

CHAPTER 3:
VIETNAMESE SOCIALIST REALISM:
THE ARTS OF THE DEMOCRATIC
REPUBLIC OF VIỆT-NAM
(THE NORTH) 1945-1975



Figure 1: Communal House at Dương Xá Village, Gia Lâm District in Hà Nội's outskirts, photograph taken by Boi Tran Huynh.

This chapter examines the change in Vietnamese aesthetics in the Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam, hereafter ‘the North’, from 1945 to 1975. In this era, Socialist Realism was established and applied to every aspect of the arts, which became a vehicle to serve the ideology of Marxism. Its relations shaped Việt-Nam’s international agenda with the Communist bloc, especially with the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. During this period, Việt-Nam adopted and developed these two influences while the French influence became subtler. The conflict between North and South Việt-Nam led to an emphasis on the fabrication of new aesthetics, aimed toward forging a national identity within the orbit of international Communism. Simultaneously, attempts were made to eliminate individualism in the art of Modernism with the assertion that it represented western decadent bourgeois art.

Interestingly, it was in this context that a number of artists deviated from the Socialist mainstream and, through personal style and expression, produced artworks that counterbalanced the official view. Also, two private art collectors established themselves as alternative patrons to the arts.

COMMUNISM AS A WAY OUT OF COLONIALISM:

Hồ Chí Minh, (fig2) founded the Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam on the 2nd of September 1945. In the *Independence Declaration* that he delivered in Ba Đình Square to some 400,000 freedom-hungry Vietnamese and a small number of World War II American officers and other foreigners, Hồ Chí Minh deliberately used quotes from the 1776 *American Declaration of Independence* and the 1789 *French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*.

In deciding to open the Declaration with the 1776 and 1789 quotations, Hồ Chí Minh was not only tipping his hat to Washington and Paris, but also more importantly placing Việt Nam squarely within the world revolutionary line of succession.¹

¹ David G. Marr, 1995, *Ho Chi Minh’s Independence Declaration*, printed in *Essays in the Vietnamese Past*, edit. K. W. Taylor & John K. Whitmore, Cornell University, p.229.



Figure 2: Nguyễn Sáng, the first stamp (1946) with portrait of Hồ Chí Minh for the newly independent Việt-Nam

The allies did not answer Hồ's appeal; Việt-Nam was left with the only option: Communism. A number of international events in the first half of the 20th century provided a critical context and justification for his choice: the success of the October Revolution in Russia in 1917, the growth of the Red Army of Mao Tse-tung in the 1940s and the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. However, Hồ Chí Minh was aware that Communism, at that time, was still a foreign theory to the Vietnamese and he tried a number of tactics to bring it to Việt-Nam. He discarded his old name Nguyễn Ái Quốc (Nguyễn Patriot), which had a record of his previous proletarian class struggles and replaced it with Hồ Chí Minh (He who Enlightens), which appealed to class cooperation and proletarian internationalism.² The Indochina Communist Party was declared dissolved in November 1946 but actually, operated in a 'quieter' manner and was reborn as the Vietnamese Workers' Party, in February 1951.

After seizing power in September 1945, the new government of the Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam (DRVN) faced many difficulties and had little control of the national resources, which were the vital element in the survival of the new regime. The French attempted to regain their colonies and in November 1946, French forces attacked Hà Nội and Hải Phòng, and then sponsored a provisional

² David G. Marr, 1995, 'Hồ Chí Minh's Independence Declaration', in *Essays into Vietnamese Past*, edit. by K.W. Taylor & John K. Whitmore, Cornell University, p.222.

government with the agreement of the abdicated king, Bảo Đại³. Hồ Chí Minh's force, the Việt-Minh, formed the League for Việt-Nam's Independence⁴ and fought back on the 19th of December. However, the Hồ Chí Minh government was forced to withdraw into the northern mountainous area of Việt Bắc and Việt-Nam had to endure a strenuous nine-year Resistance War (1946-1954), also known in the West as the First Indochina War. It was initially a fight for national independence, but it soon correlated with the conflict between two international ideologies: Communism and Imperialism. The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 turned out to be an important element behind the scenes. From 1950 to 1954, China was the only nation that provided military aid to Hà Nội, on the basis of an annual plan and strategic campaigns.⁵ Along with the flow of these gifts, thousands of Chinese Communist cadres arrived in North Việt-Nam and were attached to nearly every unit of the Việt Minh troops. Indoctrination sessions including political criticism, self-criticism and political-military teaching were given in the Resistance Zone of Việt Bắc under the direction of Chinese advisers.⁶

The Việt Minh victory at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 drew significant global attention and saw a shift in the triangular relations between China, Việt-Nam and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union, which had maintained a low profile during the Resistance years of the Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam (DRV), began sending large quantities of civilian and military aid in the 1960s, especially as North Việt-Nam now, explicitly, adopted Socialism.⁷ The growing relationship between the Soviet Union and Việt-Nam was further propelled by the subsequent realisation that the Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam (DRVN) must be industrialised. China, at that time, was not able to provide such technical support; North Việt-Nam, therefore,

³ Bảo Đại abdicated on 15 August 1954 for Hồ Chí Minh's government.

