fforde. 1997:4). In the events running up to the Congress, intense debate arose within the Party elite over the meaning of socialist orientation and socialist deviation when carrying out economic reforms (Vasavakul. 1997). That being the case, it would approximate the condition which Remington described as one not totally beholden to the dictates of ideology, but also not free of it. If the reform momentum already achieved in the general economy could still be challenged, market practices in a sensitive sector such as media can logically expect to be even more circumscribed. Here, the central ideological issue would be: 'Should information be regarded as a commodity?'. Tuan Minh (1992b) referred to the problem that information as a product was still a capitalist concept alien to a socialist society such as Vietnam. Linked to this are important questions such as private ownership of media and whether or not the fledgling foreign investment in media should be encouraged or phased out. The 1990 Press Law had removed the possibility for private ownership of media which was allowed under the previous legislation in 1957. During the National Assembly debate in December 1989, advocates stoutly defended this proscription of private ownership on ideological grounds by pointing out that 'the way to the future for Vietnamese society was to expand collective ownership...and not private ownership' or that 'private ownership of media would really mean newspapers would either be at the behest of this class or that class' (*Nhan Dan*. 28/12/89:1&4)

The post-1989 media situation has also witnessed a more guarded approach when challenges are made to ideological shibboleths which contrast with Phan Quang and Huu Tho pointing out in early 1988 that Lenin's teachings on the socialist media may be outdated for present day Vietnam. Two examples, Tuan Minh (1992b) and Nguyen Thanh Son (1995), illustrate this. Both argued for more media competition and therefore the need for news to be more information-oriented in order to attract readers. Both were also careful to point out however, that competition was congruent with the Party affirmation of the market economy and Son qualified his call for more information-based content by saying that 'propaganda' and 'agitation', as prescribed by

ideological orthodoxy, could still be able to draw readers if they were done well. Minh also qualified himself by acknowledging that socialist practices and principles still had a role to play; this being for the State to invest in infrastructure so that newspapers could keep their prices low.

### **Legal Regime**

The legal regime that tends to media has two major components: one set of rules originates from the Party and the other from the State legislative and administrative organs. With public discourse<sup>7</sup> tending to focus almost entirely on the effectiveness of the 1990 Press Law (a product of the National Assembly legislative process and then implemented by government agencies such as the Ministry of Culture and Information), it creates an impression that government prerogatives are supreme in regulating the media when, in reality, Party decrees hold the preponderance of influence. This importance accorded to State laws, even if not quite warranted yet, may be viewed in the context of a Party policy since the Seventh Congress to devolve more administrative power to State organs.

The predecessor of the 1990 Law went as far back as 1957 which argues for the necessity of new legislation to address the changes brought about by *doi moi*. But given that many of the reforms actually took place prior to the enactment of the new legislation, it would support a view that attributes less salience to legal endorsement as the promoter of change where media is concerned. Furthermore, in a country where rule of law is generally regarded as far from being institutionalised, it is reasonable to share some of the same reservations about the efficacy of the 1990 Press Law. As is the practice in Vietnam, in addition to a broad sweeping law passed by the National Assembly, a complex array of rules and regulations from central and regional government bodies would seek to manage the media at the level of minutiae with instructions covering issues like journalists' pay, freelancers' rates, permissible advertisement-copy page ratio and the selling price of a newspaper. This creates a situation similar to what is happening to the country as a whole where rules are too numerous to keep track of or bogged down with details, yet imprecisely written, and, in some instances, contradict each other. As a result a situation evolves where rules are sometimes at odds with the reality and so risk being seen as irrelevant. An example would be the regulation which set the proportion allowed for advertisements at 10 per cent of printed space (Clause 17.2 of Nghi Dinh cua Hoi dong Bo trung So 133-HDBT

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7 This refers to media coverage of the topic as well as discussions with Vietnamese editors/journalists. The debate on the draft of the 1990 Press Law was well reported by the standards of the Vietnamese press, a development never observed for Party prerogatives. In recent years, journalists have claimed rights as provided by the Press Law, two cases of which are cited in this paper. The inadequacies of the law continue to be discussed in media articles. Such responses have not been recorded for any Party regulation since the Secretariat Directive 15 (Chi thi 15) of September 1987.

ngay 20 thang 4 nam 1992 quy dinh chi tiet thi hanh luat bao chi) but it is not difficult to find newspapers which regularly disregard this ruling.<sup>8</sup>

The Press Law is not only presented as an instrument to regulate but also one which protects the rights of journalists. It has clauses affirming the right to information and the right to maintain confidentiality of sources. Given the nature of Vietnam's political culture, nobody would take these written provisions entirely at face value but editors and senior journalists have pointed out that a sound knowledge of the law does provide journalists with more resources to negotiate when confronted by obstructive officials. A good example would be an incident in Hanoi in July 1996 when the press went to check on the police trying to evict some residents forcibly from a building. The officer warned reporters against covering the event but they, in return, invoked the 1990 Press Law which stipulated that it was illegal to stop journalists in their legitimate pursuit of news. The officer then threatened them with arrest and also hit a reporter as well as smashed his camera; another reporter had his press card torn and camera confiscated. The journalists lodged reports with the city's Legal Office and wanted the office to press charges (*Cong An Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh 7/8/96:7*). Another instance of a reporter exercising his legal right happened in a courtroom when a reporter (Minh Tuan 1996) was prevented from tape recording the proceedings. He challenged the court that this violated articles in Decree 133 issued by the Council of Ministers on 20 April 1992 (Nghị định 133-HDBT quy định chi tiết thi hành Luật Báo chí). Finally, the court backed down. The fillip for all these have come as much from market opportunities as from the more liberal political climate of *doi moi*. In essence, what journalists have in the Press Law is a rough set of guidelines which is very much a part of the country's evolving legal culture, still unsettled in many ways. As much as its injunctions can be discretionary, its protective clauses may also have to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis depending on the relative power of the parties to a conflict.

Laws, however, are not as critical as the regular resolutions and directives issued by the Party Central, which are instrumental in fomenting the political environment in which media changes can take place as well as issuing up-to-date specific instructions on what the leadership would like to see. For example, in the years before and after the

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8 The question of advertisement quota received a dismissive response from majority of editors and journalists interviewed. A popular view held that the way around this restriction was to print any amount of advertisements in a separate pullout and that would be all right. Major publications like *Saigon Giai Phong* and *Tuoi Tre* of Ho Chi Minh City have advertisement pullouts which have more pages than the actual papers themselves. An editor at *Vietnam Investment Review* said his paper worked to a 35 per cent limit for advertisement and he understood that to be an overall ruling for all the press. The 10 per cent limit was repeated in a Ministry of Culture and Information communique reported in *Saigon Giai Phong* on 5 Jan 96 but it added a qualifier that newspaper could apply to the Minister for a higher quota.

Sixth Party Congress, Party decisions widened the scope for the press to criticise government inefficiencies:

- a) Directive 79 (Chi Thi 79 ve cong tac phe va tu phe trong Dang vien cac cap va cac nganh chuan bi cho Dai Hoi Dang toan quoc) of 11 March 1986 launched a countrywide campaign to criticise and self-criticise and the scope was widened to allow the press to write about the shortcomings that emerged in these criticism sessions (*Nhan Dan* 15/3/86:1).
- b) Secretariat Directive 15 (Chi thi 15) on 21 September 1987 empowered the press to expose corruption in high places and was titled 'Strengthening the leadership of the party with the purpose of better utilising the press in the struggle against negativism' (Doi Moi Thong Tin Bao Chi 1988:17-24). In particular the directive strengthened the prerogative of the Chief Editor in deciding what was to be published.
- c) Secretariat Directive 19 (Chi thi 19) on 20 November 1987 entitled 'Reforming news about protocol events' freed the press of the obligation to give prominence to unimportant protocol news about top leaders (Ibid. 25-27)
- d) Politburo Resolution 05 on 28 November 1987 concerned writers of creative literature more so than journalists but the bold literary works which were encouraged by this directive also had an impact on newspaper work. (*Nhan Dan* 5/12/87:1&4).

But the mood began to shift with the Fifth Plenum of the Sixth Congress in June 1988 where the Plenum resolution warned against the media straying from the Party line (*Nhan Dan* 22/6/88:1). This was to contribute to the dismissal of Nguyen Ngoc from the position of Chief Editor of *Van Nghe*. But the Party decision which was decisive in pulling back from bold political reforms was the Seventh Plenum Resolution in August 1989, a meeting which took place in the wake of the Tiananmen incident in China and a restive Eastern Europe. It bore the evidently anxious title 'Some pressing problems in the field of ideological work in view of the present domestic and international situation.' (Nghi Quyet Hoi Nghi lan thu bay Ban Chap Hanh Trung Uong Dang (khoa VI) Mot so van de cap bach ve cong tac tu tuong truoc tinh hinh trong nuoc va quoc te hien nay.) From then on, the cautious mood deepened and if Directive 15 of 1987 was a document which enhanced the Chief Editor's prerogative, the years after 1989 saw the issuance of Secretariat Directive 63 (cited earlier) which constrained the Chief Editor. Then in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Communist Party in 1991, the Secretariat issued Directive 08 (Chi thi 08) on 31 March 1992 which was aimed at 'strengthening leadership and control in order to raise the quality and results of the press and publications'. In practical terms, it meant the Party sought to raise flagging media enthusiasm for its traditional mobilisation duties. This directive set a deadline of three months for all party committees and responsible agencies to complete reorganisation of their press and publication activities by 'enhancing quality in the political, ideological and cultural domains' (FBIS-EAS-92-072:53-55). It has continued to serve as the basis

for ideological management of the press till the present and this is evident in the organising of a national conference in August 1997 to review the implementation of the directive (Do Muoi. 1997).

Since Party decrees are meant to be instruments of mobilisation, their dissemination through mass media and grassroots organisations is always assured. However, two features distinguishes such Party initiatives from those of the State:

- a) Party documents need not always be released in full or at all. On the other hand, full text of National Assembly laws are always released as public documents. The cut and thrust of debate over draft legislation in the National Assembly are increasingly reported in the press; this is not the case with deliberations by the Party Central Committee which carry with them an air of secrecy. Media attention is instead geared towards publicising the final Party decision and its implementation, usually in a celebratory way.
- b) Journalists view the 1990 Press Law as safeguarding some of their rights to gather information and this is reflected in the periodic media reports of the Press Law being violated. Within the same period, no attempt has been recorded of any Party decree being invoked to protect journalistic prerogative.

Hence the media operates under a legal regime where control is vested more in that component which is quarantined from the moderating influence of public scrutiny. This has been a feature of the Vietnamese media from its origins in the 1950s and while *doi moi* has relaxed the management style of the Party vis a vis media, it has not altered the orthodoxy of structural control in any fundamental way.

## Conclusion

So how much has the media changed? This question becomes more manageable if it is narrowed down to just how much has political control of the Vietnamese media been reduced, although that is not the only way by which change can or should be measured. There is no simple answer mainly because political control is difficult to quantify and, as this paper seeks to argue, it depends on what yardstick is being used. If it is gauged purely by how much media content has changed, then there is no denying that the media of *doi moi* has changed significantly and often to a degree which impresses the uninitiated. This level of observation is also the most easily accessible. Yet underlying content are structures which are fundamental to control of media – the whole managerial structure, ideology and regulations. They should also be taken into account in any examination of the issue of political control, not to mention that these structures, more so than what newspapers publish day to day, are integral to how political and bureaucratic institutions go about their business. At these deeper layers, *doi moi* has also had its influence but things have been more resistant to change, not least because they are less directly exposed than media content to change-inducing agencies such as public visibility.

Deciding the extent of political change has also been a key question in the larger field of Vietnam Studies where researchers have tried to find a meaningful conceptual framework to capture how *doi moi* has altered state-society (state here refers to the overall establishment comprising both the Party and State organs) relations. So far there is no ready consensus and Kerkvliet (1995:398-9) summarised the discourse as shaking out into three schools of thought. Thayer (1992b:111-12), Womack (1992:180) and Porter(1993:101) represent the Vietnamese system as 'mono-organisational socialism' where major decisions are made within the bureaucracy and are influenced by it rather than by extra-bureaucratic forces in society. Turley(1993a:269-70; 1993b:330-31) modifies the first argument and suggests a concept of 'mobilisation authoritarianism' where social forces may influence policy but only through organisations that the state itself dominates. A third view by Thrift and Forbes(1986:81-83,101-104) believes the Vietnam state frequently does not have the resources to impose policies, which therefore allows social groups resistant to state control to shape society as much as or more than state policy. This may be described as a form of 'penetrating civil society'.

If these terms of debate were transposed to the question of state-media relations, anecdotal evidence can provide examples of state-media relations to suit each of the three categories. It is not possible to do justice to this debate, given the need for brevity at the closing end of this paper. However I personally find 'mono-organisational socialism' in the form conceptualised by its originator T.H. Rigby (1990) for the erstwhile Soviet Union most satisfactory when it comes to analysing Vietnamese society and media in transition. This is because when the details of Rigby's model are examined, they do make allowances for situations when the state is not as effective as is assumed in its dispensation of power. Hence the 'mono-organisational' system does not stand apart from the phenomena of 'mobilisation authoritarianism' and 'penetrating civil society'. In the context of the Soviet Union, Rigby chose to term non-state or anti-state associations and activities as representing a 'vestigial civil society' meaning what little remains of the flourishing civil society which existed before the Bolsheviks took over in 1917 (Rigby 1991:111-14). While the scope for intellectual discourse and other social or personal liberties had significantly increased after the Stalin era(1929-1953), the mono-organisational system remained intact with its structures of power basically unaltered. The system only started to be seriously challenged in 1987, partly with Soviet leader Gorbachev's acquiescence or sufferance, and the momentum for change finally reached a stage where no single leader or group could arrest it. Only then did the elements of a vestigial civil society stop being vestiges (Rigby 1990:207-44). Vietnam's political restiveness has never gone that far. As this paper has shown in its exploration of the deep and not easily visible structures which continue to manage media, in the final analysis the key decisions continue to be taken by the mono-organisation which is the Party; and while the implementation of these decisions can sometimes be tardy or resisted, there is no doubt that Party decisions can be enforced when it so insists.

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Writer's Note: Russell Hiang-Khng Heng is on study leave from the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies(Singapore) to write his PhD thesis in the Department of Political and Social Change, RSPAS, Australia National University. This paper is based on his field work in Vietnam in 1996.

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## TWO

### ECONOMICS-RELATED PERIODICALS

Chu Van Lam

Before renovation in Vietnam, very few newspapers or journals specialised in economic matters. *Tap Chi Nghien Cuu Kinh Te* (Economics Research Journal) founded in 1961 by the Economics Institute, appeared monthly. Other journals such as *Tap Chi Ke Hoach Thong Ke* (Statistical Planning Journal) limited themselves to narrower fields. A few newspapers, for example *Thuong Mai* (Commerce), and *Thu Cong* (Handicrafts), offered economic information. All these publications had the principal function of making the policies of the government known to specific audiences.

After the Sixth Party Congress in 1986, and especially from 1990 onward, the number of economics-related periodicals increased dramatically. Over forty newspapers and journals appeared that concentrated on economic matters, not to mention more than four hundred other periodicals which contained economics pages or feature columns. In addition to regular staff writers, hundreds of freelance writers submitted articles for publication. Among these freelancers were numerous policymakers and enterprise managers, perhaps a unique characteristic of Vietnam's press. Economics writing in the press played a significant role in the 1980s transition, as relevant issues were discussed first among scholars and eventually reached the ears of party and government officials. This happened on the vital topic of agricultural contracts, and also on the decision to separate industrial production from the direct control of various line ministries.

Today, economic problems are covered more broadly in the press than ever before, reflecting the general desire to move ahead in economic development, to overcome the 'danger of lagging far behind' other nations, as emphasised in Communist Party resolutions. The decision to transform from a command and centralised economy to a market-oriented economy with the participation of various economic sectors as well as to promote more open political policies, has enabled the press to collect information more efficiently, upgrade technical quality, improve content, and disseminate information more quickly. The number of one-sided or very general articles has been reduced. The press no longer is only a device for information to be imposed from the top downward, but instead has become a two-way channel, a vehicle reflecting the aspirations and requirements of the people in general and of businessmen in particular.

#### **The Increase in Economics Information**

Editors and writers have access to a much wider variety of economic data than was the case ten or fifteen years ago. Communications facilities, both international and domestic, have been greatly improved. Of course, reliable statistics are sometimes difficult to secure, and need to be checked and double-checked. Compared to before, it

is easier to request interviews with government officials, to ask pointed questions, and to publish the results. Officials are more willing to talk with us informally as well, and they pay closer attention to issues raised in the press.

Besides articles on domestic and international economic events per se, we also write about the relationship between economics and social problems, and between economics and culture. Readers of general newspapers want and receive feature stories on economic matters of current concern. Regular columns offer advice to consumers. Such innovations are well received by the public, and they help satisfy the demands of society.

Substantial progress has been made with regard to journalistic professionalism, writing style, and forms of presentation. Freedom of the press is respected, mainly designed to encourage entrepreneurs in their business activities, and to encourage the public to fight corruption, smuggling, illegal trading and other violations of the interests of the people. Economic commentary and forecasting is on the increase. Competition between newspapers for readership is more intense. Being a type of commodity, periodicals work hard to increase market share. Even specialised economic publications offer a mix of articles for economists, enterprise managers and officials in economic-related agencies on the one hand, and the well-informed general reader on the other.

The Prime Minister's Office has established a press department to collect information from newspapers, codify it, and report to the Prime Minister on a daily basis. Quite a few decisions by the Prime Minister have been made after receiving information in this way. Other ministries and state economic organisations have proceeded to set up their own press departments to collect data from newspapers to use in formulating policies.

### **The Economics-related Press, the People, and the State**

In Vietnam, the state considers the press a tool to mobilise people's participation in implementing the political line and policies of the ruling Communist Party, to get people to abide by the laws of the state, and to protect the national interest. At the same time, the press acts as the voice of the people.

While the economy is in a transitional period into the market economy, ambiguous or undefined elements still remain. Inconsistent 'rules of the game' are unavoidable. For example, the foreign investment law promulgated in early 1988, despite careful preparation, has already been amended three times. A lot of legal documents in economic fields, especially sub-laws, have been amended or adjusted even more often. The state also has issued many new laws and sub-laws which were unavailable in the previous command economy. Besides, an important historical characteristic of Vietnam should be noted here: up to now over 70 per cent of the population has lived in the countryside, where actions are often governed more by rules of village community than by state law. The influence of such feelings and way of life is quite strong even among urban inhabitants.

For example, people tend to conduct their business activities without applying for an official license. If they have to apply for a business license, they avail themselves of personal contacts (with state officials) rather than going through the principles or formal channels. Officials also prefer to resolve problems based on personal relations, especially when both sides do not always have a clear knowledge of the specific content of relevant legal documents. For this reason, legal documents in various forms are given extensive coverage by the *Vietnam Economic Times* (VET). Like other newspapers, the editorial board and the reader's column of VET receive large numbers of letters from readers everyday, asking for explanations about tax policies, procedures to set up an enterprise, how to solve conflicts among economic organisations, or how to resolve disputes among citizens.

But this is only one side of the story. On the other side, and no less important, one finds that stipulations in quite a few legal documents are very general or vague. Guidelines issued by relevant agencies are inconsistent and even conflicting in a number of cases. In recent sessions of the National Assembly, delegates have complained a lot about this situation when discussing the process of law promulgation in Vietnam. Moreover, provisions in a number of legal documents or guidelines that do not conform to reality are not detected or rectified by law-making bodies until pointed out by the press in the first instance.

Additionally, the press helps to discover urgent economic problems and contributes to resolving them to a certain extent. Many examples can be cited. Economic newspapers and journals were the first to cover a controversial story about the exchange rate between the Vietnamese dong and the US dollar, pointing out how appreciation of the dong would affect Vietnam's trade balance, and how to deal with the problem. When the State bank was slow to adjust its policy, many economic newspapers and journals argued that problem needed to be resolved as soon as possible, since the longer the story lasted the higher the price the Vietnamese economy would have to pay. Similarly, the press also mentioned many sensitive issues in Vietnam concerning the role of the state-owned economic sector, which has not been as effective as it should be. Despite playing the key role in the national economy and enjoying preferences, the efficiency of the state-owned sector remains very low, and it seems no clear way out of this situation has been found.

Another burning issue in economic newspapers recently has been the exposure of corruption and smuggling. The Prime Minister called corruption a 'national enemy' at the National Assembly, and labelled it an 'enemy from within'. The press is a task force in the fight against this evil. Corruption scandals are widely covered in most newspapers and over a period of many editions. The press thus places strong pressure on the authorities to resolve this problem.

In order to encourage businessmen and small-scale producers to participate in diverse business activities, the economic newspapers and economic articles in the general press introduce portraits of successful entrepreneurs, feature well-performing enterprises, and describe the business experiences and skills of businessmen in the

region and throughout the world. These articles are widely read by Vietnam's young entrepreneurs.

Many newspapers earmark some space for 'letters from readers' columns, where the public can express opinions directly on certain topics or describe the injustices or unfair treatment they are facing. Many of these letters concern the economic interests of citizens.

### **Shortcomings on the Part of Economics Reporters**

Before *doi moi*, a number of newspapers had their own economic or socio-economic editorials, but writers were not truly economics reporters. So far, no special school or course to train economic journalists or economic editors has been held, and reporters who normally write about economic issues are not well equipped with necessary knowledge of the market economy. When our state-led economy shifted into the market economy, writers on general or social issues also shifted to write about economic issues. In some cases they failed to correctly reflect the situation for lack of specialised knowledge. So far there are but a few sharp economic commentators or economic analysts working for the newspapers.

Although the National Assembly has already issued a press law, like other laws its stipulations are very general or vague, leading to inconsistent application by both members of the press and law enforcement officials. In some cases there is no apology or correction for incorrect or dishonest stories, and the writers of these stories do not bear any responsibility before the law at all. On the other hand, in quite a few cases reporters have been harmed physically for exposing 'negative phenomenon' (corruption, bribery, embezzlement).

### **Conclusion**

Vietnam pursues the renovation process with economic reform as the starting point. This facilitates the development of the economic press in Vietnam. In spite of many shortcomings on the part of economic reporters and inappropriate mechanisms, the press not only reports the news or gives information to the public, but also plays a no less important role in reflecting the aspirations and complaints of citizens to the authorities.

Economic newspapers and journals are also beneficial to people in terms of promoting their business activities and protecting their economic benefits. Vietnamese leaders acknowledge that administrative reform has not kept pace with economic reform. This situation also constitutes an obstacle for the press in general and the economic press in particular in Vietnam.



**THREE**  
**CREATIVE WRITERS AND THE PRESS IN VIETNAM**  
**SINCE RENOVATION**

**Ho Anh Thai**

A veteran writer who had worked for over thirty years as a journalist and editor-in-chief of a magazine retired on a very small pension. Five years later, he had built a new two-storey house, with 120 square metres of floor space. Where did he get the finances to build such a house? It came from the energetic freelancing he did for newspapers after the beginning of Vietnam's period of renovation.

Before 1986, the centrally-subsidised mass media in Vietnam existed in a quiet atmosphere of self-imposed restraint. Most creative writers did not want to write for the press, since they felt such writing did not offer an opportunity to fully express either their intellect or their social and civic opinions. The press seemed engaged almost in a monologue, a one-sided conversation which would only present the best and brightest aspects of society, illustrated with examples of the 'the good man and the good act'. Any so-called divergence might merely be a paragraph about social abuses in a certain place, or a shortage of materials and work stoppages in a factory, or the problems of peasants in a particular village.

The meagre payment writers would get for articles discouraged them further. The period of centrally-subsidised media created two distinct circles: writers and journalists. Few writers wanted to work also as journalists, and some even treated the mass media with contempt, regarding journalists as government employees who were paid to produce propaganda. Although both literature and the press were restricted during this time, creative writers generally chose to concentrate on fiction, since in doing so they could find individual ways to indirectly reflect the realities of our society. This paper, however, will not digress into the achievements of fiction except in the ways in which it relates to journalism.

It seemed forgotten that most of the great Vietnamese writers during the period of French domination, and during the two wars against the French and American invaders, were talented, sharp-witted correspondents. Often an unjust situation described in the mass-media, in an article seemingly too immediate and hurriedly-written, would affect people and leave a more lasting impression in their minds than a novel. This can be seen in the short articles written before 1945 by Ngo Tat To (1894-1954) describing the brutal domination of the French imperialists and the misery and suffering they caused the Vietnamese people, or in several non-fiction books by Vu Trong Phung (1912-1939) such as *The Whores and the Whore Hospital*, concerning social abuses under French domination. Also in this genre are: *I Pull a Rickshaw* by Tam Lang, describing the hardships of the downtrodden, or *Hanoi, Thirty Six Streets* by Thach Lam (1909-1942),

concerning the customs of Hanoi. These works remain fresh and valuable while a whole slew of popular novels published at the same time have been totally forgotten.

During the anti-French war (1945-1954), all journalists worked in the resistance and wrote in the service of the urgent political duties of the time. The targeted readership of the press were the 'intellectuals, peasants, workers, and soldiers' who made up the main forces of the resistance, as President Ho Chí Minh said. The press was regarded as an effective instrument to transmit information, to encourage the morale of the people and the fighters, and to be a weapon against the enemy. In this situation, creative writers stopped producing novels and instead devoted themselves to journalism. All of the writers who were well-known before 1945 wrote for the press. Ngo Tat To, Nam Cao (1917-1951), Nguyen Cong Hoan (1903-1977), Nguyen Huy Tuong (1912-1960), Nguyen Tuan (1910-1987), To Hoai (b. 1920), and more, lived among and wrote about the intellectuals, peasants, workers and soldiers. Some of the liveliest articles and documentary fiction from that time include *The Way to the South* and *Living in the Jungle* by Nam Cao, *New Year Presents for Soldiers* by Ngo Tat To, *The Battle in Rang Street* and *One Visit to the Capital* by Tran Dang (1921-1949).

As successors of the tradition of using the pen as a weapon against the enemy, the writers of the anti-American war (1954-1975) also made many efforts to write for the press. Many valuable works from that period are still available, including *Our Hanoi fights the Americans* by Nguyen Tuan and *The Mother with a Rifle* by Nguyen Thi (1928-1968) about a Southern woman who fought the invaders while raising six children.

After the reunification of Vietnam in 1975, the press seemed to drop out of view. The entire press system in Vietnam is controlled and funded by the government. A newspaper belongs to one governmental organisation or another; for example, *Nhan Dan* belongs to the Communist Party, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* belongs to the army, *Tien Phong* (Pioneer) is published by the Youth League and *Phu Nu Viet Nam* (Vietnamese Women) by the Vietnamese Women's Association, etc. The years 1975 to 1985 made up one of the most difficult periods in the economic and social life of Vietnam. Many problems emerged, but the press usually avoided writing about them. Therefore, until 1986, the dark sides of issues were not touched upon.

The potential of journalism was suddenly awakened in the minds of writers at the dawn of the renovation period, and the renewed mass media soon became a lively part of the market system of that period.

### **Influence of the Press on Writers' Thinking**

By the end of 1996, the Vietnam Writers' Association consisted of 700 members, of whom 90 percent work in the mass media. There are approximately 400 newspapers and magazines published all over Vietnam, from daily and weekly newspapers to monthly and quarterly magazines.

After ten years of operating under the renovation policy, writers can now look back and evaluate the role of the press and its effects on society. Such an examination shows that the press has definitely rediscovered itself. These days the press has become a forum for people from all walks of life, including writers, who wish to openly express their ideas and opinions about various issues. The press does its job as a responsible watchdog, pointing out problems in areas which may have been overlooked by official inspectors. The press has become a receptive listener at times when there are not enough avenues for people to have their problems or suggestions heard. Renovation has allowed the press to actually become a force that helps push the country further along the path of renovation.

By effectively performing that role, the press at present has a considerable affect on many facets of society. It publishes and encourages various examples and models of renovation. But the press not only sings the praises of new methods and trends. It also plunges into the fight against corruption and social abuses that either already exist or that have emerged since the beginning of the open-door free market economy. The press has substantially defended the interests of workers, peasants and intellectuals, and has struggled for the social welfare of the poor and downtrodden. In the forefront of this struggle is the newspaper *Lao Dong*, published by the Vietnam Trade Union, with the novelist Xuan Cang as editor-in-chief. During 1985, a year before renovation, articles appeared in this newspaper concerning several factory directors who had attacked and dismissed workers who had spoken out about problems they saw in the workplace. This kind of article had never before been allowed publication in any newspaper. In 1986 *Lao Dong* actually began the struggle that other newspapers took up after renovation, with a series of investigative articles about totalitarian behaviour and corrupt activities of the leader of a province and about workers and peasants who were the victims of injustices committed by high-ranking officials. These investigations were taken to and used as case files by concerned and competent judiciary boards. Along with *Lao Dong*, the other newspapers joined the struggle against corruption, totalitarianism, authoritarianism, conservatism and stagnation within the system of administrative management, and against social injustices and the decline of traditional values. Also outstanding in this struggle was the Vietnam Writers' Association's *Van Nghe* (Literature and Arts), which published articles such as 'What Happened That Night?' By Phung Gia Loc, 'Confession of the Accused' by Nhat Linh, 'The Kneeling Woman' by Tran Khac, and 'Justice: Don't Forget Anyone' by Nguyen Thanh Ha. There have also been many provocative articles in the *Tien Phong*, *Phu Nu Viet Nam*, *Thanh nien cua Thanh pho Ho Chi Minh* (Youth of Ho Chi Minh City), and *Saigon Giai Phong* (Liberated Saigon). The press no longer sits quietly in a centrally-subsidised ivory tower, but actively and effectively exerts a positive influence on the process of economic, social and cultural development.

The writers who now work for the press also seem startled out of a stagnant daydream. Literary writers have changed the nature of the mass media and in turn, the mass media has strongly influenced writers' ideas about the relationship between

journalism and literature. Writers understand that now is not the time to sit back and only write the big book, the magnum opus. Writers feel they have to and should write for the press, directly observing everyday problems and participating in solving them. The life of a journalist, full of worry, excitement, and the need for timely reactions, has turned the literary writer into a more dynamic, realistic and resourceful person.

The press in Vietnam has become more interesting and lively since writers have become wholehearted insiders. In the quickly-written articles and in the investigations by talented writers, readers not only get details of events, but are also able to experience the typical flavour of life in a group or circle, or even society as a whole. The human and literary quality of newspaper articles has become stronger and more profound. Because of this, many Vietnamese newspapers now avoid their former fate of going straight to the rag or trash heap. And as a newspaper becomes more popular, it is able to attract well-known writers and to compete for their services with higher fees.

### **Influence of the Press on Writers' Daily Lives**

Since 1986, the press has not only changed writers' thinking, but also their daily lives. The end of centralised subsidies to publishing houses and the flood of foreign movies, video cassettes, music tapes and other kinds of entertainment led to a reduction in the publication of literary writing. Today serious works of literature are only published in a small quantity, a maximum of 2000 copies compared to 50,000 copies before 1988, and even such small editions are difficult to sell in a short time. The publication of a 300 page novel will bring the author a sum of approximately US\$200 dollars, which equals the earnings from 8 articles of 1500 words each. Works of poetry sell even less: usually only three or four hundred copies. To give one example of how this has changed the lives of writers ... there was one poet who retired and started writing journalism. He wrote regularly, so that he had an article published every day in either a newspaper or magazine, and his monthly earnings averaged about US\$400 dollars – an amount five times higher than his pension! Before 1986, he was unable to have any of his collections of poetry published. However, since he has become involved in journalism, he has published, at his own expense of US\$500 a book, up to four collections a year. Of course his collections are mostly presented to his friends and relatives.

At this time in literary circles there is a proverb that goes 'eat articles to feed fiction'. That is, creative writers have to live on the earnings they make from their articles to be able to write fiction, which doesn't earn as much money. A writer will usually write for the four or five newspapers which are his favourites, which pay the most, and the editors of which he works with most comfortably. The poet mentioned above has to write for a score of newspapers to be sure he has one article published everyday. The retired novelist Vu Bao is eager to travel either to the far North or the far South, under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Agriculture, the Vietnam railroads, or the provincial authorities. He will write for any newspaper that solicits articles from him, no matter how small or large, and he has a loyal following among readers no matter which publication he writes for.

That is why, at present, journalism has become the most popular livelihood among Vietnamese creative writers, almost all of whom are writing for newspapers or working as editors.

### **Impact of the Press on Literature**

In the late 1980's, during the most vigorous blooming of the mass media in Vietnam, stories and novels marked by qualities of journalism began to appear in Vietnam's literary marketplace. These were fictions that realistically depicted existing conditions in the country's urban and rural areas, and that documented the struggles against corruption and social abuses. In the turbulent atmosphere of that time, such novels and collections were welcomed warmly. Although after just a few years, readers gradually became reluctant to read such books and began to return to true literary works, the writing and publication of these works clearly show the influence of the press on literature, as well as the real talent of some of these writers, since such works fit into the long-standing and world-wide literary tradition of documentary fiction. Among the dozens that have been published recently, there are several remarkable documentary novels, such as *The Quiet Days Are Burning* by Xuan Cang and *The Land Crowded with People and Ghosts*, by Nguyen Khac Truong. The first, published in 1987 when the author was editor-in-chief of *Lao Dong*, is set in an editorial office at the time the press started its fight against corruption and injustice. Readers were interested in stories about journalists who had to overcome great difficulties, meet with notorious and/or influential contacts, and even endanger their lives in order to expose brutal truths. In the second novel, by focusing on a feud between two village families who hate each other, Nguyen Khac Truong exposes the reality of the Vietnamese countryside, where people cling to outdated customs and quarrels, and where dictatorial practices and incompetent management cause tragedy. Prior to 1986, these subjects were 'restricted areas' to both the press and literature.