⁴ League for Việt-Nam's Independence, or Việt Minh, was established in 1941 to attract all Vietnamese patriots to fight against French rule. General Võ Nguyên Giáp developed an army from this force.

⁵ William J. Duiker, 2000, *Ho Chi Minh*, Allen & Unwin, p. 426-427

⁶ Bùi Tín, 1995, *Following Ho Chi Minh*, University of Hawaii Press, p. 14-15. See also King C. Chen, *Vietnam and China, 1938-1954*, Princeton University Press, p.187 &273.

⁷ 1959 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, (English), 1981, Foreign Languages Publishing House, p. 42.

deliberately approached the Soviet Union for assistance and when the U.S. initiated its bombardment of Việt-Nam in 1965, the flow of Soviet aid accelerated. Under the leadership of Hồ Chí Minh, North Việt-Nam performed an excellent job in “preserving Khrushchev’s friendship without losing Chou En-lai’s aid and protection,”⁸ even when the Sino-Soviet dispute broke out.

As a result, the core issue for discussion at the International Comintern Congress in February 1951 was the importance for the Vietnamese Revolution to adopt the Chinese experience and Mao Tse-tung’s thoughts.⁹ The new ideological influences were apparent in the symbols used and the in newspaper coverage of the event, which described the interior decoration of the conference venue: “In front of the representatives, below the portraits of Marx, Engels and Lenin are the portraits of Stalin and Mao Tse-tung.”¹⁰ The editorial staff of the Vietnamese newspaper, typically, used words with great caution, when diffusing the Party’s policy to cadres and the masses by making Stalin and Mao Tse-tung the focal point; other names mentioned were merely part of a receding background. These two heroes were the icons around which the Vietnamese Revolution was conducted and their ideologies shaped the trajectory of the visual arts for the next 30 years.

SOCIALIST REALISM: THE NEW AESTHETICS

In a Socialist society, the two kinds of ownership are: State and collective, the mode of goods distribution is “from each according to his ability, to each according to his work.” A transitional phase is believed to be necessary and Việt Nam, up to 2004, is still on the way to Socialism.

From the beginning, in 1945, the Socialist influence was transmitted through symbols and the institutions of politics, defence and art. The aesthetic climate was shaped at the highest political levels and expressed in the everyday realities of military life.

⁸ Bernard B. Fall, 1967, *The Two Viet-Nams*, Praeger, New York, p.102.

⁹ Hoàng Văn Hoan, 1991, *Giọt Nước trong Biển Cả*, (A drop in the Ocean), N. Tran, Portland, Oregon p.355.

¹⁰ The Party’s newspaper, *Nhân Dân* (People), on 11/03/1951



Figure 3: Hồ Chí Minh and his cabinet on the Independence Day 2nd September 1945, photograph from *Ho Chi Minh* by William Duker.

Hồ Chí Minh, for instance, set himself as an example for the nation and was imitated in many ways, including in his attire (fig.3). Holding the highest office in the nation, Hồ became a national fashion model for the next 30 years His first public appearance in Hà Nội is described:

While almost all of his colleagues on the platform wore western suits and ties, Hồ deliberately chose a faded Khaki jacket with high collar, and white rubber sandals – his trademarks as head-of-State for the next twenty-four years. Although the high collared jacket originated among colonial administrators in Asia, it had also taken on revolutionary symbolism in China from the early 1920s. Perhaps Hồ regarded it as a suitable compromise between a western suit and the black tunic and turban of Vietnamese literati, deemed too traditional in the circumstances (and apparently never worn by Hồ from 1911 onward).¹¹

The khaki jacket, with standing collar, buttoned up to the neck, was initially known as Sun Yat-Sen suit by tailors, and then in the 1960s as the ‘Mao jacket’, which became the new uniform for the army and civil servants, especially after the victory at Điện Biên Phủ and described by a northern writer:

The army uniform comprised, from a sergeant to a platoon leader, a top called “big army” that had two pockets on the chest. The shoulders were lined with pads and many lines of thread were applied to reinforce the linen, I don’t know how many lines, but soldiers used to call them “thirty two suffering lines.” Cadres from company level

¹¹ David Marr, ‘Hồ Chí Minh’s Independence Declaration’, in *Essays into Vietnamese Past*, p. 225.

upward were allowed to wear shirts that had two pockets on the lower part without “thirty two suffering lines.” These types of shirts were called “big cadre,” Civil servants were also confined to the rules and had to wear “big cadre.” but in different colours from those of the army.¹²

The unity in uniform reflected the unity of the whole nation of the Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam. It was, however, a forced unity as the Party considered individualism a sin against the nation¹³ and, thus, everyone tried to be invisible by mingling into the masses (fig.4). Not a single person dared to stand out. Susan Sontag in her *Trip to Ha Noi*, made this observation:

What makes it especially hard to see people as individuals is that everybody here seems to talk in the same style and to have the same things to say.¹⁴



Figure 4: Hà Nội's residents with plain clothing, photograph by Marc Riboud.