Journalism requires most of the writer's time, energy and intellect. But even though writers are engaged in journalism, they can't escape their literary karma. Even with better living conditions, writers still lack time, money and the small quiet places they need to write the works which haunt and torment them. So far, the loss of government financial support has only had a modest affect on some writers. But in the future, writers will need more support from the government, social organisations and generous sponsors.

The mass media in Vietnam is now vigorous. Over 400 newspapers and magazines and the network of radio and television stations that broadcast to the districts are funded by the central government, provincial governments, and industry. But the prospects for some sections of the media are not altogether bright. Many newspapers will be suspended because of the poor quality of their work: they tend to simply rewrite and reprint articles from foreign newspapers over and over. Many newspapers will also close because their funders can not continue their investments. These things will probably help end some of the present chaos of the press. Finally, the participation of

writers, who always need and flourish best in full freedom and a truly democratic atmosphere, will have a positive and effective affect on the development of the press.

**FOUR**  
**VOICE OF VIETNAM RADIO**  
**PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE PROSPECTS**

**Nguyen Long**

**Role, Responsibility, and Organisation**

As a state-run institution, Voice of Vietnam (VOV)'s role is to disseminate the Party line and State policies. It also acts as a two-way forum between the public and the government. VOV is authorised by the government to manage the planning, technical and professional aspects of 53 local radio stations throughout the country.

VOV is responsible for planning and implementing a five-year development plan for the national broadcasting network, and control of the budget of the national broadcasting system. It also helps local stations with content, planning and production of programs, broadcasting technology and techniques, carries out scientific research and applies advances in broadcasting technology, and works out and implements plans of international cooperation in broadcasting.

VOV has a total staff of about 1400, 300 of whom are reporters. It is organised into the following Departments and Divisions:

- Editorial Secretariat
- Department of Current Affairs
- Department of Economy, Science and Technology
- Department of Culture and Society
- Department of Literature and Arts
- Department of Music
- Department of Ethnic Languages
- Overseas Service
- Department of Local Broadcasting
- Department of Broadcasting Technology
- Audio Centre
- Department of Personnel and Training
- Department of Finance and Accounting
- Department of International Relations
- Inspectorate
- Administration

- Local and overseas representative offices

## **A Brief History**

Voice of Vietnam's first transmission went to air at 11.30 am on 7 September 1945, only five days after Vietnam declared national independence from the French. The program featured President Ho Chi Minh's Declaration of Independence to the world, a news bulletin and some commentaries. It was broadcast in five languages: Vietnamese, English, French, Mandarin and Esperanto.

Every broadcast began with the announcement, 'This is the Voice of Vietnam, broadcasting from Hanoi, capital of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam' followed by a choir singing the song 'Smashing Fascism'.

Under French domination, Vietnam was erased from the world map as a country. There were only the geographical names of Annam, Tonkin, Cochinchina, Laos and Cambodia for the five parts of French Indochina. The name 'Voice of Vietnam' was chosen as a confirmation of an independent country. Under French rule, the French language was the compulsory medium of education; Vietnamese was treated as a foreign language. So Voice of Vietnam asserts that Vietnam is a single country which has a language and a 'voice' in the international arena.

Vietnam won independence from Japanese fascists and Vietnam joined the Allies in the anti-fascist struggle. Since its foundation, VOV's signal tune 'Smashing fascism' is still unchanged, although the country is now actively engaged in peaceful national construction. The signal tune 'Smashing fascism' is still there because it highlights the historical background of the time the Radio was founded, and that fighting fascism is still an important task for Vietnam and the whole of mankind.

The Voice of Vietnam now broadcasts simultaneously in five channels on the Domestic Service and eleven languages on the Overseas Service. The Domestic Service consists of the following channels:

*Channel 1:* News, current affairs, economic and music programs on medium and short waves with a daily airtime of 18 hours.

*Channel 2:* Cultural, social, educational, literature, arts and music programs on both medium and short waves with a daily airtime of 18 hours.

*Channel 3:* in service of ethnic minority people, broadcast in five ethnic minority languages: H'Mong, Khmer, Ede, Giarai and Bana. Meanwhile, 20 provincial radio stations broadcast in 20 ethnic languages.

*Channel 4:* General programs broadcast one hour a day from Ho Chi Minh City on Medium wave.

*Channel 5:* Music programs broadcast round the clock plus bulletins in Vietnamese, English, French and Russian and foreign language and Vietnamese language teaching.

VOV's Overseas Service broadcasts in eleven foreign languages: English, French, Russian, Spanish, Japanese, Mandarin, Cantonese, Indonesian, Thai, Lao, and Khmer



and in Vietnamese for overseas Vietnamese. The total daily airtime of the Overseas Service is thirteen hours.

For foreigners living in Hanoi and adjacent areas, Overseas Service programs are also broadcast on medium wave and in the future will be broadcast on FM. The Overseas Service broadcasts can be heard virtually throughout the world and it has so far received feedback from about 70 countries. English and Japanese programs often receive the biggest share of listeners' letters. In the first half of 1994, the Overseas Services received about 1600 listeners' letters from around the world, who account for only a tiny proportion of those who actually listen to the transmission.<sup>1</sup>

### **Globalisation and Competition**

Globalisation poses problems for VOV in the form of increased competition. Since its foundation over 50 years ago, especially in the wars against foreign aggression lasting three decades, VOV has closely linked itself with the nation's history and destiny. Yet in the new stage of development, VOV is facing challenges in various internal aspects, especially personnel, technology and program formats:

A majority of staff at VOV are now in the over-40 age group. They often lack foreign language efficiency and are slow to adapt to technological changes. The bulk of VOV's technology is analog and a mixture of equipment from various sources: China, Russia, Hungary, USA, France and Japan. Radio formats which were extremely effective during the two wars against foreign aggression now appear outdated in the new trend towards market-oriented globalisation.

Externally, growing competition from other media inside and outside the country is the main challenge facing VOV.

In Vietnam, the state only exercises direct management over public broadcasting and television systems. All other forms of mass media belong to mass organisations, social organisations and professional associations. It is not only large organisations like the Trade Union, Women's Union and Youth Union that have newspapers and radio and television programs, but all of the social, economic and professional organisations have the right to issue their own newspapers as well.

Television is a young medium in Vietnam. It emerged 25 years later than radio and initially used the facilities of VOV. Vietnam Television has grown vigorously and is becoming one of the main communications media in the country. Now television programs are broadcast on four channels and through satellite. There are several relay stations throughout the country.

The first Vietnamese newspaper came off the press in 1865 and since then the Vietnamese print medium has made rapid development and has never thrived as much as now. At present in Vietnam there are over 400 regular publications, including dailies, weeklies, bi-weeklies and monthlies circulating more than 360 million copies.

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<sup>1</sup> Review of VOV's Overseas Service's foreign listeners' letters in 1996.

Most localities have their own newspapers. Recently, the number of publications in foreign languages such as English, French and Chinese has increased markedly, a trend which contributes greatly not only to the information market in the country but also signals the possibility of entry into international markets.

Foreign satellite and wire services are another area of competition for VOV. Vietnam's media receives information from such giant news providers as CNN, Reuters, BBC, and AFP. According to Errol Hodge, 'International satellite television will no double supplant it as the principal means of international mass communication' (*Radio Wars: Truth, Propaganda, and the Struggle for Radio Australia*. 1995:265). Globalisation as a result of satellite and the Internet is making communications media virtually free from space, time and place, 'Previous communications technologies made the news more global. Now the new media also make it more local'.

However, radio still possesses a strong foothold in Vietnam for several reasons: Vietnam is a predominantly agricultural country, with over 80 per cent of the population living in the countryside. Television transmissions reach mostly urban areas, whereas radio can reach as many as 80 per cent of the total population, even in the most remote areas. Radio has been and continues to be the most popular means of information for the masses. VOV remains more popular than television and newspapers because it is faster, cheaper and easier to access.

Even in the urban areas, radio is the dominant medium in the daytime and only gives way to television from the late afternoon, when people get back from work and need more visual information and entertainment.

Like some 40 years ago in Australia when television was introduced, people thought the advent of television might mean the end of the radio era. In fact, radio continues to grow, and it is not an exaggeration to say that it is now developing faster than ever. In Australia, ABC's Radio National and SBS Radio are always high in profile and enjoy substantial audience share. It is the same with VOV, which enjoys far more popularity than the other media.

Throughout most of Asia and the Pacific, radio remains the principal broadcast medium, and in some places, it is more important than newspapers. Radio's advantages are obvious. It is far less expensive than television to install and operate; it requires fewer well-trained personnel; and radio receivers are within the means of vast numbers of people who cannot afford the much more costly TV sets. Radio is also particularly suited to the communication needs of nations and territories and over vast areas, those composed of many scattered islands and those where the mountainous terrain is a formidable obstacle to the development of television. Furthermore, radio is better able

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2 E. Hume, 'How New Technologies are Changing the News', in *Tabloids, Talk Radio and the Future of news- Technology's Impact on Journalism* (Washington D.C.: The Annenberg Washington Program in Communications Policy Studies of Northwestern University, 1995), 26.

than any other medium to overcome the barriers imposed by often extensive illiteracy and by the region's multitude of languages and cultures.<sup>3</sup>

This generalisation certainly applies to Vietnam at the present level of development. Different forms of media in Vietnam compete to cover news events. On the other hand, they commit themselves together to maintain and promote traditional culture and they join hands in the struggle against corruption, injustice and social evils. The Vietnamese government has acknowledged that many cases of corruption have been discovered and brought to trial by the media.

The impact of globalisation on VOV's performance is seen mainly in the rigours of a multi-channel environment. Founded over 50 years ago, Voice of Vietnam joined a tradition of public service broadcasting which has played a crucial historical role in many countries since World War Two. Public service broadcasting has a proud history of quality service and non-commercialism:

It is a fundamental principle then that public broadcasting must motivate the viewers as citizens possessing duties as well as rights, rather than as individual consumers possessing wallets and credit cards.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, along with the fast development of new technology and especially the emergence of the multi-channel environment, public broadcasting is facing fierce competition in terms of audience share and political impact. In Western countries there has been growing criticism from the community and the commercial sector that national broadcasters are departing from their original rationale to engage in biased reporting. Public service broadcasting has been requested to re-examine its purpose, nature and mission, even its legitimacy, in the new situation where the market is referred to as the only criterion for broadcasting choices. In Australia, public broadcasting institutions like the ABC and SBS are seen by some as 'unjustifiable luxuries' because they have no direct links with the market.

To retain its high-quality service and historical credibility VOV, like public broadcasters elsewhere, has to consider the issues of financing and technological change.

Public broadcasters operate mostly with government funding and partly with their self-generating revenue from independent sources. Reduction in government funding to public broadcasters, which is happening in most countries, poses serious problems to these institutions; they have to reshape their own financing models to survive. Voice of Vietnam is not strictly a public service institution like the ABC or the BBC but it has in many ways performed a similar role as a Western style public broadcaster. VOV differs

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3 John Merrill, 'Broadcasting', in *Global Journalism : A Survey of the World's Mass Media* (New York: Longman, 1983), 146-47.

4 Michael Tracey, 'Our Better Angels: The Condition of Public Service Broadcasting', *Media Information Australia* 66 (1992): 19.

from the BBC type of public service broadcasting system in terms of ideology, funding and monopoly status, but its functions which involve non-commercial, universal and educational characteristics share key elements of basic public broadcasting principles. Regarding the financing model, Vietnam is not yet in the same boat as Western public service broadcasters. Voice of Vietnam continues to get government funding and backing, especially in the process of modernising their broadcasting technology. A large amount of money is being spent on VOV's development plan from now to beyond 2000.

Most national broadcasters are committed to non-commercial advertisements, such as one hears on the ABC or the BBC. In countries like Vietnam, where there is no competition from commercial media, advertising is nonetheless allowed, not only as a means of generating revenue but also to promote manufacturers' products to the audience. As a public broadcaster such funding is necessary for VOV to maintain the quality and specialisation of its radio products, while keeping pace with innovation and the highest standards.

Technological advances such as submarine cable networks and integrated satellite systems capable of transmitting large quantities of information have virtually turned the world into an 'Electronic Global Village'. Take cable service as an example.

The wired consumer can get his customised news all day, at any time of day, updated regularly by his provider. He will no longer watch, hear, or read video, audio, or text 'by appointment', when the news purveyor decides to send it out. It will be stored, in digital form, for the customer to call up when and how he wants.<sup>5</sup>

Although Voice of Vietnam Radio will survive well into the next century as a reliable source of information in the region, a number of factors will have negative impact on its performance, especially for the Overseas Service.

Shortwave broadcasting is no longer a unique means of information dissemination. Satellite service can now bring global news on either AM or FM. Radio Australia has to cut down on some of its language services such as French, Thai and Cantonese because these transmissions are losing audience on their shortwave service.

The common practice at the Overseas Service of using pre-recorded programs is a slow method of providing information to the audience in the region and the rest of the world.

There is a growing number of international broadcasters in the region that are strong competitors for VOV because they not only have greater transmission strength but provide longer hours of service.

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5 Hume, *op. cit.*, 25.

## Future Prospects

Since its foundation, Voice of Vietnam has contributed greatly to the success of two wars against foreign aggression and the post-war national reconstruction. In the new era of information, it is much harder for a public service to maintain a niche in the market. The audience, having free access to information, basically can tune in to whatever source it likes. The question is, what should VOV produce in terms of content and formats to retain its audience size? The following problems still remain:

There is a lack of diversity in both news and features or documentaries. The news bulletin is normally too serious or has a high percentage of so-called 'protocol news'.

Writing style is still formal and more appropriate for readers than listeners. There are few interview grabs in a bulletin, which makes it rather 'dry' and less convincing.

Despite major changes in the domestic service with regard to news format and presentation, external service bulletins still remain rigid.

Unlike Radio Australia, which has an extensive network of news correspondents throughout the Pacific to give first-hand coverage of events in the region, VOV's Overseas Service has only a tiny number of foreign correspondents. This limits VOV's perspective on regional events.

## Reforms

VOV gives top priority to reforms in program content and formats, advanced technology, and organisational restructuring.

Voice of Vietnam, like other broadcasters, will be drawn into the global trend of advanced media technology. Digitalisation and satellite broadcasting will greatly affect professional practice. The news values are still there, but the methods of making news are to be changed to enable faster and more lively program delivery. The crucial factor for a broadcaster to survive is determined primarily by its program content which is handled mostly by journalists rather than technology. Technological change acts only as a catalyst for high standards of programs. It is the journalists that decide the identity of each station by offering 'something exclusive'. To gain a foothold in the media market VOV will have to both upgrade technology and also restructure its organisation to encourage staff participation.

*News and Current Affairs*, which was first broadcast on 7 September 1945 when the radio went to air for the first time, is seen as the spearhead of VOV's advance. Since 1 July 1994, some news and music programs have been broadcast live and highly appreciated for their short, sharp information and harmonious combination of information and entertainment. To have quick access to information, VOV has set up a computerised news centre connected with such wire services as Reuters, AFP, Kyodo and AP. Efficient young staff have been employed to carry out news processing. Some of these have been sent overseas for intensive courses on live broadcasting, news processing and advanced broadcasting technology.

Information technology has been widely applied in Editorial and in Sound and Transmission quality control. There is partial installation of the Basys computerised newsroom system, the most popular technology in Western media organisations, and the D-cart digital editing system imported from Australia's ABC. Other facilities include modern telephone interview booths, live studios, Outside Broadcast Vans and professional reporters' recorders. VOV is aiming for on-line information access through the Internet and hopes to establish a VOV homepage similar to those of other media organisations.

Drastic changes are taking place in the organisation of the workplace in public service broadcasting. National broadcasters tend to employ a lot of personnel. Technological change has had far-reaching impact on organisation. The introduction of digital technology and limited or declining budgets means a dramatic reduction in the workforce. Take Australia's ABC for example, where the government's 77 million dollar budget cuts will mean that about 900 people lose their jobs in the next two years.

To survive fierce competition from other media, especially television, on the information super highway and to keep up with technological advances and retain its leading role among other Vietnamese media, VOV and the whole broadcasting industry in Vietnam will have to pursue comprehensive reforms in the next century. So far VOV has been joining overseas training institutions to run several in-house training courses, and has sent its most efficient staff to overseas training and broadcast institutions to learn advanced journalism skills and new broadcasting technology. Some of the overseas training institutions include Australia's ABC, the BBC, Thomson Foundation, Radio Netherlands, Radio France International, Germany's Deutsche Welle and the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD). Some of VOV's staff are attending MA journalism courses at universities in Australia. VOV also sends senior editorial and technical staff on study tours to advanced broadcasting facilities in the region and Western countries, to work out the most appropriate model for VOV, and recruits new young staff with both academic qualifications and language skills.

### **Development Plan for 1995-2000**

With a view to developing the radio broadcasting service to better serve home and foreign listeners and overseas Vietnamese, the Vietnamese government has approved the Development Plan for the Broadcasting Industry of Vietnam in the 1995-2000 period and beyond 2000, aiming at enriching and diversifying programs of high quality. The plan also intends to achieve one radio set per family in the near future, and includes six major projects to develop Vietnam's broadcasting industry in the 1995-2000 period. They are:

1. Work out a master plan for VOV's Domestic and Overseas Services' programs, and coordinate transmissions of central and local stations.
2. Apply new technology in radio production with advanced radio formats in both metropolitan and provincial stations as well as Central.

3. Plan a unified network of transmission on a national scale.
4. Increase broadcasting facilities to provide further information access at the grass-roots level.
5. Conduct research on organisation and administration of radio stations at different levels as well as management models.
6. Work out a plan for science and technology research and training, and retraining of technical and editorial staff, to catch up with advanced broadcasting techniques.

### **Conclusion**

Voice of Vietnam, founded in 1945, has closely associated itself with the nation's history of resistance to foreign aggression and national reconstruction. In the present context of market economy and globalisation, VOV is undergoing qualitative and quantitative changes to survive into the 21st century against growing competition from other media, especially satellite television. VOV is carrying out comprehensive reforms in content and formats, striving for digital technology, streamlining its organisational structure, training and retraining its personnel; all to achieve better service while retaining its past glory as a national broadcaster. Voice of Vietnam has been and will continue to be the most effective news medium in Vietnam in the future to contribute to the process of renovation in the country.

## FIVE

### MAKING LIVE RADIO IN VIETNAM

Ngo Phuong Dung

#### Upgrading Provincial Radio Stations

In 1993, the SIDA (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) signed its first agreement with the Ministry of Culture and Information to support Vietnam's cultural and media sector for the period 1 July 1993 to 31 December 1995. The overall objectives of the cultural support were: to contribute to the reform process and to the development of democracy in Vietnam, and to enhance national identity.

Within its framework for support to the cultural and media sector, priority was given to the upgrading of provincial radio stations. After screening of the local radio stations in the country and with the support from Ministry of Culture and Information, Hanoi Radio and TV station in the North, Thua Thien Hue Radio station in the Central district and later Can Tho Radio and TV station in the South were selected for the pilot phase of the project. The Swedish Broadcasting Corporation in Malm' (Sveriges Radi' Malmohus/P 4, riks) was assigned by SIDA to be the consultants for implementation of the project.

The overall objective was to support the development of radio broadcasts that answered the needs of society, based on existing traditions and the changes of modern Vietnam, and to also contribute to the development of the society by interaction with listeners.

The immediate objectives were: To provide training in order to improve staff skills, demonstrate alternative methods of radio production, provide inspiration, and be a catalyst for different professional activities in Vietnamese radio broadcasting. Also, to change the format and working methods of today by introducing live broadcasts and so put the station in a position for participating in renewal, that is, *doi moi*, [?] and encourage the improvement of the radio services in accordance with the overall objectives. Lastly, to present the project results at workshops and other types of discussions with broadcasters from other provincial radio stations.

In general the training has followed the outline below, even if it has been implemented and accomplished flexibly and there are differences between the participating stations:

Firstly, the radio stations were assessed to find out the quality and quantity of present equipment, the management situation, the organisation and financial situation, the educational level and skills of journalists and technicians, and of course the standard of programs put on the air.

Secondly, for each station training that involved all staff was accomplished in two phases: Basic training. This involved an introductory one-week familiarisation and a



three to five-week training course at the radio station aimed at starting live broadcasts, for technicians and journalists who were provided with light radio equipment. Trainees learned basic skills, such as interview methods, editing, live presentation, and operational techniques.

After basic training they built up an organisation, 'Across the Day', to run daily live programs with a mix of news, current affairs, features, and music. As a third step, they initiated and sustained specific daily programs.

Follow-up efforts were aimed at maintaining and developing the live programs and staff skills, with a two-week training course for technicians and journalists at the radio station, and a radio workshop for broadcasters at the end of the pilot project.

The final training model developed during the project period for assisting one provincial radio station consists of four stages conducted over a period of approximately eight to ten months: One week of introductory training, three weeks of basic training, two weeks of follow-up training, and finally a workshop for local broadcasters in the region.

Journalists and technicians trained together. For instance, both journalists and technicians participated in the journalism lectures, and at training in the use of portable tape recorders, editing and making items. This reduced the gap between the two groups, and helped them to understand how the other works.

The first step in the training was to assemble new equipment for upgrading a control room and studio, so that the technicians could gain knowledge of the equipment to run and maintain it. As soon as the new control room and studio were equipped and put into operation, the training concentrated on basic skills, 'Across the Day' – how to organise and run a new live program, how to start and maintain live programs, and create a blueprint for developing a New Radio Model.

The implementation of the training scheme proceeded with variations according to each provincial station, as detailed below.

### **Thua Thien Hue Radio**

Thua Thien Hue Radio has a long broadcasting tradition as a French radio station, a U.S. radio station and, since the liberation, as a Vietnamese radio station. Today the station is one of the few provincial stations without a TV section.

Thua Thien Hue Radio was the first radio station selected for this pilot project. It took considerable training, and explanation of proper organisation, team work and delegation of responsibility before the station began to prepare for the project. The staff made many training programs which were not aired immediately, only broadcast through a wire to a radio set in the editor's office. The daily programs of 10 to 15 minutes, 30 minutes and finally 60 minutes contained the basic elements of modern radio-making. Everybody from the driver to the director was encouraged to make a 15-minute live program about some piece of music, which helped people understand what is involved in live broadcasting, as well as understand each others' duty.

Features were made in the field, using professional portable cassettes and tape recorders, including numerous interviews and voice reports based on 'Vox pop' (voice of the people and close to life). Guests were invited to the studio and live music presented by local artists was also introduced.

Since the training program, the content of radio programs has not changed as much as work methods, although as the motto 'close to life' is followed more 'ordinary' people are put on the air, and story items cover issues that involve a broader spectrum of the population than before. After almost five weeks of basic training, a 60-minute daily program was finally put on the air using the training format. A daily team of a producer, a technician, studio reporters and reporter was responsible for the program.

As a means to maintain the new working methods, the station was given the task of arranging a training course for journalists and technicians from nine district radio stations in the same province. Two or three local broadcasters from each district were trained at the provincial radio station in Hue, and each district received a professional portable cassette tape recorder with microphone. News of the success of the first training course spread widely among local radio stations.

The training opened up opportunities for continued close cooperation between district and provincial radio. The districts can not begin live broadcasts yet, but their programs are more lively and they have come to cooperate closely with provincial radio. The latest district news is sent via telephone lines every hour to Hue Radio.

After the completion of basic training, follow-up training and the final workshop at the beginning of 1995, Hue Radio was broadcasting live two of its three and half daily hours on the air.

### **Hanoi Radio and TV Station**

The same model used for Hue Radio station was applied to Hanoi Radio and TV station. Journalists in Hanoi Radio and TV are experienced. Besides applying the basic methods of vox pop and real-time information to radio, these skills are also used in television production. It takes much effort for Hanoi Radio and TV station to compete with the many kinds of media in the capital. This competition is why its radio programs are not drawing the attention of many listeners yet.

### **Can Tho Radio and TV Station**

The Can Tho Radio and TV station broadcasts between eight to ten hours per day, in the morning, afternoon and evening. As with other local stations, it relays VOV programs for a couple of hours per day. Before the start of training at the station, there was a determination to begin live broadcasts with or without Swedish assistance, and Can Tho actually started to broadcast live 10 minutes per day. The same model as for Hanoi and Hue Radio stations was applied for Can Tho Radio when the project started there. Reporters and technicians from Hanoi and Hue Radio Station were invited to the introductory workshop and acted as assistant trainers for Swedish experts. For the first

time in the project, Can Tho station personnel were introduced to and trained in the use of digital editing equipment.

As in Hue, the Can Tho Radio and TV station arranged training courses for district radio stations in the province. Reporters and technicians from the provincial station visited seven district radio stations, acting as trainers. The training opened up opportunities for cooperation between the provincial radio and the district radio stations. Can Tho Radio and TV station thus has been a good example for the eleven provinces in the Mekong delta.

The training ended with a workshop for all nineteen provincial radio stations in the south, the pilot radio stations and officials from Voice of Vietnam, the Ministry of Culture and Information, and the Ministry of Planning and Investment. Can Tho Radio and TV station was now broadcasting live three times a day; in the early morning, at noon and in the early evening, a total of three and a half hours of its nine hours on the air.

### **Results of the Pilot Phase**

The two-year pilot phase of the Swedish-Vietnamese project 'Support to Provincial Radio in Vietnam' ended in December 1995. Live radio programs are now being broadcast six days a week from the three participating provincial radio stations. The staff and directors of these stations are enthusiastic about the new working methods in journalism, management procedures, and technical improvements. The project is well known among other journalists and there have been a number of articles about it in the press.

The project has been fortunate in at least two respects. First, the timing has been right. The project has fitted well into the present Vietnamese renovation policy, launched in 1986, towards a more open and participatory society. Undoubtedly there is a demand from the public, from journalists, editors and radio staff, for reforms in the media sector – a process that first started in the print media. One main argument for this '*doi moi* journalism' is that a market economy needs a well-informed public to work well. Judging from the existing wide range of economic and other specialised magazines, this point has been understood by Vietnamese decision-makers.

Second, the project was lucky in its selection of project managers. Managers and staff from the three radio stations are very enthusiastic, eager to learn and to change ways of making radio. The project has already had some positive effects during its pilot phase. Apart from achieving its objective of initiating live broadcasts with more interesting radio programs and news, it has also involved ordinary people in program-making and stimulated journalists to become more ambitious and hardworking. Programs are more interesting for listeners in both content and form, dealing with subjects of concern to an audience largely consisting of farmers in these provinces. Interviews with ordinary people are frequent, something that never happened before. Another interesting innovation in broadcasting was providing information on daily market prices for a variety of crops and commodities.

The pilot phase was deemed successful. It received a lot of favourable public attention and aroused considerable interest among the 53 provincial radio and TV stations in Vietnam. SIDA thus decided to continue to support and broaden the project to other local radio stations in the country, for the three years 1996-1998.

However, in order to obtain better project results, there are several aspects which need to be improved.

When the pilot project started, the project document was mainly prepared by Swedish experts. The main driving force in the project was also the Swedish team. Now, however, the pilot phase is over, and before the project enters a normal and more stable phase a more sustainable organisation must be formed. The responsibility, the 'ownership' of the project has to be transferred to a competent Vietnamese counterpart. The organisation of the project has to be decentralised, with a continued focus on the provincial station level, and without administrative red tape.

For better control of the second phase of the project, a Management Board was formed, with representatives from concerned departments within Voice of Vietnam. The project document was worked out by the Management Board of the project at the Voice of Vietnam. At present the radio sector in Vietnam is undergoing a learning process in the production of live broadcasts. With the experience gained during the implementation of the pilot phase of the project, 'Upgrading the provincial radio stations in Vietnam', it is expected that the Voice of Vietnam, with its network throughout the country, can continue to apply this model to other local stations without any external support later on.

It is hoped that, with the changes in organisation, the radio project will run well, and that SIDA's contribution in the process of *doi moi* in Vietnam in general and in the course of changing the way of making live radio program in particular, will be of help for Vietnam.

In May 1998, Swedish Radio and Voice of Vietnam signed an agreement on bilateral cooperation, which serves to supplement the current US\$3 million project funded by SIDA to support local radio in live broadcasting until 1999.

## SIX

### INSTANT NOODLE PROPAGANDA: VIETNAM TELEVISION IN THE LATE 1990s

Jan Forrester

In 1973, when I first came to Hanoi, capital of what was still the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, international phone calls were an exotic experience. Routed through Moscow, they often disappeared into infinity. The system could deliver a telegram, including an encoded cablegram, quickly and without fail. Real-time conversations were problematic, however, for a government obsessed with controlling information.

With the spectacular collapse of Communist regimes in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Vietnam was exposed to a new set of international realities. Since opening its doors to market forces in 1989, Vietnam has ridden the bumpy and sometimes winding road of *doi moi*, or renovation. The magnitude of economic and social changes is huge. Smuggled goods now flow across the country's borders and undercut the prices of legally imported products. Clothing comes from Thailand, apples and appliances from China and hard drugs from Myanmar and Laos. Tourists now comb the country in a way unimaginable a decade ago. Information is traversing borders via modern telecommunications, the Internet, international short-wave radio and satellite television.

In opening its doors to market forces and the ambiguous blessings of globalisation Vietnam is also confronting powerful international forces of information technology, consumer culture and mass media – the latter a commodity to be bought and sold and not the more recognisable tool of propaganda and nation-building.

Vietnamese authorities respond to economic or social challenges in a number of established ways: by observing what happens in China, a 1000-year old habit of necessity; through long discussions to ensure decisions by consensus which often produce no clear direction; and by reacting to a crisis. The collapse of communism in Europe and the Soviet Union was one such crisis. Satellites in the sky showering unwanted cultural and political 'products' over Vietnam was another – cyberspace's equivalent of the old imperialist gunboat in the harbour, demanding access to local markets. Satellite television has confronted the belief of many Asian governments that they still have control of the media agenda in their own countries, or more explicitly the information and cultural agendas.

This is particularly true in Vietnam where all mass media, television, press and radio, support an information flow from the top down and from the centre out. It is still essentially the same system used during what Vietnamese call the American war: through an efficient information network the most junior cadre behind the lines in

southern Vietnam was well-informed about Communist Party policy, war strategy, and what was required of her or him.

Within Vietnam's Communist Party the generation which fought the American war and, in many cases, the French and the Chinese as well, still controls Vietnam's political, administrative, information and cultural institutions as well as mass organisations. A siege mentality still motivates many of these old guards of the revolution, who see themselves as protectors against 'peaceful evolution', an alleged American-led campaign promoting democratic values but aimed at defeating socialism forever. They were in the forefront of the country's wars of national liberation within the last half-century in which millions of Vietnamese died. In the transition from socialism to a market economy they see political and economic stability as paramount to Vietnam's ordered development. They see themselves as guardians of that stability. Fears are expressed, particularly by the older generation, of cultural invasion and a rapid proliferation of Western political and social values. It is not a minor issue. The Communist Party Central Committee's mid-1998 Plenum was devoted to formulating a policy to combat this perceived invasion.

It is endlessly fascinating to view the realities of modern, changing Vietnam superimposed on the template of old, revolutionary socialism on any one of Vietnam Television's channels. This state-run organisation still operates as an information or propaganda arm of the Party and Government. Yet it is also a revenue-generating commercial entity. Private market research, a relatively new phenomenon in Vietnam, indicates audiences want less propaganda and more films, entertainment and sport. Authorities recognise this. The challenge is how to deliver a mix of programming which serves both major stakeholders – the Party and Government on the one hand, and audiences on the other.

This description of how Vietnam's state-run television has responded, on-screen as well as off-screen, to Vietnam's historic change of direction after the fall of Communism in Europe and the massive challenge of global television, is formed largely from my own observations of the television industry in Vietnam over a period of 5 years. Television has emerged as the most important mass media at a critical time when the government needs to intensify efforts to explain and justify changing government policies to its 77 million people.

### **Vietnamese Television in the Late 1990s – From Local to International**

Television is the dominant mass media in Vietnam. Market research companies report 95 per cent of households in Hanoi and 89 per cent in Ho Chi Minh City, the former Saigon possess television sets. Few figures exist for rural areas where at least 70 per cent of the population live. There the government provides financial assistance to enable people at commune-level throughout the country to gain access to television sets.

Vietnam Television (VTV) is state-owned and run, with headquarters in Hanoi. It was only in the mid-1990s that Hanoi secured administrative control over provincial

stations, formerly under their local People's Committees, and a national network has developed. VTV Central in Hanoi possesses four channels:

VTV 1 is a mix of general programs, including news, culture, science, entertainment and sport.

VTV 2 is the science and education channel.

VTV 3 broadcasts cultural, sports and entertainment programs.

VTV 4 broadcasts internationally. It is primarily aimed at Vietnamese communities in Europe, the Asian region and Australia. The capital also has a local station, Hanoi TV. There are three regional stations, (Da Nang and Hue in central Vietnam and Can Tho in the southern Mekong delta), and there are local stations in each of the country's 61 provinces.

According to its Master Plan, VTV hopes to reach 80 per cent of Vietnam's households by the year 2000, including remote mountainous border regions and offshore islands. About 20 million people, nearly one-third of Vietnam's population, live in the country's mountainous regions. Most are from ethnic minority groups, some of whom have, in the past, shown tendencies towards independence from lowland French-colonial or Vietnamese authority. They remain the poorest of Vietnam's poor: most are illiterate and many do not speak Vietnamese. The Party and Government see the use of media as important in consolidating loyalty to Vietnam among groups who have language and cultural links outside its borders and across the region.