Figure 5: Posters became ubiquitous in Hà Nội'. Text reads, “All must fight the American Enemy”, photograph by Marc Riboud.

The exhaustiveness of the uniform, and broader notion of uniformity, is captured by journalist-Colonel Bùi Tín:

To generalise, the uniformity imposed on us at that time was painful. In fact we were all in uniform: men in Mao jackets, women in black

¹² Vũ Thư Hiên, *Đêm Giữa Ban Ngày* (Night in the Broad Daylight), Văn Nghệ, Westminster, California, p. 63

¹³ Hồ Chí Minh, speech at a Conference for the Study of the History of the Việt-Nam Workers' Party on November 28, 1959. English translation by Jack Woddis in *Ho Chi Minh, Selected Articles and Speeches 1920-1967*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1969, p. 123-128.

¹⁴ Susan Sontag, *Trip to Ha Noi*, 1969, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, p. 22.

trousers and Mao jackets. Still, women were allowed to wear their hair long if it was tied firmly into a pony-tail. Curly hair was regarded as bourgeois and an imitation of the imperialists. Thinking, writing, working, all forms of behaviour including eating, all had to be uniform to conform to the masses.¹⁵

A western journalist noted in 1972, the limited capacity for variation in society where ‘splashes’ of colour were rare and, only then, connected to explicit political goals (fig.5):

Here and there you’ll see brightly coloured billboards, showing workers and peasants in dramatic revolutionary poses beneath political slogans calling for greater production to fulfil the current plan. Most of the clothes worn in Ha Noi are dull blues, greens and khakis, if not black and white, but there are splashes of brilliant red, yellow and blue to be seen wherever there’s a North Vietnamese or a National Liberation Front flag.¹⁶

These ideological influences were reinforced by limited resources and products in an economy totally geared toward military imperatives: fabrics were scarce as the economy was interrupted by war, which saw imported goods and civilian needs diverted to military ends.

The first sign of a transition in the aesthetics of this period can be traced to an exhibition held by the Cultural Association for National Salvation (Hội Văn Hóa Cứu Quốc) in September 1945¹⁷ at the premises of Khai Trí Tiến Đức, Hồ Chí Minh paid his first visit to the first exhibition of the art of a newly independent nation. He reportedly glanced at all the works and then turned to the artists, who were excited and anxious to hear his comments. Hồ Chí Minh’s response has been repeatedly cited in many books and articles:

¹⁵ Bui Tin, 1995, *Following Ho Chi Minh*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, p. 15-16.

¹⁶ John Penlington, ABC correspondent, cited from *Vietnam a Reporter’s War*, p.75.

¹⁷ Extract from Nguyen Phi Hoanh, 1984, *Vietnamese Art*, Hồ Chí Minh City Publishing House, p. 217.

You have painted a number of nudes and flowers, all these paintings are very beautiful but these are upper-class beauties. Why don't you make paintings about lower-class beauties around us?¹⁸

Until the year 2000, Vietnamese art historians made no further comment on this quote other than to express “comments in a friendly way.”¹⁹ Hồ Chí Minh’s remark was taken literally, especially after 1950 and became a guideline for practicing artists who attended political study sessions carried out in the Resistance Zone. Nude painting and still life were avoided. It was obvious that artists had to modify their view in order to be ‘with’ the Revolution.

Trường Chinh (1907-1988), General Secretary of the Party, was another important figure in shaping art policies. At the National Cultural Conference in 1948 Trường Chinh delivered an ideological paper, *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*. The paper drew attention to the need for artists to build a new democratic culture which, “must achieve three objectives: national, technical and popular.”²⁰ It also strongly advocated, “Socialist Realism as a method of artistic creation which portrays the truth in a society evolving towards Socialism according to objective laws.”²¹ Trường Chinh particularly expressed a denunciation of western modernism.

One of the characteristics of the reactionary culture is the anti-scientific content going along side with the scientific form, the poor content is covered by beauty, subtlety and sophistication. One would not be surprised to see sprouted from the rotten wood of imperialist culture gaudy mushrooms of Cubism, Impressionism, Surrealism, Dadaism et al...²²

For almost 40 years *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* was seen as a ‘golden rule’ for artists and writers, and Trường Chinh’s criticism has been cited repeatedly in articles. From here, Vietnamese Socialists put an emphasis on content over form and viewed formalism as a taboo that later writers even aligned it with the enemy.