While expanding domestic distribution of programs is the main task, international transmission of Vietnamese programming is also assuming a greater political urgency. After years of isolation Vietnam has joined the satellite game. Programs are carried within the Asian region on Measat 1. Thaicom 3 carries programming to a larger area bounded by Africa and Western Europe, Russia, China and Australia. A major aim is to reach Vietnamese communities in Europe, North America, the Asian region and Australia. Vietnam Television is trying to secure cable access for free re-broadcast of its channel VTV4 in regions of the United States where Vietnamese-Americans are concentrated. It is also trying to secure re-broadcast of programs through SBS in Australia. Neither of these deals will be politically easy to achieve given the antipathy of local emigre groups toward the Hanoi government.

Both Vietnam Television and Radio the Voice of Vietnam have transmitters on the Spratly Islands, which the Vietnamese call Truong Sa, extending broadcast services to Vietnamese military personnel stationed there. Sovereignty over the potentially oil-rich Spratlys is contested by China and several ASEAN nations, including Vietnam.

### **How Do We Run This Show? Party and Government and the Role of Television**

Vietnam Television does not operate within a legislative framework normal in Western countries, or even neighbouring states like Malaysia or Singapore. It is tasked through broad 'policy' statements made at Communist Party Congresses, sections of the Constitution, decrees issued by the Party, and ongoing directives from Party and

Government. Essentially these statements define the socio-political and administrative roles required of Vietnam Television, which include national management of television throughout the country. In practice the Communist Party determines the overall strategic role and direction of Vietnam Television, (as it does all media), including VTV's relations with international organisations and foreign television companies.

Like most other heads of state media, the Director-General of Vietnam Television, with a rank equivalent to a junior minister, has served time with the Commission for Culture and Ideology of the Communist Party's Central Committee. The Commission is a media watchdog and exercises direct, continuing editorial control over press, television and radio through regular meetings with senior media officials. These meetings dictate the media's emphasis and approach to major items on the government's domestic and international agenda. Vietnam Television's current Director-General, Mr Ho Anh Dzung, reports administratively to the Office of the Government (which is the department under the Prime Minister). VTV receives annual funding allocated by the National Assembly through the Ministry of Finance.

There has been discussion over the last few years about the formation of a media super-ministry combining television, radio and press. VTV, Radio the Voice of Vietnam and the Vietnam News Agency were split from the Ministry of Culture and Information in 1993 to form separate organisations. This arrangement has allowed all three media arms to pursue their organisational strategies in the new era of *doi moi*. Since editorial supervision is already exercised directly by the Party through the Commission for Culture and Ideology, the major advantage of amalgamation at this time would be increased Government control over the commercial operations of media or, to put it more bluntly, advertising revenue.

Central Government control over provincial stations has been at issue since the early 1990s. In the spirit of the move to a market economy, some provincial stations were preparing to negotiate direct deals with Western program providers who were offering free programming to cash-strapped TV stations in the hope of developing long-term business relations. This meant that the importation of Western programs could be finalised outside the administrative control and ideological filter of Vietnam Television (and Party officials) in Hanoi. VTV officials in Hanoi successfully lobbied the then Prime Minister, Mr Vo Van Kiet, to restore authority to the centre.

However, Hanoi has found it much harder to bring television executives in Ho Chi Minh City to heel over the issue of management and programming autonomy. For what can only be described as political reasons, Ho Chi Minh City Television, in Vietnam's largest city, is not classified as a regional station; it has a lower provincial status. Prior to a senior management change, engineered by VTV headquarters in 1997, there was a history of tension, and at least one spectacular disagreement, between Ho Chi Minh Television and Hanoi. Within the context of the complex relationship between north and south after 1975, this imbroglio indicated to Hanoi how control over even domestic media has changed.



Tensions came to a head in 1994, when VTV headquarters in Hanoi agreed to nationally network a Japanese series, 'Oshin', on Sunday nights. The series was funded by a group of multi-national Japanese companies through a locally-based advertising agency. This was free programming for VTV from an important source. Vietnam Television executives were keen to build firm relationships with the Japanese government and business sector. In Laos the Japanese government had funded the construction of national television studios and the Vietnamese hoped to conclude a similar, larger deal for Hanoi. 'Oshin' was the first deal VTV executives had negotiated involving a foreign series and national advertising of such magnitude. It looked simple: Vietnam has only one time zone and Ho Chi Minh City is the country's largest single advertising market.

The management of Ho Chi Minh City Television, backed by the People's Committee of the city, refused to broadcast the series through its station. They objected to Hanoi's dictat on a simultaneous network broadcast, criticised the large number of clustered advertisements considered disruptive to viewers' enjoyment of the program, and took exception to Hanoi accents in the locally-dubbed version. The Japanese companies had also provided Vietnam Television in Hanoi with equipment to dub the program in multiple voices, as opposed to the normal practice of using a single voice for all characters.

The Director-General of Vietnam Television flew to Ho Chi Minh City to resolve the situation, yet could not persuade Ho Chi Minh City Television officials to change their position. In the end a simultaneous broadcast occurred in Ho Chi Minh City because VTV headquarters quickly established a new channel, by erecting a new antennae in the city and feeding the program by satellite from Hanoi. As things turned out, 'Oshin' became a very popular soapie and spawned a new word in Vietnamese: *Oshin* is now a slang word for maid.

### **Politics and the Top Job at Vietnam Television**

The current Director General of VTV, Mr Ho Anh Dzung, was appointed to the position in January 1994. In 1997 he narrowly missed selection to the Party Central Committee in the final round. Following this he was invited to stand for election to the National Assembly and secured a seat in the 1997 elections. These moves constitute Mr Dzung gaining the required status within the Party to underpin his position as head of national television.

His predecessor was Mr Pham Khac Lam, whose demise had been rumoured in Hanoi during 1993. It came swiftly in early January 1994. Mr Lam had an open, engaging personal style, which appealed to many foreigners. During 1993 he had separate discussions in Hanoi with US businessman Rupert Murdoch and Australian media entrepreneur Kerry Packer. Kerry Packer's company, Publishing and Broadcasting Limited, is involved in a business co-operation contract with the Ministry of Planning and Investment to produce an English-language business weekly, the *Vietnam Investment Review*.

Mr Packer reportedly proposed to VTV executives the establishment of a horse-racing satellite TV channel, with betting agencies on the ground throughout east Asia. It was a monumental political blunder in a country where gambling is seen as a major 'social evil' and officially banned. Mr Packer's foray into Vietnam has repercussions years later: Vietnam Television officials still verbalise their suspicions of any television company or station with links to Mr Packer's Channel 9 network, its affiliates or any television company in which Channel 9 has shareholdings (such as the Australian Television Network, Channel 7).

Rupert Murdoch's dominant role in international satellite television programming caused the Vietnamese, among others, some anxiety. After a long isolation imposed by the American economic embargo, Vietnamese were in the early stages of learning to deal with the realities of their open-door policy. Earlier in 1993, Mr Murdoch had made his famous statement that authoritarian governments could not withstand the force of modern telecommunications technology. To welcome Murdoch in Hanoi so soon after that statement was high-risk politics and Mr Lam paid the price by losing his job.

By contrast, the current Director General, Mr Dzung, has succeeded in securing a \$US 300-400 million dollar soft loan from the Japanese government, which finally agreed to build and equip the new studio complex for Vietnam Television. Mr Murdoch has mended his fences with the Vietnamese to the extent that several of his Star TV channels are included in VTV's Multi-channel Microwave Distribution System (MMDS), and his executives have secured some free-to-air television deals with VTV.

### **Gone Global**

Vietnam Television is now operating within a world vastly different from that of 1987, when, as a mere department within Voice of Vietnam radio, it was separated from that organisation. In the last decade entertainment options have expanded greatly, for urban Vietnamese in particular. Foreign videos, which were illegal to import only a few years ago, are now available in profusion at corner video rental shops. Pirate videos of recent Hollywood film releases are becoming the norm. A pirate copy of 1998 Academy Award winner *Titanic* was on sale in Vietnam's cities within days of its cinema release in north America.

Film preferences have become one way of defining class among Vietnamese: the 'lower class' watches Chinese 'instant noodle' or kung fu video films from Hong Kong and Taiwan, while the so-called educated class watches Japanese, mainland Chinese or Western dramas on video or television. Karaoke has gripped Vietnam firmly by the throat and, while the broadcast of overseas Vietnamese singers, primarily from the USA, are not permitted on Vietnam Television, most back-street karaoke bars play them extensively. The Internet was introduced to Vietnam in late 1997 after authorities created firewalls, particularly against information posted by overseas Vietnamese. Within a short time subscription applications were running well ahead of the official ceiling on numbers of Internet accounts. Internet cafes have been established in Hanoi and, as in other countries, computer-literate young Vietnamese are opening 'group'

accounts. These same young Vietnamese are not permitted access to Internet accounts established in their offices: the hierarchy of access to information is controlled by trusted Party members, especially in media organisations.

Similar controls failed to stop the entry of satellite television into Vietnam, however. In 1993, satellite television dishes began to sprout on rooftops in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, despite official attempts to limit them to Party officials, hotels and expatriates. The issuing of licences for satellite dishes formally rests with the Ministry of Culture and Information but illegal installation expanded despite intermittent attempts to contain it, including old-fashioned rooftop surveillance by local peoples' committees. City apartment dwellers often combine resources to pay for small, cheap Taiwanese or Chinese dishes, or invest in the more expensive rotatable types.

### **Vietnamese Responses**

The government's strategic response to the challenge of satellite television has been a calculated 'liberalisation' of foreign broadcasts to permit, indeed assist, their relatively cheap entry so as to control distribution. Vietnam Television established its Multi channel Microwave Distribution System (MMDS) service in Hanoi, in September, 1996. A service is also operating in Ho Chi Minh City, and there are plans to extend MMDS to other major centres, such as Haiphong and Dalat.

At first glance it is not a cheap system given average local incomes: \$US200 for installation and monthly fees of \$US12 in Hanoi and \$US30 in Ho Chi Minh City. Like access to satellite TV, current MMDS access is officially limited to Party officials, hotels and expatriates. However, it is relatively easy to install an antennae, costing around \$US80, at the end of a long bamboo pole. This is increasingly what urban Vietnamese are doing. But that route to a cheap MMDS service may end soon. Vietnam Television plans to encode the MMDS signals in 1998, and charge for the decoder.

The Hanoi MMDS service currently broadcasts nine channels. This includes CNN (for which Vietnam Television pays \$US25,000 per year), the French TV5, OPT, Discovery, NBC, MTV, TNT (which includes hugely popular cartoon programs), Star Sports and Vietnam Television channel VTV1. Ho Chi Minh City currently broadcasts 12 channels.

The Vietnamese government has made a decision not to censor programs selected for broadcast through the MMDS service. To do so on a piecemeal basis would involve huge resources. The government will simply find it easier to exclude politically problematic channels should any programming offend.

### **Financing the Future**

As mentioned earlier, Vietnam Television does not operate within a legislative framework common to Western countries. The National Assembly allocates an annual budget which is disbursed quarterly by the Ministry of Finance. However, due to liquidity problems within Vietnam's finance system, the Ministry of Finance can never

guarantee VTV will receive the entire quarterly amount due. This is not a problem unique to television, but it ensures that long-term program planning is difficult.

Advertising is currently the only other major source of recurrent funding. According to VTV sources, 1997 revenue collected by television stations nationwide was approximately US\$25 million. Vietnam Television in Hanoi collected approximately \$US12 million and retained only about ten per cent, or \$US1.2 million, which was ploughed back into program production. The remainder went to the State's consolidated revenue coffers. While advertising revenue has increased over the last three years, television rates in Vietnam are still among the lowest in the world according to local market researchers. Currently a 60-second spot at prime time costs US\$4,000, which is more than double the rate in late 1996. A more judicious pricing policy over the last several years could have earned television considerably more revenue.

Finance for capital development, local production and program supply are continuing issues. Television producers would like healthy injections of finance from international co-productions as well as guaranteed foreign program supply. However, at a time when Vietnam Television is expanding across the country and market research is indicating a demand for more films, entertainment and sport, the supply of free or cheap foreign programs from Western companies has shrunk.

One example of how this situation developed involved Australian entrepreneur Mr Kerry Packer. His company offered an initial free supply of Australian programs to the local station, Hanoi Television. The programs proved popular. However, when the *Vietnam Investment Review* publicised its 1994 Memorandum of Understanding with Hanoi Television, it alerted Vietnam Television executives to yet another local TV deal which was happening outside their control – and the control of nationwide television management entrusted to VTV by the Party. The Prime Minister was successfully lobbied by VTV executives and Party officials to restore control of all television stations, including business deals with foreign program providers, to the Director-General of Vietnam Television. The *Vietnam Investment Review* deal lapsed when the Eighth Communist Party Congress in 1997 subsequently defined the electronic media as a segment of the economy which was not open to foreign investment. In the legal uncertainty which surrounded this pronouncement the *Vietnam Investment Review* was unwilling to commit further funds to developing business in Vietnam.

It is estimated that around 65 per cent of films rented from video stores (and shown on Vietnamese Television) are from China (including Hong Kong) and Taiwan. Many of these films, as well as those from the West, are pirated. Just a few years ago Vietnam Television effectively pirated most of its foreign programs directly from satellite television. However, a December 1997 copyright agreement signed between the US and Vietnam has had the effect of drastically slashing the number of American programs available to VTV: fees charged for many recently-produced programs are well beyond VTV's budget. Movie theatres have been hit even more heavily. Local movie production has not expanded to fill this gap. Vietnamese-produced films account for less than 20 per cent of total films currently shown on television and through video.

## Programming

As in other State organisations, staff members at Vietnam Television have second or third jobs, often carried out during office hours. It is a widespread but officially-tolerated practice because of the low salaries paid to television managers and staff. The effects on operational efficiency are considerable.

TV editorial policy is also directly affected by on-the-job commercial activities, specifically journalists charging for news coverage. Those who understand the system can initiate a news item on prime-time Vietnamese-, French- or English language News programs. Whilst a 60-second prime-time national advertising spot costs US\$4,000, similar length national news coverage costs around US\$ 40-50. This informal fee is shared between one journalist and one or two crew. A journalist's monthly base salary is around US\$100.

In a standard news bulletin, domestic news which is important to the Party and Government still assumes prominence, followed by international news culled from overseas networks, followed by paid-for local news items. In this State-owned commercial entity news editorial values are thus influenced by a disarmingly straightforward commercialism as well as the information needs of the Party and Government.

In other programming areas there have been noticeable improvements in technical production, and more creative camera-work and sophisticated editing in entertainment productions. Intriguingly, this has mainly occurred in onstage productions of western jazz or classical music; the approach to Vietnamese popular and classical music retains a romantic engagement with outside locales.

The Party and Government still require the production of state-sanctioned 'traditional' and modern cultural performances, reflecting a static view of the role of the performing arts. Traditional dramas are often moral tales designed to inform the present, while young Vietnamese observe that modern dramas, particularly those produced in Hanoi, are only just beginning to detach themselves from a preoccupation with the American war and its aftermath. Educational programs on the screen merely replicate the classroom, complete with blackboard, chalk and an adult authority figure: there is little understanding of the role of television in modern approaches to learning.

By contrast, there have been considerable attempts to liven up the presentation and production style of young people's entertainment programs. One can sense, in a basic and very tentative way, the influence of MTV production values at work in these programs. Television programs involving young, demonstrative audiences are very recent in Vietnam. A quiz show, where universities and schools across the country compete with one another, was an almost instant success with audiences when introduced in 1996.

Quiz topics remain ideologically driven, however, conforming to the old model of top-down indoctrination. In one quiz show competing universities were asked to

perform skits on the dangers of social evils. In another they were required to discuss Vietnam's policy on industrialisation and modernisation. Several men in black in the front row – authority figures not bouncers – remind us this show is under control. However, it is a giant step away from the traditional decorum of young people's and children's programs of just a few years ago. It is also testament to the Party's belated efforts to respond to the entertainment needs of Vietnam's young population.

### **Television Staff**

Although production styles are changing, management methods at Vietnam Television are still influenced, as is the entire state sector, by the old Stalinist style of top-down control layered on top of a French-colonial bureaucratic system, and a much older hierarchical Confucian regime. Decisions are made at the top and staff informed. Changes demanded are often peremptory and at short notice. In reality this method of management is weak and often counter-productive. Attempts to institute piecemeal changes at departmental level fail; individual and collective passive resistance to management has been a common staff reaction.

The results can be seen on TV screens: news presenters memorise their scripts, having refused to use autocue. This is possible because of the remarkable editorial caution at work in Vietnam's electronic media : like most programs the 'News' is pre-recorded hours before broadcast. Such resistance often serves a particular area or group of workers, such as technical staff or producers, to maintain what they perceive to be their superior position in the production hierarchy.

As in many national broadcast organisations where the technical department is traditionally powerful, a major chunk of television's budget has been allocated to expanding technical infrastructure in order to extend television transmission: new technology at the expense of greater investment in the real future of broadcasting, the staff. Such an investment would require a change in emphasis away from fixation on technology toward human resource development. It probably requires nothing less than a major institutional reform of the organisation. Initial steps should include an overhaul of staffing policies, including recruitment, pay scales which include incentives, a training program which ties the introduction of new technology to more efficient work practices, a greater focus on audience by all staff, long-term resource planning, and a system of forward production planning. Many of these issues have been under discussion within the organisation for some years.

In addition to a variety of foreign programming through MMDS, and partly in response to it, local free-to-air television has increased broadcast hours and introduced a variety of new programs. VTV executives have used the introduction of MMDS as a means to precipitate a change in production values within their own program staff. Television executives are now more likely to hire younger staff who are university-educated, rather than people with Party connections. The graduates are better able to deal with and reflect the complexities of a rapidly-changing society.

Nonetheless, in the near future it is difficult to envisage a state media which is not co-opted by the existing political system. Within this system many individuals do push to open up discussion on a range of 'sensitive' issues, through drama, features or current affairs. These people risk a comfortable existence, even their careers, in resisting self-censorship or political pressure to portray significant problems in Vietnamese society, only to be regarded by many officials as promoting 'negativism'.

### Research

Falling costs in technology and the fact that Vietnam produces relatively cheap programs and has access to cheap or free foreign films, has allowed VTV to keep pace with shifting audience demand, especially the demand for films, sport and entertainment. However, there is little research on television in Vietnam. Market research companies, driven by the needs of advertisers, provide the only ongoing local analysis of viewers' habits and preferences. Local research institutions and foreign non-government organisations have carried out sporadic research on aspects of social marketing. However there is no sustained, independent study of television as a cultural, social or political institution in Vietnam.

While the State had a tight monopoly over media there was no reason to actively research audience preferences and habits. Until the mid-1990s, few officials in the Party, Government or Vietnam Television considered audience research important. A research unit within the Ministry of Information and Culture wrote (and probably still writes) lengthy dissertations on what people *should* be interested in watching on television. Satellite television changed that.

One event illustrated the shift in audience expectations in a striking way. In 1994, Vietnam Television broadcast the World Cup live via satellite for the first time. During the contest North Korea's leader, Kim Il Sung, died. The timing of his death was most unfortunate for football-crazy Vietnamese. It happened during the quarter-finals. With the most populous country in mainland South-east Asia delivered to advertisers on a platter, and illegal betting rings expanding as the Cup progressed, Vietnam Television broadcast a long eulogy. The phones at VTV rang hot with irate viewers, a commonplace response in other parts of the world, but unprecedented in Vietnam.

### Culture and Television

Cultural programming on local television, including drama, performing, folk and visual arts, is often not much more than state-promoted, static versions of 'traditional' culture. Culture, like ideology and information, remains the servant of the bureaucrats. Vietnam has had almost twenty years without a major conflict, has instituted the economic policy of *doi moi*, and opened up the possibility of economic and social choices for many Vietnamese. Yet this open door policy has not extended to the arts, except in tentative, short bursts. The control over culture exerted by the Party and Government is exercised through state-funded cultural organisations, most of which are suffering serious crises of direction.

In the recent past, and in the face of what they saw as a foreign cultural invasion precipitated by the open-door policy, Vietnamese officials have burnt offending books, shut down karaoke bars, ordered the Vietnamisation of foreign-language signage on shops and businesses, and roundly denounced foreign 'social evils', all to little effect. Television has been thoroughly co-opted in this defeatist response. Nonetheless, many ordinary urban Vietnamese also feel anxiety at what they see as a foreign cultural onslaught through tabloid newspapers, videos, satellite television and now the Internet. Preserving and renewing national cultures in an age of global television and the international commoditisation of culture is a complex business. The Party and Government are not yet willing to risk a cultural *doi moi*.

Old cultural practices are resurfacing. There has been a noticeable revival of local village festivals, which often honour legendary local historical figures or deities. The Buddhist pilgrimage season, which follows Vietnamese New Year, is now witness to massive crowds visiting major temples and shrines offering prayers for good fortune. There is a resurgence of soothsayers and shamanistic practice – both officially frowned upon by the Party. Such practices can be shrugged off as folk practices, but they run deep and long in Vietnamese history.

In the performing, literary and visual arts however, loosening the Party's reins of control would be fundamentally dangerous to many stalwarts. In the current stalemate young Vietnamese performers, writers and artists are frustrated in their efforts to explore new creative directions and contemporary themes in an ever more complex society. The effects of this cultural stasis continue to permeate cultural and media institutions alike.

### **Conclusions: The Same Old Noodles?**

The screws on Vietnam's economy may have loosened after 1989, yet despite a highly calculated 'liberalisation' of access to foreign satellite television, control of domestic information remains tight, as does control over Hanoi-based foreign media. For domestic audiences the sweetener is a greater injection of films into the television diet. But TV is running well behind what the video market can offer.

State media, including television, exists foremost to serve the political establishment. Journalists, script-writers and producers are used in the ideological struggle against aspects of 'negativism', such as corruption and social evils. Many in the ruling establishment understand that the old methods of domestic propaganda will not work in future: more sophisticated methods of producing information, culture, drama, entertainment and children's programs are needed, not just in technique and style, but also in substance. Changes have begun, and this has produced expectations for faster change, especially among young Vietnamese in urban areas who have access to MMDS, satellite TV and the Internet. For Party traditionalists any changes must include adherence to basic socialist tenets; they are looking for ways to adapt without yielding any ground.



In balancing its foreign relationships to ensure ultimate independence from just one or two major sources, VTV has secured capital finance as well as program supply and training from a range of foreign sources. The future supply of programming will be more costly than it has been. The initial goodwill shown by program providers, who supplied free material in the hope of future business cooperation, has all but dried up, due to changes in Vietnamese policy regarding foreign investment in the electronic media. In the future Vietnam Television will have to chase programming deals from a range of sources and pay copyright fees like everyone else.

Within Vietnam Television there have been considerable changes in production values, as the organisation responds to the information and cultural role assigned to it in the post-*doi moi* period, and to the challenge to old production values posed by satellite television. These days fewer people refer to the evening news as 'newspapers on television', a term once used to describe the wooden delivery of text lifted straight from the Vietnam News Agency, although some provincial stations still flash newspaper clippings on-screen and read excerpts mindlessly. While seeking a range of industry relationships, Vietnam will continue to watch how television develops in China, the country which is both its ancient cultural source and perpetual political quandary. Most Vietnamese are acutely aware of their inescapable geopolitical destiny on the southern flank of China, the 'northern invader' of legend, or, as even young Vietnamese say, 'the problem without a solution'.

Considerable money and effort is being spent extending domestic programming by satellite across Vietnam and beyond its borders to the immediate region, to Vietnamese communities in the former eastern bloc, and to emigre communities in France, the United States and Australia. In pushing its television programming across the world the Vietnamese government is looking squarely at the future. And, in unforeseen ways internationalisation of the electronic media and generational change may alter social dynamics within Vietnam and Vietnamese communities overseas. As television pictures of Vietnamese society are beamed across the globe by satellite, the Communist Party deliberates the uniqueness of Vietnamese culture and its survival in the global cultural marketplace. The irony is understood by some in Vietnam Television, if not by Party officials charged with enforcing 'stability' amidst the country's socio-economic transformation.

## SEVEN

### THE CHANGING FACE OF VIETNAMESE CINEMA DURING TEN YEARS OF RENOVATION 1986-1996

Ngo Phuong Lan

(Translated from Vietnamese by Pham Thu Thuy)

The beginning of Vietnamese film-making dates half a century later than that of the international film industry in 1895. In 1953 a national film studio was established, and 1959 saw production of the first motion picture in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In the eyes of the world, Vietnamese cinema remains relatively unknown. Many overseas cinema-goers often think of Vietnamese films merely as propaganda, the main objective of which is to depict the war in that country. Indeed, all the pictures which have won international recognition at major film festivals over the years only deal with the war. These include: *Chi Tu Hau* (Fourth Older Sister Hau) in 1961; *Vi Tuyen 17 Ngay va Dem* (The Seventeenth Parallel, Day and Night) in 1973; *Me Vang Nha* (Mother is not at Home) in 1980; and *Canh Dong Hoang* (The Uncultivated Field) in 1979. For decades, the term 'war cinema' was an accurate description of the film industry in Vietnam. Vietnamese cinema followed closely the Vietnamese people's long and fierce struggle to preserve national independence and to unify the country. Motion pictures were considered not only artistic creations, but also revolutionary instruments to foster patriotism and national pride, and to boost morale.

But the war ended more than twenty years ago. The return of peace, together with a host of complex social and family problems during the post-war era, provide abundant material for the making of a vibrant Vietnamese cinema. Today, it is no longer relevant nor appropriate to discuss Vietnamese motion pictures in terms of 'war films' and 'propaganda'.

Since the Sixth Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party (late 1986), the period of renovation has generated many changes in society. Literary and artistic fields were invigorated by a fresh wind – the wind of creative freedom, truth and honesty in examining pressing social issues. Leading the movement of renovation was the press, followed by literature and theatre. Changes in cinema seem to have been a little slower. We all know that film-making is both an intricate art form as well as a commercial venture. Producing a film requires not only the collective creative energy and artistic labour of many people, but also a lot of investment capital, equipment and technology. This unique feature of film-making may be an important reason why film-makers often do not have the freedom and power to control the entire production process that a news reporter, a writer, a songwriter, a painter or even a playwright can exercise with their own work. Ten years of renovation, however, is time enough to create a new look for the Vietnamese film industry. If we compare the film industry in Vietnam to a ship (which was also the image used at the 11th Vietnamese National Film Festival held in

Hanoi toward the end of November 1996), then for the past ten years, this ship has many a time rocked and pitched in the waves, forcing itself to weather the storms and remain steady. And the losses and gains of this film-making ship during the past ten years have left their mark on the industry.

The film *Cô Gái Trên Sông* (The Girl on the River), made in 1977 and directed by Dang Nhat Minh, can be considered to mark the beginning of the new and revitalised cinema. The central character, a prostitute living on the Perfumed River in Hue, is an historical eye witness. This woman was once willing to risk her own life to save a revolutionary cadre, whom she idolised, and also assumed that his love was reserved for her. She could not know that she would be his saviour and protector only when war was raging around them. Later, in times of peace, she became a victim of his ingratitude and betrayal. In those circumstances, she would have been unable to lift herself out of pain and despair had it not been for the support of her old school mate, previously drafted to fight for the former southern regime and more recently undergoing re-education. Ironically, the person who ultimately exposes the truth is a news reporter who is also the ungrateful cadre's wife.

When the film was first screened it created a debate, because for decades people had been accustomed to seeing a black and white depiction of the war: we are the good guys and the enemy are the bad guys; we win and the enemy loses. This is not to deny that in the Vietnam war, the just cause (*chinh nghĩa*) was on the side of the Vietnamese people, who were only defending their country and their independence. However, sometimes human beings cannot be forced to confine their feelings and emotions within the parameters of impersonal history. That is one of life's big paradoxes. Prior to renovation, it was very difficult to depict such irony on film. In this movie, the way in which the news reporter uncovers the truth, and her husband's remorse – though belated – clearly reflect the atmosphere of change and renewal in Vietnamese society.

In the 1980s, several other pictures also succeeded in enriching the national film industry with their innovative, daring viewpoint. The comedy *Thị Trấn Yên Tĩnh* (A Quiet Little Town), filmed in 1986 by director Le Duc Tien, pokes fun at the widespread problems of bureaucracy, formalism, irresponsibility and toadyism within the administrative system. In *Ganh Xích Rong* (An Itinerant Circus), via an old tale handed down orally from generation to generation, director Viet Linh seems to be warning that those who live by cheating and defrauding others will inevitably meet an unhappy ending. Also released in 1989, *Tuong Ve Hưu* (The General Retires), adapted from the story by Nguyen Huy Thiep, and directed by Nguyen Khac Loi, sounds the alarm on the deterioration of morality and social values while depicting the loneliness and isolation of a man who has spent nearly all his life on the battlefield trying to settle back into an ordinary civilian existence.

At different levels, each renovation film has generated both high praise and criticism. That is not difficult to understand, considering that for decades people have been accustomed to thinking, listening and speaking only in a one-sided manner. The emergence of many different viewpoints is also an indication of a more open and liberal

atmosphere in the film industry, which is a prerequisite for the making of pictures of a diverse nature. These films should carry bold messages, depicting life from many different angles and perspectives, including the negative, and at the same time they should also represent efforts to explore new modes of artistic expression.

### **Changes in Film Production**

The policy of renovation in Vietnam is not only confined to the areas of literature and the arts. It is in essence an attempt to transform society by replacing the state subsidy system with a market economy. The transformation of the Vietnamese film industry also follows this path.

Before 1989, the production, distribution and release of motion pictures in Vietnam were all subsidised by the state, which also 'supported' financially all those who worked in the film industry. Now the industry has been cut adrift. The state has drastically reduced its funding, continuing only small subsidies for specific films. As a result, state-owned film studios and companies [these are the Vietnamese Motion Picture Company (Hang Phim Truyen Viet Nam), the Central Company of Scientific and Documentary Films (Hang Phim Tai Lieu va Khoa Hoc Trung Uong), the Animation Film Studio (Hang Phim Hoat Hinh) in Hanoi, and the Giai Phong Studio (Hang Phim Giai Phong) in Ho Chi Minh City] have all started to look for their own funding as well as financial support for all staff and artists. On the other hand, the state no longer holds a monopoly in film production. Beside the state-owned film studios, during the period from 1990 to 1992, the Ministry of Culture and Information issued licences to nearly forty different film companies set up by various mass organisations and agencies not directly under its authority. The vast majority of these companies exist in name only, having very little capital, material resources or equipment. Money for film production comes mainly from private individuals. However, because the law in Vietnam does not yet allow private individuals to produce motion pictures, these people must operate under the names of the companies that already possess a licence for film production. Consequently, from a situation in which Vietnam only had one official film industry, endorsed and directed by the state throughout the subsidy period, now a commercial film industry funded by private individuals also exists.

These commercial films are largely produced in Ho Chi Minh City. Apart from being a form of popular entertainment, they are obviously also profit-oriented. The vast majority of these pictures are influenced by low-budget, B-grade movies made in America, Hong Kong and Taiwan, with all the usual car chases, kung fu fighting, and forbidden love against the background of romantic scenery or spectacular affluence. A particularly bizarre situation has developed, perhaps seen only in Vietnam, in which most of these movies are filmed on video and then shown commercially in local cinema theatres just like celluloid films.

From 1990 to 1994 commercial films were a novelty and extremely popular among the masses. Many film producers only spent around 10 thousand US dollars on each video film, which would then gross hundreds of thousands of US dollars at the box

office. Not a few people have come to regard films as mere commodities to be traded for profit and 'fame'. As a result, there seems to be a tendency to amateurise (*nghep du hoa*) the art of film-making. Anyone with enough money can now become a film producer, even a script-writer, a director or an actor. On the other hand, there have been quite a few professional and established film-makers who also tried to climb on the bandwagon, producing films purely for their commercial potential. The result is the emergence of a series of products which could hardly qualify as films – products of an inferior quality which are hastily put together and therefore often dubbed 'instant noodles'. Newspapers and film critics have condemned this tendency toward amateurisation and commercialisation in the film industry. In reality, cinema-goers themselves also seem to have had enough of these substandard novelties and are slowly shying away from them. Cinema theatres showing these films are slowly losing their audience. Following a series of box-office flops, many producers have seen their entire capital disappear.

After some years of setting the film industry adrift in the market economy, administrators in the industry have begun to see clearly the dominance of commercial and entertainment movies in comparison to the few serious films of high artistic value. They have detected an imbalance in film production that occurs when state funding trickles down to only a handful of films each year. This is the main reason why the Vietnamese film industry has had to contend with seemingly insurmountable difficulties when left to fend for itself in the market economy. Industry administrators also understood that film-making can never be considered a purely commercial production, because a motion picture is first and foremost an artistic creation that has a large impact on society.

As a result, beginning in 1994, the State decided to re-institute subsidies for the production of motion pictures. The State once again invested in the making of documentaries and animated films. The majority of celluloid feature films have also been reassured of State subsidies. This has helped to create the right environment for film-makers to practice their craft, producing pictures of real artistic value and social relevance.

In reality, Vietnam still suffers from poverty, and within the film industry this translates into utterly outdated filming equipment and poorly-equipped cinemas. This greatly affects the success of each film as well as the development of the film industry as a whole, not to mention the capacity of cinema-goers to enjoy the show. Take sound, for example. Members of the audience (especially foreigners) are often very annoyed at the artificial quality of the sound and dialogue in our films. They are used to watching movies with real sound (which is recorded during filming, including the dialogue), whereas 100 per cent of the sound in Vietnamese movies is added after filming. The dialogue is also dubbed afterwards. Moreover, it is difficult for anyone to imagine that, at the time of writing, 100 per cent of movie theatres in Vietnam are still using obsolete monophonic sound systems. As a result of outdated technology and equipment, there is not much difference between watching a celluloid film and a video film. That is the

reason why it has been possible to show video films at movie theatres. In recent years, the majority of cinema-goers have opted for a cheaper and more convenient form of entertainment: renting a video to enjoy at home. The result is an unprecedented slump in business for movie theatres: about 80 per cent of these theatres have been forced to switch to other lines of business to survive. Consequently, we are faced with the dilemma of how to bring pictures to the audience as intended since the birth of motion pictures: showing movies at the cinema.

### Important Issues in Film-making

The outstanding characteristic of those films that have enjoyed success during renovation is their reflection of reality and sensitive portrayal of the hidden aspects of human feelings, emotions and aspirations.

If we compare the war films produced during the previous period and those made during renovation, we can detect definite changes. Previously, audiences only saw stereotypical heroes full of self-sacrifice, honour and righteousness. Nowadays, when recreating the war, film-makers tend to portray their characters first and foremost as ordinary human beings who have weaknesses and shortcomings, who make mistakes that sometimes cost them their lives, and who also cherish a dream, a desire to live in peace and happiness.

The issues raised in these new films are very diverse and involve problems originating from real life, which is becoming more hectic and complicated everyday. In two of his most recent films, Dang Nhat Minh, considered by many the best director in Vietnam today, has skilfully and convincingly depicted the process by which Vietnamese society shifted from the state subsidy system to market economy, with all its advantages and disadvantages. *Tro Ve (The Return)*, released in 1994, describes the two faces of the market economy during its early stages: material prosperity and spiritual sterility. Unlike the urban background of *Tro Ve*, the 1996 film *Thuong Nho Dong Que (Our Beloved Countryside)* is a serene picture of the rural countryside, and yet, underneath all that beauty and peace, there is a pervasive melancholy, a profound sympathy for the people who produce the food to feed the entire society, yet who are also the most disadvantaged in the 'whirlwind of the market economy'. Despite their grindingly hard lives, the women in the film still dream of and search for happiness, and peasant farmers still think of their home village no matter where they are. The two films mentioned above have greatly impressed overseas audiences, helping them to catch a small glimpse of Vietnam, as well as inspiring them to find out more about a Vietnam that is not only open but also holds many secrets and surprises.

A number of young directors have also succeeded in presenting unique and daring points of view in their works. The films *Canh Bac (The Gamble)* in 1991, and *Hay Tha Thu Cho Em (Please Forgive Me)* in 1992, both by director Luu Trong Ninh, explore the collision between the war-torn past and modern existence, between traditional values and the selfish, individualistic way of life. Lively dialogues and a fast pace closely resembling the rhythm of modern life add to the films' appeal.

In his films *Luoi Dao* (The Blade) in 1995, and *Ai Xuoi Van Ly* (Journey Ten Thousand Leagues From Home) in 1996, director Le Hoang reassesses the war from many different perspectives and recreates the horror of war in order to emphasise his argument: if only people had learned to love each other from the beginning then everything would have been so simple. The subject of war is also explored, albeit in a more general fashion, in the 1996 film *Bui Hong* (Gone, Gone, Forever Gone), by director Ho Quang Minh. The division of country and family, the tragedy of war, national reunification and family reunion, all of these are interwoven to create depth of characterisation.

Vietnam is a country with a special historical and social background. It has gone through constant changes, alternating between war and peace. As a result, the country's history offers an abundant, fascinating source of material for film-making. The open-door policy, as well as an orientation to renovate literature and the arts, and to promote creative freedom, will in the near future create conditions to allow film-makers to explore social issues in a realistic, unconventional, and dynamic fashion. Those Vietnamese films will surely attract the attention and acclaim of overseas audiences.

## EIGHT

### LAW, THE PRESS AND POLICE MURDER IN VIETNAM: THE VIETNAMESE PRESS AND THE TRIAL OF NGUYEN TUNG DUONG

Mark Sidel

A significant theme of this volume and the conference that preceded it is the increasing but highly controlled flexibility of the Vietnamese press in reporting issues of social interest. Neither full autonomy nor complete censorship correctly characterises the Vietnamese media today; instead, the social and political thermostat is always in shift, and editors and reporters must respond to changing external and internalised signals on the reporting and publishing they can do.<sup>1</sup>

My modest goal here is to look at one instance – albeit a famous instance – in which different elements of the Vietnamese written media sought to respond to a variety of conflicting signals from reporters, editors, audiences, and the various sectors of the political, security and legal apparatus in covering a well-known murder case in Hanoi. In this case, at least for some of the Vietnamese newspapers discussed here, editorial life existed in a complex and shifting state betwixt autonomy and censorship, a state in which the highly complex informal politics of response to state, security and legal officials and to the public (rather than slavish response to intensive external guidance from the state) played a major role in press coverage.

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1 Some of the commentary on the Vietnamese press and media published outside Vietnam in the *doi moi* era includes Palmos, *The Vietnam Press: The unrealised ambition* (Edith Cowan University, Perth, 1995); Nguyen Xuan Tho, *Presse und Medien in Vietnam* (Berichte des Bundesinstituts für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien, Köln, 1992); Hiebert, 'New directions – Press takes bolder stand on corruption', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 20 February 1992, 21–22; Heng, 'The Viet puzzle: Media, Market and Marxists', *The Straits Times*, 29 November 1993, 25; and Pham Think, 'Vietnamese media find a new role', *IPI Report*, July/August 1995, 37–38; and Templer, *Wind and Shadows* (1998). See also Ho Anh Thai, 'What's *doi moi* done for literature and the press, Viet Nam News?', 8 December 1996, 4–5. For an interesting text-cum-study of the various types of print journalism allowed in *doi moi* Vietnam, see Duc Dung and Truong dai hoc tuyen giao, Khoa bao chi (ed), *Ky bao chi* (Hanoi, Nha xuất bản Thông tin, 1992).

The exceptionally strong central control of the Vietnamese media in the pre-*doi moi* era is described in Asia Watch Committee and Committee to Protect Journalists, *Still Confined: Journalists in 're-education' camps and prisons in Vietnam* (1987). For discussion of the continuing harsh treatment of journalists and commentators who publish without Party permission, see, among other sources, Asia Watch, *The Case of Doan Viet Hoat and Freedom Forum: Detention for dissent in Vietnam* (3 January 1993).



One way in which some Vietnamese media have sought to convert the politics of direct external guidance into a politics of response to multiple, sometimes conflicting internal and external signals is through specialisation, and the creation of flexible spheres for more autonomous reporting – primarily of social, economic, cultural and legal affairs. In doing so they have accepted the retention of strict Party and government limits on the reporting of political events, both at the central and local levels, and on the activities of Vietnam's small group of dissidents. By implicitly bargaining away from such reporting on political and dissident matters – sometimes by reducing political coverage considerably – a series of national and local newspapers have, in effect, been granted greater autonomy to report – sometimes in controversial or lurid detail – on a wide variety of other social, legal and other topics.

Thus a number of newspapers have both implicitly been granted and have reached out to seize more autonomy in reporting on crime and corruption, including arbitrary action and corrupt behaviour by the police and other authorities. The increased reporting on legal issues – including certain violations of law by police and other authorities – has advantages both for the press and for a Party and government seeking to legitimise a carefully controlled strengthening of legal frameworks. And so, in a number of cases the Vietnamese press, usually portrayed as subservient to and heavily controlled by the Party apparatus, has taken the lead in exposing criminal behaviour by police and other authorities, forcing legal and political institutions into punishing wrongdoers. And in a number of such cases the press has exposed and re-exposed wrongdoers in a more energetic manner than legal, Party or government authorities might have foreseen or wished, utilising some new-found autonomy to bolster their claims to represent public opinion, and at times putting heavy pressure on courts and prosecutors to resolve cases in accordance with the newspapers' views of events. All this flies in the face of a western perception that the Vietnamese newspaper media is entirely controlled by the Party and state.

### **A Death at Tet**

Nguyen Viet Phuong was a young Vietnamese man who was born and died amidst violence in a city many regard as one of Asia's most peaceful. At Tet 1993 he was 21, born during the Christmas bombing of 1972, on a day when American B-52s swept over Hanoi. His paternal great-grandfather, grandfather and maternal grandfather had been recognised by the state as martyrs in the resistance to the French. Phuong was a child of Hanoi, growing up in Ba Dinh district close to the centre of the city. He went to primary and middle school at district schools and graduated from the Phan Dinh Phung Middle School in 1991. Like many Hanoi youth, he did not go on to college. In his case, the local press reported later, that was because 'his family was poor, his mother was chronically ill.'<sup>2</sup>

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2     Huong Huyen, 'Ve vu ban nguoi o cau Chuong Duong', *Phu nu Thu do* (hereafter *PNTD*), 20 April – 5 May, 1993.

So like thousands of other Hanoi youth, literate but poorly trained, he went off to a tenuous kind of work in Hanoi's new market economy. In October 1992 Phuong was hired as a temporary employee, 'to work on a contract,' in the northern office of a Japanese, Hong Kong and Vietnamese joint venture company. 'He worked on transport, banking, delivery, collecting funds, paying for goods' – largely unskilled service work, but a lucky job for a relative few in the new market economy. He was fortunate to be in an office and out on the streets, and not in a factory.<sup>3</sup>

We know far less about Nguyen Tung Duong, who was executed in 1996 as a result of his encounter on the Chuong Duong Bridge in Hanoi with Nguyen Viet Phuong at Tet 1993. Duong was a police lieutenant (*trung uy*), 35 years old in 1993, a nearly two-decade veteran of Hanoi police work serving in the Hoan Kiem district of the Hanoi traffic police (*giao thong canh sat*). He was married and had two sons.

Nguyen Viet Phuong's work for his company often took him over the Chuong Duong Bridge from central Hanoi toward the suburban, industrial, fast growing Gia Lam District. On January 29, 1993, at the end of the annual Tet holiday and the beginning of the new year, Phuong's superior received 50,000,000 dong in cash (about US\$5,000 at the early 1993 rate of exchange) in payment for goods. Often such cash is forwarded to Ho Chi Minh City for purchases or investment rather than being placed in Hanoi banks. Phuong and his boss put the money in a small black satchel so that it could be taken over to the far end of Gia Lam Bridge for onward delivery to Ho Chi Minh City via a transport plane from Gia Lam Airport. At about 7:00 pm on January 29 Phuong set out along Hang Dieu Street, riding his motorcycle, the cash in the satchel, his two thighs pressing the satchel against the motorcycle to keep it safe. As Phuong set off his boss called out to him, 'Come back quickly for the end of Tet, lad.'<sup>4</sup>

Traffic on the bridge was very light that night, and the weather was piercingly cold. At about 7:30pm Phuong turned onto Chuong Duong Bridge, heading east toward Gia Lam. Several moments later two other young men riding their motorcycles over the bridge in the same direction approached the bridge's [watchtower] and heard three cries of 'robber, robber, robber!' They looked over and saw two men standing by motorcycles, one leaning over the bridge railing onto the automobile roadway from the motorcycle path. He said 'Friend ... robber.' The other young man was reaching into the satchel. The first young man said 'Save me, robber.'

The two observers tried to help Phuong, the young messenger, who was now bleeding heavily. One of them asked the other man, police officer Duong, if he had fired his weapon. The answer was no, then yes. Phuong was taken off to the emergency room of the Viet-Duc (Vietnamese-German) hospital in central Hanoi. He

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3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

died on the way to the emergency room, and his father and boss found his body there later that night.<sup>5</sup>

Even after two years, three court hearings, at least three formal investigations and a Supreme Court review, the events on the Chuong Duong Bridge that night remain blurred. The police officer, Duong, maintained almost until he died that he had merely stopped Phuong for the common traffic violation of operating a motorcycle in an automobile lane. He said Phuong had objected, the two had exchanged words, then scuffled, then Phuong had reached for Duong's gun and the gun had gone off as it was in Phuong's hand.

The witnesses, forensic specialists and Phuong's family would spell out a conflicting narrative – that Duong knew Phuong from his many trips across the bridge, knew that he carried money and goods, waved him down for a traffic violation in order to rob him, attempted that robbery, and shot Phuong when Phuong resisted. The conflict over those versions of the facts would electrify Hanoi for the next two years, propel two newspapers into a national spotlight for demanding punishment for the police officer, bring thousands of Hanoians onto the streets and some into violent clashes with police, and result in Vietnam's first publicly admitted execution in over ten years.

The case immediately came under the jurisdiction of police investigators attached to the Hanoi Public Security Bureau. On May 3 the police investigation group released a report saying that Duong had waved down Phuong on the bridge 'while carrying out his traffic control duties,' that Phuong had refused to stop, but had sped up and moved into the automobile lane. Then, according to the investigators, Duong again demanded that Phuong stop, when he did they quarrelled on the bridge, that Duong's gun went off as they scuffled about, Phuong was hit by two bullets and died on the road to the emergency room.<sup>6</sup>

The police investigators transferred the case file to the Hanoi People's Procuracy with the recommendation that Duong be charged with a violation of Article 103 of the *Criminal Code of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam*, which applies to acts 'endangering a person's life or health while on official duty' and carries a punishment of imprisonment of between one and five years, or three to fifteen years 'in serious circumstances.'<sup>7</sup>

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5     Huong Huyen, 'Ve vu ban nguoi o cau Chuong Duong', *PNTD*, 20 April–5 May 1993; 'Ve vu ban nguoi o cau Chuong Duong', *PNTD*, April 20–May 5 1993; 'Vu an cau Chuong Duong', *Dai Doan ket* (hereafter *DDK*), 5–11 June 1993, 1; 'Can truy to ten Duong ve toi giet nguoi', *DDK*, 19–25 June 1993, 1.

6     'Ve vu ban nguoi o cau Chuong Duong', *PNTD*, 20 April–5 May 1993.

7     Article 103 of the *Criminal Code of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam*. *Selection of fundamental laws and regulation of Vietnam* (Hanoi, The Gioi, 1995, second edition).

**‘Why did death come to this youth, who regularly carried bundles of money across the bridge?’ – The Newspapers Enter the Fray**

These events were first reported in two newspapers based in Hanoi, *Phu nu Thu do* (Women of the Capital) and *Dai Doan ket* (Great Unity) in May and June 1993. Each assigned a team of reporters to investigate Phuong's death. But it was the release of the police investigation report and the police recommendation that Duong be charged only with the lesser offence of causing a death while on official duty – denying the robbery elements of the situation, and rejecting a murder trial – that sparked *Dai Doan ket* and *Phu nu Thu do* into taking up the case as a *cause celebre*, devoting resources to investigations by reporters, and publishing extensively on the matter.

It was no accident that *Phu nu Thu do* and *Dai Doan ket* were active in reporting the story. *Dai Doan ket* is the newspaper of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front, the Party-led umbrella organisation of intellectuals, scientists, religious and cultural figures, a group accustomed to lively debate and to pushing the government on social issues. *Phu nu Thu do* was widely read by women in and around Hanoi, and had made its mark by reporting more forthrightly than other periodicals on corruption, mistreatment of women and the ways in which women were not fully sharing in the new prosperity of the market economy.<sup>8</sup>

From the beginning, both newspapers knew the power of their words and the issues at stake. As *Phu nu Thu do* wrote in early May of 1993, ‘Nguyen Tung Duong is presently in custody, public opinion awaits how he will be tried. We hope that Duong must be tried on a correct charge even though the criminal is a police officer, in order to set an example and so the people can trust the law.’<sup>9</sup>

*Dai Doan ket* and *Phu nu Thu do* took up the case vigorously at the end of May and the beginning of June, shortly after the police investigation report and recommendation were made public. *Dai Doan ket* began by confirming the stories of the two witnesses on the bridge, and added the perspectives of Phuong's father and his boss, who had searched for him on the night of his death. Police officers on the bridge and at the Hoan Kiem district station denied to Phuong's boss and his father that any untoward accidents or other events had taken place. Only when the father and employer went to the Viet-Duc Hospital did they learn that Phuong had been brought in seriously wounded and had died in the emergency room.<sup>10</sup>

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8 For a foreign report on *Phu nu Thu do* and its sister publication in Ho Chi Minh City, see, Pham Hong Nga, *Women's Magazines Break New Ground in Vietnam*, Agence France Press (Hanoi), 23 April 1995.

9 ‘Ve vu ban nguoi o cau Chuong Duong’, *PNTD*, April 20–May 5, 1993. The first newspaper reference to the case may have been in an item headed ‘sending a message’ (*nhan tin*) in *PNTD*, 5 April 1993.

10 ‘Vu an cau Chuong Duong’, *DDK*, 5–11 June 1993, 1.

*Dai Doan ket* also swiftly criticised the police investigation report, claiming that Phuong had been shot not during a quarrel but with his arms raised, and relying on its own interpretation of physical evidence, the position of the two men, the position of the motorcycles and the firing of a second shot. And the newspaper directly challenged the lesser charge filed by the Hanoi police.

‘There are public security officials who have told us that Phuong was shot and killed certainly because he resisted. But does it make sense that tens of thousands of people cross the bridge every day, and no one else is shot, only Phuong? The reasons may be correct, but they are not sufficient. The inquiry must be more complete, and perhaps it must be ‘Why did death come to this youth, who regularly carried bundles of money across the bridge?’<sup>11</sup>

### ‘You should accept some money’

*Dai Doan ket* and Phuong's family upped the stakes considerably in mid-June, when *Dai Doan ket* front-paged a letter from Phuong's father reviewing the physical evidence and raising a number of critical questions about police procedure and the investigation. Phuong's father also recounted a conversation with one of the investigators in which the police official indicates, only fifteen days into the case, that Duong would be sentenced to two years in prison for the death, and that a suspended sentence was unlikely.

But the more serious allegations were to come. According to Phuong's father,

‘Mr. Yet [the procurator] also said: ‘I think you should accept some money and you should not waste your energies with any more requests. We have come to a conclusion and whatever level this goes to it will stop with that conclusion. In any case your son is still dead. I will ask Duong's family to come in.’ And as expected, Duong's family members came in to bargain and said to me that if I write a paper suggesting that prosecution be foregone and requesting that Duong be [released], then the Duong family would give me 30 million dong.’<sup>12</sup>

Phuong's father then laid down the gauntlet for the legal and political authorities. He requested formal reinvestigation of the case, and that if the facts were as he and others believed them to be Duong be tried for murder under Article 101 of the Criminal Code, not the lesser Article 103 charge the police investigators had recommended.<sup>13</sup>

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11 Ibid.

12 ‘Can truy to ten Duong ve toi giet nguoi’, *DDK*, 19–25 June 1993, 1.

13 Ibid. In the same issue, *Dai Doan ket* published a long letter from a retired Army lieutenant colonel also demanding reinvestigation and appropriate prosecution of the case, vigorously raising the question of prosecution under the full murder statute, Article 101 of the Criminal Code, and demanding that the Supreme People's Procuracy and Supreme People's Court intervene directly in the case. ‘Y kien ban doc ve vu an cau Chuong Duong – Can dieu tra, ket luan dung toi danh, som dua vu an Nguyen Tung Duong ra xet xu’, *DDK*, 19–25 June 1993, 6.

The summer of 1993 saw a barrage of reports in *Dai Doan ket* and *Phu nu Thu do* criticising the actions of the police investigators and procuracy officials, delving into the physical evidence of the case, and making demands that Duong be tried for murder a commonplace event. Some were written by newspaper correspondents. But many others – often writing in significant detail and in legal terms – were signed by citizens from backgrounds as varied and locations as far flung as a high school student in Hanoi,<sup>14</sup> a judge or staff member at the Central Military Court (quoting from a 1984 Council of Ministers decision on use of firearms by police),<sup>15</sup> a Hanoi mother,<sup>16</sup> a representative of a group of retired cadres,<sup>17</sup> a reprint of a formal complaint by a Hanoi storeowner with knowledge of the case charging that the Hanoi prosecutor had tried to intimidate him,<sup>18</sup> a group of readers from Nha Trang in Khanh Hoa province,<sup>19</sup> ‘more than two thousand women’ from Vong La village outside Hanoi,<sup>20</sup> and additional articles by journalists from *Dai Doan ket* and *Phu nu Thu do*.<sup>21</sup>

Under the continuing barrage of the press, public opinion, and perhaps, political decisions, the Supreme People's Procuracy took over investigation of the case in August 1993.<sup>22</sup> Nguyen Viet Phuong's body was exhumed at this point and transferred to the

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- 14 Viet tiep ve vu ban nguoi tren cau Chuong Duong: Y kien ban doc – ‘Gia nhu anh Viet Phuong noi duoc’, *PNTD*, 5–20 July 1993, 1, 2.
- 15 Viet tiep ve vu ban nguoi tren cau Chuong Duong: Y kien ban doc – ‘Toi co y giet nguoi’, *PNTD*, 5–20 July 1993, 2.
- 16 Viet tiep ve vu ban nguoi tren cau Chuong Duong: Y kien ban doc – ‘Phai khan trong du Nguyen Tung Duong ra xet xu’, *PNTD*, 5–20 July 1993, 2.
- 17 Tro lai vu an cau Chuong Duong; ‘Phai khan trong xu vu a n nay de giu ky cuong phep nuoc’, *DDK*, 17–23 July 1993, 6.
- 18 Tro lai vu an cau Chuong Duong; ‘To cao hanh dong cua Ong Duong Ngoc Yet, pho phong cua Vienkiem sat nhan dan HN’ (Hanoi), *DDK*, 17–23 July 1993, 1, 6.
- 19 Tro lai vu an cau Chuong Duong; Ban doc Nha Trang: ‘Phai xet xu ten Duong ve hanh vi giet nguoi voi muc dich cuop cua moi that cong bang’, *DDK*, 24–30 July 1993, 1, 6.
- 20 Tro lai vu an cau Chuong Duong; ‘Sung cuop co hay sung cuop tien??’, *DDK*, 24–30 July 1993, 6. The language of the letter and the identification of the signing group might lead a reader to think that the letter had been drafted at a local (or other) level of the Women's Union.
- 21 See, e.g., ‘Vu an cau Chuong Duong dieu kho tin’, *DDK* (monthly), 20 July–20 August 1993, 12, 10.
- 22 Decision no. 30/KSDT–TA (Kiem sat Dieu tra) of 14 August 1993 removed the case from Hanoi's jurisdiction and transferred it to the Investigations Directorate within the Supreme People's Procuracy. The Decision is referred to in Dan hoi – Pho Vien trong trung thuc Vienkiem sat nhan dan toi cao Nguyen Van Thin tra loi: Ve ‘vu an cau Chuong Duong,’ *DDK*, 27 November–3 December 1993, 1, 6.

Procuracy for further examination.<sup>23</sup> Sharp criticism of police and prosecutorial handling of the case, and continued demands that Duong be tried for murder, continued unabated in the newspapers throughout the fall and winter of 1993 and early 1994. In conformity with the emerging pattern of widely spread anger (and newspaper strategy), writers included a *Dai Doan ket* editorial team,<sup>24</sup> Phuong's former boss at the joint venture company, with a testimonial to Phuong's character,<sup>25</sup> and a famous actor and director,<sup>26</sup> as well as a beatific article on the original witnesses to Phuong's death.<sup>27</sup>

**'Which crime Nguyen Tung Duong committed is now the crux of the matter...'**

By now the din was so intense that it was difficult to deny that Duong was guilty of something, and it was too late to sweep the matter under the rug or to pay off Viet Phuong's family. A report from a Supreme People's Procuracy meeting in August 1993 put the matter bluntly.

'[T]he participants all agreed that Duong must shoulder the entire responsibility for the death of Nguyen Viet Phuong. That Duong committed a crime – this no one denied. But what offence in the Criminal Code did Duong commit? Our nation is currently building itself into a state ruled by law, and thus if we wish to indict accused A for crime X, there must be sufficient evidence scientific evidence. The issue of which crime Nguyen Tung Duong committed is now the crux of the matter, and the investigation organs under the Supreme People's Procuracy will have to answer that before public opinion....'<sup>28</sup>

The key issue remained whether Duong's stop and quarrel with Viet Phuong was part of 'an official duty' under Article 103 of the Criminal Code (a lesser crime carrying lesser punishment), or whether it was part of a robbery attempt and thus outside any official duties. If it was outside the scope of his duties, it was generally agreed that the shooting and death that occurred incident to the non-official stop and the robbery were prosecutable as homicide under Article 101 of the Criminal Code.<sup>29</sup>

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- 23 To phong vien Bao Dai doan ket, 'Vu an cau Chuong Duong – thu pham se duoc truy to theo toi danh nao?' *DDK*, 15–21 January 1994, 1.
- 24 Nhom phong vien kinh te xa hoi – Bao Dai Doan ket, 'Vu an cau Chuong Duong dieu kho tin', *DDK* (monthly), 20 July–20 August 1993, 12, 10.
- 25 'Vu an cau Chuong Duong dang duoc lam sang to; Cuoc dieu tra keo dai, vi chua tin nhan chung', *PNTD*, 5–20 September 1993, 1, 2.
- 26 Dao Mong Long, 'An tu hinh duoi chan cau Chuong Duong', *DDK* (monthly), 20 August–20 September 1993, 6.
- 27 Quoc Khanh, 'Vu an cau Chuong Duong se ra sao neu khong co su xuat hien cac nhan chung giao long nhan hau va dung cam?', *DDK*, 18–24 September 1993, 6.
- 28 'Vu an cau Chuong Duong dang duoc lam sang to', *PNTD*, 5–20 September 1993, 1.
- 29 Hop bao ve vu an cau Chuong Duong Hai van de noi com: 'Thu tuc tien hanh dieu tra vu an, xac dinh toi danh', *DDK*, 7–13 August 1993, 6.

As the end of 1993 drew near, it appeared that the Procuracy was nearing a decision in its re-investigation of the case, and a *Dai Doan ket* report supported the Procuracy's decision to transfer Duong from Hoa Lo Prison in central Hanoi, where he had been under the control of local Hanoi authorities, to another detention facility under the control of the Hanoi military region.<sup>30</sup> The report concluded on an optimistic note.

'We hope that with their serious and objective work the Investigations Directorate ... will shortly uncover the truth in this complicated case, establishing a basis for Nguyen Tung Duong to be tried in the courts on the correct charge for that which he brought about, ensuring the strict and clear character of the law, and the consolidation of the trust of the people.'<sup>31</sup>

The national prosecutorial team responded with a conciliatory statement in late November, perhaps reflecting the somewhat more civil relationship that *Dai Doan ket* seemed to have with national prosecutors than with the Hanoi police investigators and procuracy. The Deputy Procurator-General in charge of the case asked for patience and for time while the Investigations Directorate came to conclusions on a 'very complicated' case in which 'only the accused and the victim were on the scene when the events occurred and the victim died on the way to the hospital' and 'witnesses arrived after the events occurred.'<sup>32</sup>

By January 1994, as the Procuracy neared a decision on a charge against Duong and prepared to move into the indictment (*truy to*) and trial (*xet xu*) stages of the case, the newspapers became active again. The pressure on the Supreme People's Procuracy to amend the charge to murder was intense, and in January 1994 *Dai Doan ket* published what it called a 'draft' (*ban*) of the conclusions of the investigation. The draft report recommended elevating the charge from 'endangering a person's life or health while on official duty' (Article 103 of the Criminal Code) to murder (Article 101). The factual question remained whether Duong's scuffle with Viet Phuong leading to Phuong's death was within the scope of official duties. But Duong, of course, was not cooperating with that process of altering the charges – he continued to maintain that he had fought with

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30 Order no. 97/DT (Dieu tra) of 16 August 1993 issued by the Supreme People's Procuracy, described in *Nhom phong vien Bao Dai Doan ket*, 'Ket thuc dieu tra vu an cau Chuong Duong' – 'Vien KSND (Kiem sat nhan dan) toi cao de nghi truy to Nguyen Tung Duong theo toi danh giet nguoi,' *DDK*, 26 February–4 March 1994, 1,6.

31 D.D.K., 'Nhung thong tin moi nhat ve vu an cau Chuong Duong,' *DDK*, 20–26 November 1993, 6.

32 Dan hoi – 'Pho Vien trung trung thuc Vien kiem sat nhan dan toi cao Nguyen Van Thien tra loi: Ve vu an cau Chuong Duong,' *DDK*, 27 November–3 December 1993, 1, 6.



Viet Phuong, his gun had gone off Viet Phuong, and that he knew nothing of the purse containing 50 million dong that Phuong was carrying.<sup>33</sup>

**‘Official duties’ or ‘motivated by abasing purposes’?**

By now the public discussion, which may have mirrored and influenced internal discussion in legal and political institutions, had turned to a parsing of the murder statute that Duong looked increasingly likely to face. *Dai Doan ket* pointed out that one sub-section of the murder statute, murder ‘motivated by abasing purposes with a view to committing or concealing another offence’<sup>34</sup> carried the possibility of life imprisonment or the death sentence, whereas two other potential murder sub-sections stipulated imprisonment for between five and twenty years.<sup>35</sup> Duong’s refusal to acknowledge that he had been attempting to rob Viet Phuong, and the difficulty in showing robbery as the purpose (the other offense Duong might have been trying to conceal that could lead to the higher murder count), began to make it more likely that Duong might be charged with a lesser homicide count than a charge that might bring a long prison sentence, life imprisonment or death. But *Dai Doan ket* continued to believe that robbery had been the motivation for Duong’s stop, and it continued to push for the more serious murder charge.<sup>36</sup>

On January 28, 1994, a year short of a day after Duong killed Phuong, the Investigations Directorate of the Supreme People’s Procuracy submitted its report on the investigation of the events on the bridge. Based on a re-examination of physical evidence by its own investigators and a senior military pathologist,<sup>37</sup> the witnesses’ statements and Duong’s own changing statements and admissions, the Investigations Directorate concluded that Duong should be indicted for murder under Article 101 of the Criminal Code. The report ‘refuted’ Duong’s claim that Phuong had been reaching for his gun, they had struggled, and the gun had gone off.

**‘Public opinion ... awaits the indictment....’**

But in a move crucial to the development of the case, the Investigations Directorate did not decide whether Duong was attempting to rob Viet Phuong, leaving open the possibility of the lesser charge and lesser sentence that was later to infuriate citizens throughout Hanoi. After reviewing the summary of evidence itself, including once again Phuong’s shout of ‘robber, robber, save me!’ *Dai Doan ket*’s conclusion was clear:

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33 To phong vien Bao Dai doan ket, ‘Vu an cau Chuong Duong – thu pham se duoc truy to theo toi danh nao?’ *DDK*, 15–21 January 1994, 1.

34 Article 101(1)(a) of the Criminal Code.

35 Article 101(1)(b) and (1)(c) of the Criminal Code.

36 To phong vien Bao Dai doan ket, ‘Vu an cau Chuong Duong – thu pham se duoc truy to theo toi danh nao?’ *DDK*, 15–21 January 1994, 1.

37 ‘Xung quanh vụ án cầu Chuong Duong – Trò chuyện với người giám định pháp y nan nhân’, *DDK*, 19–25 March 1994, 1, 6.

'Justice will only occur if Nguyen Tung Duong must be indicted under section (1), sub-section (a) of Article 101 of the Criminal Code (motivated by abasing purposes with a view to committing or concealing another offense). Public opinion now awaits the indictment of the procuracy and investigation institutions.'<sup>38</sup>

The decision on which murder charge to use, however, reverted to the Hanoi prosecutorial authorities after the investigation report from the national procuracy was complete. And in February 1994 Hanoi local prosecutors once again infuriated public opinion by indicting Duong not on the 'abasing purposes ... concealing another offence' murder charge, but on the lesser murder charge contained in Article 101(2) of the Criminal Code that provided for imprisonment upon conviction of between five and twenty years, rather than a longer sentence, life imprisonment, or death.<sup>39</sup>

**'He was killed because he spoke the truth: robber, robber....'**

The public and media reaction was immediate. Now openly organised by the Women's Union, a group of women in Phuc Xa village outside Hanoi wrote angrily to *Phu nu Thu do*, which front-paged their comments. '[I]f the lad Phuong had not been carrying a purse of money on his motorcycle then perhaps the lad would not have been killed. He was killed because he spoke the truth: robber, robber... and Duong had to shoot him Phuong so that he would not live on to say the truth, that Duong was a robber...'<sup>40</sup> Phuong's family spoke up harshly as well, also in *Phu nu Thu do*, denouncing the decision of the Hanoi prosecutor to indict Duong on the lesser murder charge.<sup>41</sup>

The trial was set for May 12 and 13, and eagerly anticipated throughout Hanoi. In the days before court convened *Dai Doan ket* and other newspapers applied heavy, sarcastic pressure on the court to answer remaining questions about the purse and Duong's motivations and actions on the bridge. 'Duong himself admitted and the witnesses also confirmed that after Duong shot Phuong, the money purse [found its

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38 Nhom phong vien Bao *DDK*, 'Ket thuc dieu tra vu an cau Chuong Duong' – 'Vien KSND (Kiem sat nhan dan) toi cao de nghi truy to Nguyen Tung Duong theo toi danh giet nguoi,' *DDK*, 26 February–4 March 1994, 1,6. The investigation report and conclusions are also reviewed in To phong vien Bao *Phu nu Thu do*, 'Vu an cau Chuong Duong – Khai bao khong trung thuc la tinh tiet tang an nang', *PNTD*, 23–30 March, 1194, 1, 5, which also launches a blistering attack on Duong's changing statements and veracity.

39 Article 101(2) reads: If the offence is committed in circumstances other than those set in paragraph 1 of this article, or there are no extenuating circumstances, the offender shall be subject to a term of imprisonment of between five and twenty years.

40 'Y kien ban doc – Ve vu can cau Chuong Duong', *PNTD*, 13–20, April 1994, 1.

41 'Nhan vu an cau Chuong Duong sap xu – Loi khan cau cua gia dinh nan nhan Nguyen Viet Phuong', *PNTD*, 11–18 May 1994.

way] from Phuong's motorcycle to Duong's motorcycle. A chance phenomenon, or an inevitable one?'<sup>42</sup>

### 'Halfway down the road, the burden snaps'

The trial was held on May 12, 13 and 14, 1994 before a judicial panel of two judges and three lay people's assessors, closely watched by Viet Phuong's family, Duong's family, police colleagues of Duong's, journalists, higher court and procuracy officials and spectators – all within the courtroom – and more than a thousand crowded outside on Hai Ba Trung Street in central Hanoi.<sup>43</sup> 'It may be,' *Phu nu Thu do* noted with perhaps a hint of sympathy 'that never in the history of the Hanoi Court has there occurred a trial of this scale.'<sup>44</sup>

The prosecutors made clear that they wanted Duong to be imprisoned for the longest possible sentence, twenty years, on the lesser murder charge. On the third day of the trial, faced with an still unclear record and sharply conflicting statements by the participants, the chief trial judge issued a formal decision returning the case file to the Hanoi People's Procuracy 'for supplemental investigation to clarify the motive and purposes of Nguyen Tung Duong in committing the murder.'

Newspaper reactions were ambivalent – *Phu nu Thu do* applauded the general view that Duong had indeed committed some form of murder, the new evidence presented, and the professional behaviour of the participants, but called it 'unfortunate' that the investigation still had to go on sixteen months after Phuong had died.<sup>45</sup> *Dai Doan ket* also applauded the fact that there was 'no contrary view' to the assertion that Duong had committed some form of murder. But *Dai Doan ket* also took a much darker, more conspiratorial view of the decision to proceed with the trial with the record so unclear.

'Public opinion has been full of doubts (*thac mac*), and questions have been asked: Why, when it felt that the file contained so many unclear points, did the Hanoi Court still put the case up for trial? Why didn't [the Court] return the file to the Procuracy for truly thorough preparation before beginning the trial?... Really difficult to understand!'

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42 P.V., Tin moi nhat ve vu an 'cau Chuong Duong' – 'Chuan bi xet xu Nguyen Tung Duong', *DDK*, 14–20 May 1994, 1.

43 Huong Huyen, 'Phien toa xu vu an cau Chuong Duong chua ket thuc', *PNTD*, 18–25 May 1994, 1, 2.

44 Viet tien vu an cau Chuong Duong – 'Mot ban giam dinh phap y day tinh thuyet phuc', *PNTD*, 25 May–1 June 1994, 1, 2.

45 Huong Huyen, 'Phien toa xu vu an cau Chuong Duong chua ket thuc', *PNTD*, 18–25 May 1994, 1, 2.

'Halfway down the road, the burden snaps' (*Nua duong dut ganh*) was the sardonic headline to the *Dai Doan ket* coverage, a commentary on a weak court under intense pressure from more powerful forces within its walls and outside its building.<sup>46</sup>

**'There will only be one truth, there will only be one truth'**

In the days following the re-transfer of the case to the procuracy for additional investigation, *Phu nu Thu do* and *Dai Doan ket* kept up pressure for a trial and conviction. Each sought to publicise the detailed findings of the military forensic team, which it viewed as insufficiently incorporated in the prosecutor's arguments.<sup>47</sup> *Dai Doan ket* again denounced the errors and biases in the original investigation, tying those mistakes to the shortcomings in the current trial,<sup>48</sup> and it provided a forum for one of the trial judges to explain the decision to send the case back for re-investigation.<sup>49</sup> *Phu nu Thu do* exhaustively reviewed the whereabouts and control of the purse containing 50 million dong, concluding (in contradiction to Duong's earlier denials), that Duong had in fact accompanied Phuong to the hospital and that the purse had disappeared during that trip.<sup>50</sup> And in a particularly harsh commentary, *Phu nu Thu do* asked why some of the witnesses' statements in court had been different from some of their earlier statements. 'There will only be one truth,' a wrathful *Phu nu Thu do* warned and repeated, and called upon the court and prosecutors to caution the witnesses – particularly Duong's witnesses – to be reply truthfully in court.<sup>51</sup>

In August *Phu nu Thu do* and other newspapers published the results of the re-investigation by the prosecutors. The Procuracy again stated that the evidence was not sufficiently clear to determine whether Duong had been attempting to rob Phuong, in effect pushing the decision back to the Hanoi court. *Phu nu Thu do* published a number

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46 P.V., 'Phien toa xet xu vu an Nguyen Tung Duong, Nua duong dut ganh', *DDK*, 21–27 May 1994, 1, 6.

47 Viet tiep vu an cau Chuong Duong – 'Mot ban giam dinh phap y day tinh thuyet phuc', *PNTD*, 25 May–1 June 1994, 1, 2; Quoc Khanh, 'Tai phien toa xet xu Nguyen Tung Duong – Bao cong thoi may', *DDK*, 28 May–3 June 1994, 6.

48 Viet tiep Vu an cau Chuong Duong – 'Qua nhieu sai sot trong khau dieu tra ban dau', *PNTD*, 1–7 June 1994, 1, 2.

49 Pho Chanh an TAND (Toa an nhan dan) T.P. (Thanh pho) Ha Noi tra loi Bao Dai Doan ket – 'Vi sao phien toa xet xu Nguyen Tung Duong lai nua duong dut ganh,' *DDK*, 28 May–3 June 1994, 1, 6.

50 Viet tiep vu an cau Chuong Duong, 'Tui tien 50 trieu chung cu quan trong', *PNTD*, 22–29 June 1994, 1, 2.

51 Huong Huyen, Ve vu an cau Chuong Duong – 'Trach nhem cua nhan chung', *PNTD*, 8–15 June 1994, 1, 2.

of angry letters on the delay and the investigators' report.<sup>52</sup> Its own response was righteous fury:

'Over a long time, the 'Chuong Duong bridge case' has become a thermometer, measuring the trust of the people in the objectivity, and the spirit of justice and enlightenment of the institutions defending the law...The fundamental issue is not whether to judge heavily or leniently, but that we do not know which crime was committed, and that it has not been investigated clearly. And thus when the institutions of law are unable to indicate what police officer Nguyen Tung Duong's motivations were when he committed murder, then that is a debt that society has a right to demand.'<sup>53</sup>

#### 'Central institutions ... contributed many views'

By this point, pressure was becoming intense on the Hanoi local prosecutors to amend its original indictment to increase the severity of the charge (and potential punishment) against Duong. After resisting that for months, the situation suddenly changes in late September of 1993. *Dai Doan ket* explained why:

'We have learned that after the file was transferred to the Hanoi Procuracy [after re-investigation at the central level], and before the indictment was released, Central institutions responsible for protection of law contributed many views. And on September 15, 1994, the Hanoi People's Procuracy is-sued indictment no. 636, charging Nguyen Tung Duong under Article 101, section (1), sub-section (g) of the Criminal Code (murder constituting a case of hooliganism). In this way no robbery indictment is included, but under this framework of punishment the accused may be forced to bear the highest level under the Criminal Code.'<sup>54</sup>

#### 'Justice for the living and justice for the dead'

With the logjam broken, and Duong now charged with a crime that could bring a higher sentence, the trial proceeded more smoothly and the court had more confidence in the decision to be rendered. But, apparently fearful of backsliding, the newspapers did not let up the pressure. In the week before Duong's trial reconvened on October 19, *Dai Doan ket* reviewed the evidence for robbery and murder and headed its coverage 'There must be justice for the living and justice for the dead!'<sup>55</sup>

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- 52 Tieng noi ban doc vu an cau Chuong Duong – 'Phai chang dan da xu roi?', *PNTD*, 31 August–7 September 1994, 1, 3.
- 53 To P.V., 'Ket qua dieu tra bo sung vu an cau Chuong Duong', *PNTD*, 10–17 August 1994, 1, 7.
- 54 Q.K., 'Tin moi nhat ve vu an cau Chuong Duong – Nguyen Tung Duong bi truy to theo khoan 1 cua toi giet nguoi', *DDK*, 1–7 October 1994, 1.
- 55 'Phien toa xet xu Nguyen Tung Duong (vu an tai cau Chuong Duong) se dien ra trong ba ngay 19–21–10–1994 – Y kien cua mot so ban doc trong gioi luat gia: 'Chung toi rat quan tam vu an nay vi vu an xay ra tai thu do – trung tam cua ca Nuoc...' – Can cong

On October 19, 1994, Nguyen Tung Duong's trial reconvened.<sup>56</sup> Once again the courtroom was packed, and more than 10,000 listened outside.<sup>57</sup> Again the prosecutors, Duong's lawyer and the lawyer for Phuong's family spoke, and Duong was re-questioned. On October 20, during interrogation by the judges, according to news reports, Duong said that the gun had been in his hand (rather than Phuong's) when it went off, and that it had gone off by accident. That account was challenged in great detail by the chief military forensic specialist, called in by the Supreme People's Procuracy to work specially on the case.<sup>58</sup> After extensive argument by the prosecutors and lawyers for Duong and for Phuong's family, Duong was convicted of murder 'motivated by abasing purposes with a view to committing or concealing another offence,' the robbery of Nguyen Viet Phuong, and sentenced to death. '*The judgement of the court was not due to public opinion....*'

Whether by design or legal analysis, the court convicted Duong of the precise charge – and mandated the precise sentence – that *Dai Doan ket*, *Phu nu Thu do* and other newspapers had demanded. The President of the Hanoi People's Court tried to end the matter with a clear statement: 'Nguyen Tung Duong committed murder in order to appropriate the assets of the victim; he committed the crime with a clear motive and purpose, determined to carry that out to the end.'<sup>59</sup>

But beyond the legal analysis there were strong defensive elements in the judgement as well. While admitting the complications of the case and the great interest it had aroused, the court vigorously denied that public opinion or the press had played any role in its decision.

'The Hanoi Court tried the case of Nguyen Tung Duong under conditions in which public opinion in society on the case was very complex; that fact served all the more to make the Court abide by the law seriously and strictly. The judgement of the Court was not due to public opinion, but had to follow the law, to guarantee (*ky cuong*) and

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bang cho nguoi dang song va cong bang cho nguoi da khuat!', *DDK*, 15–21 October 1994, 1, 6.

56 Huong Huyen, 'Khai mac phien toa so tham xu tiep vu an cau Chuong Duong', *PNTD*, 19–26 October 1994, 1, 2.

57 Manh Hung, TAND (Toa an nhan dan) 'pho tuyen phat Nguyen Tung Duong: Tu hinh!', *Ha Noi moi*, 22 October 1994.

58 Ngoc Giao, Ha Noi: 'Xet xu lai vu an cau Chuong Duong,' *Thanh nien*, 23 October 1994, 1.

59 Tien Chuoc, 'Nguyen Tung Duong giet nguoi de chiem doat tai san, y da pham toi co dong co, muc dich ro rang...', *Lao dong*, 27 October 1994, 1, 2.

national customs, to defend justice for society and justice for each person before the law...'<sup>60</sup>

The newspapers that had taken up the Duong case greeted the sentence with triumph, full of praise for the judges.<sup>61</sup> *Phu nu Thu do* even front paged a story boldly bannered 'When the death sentence against Nguyen Tung Duong will be carried out.'<sup>62</sup> Domestic press coverage dramatically expanded into mainstream outlets such as *Lao dong* (Labor), the trade union newspaper, other local Hanoi newspapers,<sup>63</sup> and a number of newspapers directly run by the Party.

### 'And what if Nguyen Tung Duong's two sons lost their father?' – The Battle is Joined

For the first time, now, the police officer Nguyen Tung Duong began to have his media defenders as well, newspapers that had been largely silent for the entire long legal process. Police and Ministry of Interior newspapers such as *An ninh Thu do* (Capital Security) now ran long stories, virtually all disagreeing with the verdict and sentence.<sup>64</sup> *An ninh Thu do* used the same methods to defend Duong as *Dai Doan ket*

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60 'Phan quiet cua toa an khong vi du luan ma phai theo luat phap' (Trich ban an so 701/HS-TA xet xu tu hinh Nguyen Tung Duong), *DDK*, 2–9 November 1994, 1, 5.

61 See, e.g., Huong Huyen, 'Vu an cau Chuong Duong – Toa so tham Ha Noi xu: Nguyen Tung Duong tu hinh cong ly sang to nuc long dan', *PNTD*, 26 October–2 November 1994, 1, 2, 4; 'Nguyen Tung Duong linh an tu hinh! – Mot ban an hop long dan, nghiem phep nuoc', *Dai Doan ket*, 29 October–4 November 1994, 1, 6. Portions of the formal court opinion were published as 'Phan quiet cua toa an khong vi du luan ma phai theo luat phap' (Trich ban an so 701/HS-TA xet xu tu hinh Nguyen Tung Duong), *DDK*, 2–9 November 1994, 1, 5.

62 *PNTD*, 'Viet theo yeu cau ban doc – Bao gio se thuc thi ban an xu tu hinh Nguyen Tung Duong', *PNTD*, 2–9 November 1994, 1.

63 See, e.g., Manh Hung, TAND (Toa an nhan dan) 'pho tuyen phat Nguyen Tung Duong: Tu hinh!', *Ha Noi moi*, 22 October 1994; Nguyen Ha Lam, 'Phien toa mong doi... – Ghi chep xung quanh phien toa xu Nguyen Tung Duong', *Nguoi Ha Noi*, 30 October 1994, 1, 4, 5.

64 Y kien hai vi dai dien Vienkiem sat va Toa an nhan dan Ha Noi, *An ninh Thu do* (hereafter *ANTD*), 23 October 1994, 6; To phong vien noi chinh, 'Xet xu vu an cau Chuong Duong', *ANTD*, 23 October 1994, 6, 7; Dao Hong Duc, 'Sau phien toa xu vu an cau Chuong Duong', *ANTD*, 30 October 1994, 6; Anh Quang, 'Nhiều người đồng ý với tôi', *ANTD*, 30 October 1994, 6; Ho Si Tao, 'Nói đầu của người mẹ', *ANTD*, 30 October 1994, 6, 8; 'Sau ban an ve vu an cau Chuong Duong' – Do Thanh Thuy, 'Chau khong muon co nhieu dua tre mat bo me', *ANTD*, 4 November 1994, (6); Nguyen Thi Duc, 'Nhung nguoi me nghi ve noi dau cua hai nguoi me', *ANTD*, 4 November 1994, 6; Nguyen Binh Minh, 'Hay xu dung toi', *ANTD*, 4 November 1994, 6; Le Xuan Quang, 'Neu nhu hai dua con cua Nguyen Tung Duong mat cha', *ANTD*, 4 November 1994, 6; 'Chi Trung, Dung de noi an han day vo chung ta', *ANTD*, 4 November 1994, 6.

and *Phu nu Thu do* had utilised to express popular anger toward Duong and the Hanoi prosecutors. It published letters and short articles by a Hanoi high school student,<sup>65</sup> a Hanoi mother writing on behalf of a group of mothers in her neighbourhood,<sup>66</sup> a doctor at Hanoi's Thang Long Hospital, also writing on behalf of a group of his colleagues,<sup>67</sup> a retired cadre in Hanoi's Kim Lien District,<sup>68</sup> a female artist, writing on behalf of other performers at the Youth Drama Troupe,<sup>69</sup> and a soldier's wife,<sup>70</sup> all criticising the severity of the sentence or the specific crime for which Duong had been judged.

With the conviction of Nguyen Tung Duong a battle now went on in the newspapers that seemed more directed at the appeal process than at celebration, coverage still dominated by *Dai Doan ket* and *Phu nu Thu do* but now joined by *An ninh Thu do* and other security newspapers angry at the verdict and sentence. During the two month period between Duong's conviction on October 21, 1994 and his appeal hearing in mid-December, *Dai Doan ket* and *Phu nu Thu do* continued to run articles on the case, defending the verdict and sentence, setting the stage for a rejection of Duong's appeal,<sup>71</sup> reporting directly and by name on which officials had delayed investigation and judgement for nearly two years,<sup>72</sup> and now directly warning the legal authorities of their own power and that of public opinion.

The intensity of the press battle was dictated by the appeal schedule. Under the Criminal Procedure Code, Duong had a limited period from the date of his sentence to appeal. So the window for 'public opinion' – whether *Dai Doan ket* and *Phu nu Thu do*'s public opinion, or *An ninh Thu do*'s public opinion – to make itself felt was short

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- 65 Sau ban an ve vu an cau Chuong Duong – Do Thanh Thuy, 'Chau khong muon co nhieu dua tre mat bo me', *ANTD*, 4 November 1994, 6.
- 66 Nguyen Thi Duc, 'Nhưng người mẹ nghi về nỗi đau của hai người mẹ', *ANTD*, 4 November 1994, 6.
- 67 Nguyen Binh Minh, 'Hay xu dung toi', *ANTD*, 4 November 1994, 6.
- 68 Le Xuan Quang, 'Neu nhu hai dua con của Nguyen Tung Duong mat cha', *ANTD*, 4 November 1994, 6. Mr. Quang's commentary emphasized the question that heads this section.
- 69 Chi Trung, 'Dung de noi an han day vo chung ta', *ANTD*, 4 November 1994, 6.
- 70 Nguyen Thi Tinh, 'Ban an can duoc xem xet lai', *ANTD*, 4 November 1994, 6.
- 71 See, e.g., Anh Ly, Nhan phien toa xet xu Nguyen Tung Duong – 'Toi danh va cao trang trong vu an cau Chuong Duong', *DDK*, 22–28 October 1994, 1, 6; Tieng noi của Ong Nguyen Van Lat, bo de nan nhan tai phien toa – 'Phap luat phai nghiem de moi nguoi dan luong thien duoc song yen on, de moi gia dinh tranh duoc tham hoa' *DDK*, 29 October–4 November 1994, 6; Tran Ngoc Binh, Viet theo yeu cau ban doc – 'Muc an tu hinh Nguyen Tung Duong co nang hay khong?' *PNTD*, 9–16 November 1994, 1, 2.
- 72 Vu Tien, 'Ai da lam cho vu an cau Chuong Duong duong keo dai gan 2 nam', *PNTD*, 9–16 November 1994, 1, 2.



indeed. And with the widespread perception that public opinion and the press had indeed influenced the first trial, neither side was taking any chances.

Duong indeed appealed the judgement and sentence, and the Hanoi People's Court scheduled the appellate hearing in the case for December 13-15, 1994. Thousands gathered outside the stately French colonial courthouse housing the Supreme Court as the appellate hearing began underway, and the tribunal's proceedings were broadcast over loudspeakers. On December 13 clashes broke out between angry members of the crowd concerned that the appellate tribunal would weaken the final verdict, and police guarding the courthouse. Rocks were thrown by people in the crowd, and 'police were seen charging the crowd of several thousand using batons and shields that give off blue sparks and electric shocks,'<sup>73</sup> although it was unclear who had attacked whom first.<sup>74</sup>

On December 15, 1994 the Supreme Court appellate tribunal approved the verdict of the Hanoi court, noting that the case had 'caus[ed] bad political and social consequences.'<sup>75</sup> Once again the judgement was covered in the domestic press, both by *Dai Doan ket* and *Phu nu Thu do* and also by other national newspapers that had not earlier given priority to the Duong case.<sup>76</sup> Triumph was once again the theme of the

73 Police clash with crowd outside Hanoi trial, Agence France Press (Hanoi), 14 December, 1994, available on Lexis.

74 For foreign news reports on the scene at the Hanoi courthouse on December 13, 14 and 15, 1994 and the appellate tribunal's decision, see Greg Torode, Crowds rally against officer facing death, *South China Morning Post*, 14 December 1994, 14; Incidents lors du proces en appel d'un policier condamne pour meurtre, Agence France Press (Hanoi), 14 December 1994; Court upholds death penalty on Hanoi policeman, Agence France Press (Hanoi), 15 December 1994; Vietnam policeman sentenced to death for murder, Kyodo News Service/Japan Economic Newswire (Hanoi), 15 December 1994; Vietnam court confirms death sentence on policeman, Reuters World Service (Hanoi), 15 December 1994; Le tribunal de Hanoi confirme la peine de mort infligee a un policier, Agence France Press (Hanoi), 15 December 1994; Greg Torode, Crowds applaud death sentence on policeman, *South China Morning Post*, 16 December 1994, 14; Tim Larimer, Policemen's trial triggers unheard-of Hanoi street protest, *The Houston Chronicle*, 17 December 1994, 27; Vietnam: Courts of public opinion, *The Economist*, 24 December–6 January, 1995, 31.

Vietnamese domestic reports in English include Death sentence for killer policeman, *Vietnam Investment Review*, 10 December 1994 (digested from an Agence France Press report); and Supreme People's Court upholds policeman's death sentence, BBCSWB, 5 January 1995, FE/2193/B (text of a Voice of Vietnam radio report).

75 Traffic policeman executed for killing, *Vietnam Investment Review*, (x) March 1995.

76 Coverage includes Huong Huyen, Toa phuc tham TANDTC (Toa an nhan dan toi cao) 'xet xu vu an cau Chuong Duong xu y an Nguyen Tung Duong tu hinh', *PNTD*, 14–21 December 1994, 1, 2; Nguyen Tien Dam, Nhan toa phuc tham Toa an nhan dan toi cao mo phien toa xet xu phuc tham vu an Nguyen Tung Duong – 'Cong luan voi cuoc dau

*Dai Doan ket* and *Phu nu Thu do* coverage; *Phu nu Thu do* termed the ruling ‘welcomed by the people as a verdict on the correct person, for the correct crime, and correct under the law.’<sup>77</sup> But the coverage was neither as prominent nor as exultatory as after the October hearing, and more often now relegated to inside pages than beginning on the front page.

Following the decision by the Supreme Court tribunal upholding the death sentence and the violence during that appellate hearing, press coverage dropped away quickly. But careful efforts were underway to interpret the results in official ways, to placate Hanoi and national police forces very angry over the treatment of their lieutenant and their forces – and their inability to control the result of the case – and to make peace between the legal institutions that had been brought into direct contact during the Duong matter.

*Dai Doan ket*, for example, was fully cooperative in that effort. A senior national prosecutor explained in the newspaper in late December 1994 that the Nguyen Tung Duong case was an example of the positive role of public opinion in cooperation with the state in the struggle against crime.<sup>78</sup> Nor was the incident indicative of a general problem of police corruption, stated the president of the appellate tribunal in the Duong case under a front-paged banner headline in *Dai Doan ket* the next week. ‘The Nguyen Tung Duong phenomenon was particular, and it cannot dim the great feats of arms and sacrifices of the people’s public security over the past fifty years.’<sup>79</sup>

Few articles appeared in the period before and after Tet, in January and February 1995, when Duong’s formal appeal for clemency was lodged with President Le Duc Anh under the provisions of Vietnam’s Criminal Procedure Law, and the Office of the

tranh chong toi pham’, *DDK*, 17–23 December 1994, 1, 6; Ong Do Cao Thang, Pho Chanh toa phuc tham TANDTC (Toa an nhan dan toi cao) tai Ha Noi, Chu toa phien toa xet xu vu an Nguyen Tung Duong tra loi phong van cua Bao Dai Doan ket – ‘Hien tuong Nguyen Tung Duong chi la ca biet, khong the lam lu mo chien cong va su hy sinh lon lao cua cong an nhan dan trong gan 50 nam qua’, *DDK*, 24–30 December 1994, 1, 6.

77 ‘Chu tich Nuoc khong chap nhan don xin an giam toi chet cua bi cao Nguyen Tung Duong’, *PNTD*, 1–7 March 1995, 1.

78 Nguyen Tien Dam, Nhan toa phuc tham Toa an nhan dan toi cao mo phien toa xet xu phuc tham vu an Nguyen Tung Duong – ‘Cong luan voi cuoc dau tranh chong toi pham’, *DDK*, 17–23 December 1994, 1, 6;

79 Ong Do Cao Thang, Pho Chanh toa phuc tham TANDTC (Toa an nhan dan toi cao) tai Ha Noi, Chu toa phien toa xet xu vu an Nguyen Tung Duong tra loi phong van cua Bao Dai Doan ket – ‘Hien tuong Nguyen Tung Duong chi la ca biet, khong the lam lu mo chien cong va su hy sinh lon lao cua cong an nhan dan trong gan 50 nam qua’, *DDK*, 24–30 December 1994, 1, 6.

President requested opinions on the clemency petition from the President of the Supreme Court and the Procurator-General of the Supreme People's Procuracy.

President Le Duc Anh issued a formal decision rejecting Nguyen Tung Duong's appeal for clemency (*don xin an giam*) on February 27, 1995, following a recommendation by the President of the Supreme Court and the Procurator-General that the clemency not be granted.<sup>80</sup> On the same day, the Chief Judge of the Hanoi People's Court issued a decision to enforce the appellate court's judgement, in accordance with the Criminal Procedure Code, and establishing an judgement execution committee for the case. That committee included the Chief Judge of the Hanoi People's Court, the Chief of the Enforcement Division of the Hanoi People's Procuracy, the Deputy Commander of the Hanoi Police, and 'representatives of some related institutions.'<sup>81</sup>

Under the terms of that enforcement decision, and after detailed preparations were undertaken, the judgement execution committee met at 3:00 am on the morning of March 5, 1995 at Cau Nga, the execution ground for Hanoi located in adjacent Ha Tay province, to carry out the sentence. *Dai Doan ket*, *Phu nu Thu do* and other media reported the execution, in what Amnesty International later called '[t]he first official confirmation of a death sentence having been carried out since 1985.'<sup>82</sup>

After hundreds of column inches on the case over two years, *Dai Doan ket* finished its coverage in sparse terms: 'In accordance with the convict's wishes, Nguyen Tung Duong met with his family (*ngươi than trong gia dinh*) before the sentence was carried out. The sentence of death against Nguyen Tung Duong was carried out swiftly and in

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80 'Chu tich Nuoc khong chap nhan don xin an giam toi chet cua bi cau Nguyen Tung Duong', *PNTD*, 1-7 March 1995, 1; P.V., 'Ban an tu hinh doi voi Nguyen Tung Duong da duoc thi hanh', *DDK*, 11-17 March 1995, 1. The decision was Quyet dinh no. 333/CTN (Chu tich nuoc), dated February 27, 1995.

81 'Ban an tu hinh doi voi Nguyen Tung Duong da duoc thi hanh', *DDK*, 11-17 March 1995, 1.

82 'Ban an tu hinh doi voi Nguyen Tung Duong da duoc thi hanh', *DDK*, 11-17 March 1995, 1; Bui Cong Ly, Sang 5-3, 'tai phap trung Cau Nga, Ban an tu hinh Nguyen Tung Duong da duoc thi hanh', *Ha Noi moi*, 7 March 1995. Other reports on the execution included Traffic policeman executed for killing, *Vietnam Investment Review*, (x) March 1995.

Foreign reports included Hanoi traffic policeman executed after controversial case, Agence France Presse (Hanoi), 6 March 1995; Vietnamese policeman executed for murder, Reuters World Service (Hanoi), 7 March 1995; Policeman executed by firing squad for widely publicized murder, Deutsche Presse-Agentur (Hanoi), 8 November 1995; Vietnam policeman executed, *The Washington Post*, 8 March 1995, A25. Amnesty International's report on the execution may be found at Amnesty International, *Socialist Republic of Vietnam: The Death Penalty* (1996). A news dispatch on that report is Amnesty concerned over Vietnam death penalty, Reuters North American Wire (Hanoi), 21 February 1996.

an orderly fashion (*nhanh gon*), in accordance with law, and was completed at 4:30 on the morning of March 5, 1995.<sup>83</sup>

But *Ha Noi moi* (New Hanoi), a newspaper not earlier associated with extensive coverage of the Duong case and one close to the Hanoi city leadership, provided a much more detailed report on the execution, and probably the most detailed coverage ever publicly issued on an execution in Vietnam. While the *Dai Doan ket* and other reports read like brief wire services digests of an official government release, the *Ha Noi moi* reporter, Bui Cong Ly, wrote in terms that might have implied presence at the event itself.

'On the morning of March 5, at the Hanoi prison, Nguyen Tung Duong was escorted from his cell to the judgement execution committee to complete final procedural formalities. The judgement execution committee included representatives of three institutions: municipal court, procuracy and public security. Those participating as witnesses and supervisors of the final procedural formalities also included representatives of other institutions: the Hanoi prison, criminalistics technicians, archival personnel to identify the prisoner, central forensic specialists, and local government personnel on location at the prison.

Then the technicians from the archival institution identified the prisoner, by taking fingerprints of Nguyen Tung Duong on the spot; those were examined by the criminalistics technical experts and a comparison was done on the spot, under a magnifying glass, between the fingerprints taken there and the fingerprints in Nguyen Tung Duong's archived file. It was then announced that the results confirmed that the person against whom sentence was to be carried out today was Nguyen Tung Duong.

Before the judgement execution committee, Nguyen Tung Duong was directly read the decision of the President rejecting the appeal for clemency from the death sentence and the decision of the President of the municipal People's Court on carrying out the judgement. Then he signed the record of proceedings, and met with family members (*nguai than trong gia dinh*), before going to the execution ground.

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83 'Ban an tu hinh doi voi Nguyen Tung Duong da duoc thi hanh', *DDK*, 11–17 March 1995, 1. Other domestic reports include Hanoi judge reports execution of convicted policeman, Voice of Vietnam radio, 6 March 1995, translated in BBCSWB, 8 March 1995, FE/2246/B; Traffic policeman executed for killing, *Vietnam Investment Review*, (x) March 1995; and Ten cases that caused the greatest (whispers) in 1994, *DDK*, 25 February–3 March 1995, 1. Foreign reports include Hanoi traffic policeman executed after controversial case, Agence France Press (Hanoi), 6 March 1995; Vietnamese policeman executed for murder, Reuters World Service, 7 March 1995; Vietnam policeman executed, *The Washington Post*, 8 March 1995, A25; Policeman executed by firing squad for widely publicized murder, Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) (Hanoi), 8 March 1995; all available on Lexis.

At the Cau Nga execution ground, the execution committee issued the order to execute Nguyen Tung Duong. When the firing was completed (*dut loat sung no*), the forensic physicians carried out an examination of the convict's corpse, and then signed the report to confirm: Nguyen Tung Duong was dead.

The judgement was carried out in conformity with procedural formalities, carefully, accurately and safely.<sup>84</sup>

Newspaper coverage ceased almost completely after Duong's final appeal was denied and while President Le Duc Anh considered his clemency petition. One exception was an acerbic, sly, truculent summary in a *Dai Doan ket* wrap-up article on 'Ten cases that caused the worst reaction (*tai tieng*) in 1994,' published just before Duong's execution. *Dai Doan ket* defiantly gave the people and the press some credit for justice in the case of Nguyen Tung Duong.

'The case of Nguyen Tung Duong committing murder on the Chuong Duong Bridge has caused an uproar in public opinion within society and in the newspapers throughout the past two years. It caused the worst reactions about the Hanoi traffic police during 1994. The case took three hearings and took very extensive labour and time. Many people have said that if this case had occurred in a different place, where the people's standards of intellect and culture (*dan tri*) had not yet been familiar with law, and without the unusually active efforts of the press, the case also would have been concluded at the first hearing.'<sup>85</sup>

Not all agreed that the press had helped reach a just result. A staff member at the Institute of Strategic Studies under the Ministry of Defence strongly stated the contrary view, angrily endorsing acerbic comments on the role of the press in the Nguyen Tung Duong case made by a senior Hanoi judge.

'I am in strong agreement with the views expressed by Mr. Pham Quang Liem, Deputy Chief Judge of the Criminal Tribunal of the Hanoi People's Court, when he answered journalists' questions in *An ninh Thu do*: 'The purpose of every court hearing is to be accurate with respect to persons and to be accurate with respect to crime. Press institutions are not trial institutions. Debating the case of a defendant is not the function of newspapers and radio. We should not bring in freedom of the press in order to conduct psychological incitement' utilising matters that are contrary to the truth.'<sup>86</sup>

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84 Bui Cong Ly, Sang 5-3, 'tai phap truong Cau Nga, Ban an tu hinh Nguyen Tung Duong da duoc thi hanh', *Ha Noi moi*, 7 March 1995.

85 Ten cases that caused the greatest whisperm in 1994, *DDK*, 25 February-3 March 1995, 1, 6.

86 Y kien hai vi dai dien Vienkiem sat va Toa an nhan dan Ha Noi, *ANTD*, 23 October 1994, 6; Anh Quang, 'Nhiều người đồng ý với tôi', *ANTD*, 30 October 1994, 6.

And so newspaper coverage of the death of Nguyen Viet Phuong, and the trials and execution of Nguyen Tung Duong, ended about as abruptly as the deaths themselves occurred.

What does the coverage of this case teach us? One lesson is that despite the wealth of coverage, we still know little about the internal processes and pressures under which Vietnamese editors and journalists work when confronted with complex social issues in which there is intense public interest. In this case, for example, it is clear that *Dai Doan Ket* and *Phu Nu Thu Do* perceived that they were relatively free (until the end of the trial) to pursue the case. And it is reasonably clear that the security newspapers, including *An ninh Thu do*, remained under publication restrictions until the final stages of the matter.

Why are those pressures applied and signals communicated in specific cases. How are they applied and communicated, both to newspapers and then within them? Both issues require further research. What is clear is that under certain circumstances Vietnamese newspapers do feel a certain flexibility to pursue the punishment of certain individuals in power – and, at least in this case, they pursued that punishment vigorously. Complex cases like this certainly do not mean that the Vietnamese press is ‘free’ in any sense, for obviously it is not. But such cases introduce significant complexity into the discussion, a complexity that belies and provides texture to the sometime perception that the Vietnamese press is completely directed, controlled and dominated in its daily, article-by-article work by the political structure in which it seeks to work.

The Vietnamese written press has been effectively strategic in choosing arenas for reporting in which the Party and state have, at least in formal terms, promised more autonomy than in the past. Law is a clear example of both the increased autonomy promised (though not always delivered), and the ways in which the written media has sought to bootstrap onto those formal expressions of autonomy. When the Vietnamese press treats law as a somewhat separate sphere of social life and reports on it in more aggressive and autonomous ways than is possible with political spheres that have not been granted enhanced (albeit formal) autonomy, the arena itself becomes a shield for the press. Freedom of the press itself could not, at least under current circumstances, serve as nearly a powerful shield for press activity than reporting on law or analogous arenas of a now more separate social life in Vietnam.

NINE

**UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OUTSIDE:  
VIETNAMESE TRANSLATIONS  
OF FOREIGN SOCIAL SCIENCE PUBLICATIONS**

**David Marr and Mark Sidel\***

Almost any afternoon or evening in Ho Chi Minh City or Hanoi, hundreds of people can be seen browsing the downtown bookstores and bookstalls: retired cadres rub shoulders with university students; western music plays in the background; and sales staff make no effort to push anyone to purchase. Book prices are quite high for the average consumer, the state having removed or severely reduced publishing subsidies about seven years ago. Translations of foreign social science books are especially expensive, yet they attract the attention of browsers because of their novelty, and sales are sufficient to clean out stocks of many titles within one or two years, and often within months.

At another level entirely, high-ranking members of the Communist Party and state apparatus also seek out translations of foreign social science works, in hopes of enhancing their capacity to make effective decisions in the challenging new climate of economic transformation, international integration, social dislocations and cultural uncertainty. At the Eighth Party Congress in mid-1996, a long book table was placed in the garden of the conference site at the National Assembly headquarters on Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi to attract delegates and members of the press during adjournments. At one point Party General Secretary Do Muoi emerged from the building and moved down the table, examining the choices available. Among them were Vietnamese novels, volumes on Vietnamese history and politics, dictionaries and reference works, and translated books on market economics and political economy. Do Muoi purchased a translation of a French study on Napoleon, explaining to Vietnamese and foreign reporters, 'He was the hero of his time. Let's see how he carried out aggression so that we can take precautions against aggressors.'<sup>1</sup>

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\* The authors are grateful to Hoang Oanh Collins for assistance in preparation of the database of translations, and to Russell Heng and Ben Kerkvliet for comments on a draft manuscript.

1 Mark Sidel discussions with Hanoi-based foreign journalists, November 1996 and January 1997. Seth Mydans quotes Do Muoi in the *New York Times*, 2 July 1996, p. 4. Reuters correspondent Adrian Edwards also quotes Do Muoi in 'Vietnam sets seal on Party congress changes', Reuters, 1 July 1996. *The South China Morning Post* of 2 July 1996 carries an Agence France-Presse photo of Do Muoi holding the Napoleon volume, captioned 'Source of inspiration.' The book is *Na-po-le-on Bo-na-pac*, by E. Tac-Le (Hanoi: Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1996). Third revised printing.

In Vietnam today, translations are by no means the most common way to acquire information about the world at large. Newspapers and weekly magazines contain a range of stories supplied by Vietnam News Agency or lifted from foreign press services. Vietnam Television routinely incorporates foreign satellite feeds into its news programs, and screens foreign documentaries and soap operas. Voice of Vietnam Radio tries to compete with the BBC and the Voice of America. A limited number of foreign periodicals are available for sale in the main cities. Videotaped foreign films are readily accessible, even in remote towns. Overseas Vietnamese carry in publications and videotapes to give to their relatives, and offer colourful verbal accounts of life in America, France or Australia, which became part of local lore. Meanwhile, assorted government agencies and research institutes provide Party and state officials with confidential summaries and assessments of the foreign media.

Given this recent proliferation of information about the world outside, it is natural that Vietnamese increasingly seek more in-depth analysis and exposition, hoping to make sense of an obviously complicated global condition, and to apply whatever knowledge is gained to their own specific circumstances. Most older generation Vietnamese writers are not in a position to satisfy this reader demand, having been trained in the former Soviet Union, spent most of their lives in a neo-Stalinist domestic system, then been compelled since 1989 to survive in a buccaneer market economy. They publish numerous articles that reflect their own difficult transition, but they appear to lack the confidence or the motivation to research and write major analytical monographs. This intellectual challenge is likely to be taken up by some among the new generation of Vietnamese currently undertaking degree programs in western universities. In the meantime, book translations offer readers the most food for thought.

Several years ago the authors of this article began to collect data on Vietnamese social science publications translated from foreign languages, as part of our separate, repeated journeys down the shelves of bookstores and libraries in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang and Hue. This reflected our broader desire to understand something about how knowledge is acquired, circulated, reformulated and utilised in contemporary Vietnam. It also led to a practical database for a project to translate and publish a limited number of additional social science monographs.<sup>2</sup> Supported by the Ford Foundation, this project so

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<sup>2</sup> Copies of the computer database of foreign works already translated and published in Vietnamese, which provides the basis for this article, can be obtained from either of the authors.



far has resulted in translation and publication of two seminal works: Edward Said's *Orientalism*; and Fernand Braudel's *Les structures du quotidien*.<sup>3</sup>

Up to early 1998, the authors had canvassed about 240 published translations, excluding novels, computer science manuals, and the occasional textbook in engineering or the natural sciences. We did not attempt to track down all social science titles published before 1993, nor can we claim to have located every translation produced after that date. Nonetheless, we believe we have collected a sufficiently large sample to be able to say something meaningful and interesting about the state of social science information circulation in Vietnam during this period of rapid change and substantial conceptual challenges.

### Translations in Historical Context

Until the first decades of the twentieth century, educated Vietnamese depended on classical Chinese to communicate in writing. Vietnamese translated to Chinese a range of texts imported from Cambodia, Siam, Laos and India, perhaps most importantly Buddhist scriptures in Pali and Sanskrit. However, not many of these translations appear to have survived into the modern era, nor have extant texts been the object of much scholarly scrutiny. From the seventeenth century, Portuguese, Dutch and French texts also sparked interest among the Vietnamese literati, and presumably provoked the royal court to commission the occasional internal translation to Chinese, yet there was no sustained initiative to scrutinize western learning in the manner of 'Dutch Studies' efforts in Japan.

Although relying mostly on classical Chinese, Vietnamese also created over time a separate but related ideographic system to accord with the sounds and syntax of their own spoken language. Known as *Nom*, this unique Vietnamese script was useful in the first instance for recording local songs, proverbs, placenames, medicinals and the names of gods or spirits, but it eventually became the vehicle as well for composition of original poetry of major importance to the development of Vietnamese literature. Eventually a variety of Chinese texts were also translated into *Nom*, to facilitate the circulation of ideas among Vietnamese lacking a classical education, not unlike the emergence in Europe of vernacular translations from Latin. These included medical treatises, children's primers, mathematics manuals, and especially Buddhist, Taoist and Christian scriptures.<sup>4</sup>

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3 *Orientalism* appeared as *Dong Phuong Hoc* (Hanoi: National Politics Publishing House [hereafter NPPH], 1998). Braudel's history was published as *Nhung Cau Truc Sinh Hoat Thuong Ngay* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishing House, 1998).

4 In a personal communication of 23 May 1997, Dr. Li Tana reported the existence of two shelves containing such *Nom* translations from Chinese in the Social Science Information Library in Hanoi.

By the seventeenth century, Western Catholic missionaries had formulated a romanized alphabet to aid in their own study of spoken Vietnamese, prepare sermons, and train Vietnamese auxiliaries. Eventually tracts and catechisms were composed which utilized this romanized alphabet, yet it was not until the 1860s, when the invading French carried with them a printing press, that circulation expanded to significant proportions. Two Vietnamese Catholics, Truong Vinh Ky (1837-98) and Huynh Tinh Cua (1834-1907), labored to raise the romanized script beyond its existing status as a rather crude vehicle for foreign religious and political propaganda, producing a number of secular translations and codifications from French and Latin. They labeled the romanized alphabet *quoc ngu* (national language), a term previously used by some to identify materials in *Nom*. Vietnamese nationalists soon took up both the alphabet and the term with enthusiasm. By the 1920s, Vietnamese of all political persuasions were translating and publishing hundreds of Chinese and French texts to *quoc ngu* on every subject imaginable. The new Vietnamese intelligentsia considered translation an integral part of language development, engaging in lively debates about word formation, grammatical innovations, links between written and spoken languages, and the best ways to communicate modern ideas to the public at large. By the early 1940s, most intellectuals were confident that an independent Vietnam could make its way in the world using *quoc ngu* and spoken Vietnamese, not French and certainly not Chinese.<sup>5</sup> This language development became a reality in North Vietnam by the late 1950s, and in South Vietnam about one decade later, a remarkable achievement compared to most other post-colonial societies.

As an eager member of the socialist bloc, North Vietnam accepted tutelage from the Soviet Union and China, to include extensive translations of the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Tse-tung. In addition, Russian books on political philosophy, history, literature, linguistics, ethnology, economic organization, and international relations were translated to Vietnamese and utilized in North Vietnam's universities and research institutes. During the 1960s, China printed large quantities of Maoist texts in Vietnamese and shipped them to Hanoi, a process that peaked with millions of copies of the *Little Red Book*, yet it seems that a substantial percentage of these publications remained stacked away in the back rooms of institutions and bookstores.

In South Vietnam, meanwhile, the U.S. Agency for International Development sponsored translation and publication to Vietnamese of a limited number of books in political science, public administration, economics, and education. Students returning from graduate training in the United States also compiled and printed translated compendiums of textbook extracts and lecture notes, for use in university instruction in Saigon, Hue, Dalat and Can Tho.

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5 David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 136-89.

Overall, the 1960s and 1970s impact of Russian and Chinese translations in the North, and English translations in the South, was pale compared to French translations during the 1920s and 1930s. This had more to do with the wide-eyed curiosity of the new intelligentsia in colonial Indochina during those decades, and the relatively favorable conditions for intellectual discourse, than it did with the content of the original books or the quality of translation, although these factors should not be discounted entirely.

The period of ‘renovation’ (*doi moi*) in Vietnam, beginning in 1986, has been another time of intellectual exploration and reaching out, although in conditions quite different from before. For the first five years or so, new booklength translations were rare, reflecting the difficulty of obtaining suitable publications from overseas, the continuing conservative tendencies of central publishing houses, and above all the chaotic financial circumstances faced by publishers, translators, editors and potential consumers alike. Some lengthy translations were published by Party and state institutions for internal circulation only.

It was newspapers and magazines, however, that spearheaded the exciting economic, cultural and quasi-political discussions of the late 1980s, sometimes including translated articles from the foreign press. Russian publications and Russian television provided an important catalyst in this era of glasnost and perestroika; when Vietnam’s censors began to block out materials of Russian origin in 1989-90, it was a sign that constraints were being reimposed on political debate. Since then, certain topics have been excluded from publication, although not necessarily from small-group encounters.

By 1992-93, it was less difficult to identify and obtain potentially interesting publications from the United States, France, Hong Kong or Singapore. Enterprising local publishing houses accepted translations that seemed to offer money-making opportunities, while the Communist Party leadership appears to have worked out a policy on what types of translations they wished to encourage. Central publishing houses were consolidated, restructured, and once again provided with state subsidies, although not the open-ended budgets of neo-Stalinist times. Retail prices of books escalated sharply, yet the purchasing power of many potential book buyers also increased during this period, whether they were individuals, organizations, offices, or production units. The size of print runs dropped dramatically, reflecting the new importance of accountants in publishing houses, but not necessarily the number of people actually reading books distributed.

*Original Language of Social Science Books Translated to Vietnamese*

English	118	(49.4%)	Japanese	8	(3.3%)
French	51	(21.3%)	German	4	(1.7%)
Chinese	48	(20.1%)	Swedish	<u>1</u>	(0.4%)
Russian	9	(3.8%)	Total	239	

The vast majority of English language titles translated to Vietnamese are published in the United States, with another dozen or so from Great Britain, and a handful from Japan,

Australia and Singapore. The significant number of French language titles reflects residual cultural influence, the availability of qualified translators, and recent French government publishing subsidies. The number of Chinese language titles has been increasing in the past few years, mostly published in the People's Republic, but also coming from Singapore and Taiwan. Russian language titles have declined precipitously since the late 1980s. Japanese language titles are limited by the paucity of good translators, although this is starting to change. Finally, it is worth noting the complete absence of titles from the Khmer, Lao or Thai languages, even though an abundance of potential translators to Vietnamese are available.

*Foreign Books Translated to Vietnamese: Disciplines and Subject Matter*

Economics	84 (35.0%)	Law (non-business)	11
General	12	History	48 (20.1%)
Banking, money, financial markets	11	Vietnam (non-war)	5
Business entrepreneurship	13	Vietnam War	7
Import-export	5	China	17
Marketing research and strategies	5	Japan	7
Business law	3	Former Soviet bloc	6
Accounting/auditing	4	Western	5
Labour	1	Southeast Asia	1
Tourism	1	Philosophy	10
Mixed economies	4	Personal improvement	7
Vietnamese economy	3	Religion	3
Asian developing economies	9	Sociology	6
Chinese economy	5	Psychology	1
Japanese economy	8	Anthropology	2
Management	10	Linguistics	1
'Futurology'	12	Social science methodology	2
'Understanding America'	7	Communication	2
International relations/ strategic studies	16	Literature	2
Political science	8	Environment/ecology	1
		Encyclopedias	1
		Other	5
		Total	239

### Economics in Command

Thirty-five percent of all books surveyed deal with economic topics, reflecting Communist Party policy priorities, but also popular Vietnamese assumptions about how one ‘gets ahead’ in contemporary society. Most of the general titles are American university textbooks on the market economy, following on from the mid-1980s translation of Paul Samuelson, *Economics*, acquired originally by then Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach on one of his visits to United Nations headquarters in New York. While Samuelson has been reprinted several times, and is still readily available in bookstores, in recent years he has been joined by translations of: Beggs, Fischer and Dornbusch, *Economics*; Robert Gordon, *Microeconomics*; and Pindyck and Rubinfeld, *Microeconomics*. Leonard Silk, *Contemporary Economics: Principles and Issues*, is available in bilingual English/Vietnamese edition, a rarity these days, but recalling numerous bilingual French/Vietnamese publications of the 1920s and 1930s. Each of these texts had first print-runs of 2,000 copies, quite impressive if one looks at the retail price tags, which average 55,000 *dong* (US\$4.00), the equivalent of several days wages for a Hanoi office worker. The only general economics classic to be translated so far is Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*.

A number of economics titles focus on particular facets of the market economy, for example banks, stock exchanges, futures markets, export-import operations, marketing research, advertising, accounting and commercial law. Other translations aim to prepare the reader for setting up and running a small business, with titles like *Cam Nang de Khoi Su Doanh Nghiep* (Essentials for Beginning a Business),<sup>6</sup> or *50 Thuat Giu Khach Hang* (Fifty Techniques to Keep Customers).<sup>7</sup> Most of these entrepreneurial primers contain a fair amount of information and suggestions unsuited to current Vietnamese conditions, yet additional titles continue to be translated and published, complete with garish cover designs and rash promotional blurbs. Whereas most translations on economics topics are expected to succeed or fail by means of public purchases, a significant minority of titles that target smaller audiences of government officials and consultants appear to be subsidized by foreign or domestic sources.<sup>8</sup>

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6 Translation of *The McGraw-Hill Guide to Starting Your Own Business: A step-by-step blueprint for the first time entrepreneur*, by Stephen Harper (New York, 1992).

7 Translation of *Fifty Powerful Ideas You Can Use to Keep Your Customers*, by Paul Timm (1995).

8 These include: Joseph Stiglitz, *Economics of the Public Sector* (2nd edition, 1995), published as *Kinh te hoc cong cong* (Hanoi: Science and Technology Publishing House and National Economics University, 1995); Carolyn Hotchkiss, *International law for business*, published as *Luat quoc te va doanh nghiep* (Hanoi: Statistics Publishing House, 1996); and

Certain economics specializations are ignored entirely or barely represented. The absence of any general political economy text in translation is almost surely due to Communist Party reluctance to submit longstanding political assumptions to public scrutiny, even by implication. There is no translation in the field of agricultural economics, even though at least seventy percent of Vietnamese still make their living from the land. Perhaps it is assumed that nothing new and stimulating has emerged in this sub-discipline, or that foreign preoccupations are largely irrelevant to Vietnamese agricultural conditions. The existence of only one labor economics translation is puzzling, given Vietnam's high rate of unemployment, unprecedented internal labor migration, and the increasing number of strikes.<sup>9</sup>

Also notable is the paucity of translations of foreign studies of the Vietnamese economy. The few exceptions include a couple of works by a team at Harvard's Institute for International Development,<sup>10</sup> an extended essay by a Japanese economist, Hisashi

Ronald McKinnon, *The Order of Economic Liberalization: Financial control in the transition to a market economy*, published by NPPH in 1995. The French government has subsidized Vietnamese translation and publication in the economics area, including such volumes as Jean Lafay and Jacques Lecaillon, *L'economie mixte* (published as *Kinh te hon hop* by the World Publishing House, in 1993); D. Larue and A. Caillat, *Economie d'entreprise (Kinh te doanh nghiep)*, Hanoi: Science and Technology Publishing House, 1992); Robert Lanquar, *L'economie du tourisme (Kinh te du lich)*, Hanoi: World Publishing House, 1993); and Jean Marc Siroen, *Le desordre montaire international (Su roi loan ve tien te quoc te)*, Hanoi: Education Publishing House, 1993). A key volume on Chinese economic reform, edited by the Chinese economic reform theorist and official Ma Hong, has been published as well: *Kinh te thi truong xa hoi chu nghia* (The socialist market economy), published by the NPPH in 1995.

<sup>9</sup> That publication is Sung Sang Park, *Tang Truong va Phat Trien: Tong San Pham Vat Chat va Chien Luoc ve Lao Dong* (Growth and Development: General Material Production and a Strategy regarding Labor) (Hanoi: Central Institute of Economic Management, 1992). Originally published by St. Martin's Press, in 1977.

<sup>10</sup> Borje Ljunggren, editor, *Nhung Thach Thuc tren Con Duong Cai Cach o Dong Duong* (Challenges on the Road to Reform in Indochina) (Hanoi, 1994). The original English title is *Challenge of Reform in Indochina*. This was followed by Dwight Perkins, David Dapice and Jonathan Haughton, editors, *Viet Nam Cai Cach theo Huong Rong Bay* (Vietnam Reforms in the Manner of the Flying Tigers) (Hanoi, 1995 and 1996). As of late 1997, the English edition of this *Tigers* collection had yet to be published.

Nakatomi,<sup>11</sup> and the ambitious description and analysis by Adam Fforde and Stefan de Vylder, titled *From Plan to Market: The Economic Transition in Vietnam*, discussed further below.

As might be expected, Vietnamese have been eager to read about the advanced Japanese economy and other less advanced but rapidly developing Asian economies. *The Political Economy of Japan*, a six volume study edited by Yasusuke Murakami and Hugh Patrick, is gradually being translated and published. Books lauding Japan's 'economic miracle' predominate, written by Americans as well as by Japanese. By contrast, translated titles on developing Asian economies are more diverse in interpretation, ranging from the 1985 upbeat volume by Mohamed Ariff and Hal Hill, *Export-oriented Industrialization: the ASEAN Experience*, to the 1993 book by Walden Bello and Stephanie Rosenfeld, *Dragons in Distress: Asia's Miracle Economy in Crisis*, which focuses on environmental degradation, social dislocations, employee conditions, and fragile domestic markets. Only one of these translations focuses on a single dragon economy; in this case Taiwan.<sup>12</sup> Given the recent economic meltdown in Asia, one can imagine Vietnamese cadres now busily searching for learned explanations to translate and distribute.

In the past three years the National Politics Publishing House has translated and distributed at least five Chinese accounts of economic transformations in China. These books emphasise central policy-making, management of foreign investment and trade, reform of state-owned enterprises, and revitalisation of socialist economics as a scientific discipline – all topics dear to the hearts of many top-level Vietnamese leaders. The basic terminology, categorisation, formulation of arguments and writing style is familiar to several generations of Vietnamese readers, whether they agree with what is being said or not. It seems likely that the NPPH has been instructed to publish such Beijing expositions on the Chinese economy as a counterweight to the scores of translations appearing since the early 1990s which begin from essentially capitalist or free market economic assumptions.

### **Futurology, Globalization and 'Peaceful Evolution'**

In an era of rapid change, Vietnamese are fascinated by books which predict in sweeping, confident terms what the twenty-first century will bring to the world at large. Most popular of these 'futurology' translations are works by Alvin Toffler, to include *Future Shock*, *The Third Wave*, *Powershift*, and *War and Anti-War: Survival at the Dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. On the cover of the 1992 Vietnamese translation of *Powershift*, the publishers titillate the public by repeating the phrase *du bao tuong lai* (forecasting the

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11 *Mot Cach Nhin ve Cai Cach Kinh Te Viet Nam* (A way of viewing Vietnam's Economic Reforms) (Hanoi, 1998).

12 *Bon Muoi Nam Kinh Nghiem Dai Loan* (Taiwan's Forty Years of Experience), issued by the *World Affairs Review* (Hanoi, 1992).

future) four times, then printing *khong luu hanh rong rai* (not for broad circulation) on the title page, implying access to privileged internal information. Toffler offers Vietnamese a humanistic, non-threatening, outwardly de-politicized interpretation of technological advance and globalization, while also providing guidance on how to succeed in the expanding international market economy.<sup>13</sup> Le Mai, recently deceased Deputy Foreign Minister, and perhaps Hanoi's most sophisticated advocate of global engagement, often chose to quote Toffler in his annual published essays on Vietnam's foreign policy and Vietnam's overall place in the world.

However, other futurology translations are not as sanguine as Toffler, for example: Lester Thurow, *Head to Head: The Coming Economic Battle among Japan, Europe and America*; Peccei and Ikeda, *Before it is Too Late*; and Maridon Tuareno, *The World Turned Upside Down*. Dating from the first decades of the twentieth century, Vietnamese readers are already equipped with vivid Social Darwinian images of struggle and survival of the fittest, so they will find such forecasts sobering but not necessarily disruptive. For additional interpretations they can consult translations of Paul Kennedy, *Preparing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, and David Halberstam, *The Next Century*.

As relations gradually improved between Vietnam and the United States in the early 1990s, a number of introductory books were translated, which we have categorized here as 'Understanding America'. These range from eminently practical manuals, for example *Doing Business with the United States*, by the law firm Baker and McKenzie, to the more broadly philosophical *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, by Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Stoidler and Tipton. The latter was translated from a Russian edition, and given the bland Vietnamese title of *Van Hoa va Tinh Cach cua Ngươi My* (Culture and Character of Americans). A popular Russian description of America by Tsetinskii-Ichaerskii was translated and published under the title of *Nuoc My: Muon Mat Doi Thuong* (The United States: A Thousand Faces of Everyday Life). A French interpretation was translated as well, *L'état des États Unis*, edited by Lennkh and Toinet. Several Vietnamese authors compiled their own guides to the United States for the edification of fellow citizens preparing or hoping to leave on the Orderly Departure Program (ODP), an interesting exception to our earlier point about the paucity of first-person interpretations. The most critical translated view of America was *What Uncle Sam Really Wants*, by Noam Chomsky, followed by *Getting to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, by David Korten. Clearly much room exists for the recently established U.S. Embassy to introduce prospective titles and sponsor translations.

In the post-Cold War international environment, some Vietnamese try to understand the new strategic equations and ascertain what policy adjustments are necessary. Traditionally, international relations research has been the prerogative of a tiny elite group

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13 Toffler has played a similar role in China from the late 1970s onward.



working under stern confidentiality restrictions, a pattern still reflected in subordination of the Institute of International Relations to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the absence of IR programs in universities. However, doors have opened in Hanoi to a string of foreign IR specialists, and a few Foreign Affairs employees are embarked on postgraduate degree programs overseas. No international relations textbook has been translated and published yet. *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, by Paul Kennedy, offers Vietnamese readers a prediction that U.S. power will decline in the post-Cold War era because of arrogance, over-extension and military expenditures outpacing economic resources. A translation of *America's Role in Asia: Interests and Policies*, by the Asia Foundation, was published in 1993. President Clinton's *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* appeared in Vietnamese four years later. A Japanese military assessment of strategic competition in the South China Sea area was published in 1994, under the title *Ve Van De An Ninh o Khu Vuc Dong Nam A* (Concerning Security Problems in the Southeast Asia Region), complete with Vietnamese publisher's warning that the issues were 'big and complicated', the original text 'lacked objectivity' in places, and certain 'unnecessary passages' had been deleted from the translation. Three books about the American CIA have been translated recently, reflecting Vietnamese curiosity about a long-reviled opponent.

Since the early 1990s, substantial Vietnamese effort — particularly within the ministries of defense and interior, and the central Party apparatus — has focused on translation and publication of Chinese critiques of 'peaceful evolution', the term coined to characterize alleged continuing U.S. imperialist attempts to destabilize socialist states and to topple communist parties in power. The terminology, intellectual assumptions and practical policy implications of these books stand in stark contrast to most of the translations discussed above, reflecting a divided Vietnamese elite view of the world today. Vietnamese editors insert prefaces or long introductions which relate Chinese arguments to Vietnam's specific circumstances, as well as inserting the standard disclaimer about conditions in the two countries not being identical. The book titles convey some of the apocalyptic mood of the texts, for example *Cuoc Do Suc giua Hai Che Do Xa Hoi: Ban ve Chong 'Dien Bien Hoa Binh'* (The Test of Strength Between Two Social Systems: Discourse on Opposing 'Peaceful Evolution'), or *Hay Canh Giac cuoc Chien Tranh The Gioi khong co Khoi Sung: Nghien Cuu ve Van De Chong 'Dien Bien Hoa Binh'* (Remain Vigilant in the World War Without Guns: Researching the Question of Opposing 'Peaceful Evolution').

### **Sensitive Terrain: Politics, History and Philosophy**

Many educated Vietnamese feel a pressing need to reexamine a wide range of political, historical and philosophical questions in light of new economic and strategic imperatives, not to mention feeling the psychological frustration of so many decades of censorship and self-censorship. During the late 1980s, the lid on Pandora's box appeared to open, only to

be pushed down by the authorities in 1990-91, but not as tightly as before, and not without a few gremlins continuing to roam at will. The Communist Party endorses the necessity of political renovation, but neutralizes any attempt at public discussion of political options, preferring instead to concentrate on promulgating laws and reorganizing the bureaucracy. In such a climate, the range of translations on political, historical and philosophical topics is likely to suffer, yet some publications still manage to attract considerable reader interest.

Two political science textbooks have been translated, a 1971 Russian history of world political theories, finally published in Vietnamese in 1993, and *Institutions politiques et droit constitutionnel: les grands systemes politiques*, by Maurice Duverger, translated and published in 1995. Other texts have been proposed for translation and use in conjunction with eventual political science course curriculums, but seem to have been delayed pending further Party scrutiny. Meanwhile, readers can consult translations of *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*, a compilation of articles by Chinese leaders Jiang Zemin and Li Peng, or *What is Scientific Socialism*, by Kazuo Shii.

In 1993, Party General Secretary Do Muoi was attracted to a book by the famous post-modernist Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The state of debt, the work of mourning and the new international*, citing it in at least one speech and ordering its translation and release in Vietnamese. While capitalists gleefully point to the collapse of the Soviet Union as evidence that Marxism was dead, Derrida argues that the ghost of Marx is returning to haunt the international capitalist system, which is encountering many of the fundamental contradictions Marx predicted. The Vietnamese editors have added a preface lauding Derrida's call to 'return to Marx', but cautioning readers that Derrida is still 'a bourgeois scholar viewing conditions from his own class in order to restore the honor of the author of *Capital*'.<sup>14</sup>

The study of law is somewhat less delicate than political science in contemporary Vietnam. In addition to business law translations, mentioned earlier, books describing the legal systems of China, Japan, France, the United States and Sweden have been translated and published. A 1989 Moscow textbook on trade, civil and family law in capitalist countries was translated and released in 1993, with 'Capitalist' being altered to 'Western' in the Vietnamese title. China's 1991 *White Paper on Human Rights* was published in Vietnamese three years later, and in 1995 a French text book on human rights appeared in Vietnamese as part of a larger government project on this politically sensitive subject. More interested in collecting evidence of deviant behaviour, the People's Police Publishing

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14 *Nhung Bong Ma cua Mac* (Hanoi, 1994), p. 6

House translated a history of criminology, the first volume devoted to physical evidence, the second to pathology.<sup>15</sup>

History has long been contested terrain in Vietnam, with the state always determined to define and project an authorized corpus, while dissidents, private researchers and local luminaries dare to put forth alternative interpretations. Most of the argument is over Vietnamese history, hence essentially considered a domestic affair, but occasionally the work of foreigners will be appropriated to help defend one position or another. At least five translations on topics unrelated to the Vietnam War have appeared in recent years, beginning with a Russian study on the Dai Viet state in the 10<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, then proceeding to Insun Yu's *Law and Society in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Vietnam*. Georges Boudarel's three decade-old French language study of Phan Boi Chau, early 20<sup>th</sup> century anticolonial activist, appeared in translation in 1998. By far the most ambitious effort to translate French scholarship on Vietnam is taking place in Hue, where the entire 1914-1944 run of the *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hue* is being translated and published one year at a time.<sup>16</sup> The editor of the original *Bulletin*, Fr. Léopold Cadière, is best known scholastically for his three volume *Croyances et Pratiques Religieuses des Vietnamiennes*, from which 16 chapters have recently been translated and published.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, for decades Cadière was denounced by the Vietnam Communist Party as a reactionary colonialist, whereas now concern is expressed that his admirable work must be translated or it will be lost to younger generations of Vietnamese who cannot read French.

Given the centrality of the Vietnam War experience to the Communist Party's image of its own right to rule, one imagines that considerable thought is given to any proposal to translate and publish a foreign account of those events. Among recent French histories of the first phase of the Vietnam War (1945-54), only one has made it past this screening process: *Paris-Saigon-Hanoi: les archives de la guerre, 1944-1947*, by Philippe Devillers. *Why Vietnam?: Prelude to America's Albatross*, by Archimedes Patti, was probably cleared because of its very favorable portrait of Ho Chi Minh, and its argument that the

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15 Guyec Gien Tooc Van (?), *100 Nam Khoa Hoc Hinh Su The Gioi* (One Hundred Years of World Crimonology) (Hanoi, 1994).

16 *Nhung Nguoi Ban Co Do Hue* (Hue: Thuan Hoa Publishing House). The 1914, 1915, and 1916 volumes were published in 1997. Translated by Vuong Hong. Simultaneously, the Hanoi office of the Ecole Française de l'Extrême Orient published a CD-ROM compilation of the *Bulletin*.

17 *Ve Van Hoa va Tin Nguong Truyen Thong Nguoi Viet* (Hanoi: Van Hoa Thong Tin, 1997). Forward by Paul Boudet, Introduction by Dao Hung.

United States missed a precious opportunity to avoid war in 1945.<sup>18</sup> *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, by Neil Sheehan, appeals to the Vietnamese sense of ethics, in which the war can be seen as a vast morality play, with Vann symbolizing hubris, duplicity and decadence. *Facing the Phoenix*, by Zalin Grant, is a searing critique of American pacification operations.

The Vietnam War translation which occasioned the most interest in Vietnam was Robert McNamara's *In Retrospect: the Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*. Approval must have been gained very quickly at Party Politburo level, since only a couple of months passed between New York release of the original in 1995 and translation, printing and distribution of the Vietnamese version. The translation was reviewed by an elite Party team in Hanoi, another indication of high-level approval for what was seen as McNamara's (and thus to some degree America's) most public mea culpa. Numerous book reviews appeared in Vietnamese newspapers, all emphasizing that the former Secretary of Defense had finally admitted the error of his ways. When McNamara was permitted to visit Hanoi for the first time, shortly after release of the Vietnamese edition, he chided Tran Nham, head of the National Politics Publishing House, for not requesting permission and paying royalties. Although McNamara probably meant it as a gentle dig, and did not expect significant Vietnamese proceeds, the western press and American publisher picked up the anecdote, leading Tran Nham to apologize publicly.<sup>19</sup>

If book translations are any indication, Vietnamese are far more interested in the histories of China and Japan than any other countries or regions. At least ten titles have been translated and published on China's top-level political struggles since foundation of the People's Republic in 1949. These are highly personalized, colorful, popular histories, in the tradition of tales about charismatic commanders, powerful emperors and scheming courtiers — quite a contrast to the dry, ideologically correct histories which both Chinese and Vietnamese bookstore have stocked for decades. Two of these books treat the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, two the rise and fall of Lin Piao, two the secret lives of Chairman Mao and his retinue, one the fall of the Gang of Four in 1976, one the careers of the Red Army's ten marshals, one the spread of corruption from the top, and one the life of

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18 Up until the late 1980s, Hanoi history books considered Patti and other OSS members in Vietnam in 1945 as enemy agents, whereas more recently they are considered friends who failed to make a policy difference in Washington. Significantly, Patti's book was translated by Le Trong Nghia, who had worked closely with him in August-September 1945, and later achieved high rank in military intelligence before being purged in the 1960s 'Anti-revisionism' campaign.

19 David Marr meeting with Tran Nham, Hanoi, 4 August 1995. Mark Sidel discussions with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, July-August 1995.

Kang Sheng, head of the Chinese Communist Party's security apparatus for many decades. A number of these translations are published by Vietnam's Public Security Publishing House, presumably to help convince readers that Hanoi has long been an oasis of leadership rectitude and solidarity compared to Beijing.

The diplomatically most sensitive translation effort from Chinese was the selected works of Deng Xiaoping during which Vietnamese tussled with the Chinese Embassy over a passage in which Deng restated Beijing's position on the Paracel and Spratly island groups in the South China Sea. Vietnamese political authorities and the Party-run National Politics Publishing House decided to delete the passage, concerned that it might be regarded as formal acknowledgement of Chinese jurisdiction, and perhaps also not wishing to accept blame for allowing such words to appear in print inside Vietnam. When this deletion came to the attention of staff at the Chinese Embassy, they complained and threatened to withdraw a promised publishing subsidy of \$30,000. Vietnamese Party academics responsible for translation argued internally for retention of the offending passage, in the name of 'scientific integrity', to no avail. No subsidy was forthcoming from Beijing, but somewhat later, when the Vietnamese translation was being launched publicly in Hanoi, the Chinese Embassy provided a donation of \$3,500.<sup>20</sup>

Translated histories of Japan reflect Vietnamese desire to understand the cultural, social and political as well as economic underpinnings of Japanese success. It also helps that the Toyota Foundation has subsidized six out of the seven titles located. All seven of the original publications are in English, reflecting the paucity of qualified translators from Japanese. Most ambitious is a translation of the classic three volume *A History of Japan*, by George Sanson. Vietnamese readers are likely to be especially interested in *The Japanese Social Structure: Its Evolution in the Modern Century*, by Tadashi Fukutake, which examines transformations since the Meiji Restoration, but also social limits placed on post-World War II democratization.

Vietnamese naturally possess considerable curiosity about events leading up to the collapse of the Soviet Union and eastern European communist regimes, but so far no scholarly history has been translated and published. Instead, they can read two popular Russian condemnations of former General Secretary Gorbachev, the memoirs of current President Boris Yeltsin, an exposé of Yeltsin by his former security chief, the memoirs of Poland's General Jaruzelski, and the memoirs of East Germany's former General Secretary, Erich Honecker, written in prison.

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<sup>20</sup> Separate meetings of the authors with Vietnamese academics responsible for translation, Hanoi, 3 March 1995 and 16 August 1995. About the same time the memoirs of Deng's daughter were also translated and published: Deng Maomao, *Cha toi Dang Tieu Binh* (Deng Xiaoping: My father) (Hanoi, 1995).

Five histories of the western world have been translated and published: the biography of Napoleon which attracted Do Muoi's interest; the studies by Edward Said and Fernand Braudel also mentioned earlier; another work by Braudel, titled *Grammaire des civilisations*; and a somewhat dated textbook, *Civilisation in the West*, by Crane Brinton, John B. Christopher and Robert Lee Wolff. Other regions of the world, for example South Asia, Africa, Latin America and Australia/New Zealand, have so far been ignored entirely. The only exception is *A History of Southeast Asia*, by D.G.E. Hall, translated and published with assistance from the Toyota Foundation. Such important neighbors as Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia remain untouched, at least in our sample, when it comes to translations of country histories.

In keeping with the Communist Party's insistence that philosophy be a sub-category of political ideology, philosophical translations long focused almost entirely on the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin, with the occasional teleological nod to Kant and Hegel. In the 1950s and 1960s, Josef Stalin and Mao Tse-tung also were regarded as philosophical giants, hence being translated and published in large quantity. Today, although it is still impossible to translate 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxist philosophers not in the Leninist line of succession, pre-Marxist philosophers are being given their most sympathetic reexamination since the early 1940s. A translation of *Du contrat social*, by Jean Jacques Rousseau, attracted intellectual attention when it was published in 1992. The French government then sponsored *L'esthétique de Hegel*, edited by Bernard Teyssedre, and a translation of Montesquieu's 18<sup>th</sup> century classic, *Le Esprit de lois*. To meet the need for a detailed history of western philosophy, however, Hanoi turned to a Chinese Marxist, Liu Fangdong, whose *Triet Hoc Phuong Tay Hien Dai* (Modern Western Philosophy) actually stops at the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup> This was followed by translation in Ho Chi Minh City of a 14-year old Russian philosophy textbook.<sup>22</sup>

Vietnam's most original philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tran Duc Thao, who wrote largely in French, finally had his *Recherches sur l'origine du langage et de la conscience* translated posthumously into Vietnamese.<sup>23</sup> This translation is the only one by a Vietnamese author to show up in our survey of bookstores. It is politically significant because Tran Duc Thao was one of the most prominent victims of the late 1950s

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21 Published in four volumes in 1994-95 by the NPPH. The tenth printing of the original Chinese opus was released by Beijing's People's Publishing House in 1992.

22 J.K. Melvil, *Cac Con Duong cua Triet Hoc Phuong Tay Hien Dai* (The Paths of Modern Western Philosophy) (Ho Chi Minh City: Giao Duc Publishing House, 1997).

23 The original was published by Editions Sociales in Paris in 1973, while the translation was distributed by Culture and Information Publishing House (Hanoi) in 1996. Only 800 copies were printed.

Communist Party crackdown on intellectuals, eventually being permitted to migrate to France, only recently being rehabilitated to the extent of having his remains returned to Vietnam and his writings selectively complimented in the press.

Far more public attention is now being devoted in Vietnam to classical Chinese philosophers (e.g. Confucius, Mencius, Hsün-tzu) than was permissible a decade ago. Vietnamese translations of the four books and five classics have been re-issued, and a wealth of secondary studies of eastern philosophy have appeared, part of the broader, politically significant discourse on 'Asian values'. Nonetheless, we could only locate one translation of a book on the theme of contemporary Asian values: *Tuyen 40 nam Chinh luan cua Ly Quang Dieu* (A Forty Year Selection of Upright Exposition by Lee Kwan Yew).

In the realm of popular philosophy, Vietnamese have long been attracted to self-improvement or personal development manuals. Recent offerings include two of Dale Carnegie's exhortations, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, and *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, as well as one by his wife, *Don't Grow Old, Grow Up!*. Three different Mekong delta publishers released these Carnegie titles, suggesting lively commercial competition. One Japanese popular philosophy, by Cho Sakaue, was translated under the title of *Ba Nguyen Tac Suy Nghi de Thanh Cong* (Three Principles of Thinking in Order to Succeed).<sup>24</sup>

### Slim Pickings

A number of other social science disciplines have aroused much less interest, if translations are a reliable indicator. Only three translations on religion have been published – two histories of Buddhism by Japanese and French authors, and a Chinese Buddhist exegesis. Sociology has received more translation attention recently, boasting three general textbooks, a text devoted to social organisation, a study on the sociology of religion, and Emile Durkheim's classic, *The Rules of Sociological Method*. Anthropology is represented inadequately by a dictionary of symbols and Dan Sperber's *Le savoir des anthropologues: trois essais*. Linguistics has one translated textbook, while psychology possesses merely a translation of the eccentric essay by Roberto Assagioli, *La développement transpersonnel*. The relatively new field of Communications Studies is represented by *L'explosion de la communication: la naissance d'une nouvelle ideology*, and a popular manual titled *Non-verbal Communication: How to get it, How to use it for Love, Profit and Pleasure*, by Allan Pease. Literature can boast only a general history of French literature, and Lu Hsün's classic history of Chinese fiction, translated from an English translation. Environment/Ecology Studies possesses one textbook: *L'environnement*, by Jacques Vernier.

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24 Translated from a Taiwan Chinese version, and published by World Publishing House, Hanoi, 1995.

We did not manage to locate any recent translations in the following disciplines: Archaeology, Human Geography, Demography, Architecture, or Urban and Regional Planning.

### **How Books are Selected for Translation**

In the early 1980s, the (U.S.) Association for Asian Studies donated several hundred books and journals to the History Institute library in Hanoi, while the U.S. Committee for Scientific Cooperation with Vietnam donated hundreds of titles to other institutions in the capital. Many of the books remained stacked in damp, dusty corners — uncatalogued, unpublicized and unread. By the late 1980s the intellectual mood was far more open, yet the institutional framework failed to keep pace. In 1993, the Harvard-Yenching Library sponsored distribution of over two hundred classics in the western humanities and social sciences to seven libraries throughout Vietnam. Subsequently the American Council of Learned Societies, the Ford Foundation and other funders have also provided book sets to key institutions. In many cases the books remained inaccessible or unknown to academics, much less students, journalists, public servants and other potential readers. Meanwhile, lack of foreign currency prevented Vietnamese libraries from initiating their own purchasing strategies.

With libraries lagging behind, it is much more common for individual Vietnamese officials or academics to bring home a couple of books from overseas meetings, perhaps review a favorite title in a newspaper or journal, and eventually share their personal book acquisitions with colleagues. At the same time, representatives of foreign embassies, international agencies and NGOs, as well as foreign academic visitors to Vietnam, bring books to the attention of Vietnamese counterparts and often make gifts of specific titles. From these encounters the question of whether a particular book deserves translation to Vietnamese or not arises quite naturally.

Certain Vietnamese organizations are more eager to promote translations than others. Since the late 1980s, the Central Institute of Economic Management (CIEM) has played a key role in identifying and sponsoring translations on economics topics. The Vietnam Historical Science Association has fostered relevant discussions, especially via its monthly journal, *Xua va Nay* (Past and Present). The Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy (Party School) has long sponsored translations of foreign texts, including most of Vietnam's translations of human rights documents and commentaries. Editorial teams at English-language newspapers routinely discuss foreign books, to include possible translation, and individual members take part in specific translation efforts. On a more restricted basis, the Social Sciences Information Institute surveys foreign materials, circulates Vietnamese synopses, and occasionally recommends books for full-scale translation to the Social Sciences Publishing House. The Second Department of the



Ministry of Defense does much the same, with translation recommendations going to the National Politics Publishing House.

Among foreign organizations, the Toyota Foundation took first initiative in the 1980s in recommending titles for translation, not limiting itself to Japan-related topics or to Japanese-language titles.<sup>25</sup> The French Ministry of Culture became increasingly active from the early 1990s in promoting Vietnamese translations from French, as part of its international Francophone strategy. The Chinese government has done likewise with books on Chinese economic reform, as well as the selected works of Deng Xiaoping, mentioned earlier. By contrast, the Swedish International Development Authority has tended to sponsor more diverse translations from English. The Ford Foundation has supported translations of foreign social science perspectives unlikely to achieve circulation in Vietnam through other channels.

Financial subsidies, whether domestic or foreign, continue to play an important part in determining what is translated to Vietnamese. In the early days, Toyota translation grants were so large that they amounted to an operational subsidy for the particular Vietnamese institute or department involved. This set an unfortunate precedent, not simply in terms of cost per translation, but also encouraging some Vietnamese institutions to lobby for grants without much thought to what was proposed for translation. More recently, some foreign donors have offered partial or matching grants, leading some Vietnamese to criticize them as parsimonious. Nonetheless, domestic subsidies are smaller.

Market forces have spurred on translations to Vietnamese in certain realms, notably fiction, but also economics and accounting textbooks, entrepreneurial primers, ‘futurology’ books, and personal improvement manuals. A few titles have already undergone multiple printings. However, many books that undoubtedly would sell well in translation remain out-of-bounds due to Party and government content restrictions.

### **Translators**

Vietnam lacks a professional association of translators and interpreters to be able to define and safeguard technical standards, protect the interests of members, and foster public appreciation of quality language skills. Nor is there sustained discussion among intellectuals about the art of translation, the enrichment of Vietnamese vocabulary through neologisms, or the amount of effort which ought to be allocated to translation versus

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25 The Toyota Foundation also sponsored translation of Vietnamese titles into Japanese, Thai, Indonesian and Tagalog, a remarkably open-minded approach compared to other foundations or government cultural agencies.

teaching people to read in foreign languages. Only among devotees of French or Russian literature does one occasionally see attention devoted to such questions.<sup>26</sup>

Most of the highly respected French translators have died or retired, although a few of the latter continue to accept commissions to be able to supplement their meagre pensions. Many well-regarded Russian translators are still available, but there is little call for their services. Vietnamese who received advanced training in China in the late 1950s and 1960s are quite active again, after a hiatus during the period of intense Sino-Vietnamese animosity in the 1970s and early 1980s. A small group of translators led by Nguyen Huy Quy, Director of the Center for Chinese Studies at the National Center for Social Sciences in Hanoi, has energetically selected, translated and arranged publication of a number of economic, political and 'peaceful evolution' volumes from China. Because very few leaders in the Party, government or military can read Chinese fluently, the efforts of Nguyen Huy Quy and his colleagues are assigned high priority, beginning with special access to source materials from China, the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi, and Vietnamese diplomats in Beijing and Guangzhou.<sup>27</sup>

As might be expected, the demand for qualified English-language translators has completely outstripped supply in recent years. The first small group of Vietnamese fluent in English from the 1940s is now mostly gone.<sup>28</sup> Many of those who mastered English in South Vietnam during the 1950s and 1960s fled the country after April 1975. The minority who remained were systematically excluded from employment, although in recent years, in middle age, they have dusted off their English and sometimes found remunerative jobs. Another group studied English in Australia in the late 1970s, and can now be found at upper or middle levels of the bureaucracy, occasionally turning their talents to translation.

When perusing Vietnamese publications translated from English, one is immediately struck by the extreme variation in translation quality. Some are highly proficient, some erratic from chapter to chapter, some very inaccurate or barely comprehensible. Translators are normally paid by the page, with the most highly regarded English-to-Vietnamese translators receiving US\$8.00 per page in 1998. Individuals at this level receive most of

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26 See especially the bi-monthly journal *Van Hoc Nuoc Ngoai* (Foreign Literature), published by the Vietnam Writers Association. Biographical sketches of translators of specific texts are provided.

27 Mark Sidel, 'The reemergence of China studies in Vietnam', *The China Quarterly* (June 1995).

28 One from that era, the composer and writer Do Xuan Oanh, headed the Vietnam Committee for Solidarity with the American People in the late 1960s and 1970s, and continues to work as an English translator in Hanoi. Another, Pham Van Chuong, is Executive Vice Chairman of the Party's External Relations Commission.

their income translating documents or reports for foreign companies and international agencies, often leaving them little time or energy for booklength projects. At best they are able to join a bevy of translators, take responsibility for one section, and leave it to others to iron out discrepancies. Often the editor or publisher pays a senior academic or official to scrutinize the translated segments, comment and make recommendations (*hieu dinh*), but these individuals are not necessarily selected because of high language competence, and even those who possess the necessary expertise may find the job too daunting, simply returning a dubious manuscript for publication.

The weakest translations we encountered seem to have been completed by one person working in isolation, then printed without further assessment by small local publishing houses hoping to make a quick profit. Stories of such disastrous translations are well known among Vietnamese intellectuals and the object of much scorn or amusement. Even the most serious translated publications usually lack a translator's preface to describe problems encountered and measures taken. Few translations possess annotations to elucidate alien terms or explain unfamiliar events, people and places. We noticed, for example, that the key English term 'business' was translated in five different ways in Vietnamese, without explanation: *kinh doanh*, *doanh nghiep*, *doanh thuong*, *cong nghiep*, and *buon ban*. Of course, piece-rate remuneration does not encourage translators to pause over words, consider alternatives, and provide annotations. More fundamentally, translators today lack esprit de corps or practical ways to help each other improve performance and secure better contract provisions from employers. One tightly-knit group associated with the Party's External Relations Commission has accomplished some of the strongest translations, especially relating to strategic and development issues. The group also enjoys ready access to relevant publications and routine contact with foreign consultants, senior visitors and representatives of international organizations, not to mention rapid access to Party approval mechanisms.

### **Publishers**

Publication of Vietnamese translations is dominated by three or four publishing houses, but with a large number of other houses able to produce the occasional translation, as can be seen from the following table:

#### *Number of Vietnamese Social Science Translations Released by Specific Publishers*

Chinh Tri Quoc Gia (National Politics)	76	(31.8%)
Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi (Social Sciences)	34	(14.2%)
Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh (Ho Chi Minh City)	19	(7.9%)
Khoa Hoc va Ky Thuat (Science and Technology)	11	(4.6%)
The Gioi (World)	9	
Thong Ke (Statistics)	8	
Van Hoa Thong Tin (Culture and Information)	8	
Cong An Nhan Dan (Peoples Police)	8	

Giao Duc (Education)	7
Mui Ca Mau (Ca Mau Peninsula)	5
Other	42
Unknown	<u>12</u>
Total	239

The National Politics Publishing House has released a clear plurality of foreign translations since the early 1990s, and appears to be strengthening its position with each passing year. It has the best relationship with Vietnam's central leadership, the least problem obtaining permission to publish, the readiest access to domestic subsidies, the capacity to cut across all bureaucratic obstacles when seeking foreign contacts or foreign language materials, and the most extensive book distribution network in the country. As an entity, NPPH results from the early 1990s merger of three Party publishing houses and the former Law Publishing House. NPPH books are read by higher and middle level officials and senior academics in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and they make their way to other localities via Party and government channels, the National Library's distribution system to local libraries, and availability in local bookstores.

What is not clear is how many NPPH books are purchased and how many are distributed gratis, not to mention how many copies are actually read by ordinary citizens. Compared to the largest of its predecessors, Truth Publishing House, the NPPH operates under much looser ideological instructions, hence can release 'liberal' translations that reflect capitalist values, or non-communist political theories, and even critique socialist development policies, while on the other side translating 'conservative' Chinese condemnations of 'peaceful evolution' of interest to some Party groups and the ministries of interior and defense. If a specific publication encounters subsequent criticism, whether in the press or via confidential leadership memos, as has happened on more than one occasion, NPPH is in a good position to protect translators and editors from retribution.

Ultimate responsibility for translated content rests with the publisher, large or small, but the censorship process is far from straightforward or transparent. All publishing houses are state-owned, and all houses contain Communist Party cells, yet local entrepreneurial and intellectual interests are often well represented in decision-making. A great deal of self-censorship occurs, whether in decisions by a translator to fudge the meaning of sentences in the original text, the choice by an editor to excise entire passages, or the decision of a publishing house manager to turn down a book entirely because of its controversial character. Abridgement on political grounds is probably the most common form of censorship, with the only issue being whether or not to insert the notorious [...] symbol indicating that a passage has been removed. In recent years, however, a few prominent intellectuals have stated their opposition to such political abridgement, arguing

that foreign books should be either accepted or rejected in totality, not carved up according to what persons at various levels believe to be acceptable at the moment.<sup>29</sup>

Until the mid-1980s, one technique for dealing with controversial topics was to print the warning ‘*Luu Hanh Noi Bo*’ (Internal Circulation) on the cover of publications and limit distribution to Party government and military offices only. In practice, however, custodial procedures appear to have been lax, so that copies passed from hand to hand among intellectuals, and eventually made their way into used bookshops. More recently, the warning has appeared less and less on publication covers; when utilized, the purpose probably has more to do with suggesting exciting reading to potential customers than limiting circulation. A variation is to print ‘*Sach Tham Khao*’ (Reference Book) on the cover, especially of translations, meaning that the content has not been subjected to procedures which make it part of official wisdom. Some translations still appear to be distributed through closed channels

The 1997 translation of Fforde and de Vylder, *From Plan to Market*, mentioned earlier, may mark a new, healthier phase in Party responses to foreign studies containing highly controversial assertions.<sup>30</sup> Rather than simply delete large chunks of the original text that ‘do not conform to Vietnamese attitudes’, as in the past, the publishers appended a seven-page disclaimer, taking exception to the characterisation of the earlier system as ‘Neo-Stalinist’, criticising the author for inadequate attention to the historical effects of war and revolution, and rejecting their emphasis on spontaneous, grassroots economic initiatives rather than central policy formulations. One short section of the book, about limits on the rights of citizens to travel, to meet foreigners and to form independent organisations, is labled an infringement on Vietnam’s sovereignty, yet still translated with reasonable fidelity. Publisher’s footnotes have been added in the same spirit. Outright deletions appear to be limited to a couple of comments about individual Vietnamese personalities. Moreover, the authors were consulted during the process of translation and editing – an almost unprecedented innovation.<sup>31</sup>

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29 First meeting of Translation Consultative Group, Hanoi, 2 December 1994. David Marr discussions with journalists in Ho Chi Minh City, 5 March 1996. Discussions with Adam Fforde about translation of *From Plan to Market*, cited below.

30 Adam Fforde and Stefan de Vylder, *From Plan to Market: The Economic Transition in Vietnam*, published as *Tu Ke Hoach den Thi Truong: Su Chuyen Doi Kinh Te o Viet Nam* (Hanoi: NPPH, 1997).

31 Stein, Tonnesson was also consulted during translation of his book, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh and de Gaulle in a World at War* (London, 1991), but as of 1998 too many issues of content remained to permit publication to go ahead.

Hanoi's declarations that it will abide by international copyright conventions, and the recent signing of a Vietnam-U.S. copyright agreement, adds a new dimension to translation and publication of foreign books. Many of the books we perused did not even bother to identify the original title and publisher. The Vietnamese publishing market is still quite small from the point of view of major international publishers, so that investigations and formal complaints are not yet worth the costs involved, unlike the situation with pirated CDs and videotapes. However, foreign textbook publishers are making discreet joint venture soundings in Vietnam, so it is only a matter of time before the whole gamut of intellectual property issues are addressed. In the meantime, at least one major Vietnamese publisher is willing to provide token copyright payment to a foreign publisher for the right to publish a translation, although the transaction is being negotiated via a third party. The question of abridgement or modification of the original text when translating is likely to precipitate as much tortuous discussion as the financial details.

### **Distribution**

In the tradition of the French Depot Legal, Vietnamese books usually list the print run among the publishing details. Most translations surveyed here listed print runs of 800-2,000 copies, with an occasional 3,000 or 4,000 copies being listed. However, it is well known that publishers sometimes receive a grant to print a specific number of copies, list that amount officially, then quietly produce a smaller amount to be able to pocket some of the grant or share it with the translators. Aware of this practice, some donors have given up specifying the print run, instead requiring the publisher to provide them several hundred copies gratis, which then often collect dust in the corner of some office, a problem hardly unique to Vietnam.

Distribution channels beyond Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City remain erratic at best. Even in Hue, a city noted for its cultural heritage and pride, the three or four small bookshops contain mostly public school texts, fiction, popularized history, comic books and a smattering of titles from the NPPH, including one or two translations. Conditions are similar in Hai Phong.<sup>32</sup> An interesting exception may be the Mekong delta, where bookshops in My Tho and Can Tho, at least, stock some of the translated business manuals, personal improvement books and 'understanding America' volumes. Other than browsing bookstores, potential readers mostly hear about new translations via the grapevine or in newspaper reviews and commentary articles. Publishers do not yet spend much money on advertising. Sales of books are limited by the high retail prices, especially for translations. On the other hand, it is not unusual for a single copy of a highly regarded translation, whether purchased or obtained free, to go through four or five sets of eager hands in the space of one year.

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32 David Marr observations in Hue, February 1996 and April 1998. Mark Sidel observations in Hai Phong, July and August 1995.

## **Conclusion**

Vietnamese translations of foreign social science publications can probably be divided into three categories. First, there are the titles aimed explicitly at upper and middle level cadres, with the content possessing definite policy implications, at least for purposes of internal government deliberation. Second are the translated textbooks meant to be used in classroom instruction, not as officially-approved components of the public education curriculum, a process which lags years behind, but as informal supplementary reading. In fact, many of these translated textbooks are likely to be employed more in the host of private schools that have cropped up, or in tutorial sessions with privileged students. Finally, there are many titles aimed at the general reading public, at least those citizens who wish to go beyond amusement, to be educated, informed or inspired. Of course, individuals may choose to read across these categories, which is no problem if they live in one of the major cities and can afford the bookstore prices, or can share battered copies with colleagues and friends.

What is still lacking in Vietnam is public discourse about what needs to be translated, and how to improve quality and expand readership. With these questions in mind, a Translation Consultative Group was formed in 1994 in Hanoi, chaired by Professor Phan Huy Le, of Hanoi National University, and including foreign as well as Vietnamese members. While two foreign social science titles have been translated and published, and four others are in process, the objective of stimulating broader discussion about the content and technique of translation remains unfulfilled. Translation in Vietnam is still being accomplished by scores of small groups encountering foreign books separately, deciding whether to translate or not, and proceeding through the various steps with minimal consultation. The exception is the National Politics Publishing House, which however prefers to conduct affairs in confidence.

If Vietnam is compared with other countries of Southeast Asia in the ongoing translation and publication of foreign social science works, the picture is by no means grim, despite its late start and Vietnam's continuing low per capita income level. Vietnamese readers are more likely to look for translations than readers in Singapore, the Philippines or Malaysia, even when they know how to read English or some other foreign languages. More meaningful comparisons are with readers in Thailand and Indonesia, where larger numbers of translations are probably available for purchase than in Vietnam, yet per capita consumption of translated books may not be as high. Everywhere in Southeast Asia there is intense curiosity about foreign ideas, customs and behaviour, yet the desire in Vietnam today to test everything against received wisdom, to fathom the diverse social, political and cultural dilemmas which accompany rapid economic change, seems especially pronounced. With a new contingent of students and scholars returning from overseas, we may see an upsurge in intellectual activity in general and translation in particular of the kind which characterised life in 1920s and 1930s Vietnam.

If the pattern observed in Vietnam during the 1920s and 1930s repeats itself, we are likely to see very soon an explosion of Vietnamese-authored social science publications which draw heavily on recently acquired information and interpretations from overseas, including the several hundred translations surveyed in this essay. Actually this phase has already begun modestly, in the form of locally written textbooks designed to compete commercially with foreign texts translated to Vietnamese. During an early 1998 visit to bookstores, new Vietnamese-authored textbooks were noted on the subjects of economics (4 titles), accounting (3), management (3), marketing (2), banking and finance (1), international law (1), and politics and law (1).<sup>33</sup> Some of these textbooks were quite basic, perhaps aimed at the secondary school market, and certainly less expensive than the hefty foreign translations. Some appeared to translate large chunks of foreign books without attribution. One economics text admitted to relying entirely on two sources: Roger Le Roy's *Economics Today* (1991); and the *Fortune Encyclopedia of Economics* (1993). The politics and law text showed few signs of change from the rigid 1980s offerings, dividing its presentation into the following: classical-feudal-bourgeois ideas; scientific Marxism-Leninism; and Ho Chi Minh thought.

The next step is for Vietnamese social scientists to advance beyond translations and textbook reformulations to original interpretations and analysis. On the bookshelves in early 1998, at least two books seemed to be trying to meet this challenge, an expostulation on cultural sociology by Doan Van Chuc, and an international relations examination of President Clinton's strategy of engagement and enlargement. What comes next will depend on a host of variables – commercial, cultural, intellectual and political. In any case, return visits to bookstores are sure to prove rewarding.

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33 David Marr's observations in bookstores in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi and Da Nang, March-April 1998.



**TEN**  
**REPORTING VIETNAM:**  
**TRUE CONFESSIONS OF A FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT**

**Peter Mares**

When it comes to the activities of the foreign media, Vietnam remains one of the most tightly controlled societies in the world. Foreign correspondents are thus confronted with a dilemma. In order to satisfy our bosses and advance our own careers we must do our best to file lots of stories and to make them as interesting as possible. But such reporting can contribute to the inaccurate impression that Vietnam is a country steadily opening up to the outside world. Foreign journalists are in danger of becoming unintentional 'spin doctors' for Vietnam's communist government and its policy of '*doi moi*' or economic reform.

Editors, readers and audiences are generally not interested in how hard a story is to get unless it happens to be something extraordinary (like Nate Thayer's coverage of the Khmer Rouge 'trial' of Pol Pot where getting the scoop is almost as much of a story as the story itself). The bureaucratic and legalistic barriers to accurate reporting do not make good copy. With the exception of natural disasters, and in contrast to the country's war-torn past out of which so many famous journalists built their careers, dramatic news events are rare in contemporary Vietnam. Political conflicts are fought out in secret and communist party officials have perfected the art of bland pronouncements. On the infrequent occasions that a difference of opinion is revealed in public the reference is usually oblique and veiled, requiring interpretation and analysis by a reporter, rather than making a headline in its own right. When social tensions erupt into protests or demonstrations, there is an immediate ban on foreign journalists gaining access to the site of the dispute.

By describing some of my own experiences during two years in Vietnam as the Hanoi correspondent for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), I will attempt to outline the regulations and practical obstacles that make reporting in Vietnam so difficult. I will also provide some examples of the suspicion that attaches to the western media, including international shortwave broadcasters and foreign language publications produced in Vietnam. I hope this will go some way to explaining the limitations of foreign media coverage of Vietnam and the frustrations of foreign journalists working in the country.

I will argue that restrictions on foreign media helped Hanoi to successfully mould and manage Vietnam's international image after the country opened its doors to international trade and investment in the late 1980's, but that those same restrictions are today backfiring. The result is reduced and consistently negative reporting about Vietnam.

Allow me to begin with an extended anecdote.

## Burning Bridges in Vinh Long

My request seemed simple enough. Alexander Downer was heading to Vietnam to turn the first sod on the My Thuan bridge, the biggest infrastructure project ever funded with Australian aid money. I wanted to get some advance footage of the bridge site and the existing ferry service at My Thuan in order to ship a story to Australia in advance of the big day. This would spare the cash-strapped ABC the prohibitive costs of transmitting the pictures via satellite. I would also save the ABC the cost of a camera crew by shooting the pictures myself on a mini digital camera. Television on the cheap, but it helped me to justify the cost of a visit to the Mekong Delta to look at problems in the rice industry (a subject of far more importance than the sod-turning but not one to evince much excitement from my editors).

I put in my formal travel request to the Press Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the agency that is the official sponsor of all foreign journalists resident in Vietnam and with which we engage in a process of 'mutual cooperation and understanding'. According to the regulations governing the foreign media, all journalistic activity requires an official permit. If the project involves travel outside Hanoi, then the Press Department must also request the assistance of the International Relations Department of the provincial Peoples Committee. This is not necessarily a straightforward matter. In Vietnam as they say, the power of the emperor ends at the village gate. If provincial authorities do not want a journalist to visit for whatever reason, then they can simply refuse to cooperate even though the request comes down from on high.

In the case of the My Thuan bridge however, I did not anticipate any cause for concern. After all, this a project of national priority, a symbol of the enduring friendship between two nations agreed to at the highest levels of government. Along with the Australian Foreign Minister, Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister was also scheduled to take part in the sod-turning ceremony. As the only Australian journalist resident in Vietnam surely my way to reporting the story would be smooth.

Accompanied by my colleague Jeremy Grant from the *Financial Times*, I flew down from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City on a Monday morning, picked up a hire car at the airport and headed directly to the Delta. The Foreign Ministry press assistant travelling with us was a handsome and stylish young man called Khang, who seemed to have everything in hand. After escaping the choking traffic in Ho Chi Minh City I sat back to enjoy the view. As we entered the Delta factories became fewer, bridges and canals more frequent and the rice fields a deeper green.

Four hours later we arrived at the My Thuan ferry and encountered our first obstacle. The Press Department in Hanoi had forgotten to process my request to film there. When Khang checked the all-important permit that we carried with us, My Thuan was not mentioned. The permit stated only that I was authorised to carry out journalistic work in Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho but here we were in Tien Giang province. We chatted with the uniformed guards at the ferry station and I flashed my

official journalist card issued by the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry – something which I dutifully carried at all times in accord with government regulations – but which I was never once asked to show and which never once proved of any use whatsoever in getting me access to anything. This occasion was no different. The guards pointed to the sign that indicated it was forbidden to take pictures around the ferry station and told us to come back tomorrow to talk to their senior officer who had already knocked off for the day. (It was after four o'clock). Undeterred, the enterprising Khang searched out the ferry station boss and found him sipping iced coffee under a shady tree. In his most polite, most apologetic and most deferential Vietnamese, Khang asked him to assist us in our mission to film the ferry. He refused. He said that we needed authorisation from the Peoples Committee in Tien Giang town which was some distance away. We could call them and ask for permission I suggested lamely, proffering my mobile phone. Khang looked at me like I was complete fool. Apart from the fact that it was well past knock-off time, such matters must be dealt with in writing or in person.

Having wasted an hour we gave up and drove on the Can Tho. At this stage I was still confident that the problem could be solved. After all we had to drive back to Ho Chi Minh City via the same route and I was sure that we would be able to get permission to film the ferry on the return journey three days later.

From Can Tho I contacted the Foreign Ministry Press Department in Hanoi and explained the problem. They apologised for the oversight and promised to arrange the required permission for our filming schedule. Since we would be approaching the bridge from the opposite direction this time, we agreed it would be more convenient to 'cooperate' with the Peoples Committee in Vinh Long province rather than Tien Giang. (The river marks the provincial boundary).

On the morning in question we set off early from Can Tho. I needed to get the filming completed as quickly as possible in order to make a two o'clock appointment back in Ho Chi Minh City. We arrived at the offices of the International Relations Department of Vinh Long Peoples Committee around 8 am and Khang and I went inside while Jeremy Grant waited in the car. I naively assumed that it would be a simple matter of picking up a stamped document authorising our filming before proceeding on to the ferry. I had been in Vietnam 18 months, long enough to know better.

Khang and I were ushered upstairs to the air-conditioned reception room. My heart sank. The table was groaning with platters of rambutan and long an. Plastic bottles of Le Ville mineral water (a rip-off of the dominant La Vie brand) stood ready for consumption. Clearly the People's Committee had prepared for a large official journalistic delegation appropriate to the size and importance of the bridge project itself. At the very least they must have expected a complete film crew of three or four people, not a single reporter with a mini-digital camera that looked more like tourist accoutrements than a piece of professional equipment. I realised that I should have asked Jeremy to come inside with me to boost my appearance of weighty professionalism.

Khang and I sat down on 'our' side of the immense table, while four serious looking officials all armed with attaché cases sat opposite. The geometry of such meetings is always the same; foreign visitors line up on one side of the table, local officials on the other, mirroring the formality of high-level diplomatic consultations in Hanoi's Government Guest House. The rules of engagement also vary little. As the visitor and supplicant, it was up to me to state my business and request the assistance of my interlocutor. Adopting my most polite manner, I thanked the peoples committee officials profusely for their time and their gracious welcome. I described my project and waxed lyrical about the significance of the My Thuan bridge to Vinh Long province. My hosts listened impassively and then responded in kind. Without any apparent enthusiasm they told me how honoured Vinh Long Province Peoples Committee was by my visit and assured me that the International Relations Department would do everything in their power to assist me with my task. The My Thuan bridge was a project of national importance being built with the generous assistance of the Australian government. Because I was an Australian journalist special arrangements had been put in place on my behalf and I would be given access to film the construction site for the bridge.

I noted that there had been no mention of the ferry and felt my first twinge of alarm. I knew that without pictures of the ferry, a TV report on the bridge would be unlikely to make it onto the main evening bulletin. It was one of the only elements of the story that held some visual promise; the colour and movement of vehicles and crowds of pedestrians getting on and off, ferries pulling out from the wharf and crossing the expanse of river. I had intended recording a 'stand-up' (or piece to camera) in front of the ferry station because it would provide the backdrop I needed to talk about the bridge: 'The 1500 metre long My Thuan bridge will replace this creaking and overloaded ferry service which currently carries twenty thousand people across the Mekong River each day...'

I suppressed my rising feelings of panic and courteously thanked the Peoples Committee for their generous assistance once more. I was very pleased that I would be able to visit the construction site for the bridge and, I added carefully, I was of course also looking forward to filming the existing ferry service which was, I explained, an essential part of my story.

The Peoples Committee spokesman responded in kind. Vinh Long was honoured by my visit and had gone to great lengths to organise my itinerary so that I would be able to film the construction site for the bridge.

'And the ferry,' I added. 'The construction site,' he replied. We batted this one backwards and forwards a few times like polite ping pong players until it was clear that neither side was willing to concede the point.

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence. Then the Deputy Head of the International Relations Department reached into his attaché case and slowly drew out a fax. It was the letter sent to Vinh Long from the Press Department in Hanoi. He read it

through slowly. 'No mention of the ferry,' he concluded. 'According to your request you want to film the construction site for the bridge. We have arranged that.'

'Oh, there must have been a small misunderstanding,' I said, trying to sound jolly as I used the polite code word for 'complete stuff-up'. In an attempt to build solidarity with my hosts and exploit regional resentments towards the central authorities, I tried to put the blame on Hanoi. 'You see the people up there don't understand,' I said. 'They think the ferry and the bridge are in the same place. They have not been to Vinh Long province. They don't realise that they are 500 metres apart'.

The Vinh Long delegation was unmoved. The top man slowly re-read the letter and reiterated his earlier point. Hanoi had not mentioned the ferry.

'Surely in this case there can be some flexibility,' I said, almost pleading now.

I was told that existing laws made it impossible to take photographs of the ferry. Only the chairman of the Peoples Committee could authorise an exemption. 'Well, let's ask him,' I suggested blithely.

'He's not available,' I was told.

I began grasping at straws. I pointed out the bridge was a high-priority project of great significance to both nations, a symbol of friendship between the Australian and Vietnamese people and I hinted how embarrassing it would be when I explained to the Australian Ambassador that I could not do a TV story about the bridge because the Vinh Long Peoples Committee would not allow me to film the ferry.

My hosts did not bat an eyelid. They passed the Hanoi fax around amongst themselves, reading and re-reading it. 'No mention of the ferry,' they concluded.

Desperate now, I offered a last ditch compromise. We would go to visit the construction site as arranged and in the meantime I would call Hanoi on my mobile phone and ask that they send a new fax explaining the error and requesting access to the ferry on my behalf. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. There was a way out of the immediate impasse. We broke the seals on our bottles of La Ville and chewed a few rambutan. Then, after a polite interval, we drove the fifteen kilometres to the bridge site, a car load of Vinh Long officials in tow.

The construction site confirmed my worst fears. There was nothing even remotely interesting to film. A flat expanse of red earth, a flat river and a flat, distant shoreline. There was no work going on, no cranes, no trucks or other equipment with the exception of a small compacter parked in the shade. As we piled out of our cars a lone worker climbed into the compacter and drove it carefully backwards and forwards over the already billiard-table smooth red earth. Realising that this had been staged for my benefit I dutifully filmed the performance, knowing all the while that the pictures would be too boring to use.

In an effort to salvage something from the disaster, I decided to try to film my piece to camera on the river bank with the 'colour' of a barge going past in the background.

There were a couple of old concrete pillars sticking out of the water. One of the people's committee officials told us that they were remnants of the Saigon regime's attempts to build a bridge in the same spot in the early seventies. Because of the war, he said, the project was abandoned. To the drowning man that I was, this small fact appeared to be a lifeline and I grabbed onto it without question. With Jeremy's assistance as stand-in camera operator I positioned myself on the river bank with a crumbling concrete bollard in the background, waited for a ferry to go past and recorded my piece to camera:

'You can see the remnants here of a bridge that the government of the former South Vietnam tried to build in the 1970's. The Vietnam War put an end to that plan. Now the new My Thuan bridge is a high national priority for Hanoi'.

Hardly incisive journalism but at least it lent some relevance to the location – or so I thought. After the story was aired on ABC-TV, an AusAID official offended by my mild criticism of the My Thuan project took great joy in telling me that what I had said in my piece to camera was 'a complete load of bullshit'. The concrete pillars were not the remnants of an attempted bridge at all. They were for river boats to tie up to.

But as I stood squinting into the camera in Vinh Long I doubted whether the story would ever be broadcast in any case. An overlit piece to camera on the riverbank and an undersized steam roller were hardly the images that I had hoped for from My Thuan.

We climbed into our vehicles and set off back in the direction of Vinh Long town and I called Hanoi on the mobile phone to get more bad news. The Press Department assured me that they had tried very hard to get permission for me to film the ferry but the Chairman of the Vinh Long Peoples Committee was not available to authorise it. Furious, I asked the driver of our car to head directly for Ho Chi Minh City. There was no point in going back to the offices of the Vinh Long Peoples Committee for more rambutan. We flashed the car full of officials with our headlights and turned around. Out of politeness I also asked Khang to ring Vinh Long, thank them for their assistance and explain that we had urgent business in Ho Chi Minh City.

When we arrived at the ferry station I got out of the car, mixed in with the crowd, pulled out my camera and began filming. It was a bit rushed and there was no chance of recording a 'stand-up' but I basically managed to gather the images I needed. Crowded buses, vendors, loading and unloading, ferries crossing the river. Then I looked over my shoulder and saw Jeremy frantically waving at me to stop filming. Behind him Khang was in conference with the bevy of Vinh Long officials who had accompanied us to the construction site. I snuck back through the crowd like a naughty school boy, sidled up to the car on the blind side of the officials and dumped my camera on the passenger seat. Then I walked up to Khang and the officials to find out what was going on, assuming that they had followed us because they suspected my underhand scheme to secretly film the secret ferry. I was wrong. The reason that they had driven the 15 km back from Vinh Long was that we had failed to pay them the 'organising fee' of 50,000

dong (about US\$4.50) for their 'assistance' with our itinerary. Such 'fees' are commonly demanded of foreign journalists in Vietnam though receipts are rarely issued.

I regard myself as even tempered and patient but on this occasion I had reached my limit. Angry beyond words I ostentatiously pulled out my wallet and thrust a green 50,000 dong note into the official's hand. By now a crowd of people were watching our negotiations with interest. I had of course made it impossible for him to take the money, which should be discretely handed over in an envelope via my assistant. Publicly humiliated, he gave the money back to the long-suffering Khang and inflicted him to a dressing down. I got in the car and slammed the door, the one and only occasion that I had completely blown my cool in Vietnam. It is not a moment of which I am proud. I sent my secret ferry footage back to Australia where it was broadcast on the 7pm news. There were no repercussions.

### **Mutual Cooperation**

In retrospect my trials and tribulations at the hands of the Vinh Long Peoples Committee make for an amusing anecdote of limited journalistic consequence. It was simply a matter of gathering some video footage to meet the narrow and predictable requirements of a brief television news story. However the fact that I ran up against so many bureaucratic obstacles in executing such a trivial task is an indication of the much greater difficulties presented by covering politically sensitive events and issues. Often I was prevented from covering a story at all, or at least from doing so adequately.

In August 1997 for example, I planned to visit Quang Tri province to witness the annual Catholic pilgrimage to La Vang which is held to coincide with the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. The pilgrimage celebrates an appearance of the Virgin to Catholics who were suffering persecution at the hands of the Nguyen Dynasty in the 18th Century. This makes it both interesting and controversial (as all reporting of religious affairs is in Vietnam). The Foreign Ministry Press Department in Hanoi told me that the provincial officials in Quang Tri were 'too busy' to assist me. I remonstrated that I did not need their assistance, only their permission, pointing out that I would after all be travelling with my official Foreign Ministry press assistant. My protests were to no avail. Press Department officers assured me that they had done their utmost to convince their counterparts in Quang Tri to cooperate and appealed for my 'understanding' that bureaucrats in some parts of the country were still afflicted by 'old thinking'. I do not know if they were telling the truth or simply passing the buck.

Another example was the difficulty correspondents encountered in covering rural unrest in Thai Binh province just 60 km from Hanoi during mid-1997 because all requests to visit the area were rejected. We all worked our contacts as much as possible, talking to people who had travelled to the province and placing telephone calls to local district offices. In the end however, nothing can substitute for first hand experience and direct conversations with local people. Of course the option remained open to correspondents to defy the regulations and simply travel to Thai Binh independently. One correspondent took this course. She was spotted and immediately 'invited' into the

Press Department 'to drink tea' – a euphemism for being reprimanded and officially warned. All correspondents rely on the Press Department for assistance in the six monthly renewal of their visas. Without the Press Department's assistance a correspondent can find themselves forced to leave the country when their current visa expires. This happened in 1996, when Adam Schwarz, correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, was effectively expelled from Vietnam.

Correspondents also rely on the Press Department for assistance in obtaining official interviews and travel permits, a power which can be turned against those who refuse to 'cooperate'. I was personally warned in this manner after travelling to Kim No village on the outskirts of Hanoi to report on a dispute over a proposed golf course development. Villagers were protesting because the local peoples committee was attempting to cream off the bulk of the money that had been promised to them in compensation for loss of their paddy fields. After my third visit to the village I was invited for tea at the Press Department and informed that I was breaching regulations because I did not have permission to carry out journalistic activities in that district. One of the three officials lined up to reprimand me then pointed out that the Press Department could only 'cooperate' with foreign journalists who obeyed the laws of Vietnam. I interpreted this as an unambiguous warning: if I persisted in visiting the golf course site then in future I could expect very little assistance in obtaining official interviews and travel permits. I was then asked for a guarantee that I would not visit the site again. I tried to dodge the issue by pointing out that the area in question was part of Hanoi and that I routinely went about reporting events in Hanoi without requesting official permission in advance. The head of the press department then referred me to the explicit letter of the law, which states:<sup>1</sup>

'In order to carry out journalistic activities mentioned in the Regulations, the resident journalists must send their requests on a case-by-case basis to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at least 5 days in advance and are not allowed to carry out those activities before the issuance of the press Permit by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs'.

Taken literally, Regulation 13 means that I should request written permission from the Foreign Ministry five days before I even pick up the telephone to call the Australian Embassy to ask for a recent trade statistic. When I put this to the head of the Press Department during our tea-drinking session he laughed and said 'You must understand, of course we are flexible'.

'Flexibility' means that the regulation is arbitrary. The last thing the Press Department wants is to be flooded with formal applications for permission to carry out run of the mill journalist activities. Like so many Vietnamese laws, the regulations governing foreign media activities are broad brush provisions that can be applied to prevent a journalist from engaging in any activity that any official body at any time has

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<sup>1</sup> Article 13 of the 'Regulations on Press and Information Activities of Foreign Journalists, Offices and Organisations in Vietnam.



decided is off-limits. One of the most ludicrous examples of this occurred when a Dutch tourist was stabbed to death by a thief in Ben Thanh market in Ho Chi Minh City. A colleague who happened to be in Ho Chi Minh City that day contacted the local branch of the Foreign Ministry Press Department to request the assistance of an interpreter to interview market stall holders about the incident. Her request was rejected because she had not applied for permission to report the event five days in advance! To add insult to injury, the responsible official lectured my journalist colleague for using the word 'murder' to describe the Ben Thanh market death. She was told that the Dutch woman had not been 'murdered' but 'killed while resisting being robbed', an interesting distinction.

Language is a major difficulty for foreign reporters in Vietnam. Few correspondents speak good enough Vietnamese to work independently and they are required to hire their press assistants and interpreters through the Foreign Ministry. This creates a number of problems. Firstly, while some press assistants are highly skilled, the pool of talent is not very large. Despite being willing, many assistants are not able; they lack adequate language skills to work as interpreters and translators dealing with complex material. If media organisations were free to hire outside the Foreign Ministry they could easily find competent and highly motivated assistants amongst the numerous young graduates looking for work. Secondly, press assistants are expressly forbidden from engaging in 'journalistic activities' themselves.<sup>2</sup> This means that they cannot attend a media conference and ask questions on behalf of a correspondent, let alone write articles or news reports in their own right. This diminishes the capacity of foreign news organisations to take advantage of local knowledge, renders the press assistants' job boring and reduces opportunities for skills development and career advancement of Vietnamese staff. Thirdly, and most importantly, the assistants are expected to guide and monitor the activities of correspondents. At worst this turns them into spies; at best it means that they are put in the invidious position of having divided loyalties. Each Saturday afternoon press assistants are expected to attend a weekly briefing and may find themselves singled out and chastised over the activities or reporting of 'their' correspondent or newsagency. Press assistants may also find their personal life under scrutiny. For example, any assistant who marries a foreigner will be forced to immediately quit their job, regardless of whether or not their spouse has any connection to journalism.

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2 Article II.C.8 of Circular No 84/TTLB 'Guiding the implementation of the Regulations on Press and Information Activities of Foreign Journalists, Offices and Organisations in Vietnam' states: 'The Foreign Press Centre at the MOFA is the only office authorised to introduce and provide interpreters and press assistants to, and sign labour contracts with resident press bureaus in Vietnam as specified in Article 14 of the Regulations. Interpreters and press assistants of the press bureaus are not entitled to journalists' status and are not allowed to carry out journalistic activities as the correspondents of the press bureaus.'

If a trip to a troubled province like Thai Binh is to yield worthwhile material then the journalist needs help, not only in interpreting but often in winning enough confidence and trust from local people to get them to open up to a foreign visitor. But journalists are only too aware that asking for help from their assistant, or from a Vietnamese friend or colleague, is to expose that person to unacceptable personal risk. It is the Vietnamese helper who may find their career on the skids, their chance to study denied, their promotion blocked, their application to travel overseas stalled – at worst it is the Vietnamese assistant who will end up in jail, charged with revealing state secrets or one of the other myriad catch-all offences from Vietnam's criminal code. What stopped me returning to the Kim No golf course village was not so much the fear that I would be denied future access to senior government officials (few of whom I found worth interviewing in any case), but concern for those who had assisted me on my earlier visits. While I was called in to 'drink tea' my assistant was taken off to another room for a separate dressing down which left her visibly shaken and upset. I later discovered that the driver of the vehicle that had taken us to Kim No had also been questioned about the visit.

The government is also concerned that Vietnam's new crop of young, enthusiastic and increasingly critical domestic journalists is a potentially rich source of information for foreign correspondents. After all, local journalists often know much more about a given story than they are allowed to print or broadcast themselves. In order to address this issue the government introduced new regulations in September 1997 explicitly banning Vietnamese journalists from providing their foreign colleagues with information, photographs or articles without prior approval from the government. The ban will further reduce the already sadly limited interaction between local and foreign media. Foreign journalists are excluded from most domestic media conferences organised by government departments or agencies in Vietnam and the Communist Party clearly wants to limit ideas or information flowing in either direction. In late August 1997, the head of the Ho Chi Minh Political Academy, Politburo member Nguyen Duc Binh, launched a blistering attack on western influence on the Vietnamese media, saying such 'cultural and political trespassing....destroys the boundaries of social order and national sovereignty in press and information activities'. There also appears to be an unofficial ban on Vietnamese journalists going to the United States to upgrade their professional qualifications or skills in journalism, though countries like Australia or the United Kingdom still appear to be acceptable places to undertake such study.<sup>3</sup>

Despite its role in regulating and reprimanding foreign journalists, the Foreign Ministry must still be regarded as one of the most open and progressive of all

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3 In September 1997, a promising young journalist from the English language *Vietnam Investment Review* was prevented from taking up a three month scholarship to report on the opening session of the UN General Assembly because he could not obtain an exit visa to travel to New York. However, it is unclear whether this was the result of official policy or personal rivalries.

Vietnamese government agencies. My own subjective assessment is that the Ministry's Press and Information Department is not particularly pro-active in its monitoring activities. Rather, the Press Department responds to pressures from other more security minded sections of the state apparatus, particularly the Interior Ministry.

In the case of the Kim No golf course, for example, I was not called in because the Press Department or the Vietnamese Embassy in Canberra had monitored my critical radio reports on the dispute via the ABC or Radio Australia, but because the Interior Ministry had complained to the Press Department that foreign journalists were visiting a sensitive area where unrest was occurring. The Press Department then quizzed press assistants in foreign news bureaus to identify the culprits.

With the important exception of television stories, the Press Department has no means of exerting direct control or censorship over the material that foreign journalists file from Vietnam. For example, my radio reports were generally filed directly over a standard telephone line. Some of my meetings with critical figures were observed by secret police who were either very unskilled in their art, or else deliberately chose to make themselves obvious as a form of intimidation. At other times people who had agreed to see me would suddenly pull out of the meeting at short notice and without explanation. I can only presume that they had been warned off. Of course there are other critical figures, such as the ageing dissident Nguyen Ho who is under house arrest in Ho Chi Minh City, to whom access is completely impossible. But generally, if someone was willing and able to talk to me then I was able to record their voice and send their comments to Australia without any hindrances.

Television is different because of the cumbersome nature of the medium. Any video or film footage shot in Vietnam must be cleared by the Foreign Ministry prior to its export or transmission via satellite. Courier companies will refuse to carry a tape that has not been cleared; Vietnam Television will refuse satellite access to ground station facilities unless the appropriate clearances are obtained first. The clearance of tapes is generally a routine matter, provided that permission to film the story was obtained in advance. Given the permit process for carrying out journalistic activities, it is rare for a tape to contain any highly controversial scenes or comments in any case. (Where the subject of filming is controversial, then the tape has usually been recorded without permission and so the journalist must find an unofficial way to get it out of the country.) But even if a report is critical, the Press Department does not generally argue over the selection of individual shots or the comments of interviewees.

To take an example, I made a short feature on Hanoi's pavement culture for ABC TV. The idea was to show the vibrancy and diversity of Hanoi street-life from early morning to late evening. Essentially this was a 'colour' story but I also wanted to illustrate the problems of a recent government decree on maintaining order in the streets, which had given the police arbitrary powers to hound itinerant traders and confiscate their goods. I asked for permission to interview the police and film them going about their work. My request languished on various desks for nearly two months and eventually went all the way to the head of the Hanoi police department for approval.

Finally I was given permission for the interview and invited to the local police station in Cho Hom ward. This area contains one of Hanoi's busiest markets and the streets and pavements are usually overflowing with stalls, traders, shoppers and chaotically parked motorbikes. I arrived to find that a Potemkin like scene had been arranged for our benefit. Reinforcements had been called in and there were two or three smiling policemen patrolling on every street and chatting politely with local citizens; traders' stalls had been banished from the neatly swept footpath and there was no sign of the usual army of wandering women who sell goods from a pair of baskets slung from a pole across their shoulders. In the market itself hardly a lettuce leaf was out of place. Luckily we had already recorded other footage of typically heavy handed police action amongst the usual chaos of Hanoi's streets. So in the final version of the story we were able to show up this staged scene for what it was.

The Press Department did not object to, or even question, any of the raw footage that I shipped back to Sydney for that story. On another occasion the Press Department was actually my saviour in getting tapes out. At that stage (prior to November 1996), the Ministry of Culture and Information rather than the Foreign Ministry was responsible for approving the export of tapes. I was making a feature on returning boatpeople with a camera crew that had flown into Hanoi on a repatriation flight from Hong Kong. The crew had filmed sequences in the detention camps there and some of the boatpeople interviewed had made very negative comments about Vietnam. When I submitted the full set of tapes for export approval, officials at the Ministry of Culture and Information withheld that footage. They did not explicitly object to the content of the tapes but complained that they had been brought into Vietnam illegally. According to regulations the tapes shot in Hong Kong should have been declared to customs officials at the airport and then sealed (presumably to stop such subversive material from being duplicated and distributed within Vietnam). It took several days of difficult negotiations (with the Foreign Ministry Press Department acting on my behalf) before Culture and Information finally relented and agreed to release the tapes.

Documentary film makers are not treated as journalists and must still work through the Ministry of Culture and Information. This means that they experience much closer scrutiny than television crews. In 1997 a film crew working on a documentary about charity work amongst street children in Ho Chi Minh City had to be accompanied at all times during the shoot by officials from Culture and Information. They found themselves arguing over every shot that portrayed a potentially negative image of Vietnam such as images of poor shanty dwellings or of rubbish strewn along the banks of canals.

### **Hostile Forces**

Working for the Australian electronic media probably protected me from suffering the same intense scrutiny as some of my colleagues in the print media, particularly US citizens and those working for influential regional magazines like the *Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER)* or the Asian edition of *Time*.

Magazine articles are easily photocopied and passed around. *FEER* and *Time* appear once a week on the same day. The table of contents can be easily checked for stories on Vietnam. Paragraphs or even entire stories that are considered offensive or overly critical are frequently blacked out before copies of the magazines are distributed domestically. Journalists working for both publications are monitored extremely closely. They are routinely called in to 'drink tea' and forced to mount a line by line defence of their copy. Newspapers and wire services also receive considerable attention and are periodically taken to task for their reporting in commentaries in Vietnam's state controlled press.

By contrast I was able to go about my work with less harassment and intrusion. One reason may be that I was not considered to matter much. Television may be extremely influential but the ABC is not CNN. Secondly, given the restrictions outlined above and the practical limitations of the medium, it is hard to make really penetrating and critical television reports in Vietnam. (For example, it was extremely difficult to produce any kind of TV report about the 1997 unrest in Thai Binh because there were no pictures to go with the story).

Radio is much more flexible than television and that is where my best and most incisive work was done, although in contrast to print, radio is ephemeral. I rarely knew when my stories would be broadcast, so without rigorous and exhaustive monitoring there was little chance that Hanoi officials would manage to keep a close watch on what I was writing. The daily shortwave Vietnamese language service of Radio Australia which broadcast translations of my stories was relatively easy to monitor and had a considerable listenership in Vietnam. However, Radio Australia is generally not viewed in such antagonistic terms as the BBC, Voice of America, Radio France International or Radio Free Asia.<sup>4</sup>

The BBC is still unable to open a bureau in Hanoi and officials continue to chastise visiting BBC representatives over the series of extended interviews with the dissident Bui Tin broadcast by the Corporation's Vietnamese service after he first went to Paris in 1990. Voice of America and Radio Free Asia are frequent targets of attack in the domestic media, of which this commentary from the communist party daily *Nhan Dan* is typical:

'Abusing modern broadcasting technologies under the pretext of 'freedom' and 'democracy', a handful of hostile forces in the United States have been pursuing a plan of 'peaceful evolution' in an attempt to interfere in other countries' internal affairs, destabilise and eventually overthrow political regimes out of their favour.....[they]

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4 The closure of Radio Australia's Darwin transmitter by the Howard government in July 1997 means that Radio Australia's service is now virtually impossible to pick up in Vietnam.

intentionally use information and cultural means as an invasive instrument [and] persist in realising their scheme cooked up carefully for heinous purposes.’<sup>5</sup>

It is not surprising that Hanoi remains concerned about the influence of international shortwave radio broadcasts in Vietnamese, given the limited media choices open to most citizens, particularly in rural areas. Anecdotal evidence suggest that Voice of Vietnam radio fails to win much of an audience and, despite high literacy rates and the hundreds of separate press and magazine titles published in Vietnam, few rural Vietnamese ever have access to a newspaper. (According to a survey of 372 people in Hai Hung and Ninh Binh provinces, only 8 per cent had regular access to newspapers. Most of those people were teachers, pensioners and government employees.)<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, Vietnam Television is really successful in winning viewers, although the communist party is still concerned that the advent of satellite TV threatens to undermine the state’s attempts to control political and cultural values. A decree issued in late 1996 restricted access to satellite dishes. Only senior party, government and state officials, media organisations, sections of the security apparatus and up-market hotels were authorised to receive satellite broadcasts. (However, nine months after the decree was implemented there still had been no concerted attempt to crack down on unlicensed dishes.)

The government also keeps a watchful eye over foreign language magazines and newspapers published in Vietnam, such as the daily English language *Vietnam News*, the weekly *Vietnam Investment Review (VIR)* and the monthly *Vietnam Economic Times (VET)*.

For example, *Vietnam News* ran into problems over the following headline: ‘Successful farmers suffering heavy losses due to bad government policy says Nhan Dan.’<sup>7</sup> As the headline suggests, the article was a translation from the communist party’s own official newspaper, but the choice of the phrase ‘bad government policy’ in the headline caused offence. In the body of the article government policies were labelled ‘inappropriate’. Late in the evening, as copy deadlines loomed, a tired foreign sub-editor had substituted the much snappier and shorter ‘bad’ for ‘inappropriate’, in order to make a headline which would fit the available space. This ‘error’ prompted Interior Ministry investigators to visit the *Vietnam News* offices and re-trace the editorial path of the story.

Images can be equally controversial. In early 1996 embarrassed staff from the *VIR* came knocking on doors asking subscribers to return copies of the magazine that had been delivered the day before. The problem was a front page photograph accompanying a financial story. The photograph showed a cyclist riding past the State Bank building

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5 *Nhan Dan*, 22/10/97.

6 *Nhan Dan*, 6/10/96.

7 *Vietnam News*, 15/2/97.

in Hanoi. In the corner was a small inset photograph of Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet. Apparently the relative size and placement of the Prime Minister's image caused so much offence that the entire issue had to be recalled. *VIR* also produces a weekly leisure insert called 'Time Out'. In mid 1996 the cover of a special summer edition of 'Time Out' showed a young woman lying on a blue and white striped beach towel with a piece of green star fruit over each eye. Staff at the magazine were chastised for surreptitiously trying to reproduce the American flag! Astounded by the unintended symbolism that had been read into their innocent image, staff then decided to test the official capacity for deciphering coded messages. A subsequent issue of 'Time Out' featured a picture of two Soviet watches one laid over the other. The watch underneath had the word 'perestroika' written on the dial – the top watch read 'glasnost'. But this subliminal message about the primacy of political over economic reform passed unnoticed.

*VIR* is a joint venture between Vietnam's Ministry of Planning and Investment and Australian business interests, including media tycoon Kerry Packer. Former Managing Director Alex McKinnon did not deny that the magazine's links to the government set the paper's overall editorial agenda. 'Well I don't think we are afraid to say that we are in fact, if you like, a public relations department of the Ministry of Planning and Investment', he told me in an interview for the ABC. 'I mean that's why we came here, to promote Vietnam,' he added.

*VIR* has to play down the role of expatriate staff who remain crucial to the production of its English language edition. In 1996 the magazine celebrated its fifth anniversary and was awarded a labour medal for its contributions to the nation by the Vietnamese government. However, at the official award ceremony the magazine's foreign staff were asked to sit unobtrusively at the back of the hall. They were also instructed to make themselves scarce when then President Le Duc Anh made a tour of the editorial offices.

*VIR* has a resident censor from the Ministry of Culture and Information who holds the post of Deputy Editor and who, in McKinnon's words, 'monitors all the material... to make sure it is OK.' McKinnon admits that 'there's still an incredible amount of paranoia' when it comes to the press in Vietnam but he also says that *VIR*'s editorial team put up a solid fight to push out the boundaries of acceptable journalism. Certainly the magazine has nurtured and encouraged some of the most skilled journalists in the country, although the more prominent and successful they become, the more likely they are to face professional difficulties.

Despite continuing suspicion towards domestically produced foreign language publications, government agencies also seek to use them to their own advantage, albeit rather clumsily. In mid 1997 *VIR* ran the text of an 'exclusive interview' between Reuters newsagency and Nguyen Tan Dung, Politburo member and a rising star within the Communist Party. In reality no interview had taken place. Reuters Hanoi office had submitted an interview request, accompanied, as is generally required, by a list of proposed questions. In return they had received written answers. Because no face-to-

face interview had taken place, and because the answers were in any case entirely predictable and uninteresting, Reuters journalists did not even bother to file a story. However, someone either in Dung's office, or in the Press Department, decided to share the transcript of Dung's 'exclusive interview' with VIR, who dutifully published it in full.

In September the monthly *VET* published a similar interview with Dung under the headline 'The Voice of Youth' (Dung is 47). The article was accompanied by a flattering picture of suit-wearing Dung, his hand in mid air, as if in the midst of a lively exchange with an unseen journalist. Again, no such meeting had actually taken place and the 'interview' was written transcript supplied by Dung's office.

### Turning Sour

In the late 1980s and early 1990s many of the western journalists who arrived in Hanoi to open up offices on behalf of foreign news organisations harboured a considerable residue of sympathy for Vietnam as a result of the war years and the subsequent economic embargo. Their initial reporting of the country focussed on business opportunities for foreign investors, and on the nation's own attempts to reform and rebuild its economy and society. Much of this coverage was broadly optimistic in tone, supportive of the reform process and enthusiastic about the nation's achievements.

By late 1997 the mood had soured dramatically. Some early advances in journalistic and editorial independence in the Vietnamese media had been reversed and controls on the activities of both the foreign and domestic press had been tightened.

With a slowdown in foreign investment Vietnam was producing very few positive news stories. In fact after two years of inward looking politics and stalled reforms, as the communist party negotiated a generational change of leadership, there were very few stories at all. After the 20th anniversary of the fall/liberation of Saigon, interest in war-related anniversaries had diminished; the long saga of the boatpeople was all but over; normalisation with Washington had been achieved and the process of drafting a US/Vietnam trade agreement was too protracted and prosaic to excite much interest. Newsagency journalists kept filing, but found that less and less of their copy was being picked up internationally; other correspondents found that their editors needed them to be in Bangkok, Jakarta, KL, Rangoon or Hong Kong more often than Hanoi. The ranks of the Hanoi press corps began to thin. Both *The Nation* and the *Bangkok Post* closed their bureaus due to financial problems associated with the collapse of the Thai baht. The ABC closed its Hanoi office due to government budget cuts in Australia. A number of other media organisations remained operational in name only, hoping to maintain precious multi-entry visas for their bureaus despite the fact that their correspondents were now spending almost all of their time in other countries.

In this environment Hanoi's heavy handed controls over the media have become counter productive even to the regime's narrowly defined interests. Firstly, they foster a climate of negativism and frustration amongst foreign journalists. This process reached its apotheosis just prior to the Communist Party's Eighth National Congress, when



Vietnam stopped issuing visas for foreign tourists to visit the country. The restrictions were confirmed by travel agents, by foreign embassies in Hanoi, by Vietnamese embassies in overseas capitals and by individual travellers, yet when foreign journalists asked for clarification from the government we were told that 'Vietnam's visa policy remains unchanged.' Such blatant doublespeak can only encourage total cynicism towards all official statements.

Secondly, the restrictions hinder the accurate and timely reporting of real problems, and compounds the spreading of rumours and inaccuracies. For example, when foreign journalists were prevented from visiting Thai Binh to report on farmer's protests in the province, this opened the way for some overseas Vietnamese groups to portray unrest as the beginning of a massive uprising against communist rule. Such views fed back into Vietnam via shortwave radio and other media, with no effective counter. When I was interviewed by the BBC World Service about events in Thai Binh, I found myself sounding almost like a propagandist for the regime; I had to fend off suggestions that the unrest heralded the death knell for communism by explaining that the protests were a localised response to specific grievances in the province. The interviewer then challenged me by asking whether I could be sure that the situation in Thai Binh was not much worse than I imagined; I had to admit that I could not.

Thirdly, if foreign investors are not confident that they can get reasonably accurate statistics and timely information, then they will approach Vietnam with added caution. When State Bank officials fail to answer questions on the pressing issue of bad loans this was a missed opportunity to restore international faith in Vietnam's creditworthiness and calm fears that the mountain of problem loans could overwhelm the entire financial structure.

While Vietnamese officials repeatedly stress that they want foreign journalists to 'understand Vietnam', the real intention of existing regulations is exactly the opposite; the aim is to corral correspondents into acceptable corners where they can cause minimal embarrassment to the regime. When foreign journalists are summoned in to the Press Department for criticism sessions, it is usually because their understanding of what is going on around them is too acute. It is knowledge, rather than ignorance, which generally causes offence.

In restricting the activities of the foreign media, the Communist Party's overriding aim is to maintain a superficial image of political stability and harmony by keeping the lid on negative stories. But in the cut-throat world of international competition for capital and markets, media coverage is a crucial weapon, and the only thing worse than negative stories is to be ignored altogether.

If Hanoi were to take a more liberal approach to foreign journalists it would undoubtedly mean that more critical information about Vietnam found its way into the international media; but it would equally mean that foreign journalists would be more likely to demonstrate sympathy for the challenging and complex task of administering a

developing country undergoing rapid social change as it attempts to catch up with the rest of the world.

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## **The Mass Media in Vietnam**

Transformations in print publication, radio, film and television are an integral part of broader changes taking place in Vietnam since the mid-1980s. Although the Communist Party continues to scrutinise content, and every mass media outlets is formally state-owned, new market economy imperatives, technological upgrades, international linkages, and persistent audience demand for novelty all serve to propel media experimentation and innovation, whatever the intentions of Hanoi's elderly leadership. As a result, today's media would be almost unrecognisable to Vietnamese citizens living only fifteen years ago. This is the first book in English to describe these significant changes, drawing on the knowledge and experience of both Vietnamese and foreign experts.

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