¹⁸ cited from Quang Việt, 2000, *The Fine Arts of the Capital Hanoi*, Fine Arts Publishing House, p. 79 (Vietnamese) , p. 411 (English version)

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Trường Chinh, *Chủ Nghĩa Mác và Văn Hoá Việt Nam* (Marxism and Vietnamese Culture), 3rd edition in 1975, Sự Thật Publishers, p. 65.

²¹ Ibid, p. 92.

²² Ibid, p. 20.

Trường Chinh's enthusiasm for the cultural domain reached such an extreme that he was seen as the "cultural czar" of Việt-Nam.²³

The uprisings in August 1945 organised by Việt Minh activists and Communists was named the August Revolution and gave Vietnamese the impetus to establish a new independent nation. The word 'revolution', once forbidden in colonial times, was now, finally, used publicly in the hope that everyone could start a new and better life. However, 'revolution' gradually became loaded with complications. First, it was a new concept introduced by Trường Chinh in 1951 for Vietnamese, proletarian dictatorship,²⁴ which meant that the working class must gather in Socialist revolution in order to terminate the ruling class and colonial exploitation. Later, 'revolution' was interpreted as a process encompassing three stages: revolution in relations to production, technological revolution and ideological and cultural revolution.²⁵



Figure 6: Tô Ngọc Vân, *Hà Nội's Standing Up*, 1946.

With such strong political imperatives, ideological tasks were made a priority, leading to the shift in aesthetics. It is clearly demonstrated in the art of Tô Ngọc Vân, who is seen by Vietnamese art historians as an excellent example of an artist,

²³ Jamieson's word in *Understanding Vietnam*, p.212.

²⁴ *On the Vietnamese Revolution*, Report to the Second National Congress of the Party, February 1951.

²⁵ Lê Duẩn, *Role of the Vietnamese Working Class and Tasks of the Trade-Unions at the Present Time*, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/le-duan/works/1966/12/28.htm>

who, as the common saying went, “is peeling off his petite bourgeoisie coat” and putting on a revolutionary shirt. Tô Ngọc Vân’s poster, *Hà Nội’s Standing Up* (fig.6), is a continuation of his painting style of the Indochinese period and shows his preference for female beauty. This work also represents the nature of the partnership between intellectuals and the Việt Minh shaped by the exciting atmosphere of the era. The head of the woman is pushed into the background leaving more space for the curved lines denoting her long wavy hair and turbulent áo dài. She occupies most of the canvas and her left shoulder rises toward her chin implying a slight dancing movement and a hint of sexuality. The slogan *Hà Nội’s Standing Up*, added in the far corner of the poster, suggests that propaganda had begun to monopolise the artist’s intent. A short musical line underneath the slogan shows that its inspiration was from a song by Nguyễn Đình Thi, *The People of Hà Nội*. The combination of romantic representation and revolutionary content led to the term ‘revolutionary romanticism’ which corresponds to the transition from colonial to Socialist aesthetics in the late 1950s. Later, Tô Ngọc Vân painted Hồ Chí Minh and images of the masses to express revolutionary achievements.

In his article *Criticising the Control of Literature and Arts*, Phan Khôi (1987- 1959) described the direction that Tô Ngọc Vân took in making ‘revolutionary art’:

The late Tô Ngọc Vân used to be fond of painting beautiful women. In 1948 he painted a gouach entitled *Hà Nội, Standing Up*, presenting a beautiful woman in a heroic manner standing in a fire, surrounded by the ruins from bombardment. Then, he gave that ‘taste’ up completely, and in 1952, his painting displayed only old women and young girls.²⁶

Tô Ngọc Vân’s works of the later years of the Resistance period portrayed an evident shift in his subject matter and a tendency toward populism (figs.7-8), which was shaped by Trường Chinh’s *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*.²⁷ Ironically, in a letter Tô Ngọc Vân wrote to Picasso in May 1951, he rejected French artistic

²⁶ Phan Khôi, ‘Phê Bình Lãnh Đạo Văn Nghệ’ (Criticising the Control of Literature and Arts), from *Hundreds of Flowers Blossoming*, p. 62.

²⁷ Trường Chinh, *Chủ Nghĩa Mác và Văn Hoá Việt Nam* (Marxism and Vietnamese Culture) paper presented at the National Cultural Conference in 1948, published by Sự Thật, 3rd edition in 1975.

influences and raised questions related to censorship that indicated the strict directions imposed by the Party:



Figure 7: Tô Ngọc Vân: Going to Night Class



Figure 8: Tô Ngọc Vân: Hồ Chí Minh.

I believe that only when a human being has freedom, can the artistic part in that person develop. Therefore, Vietnamese art could not evolve under the French suppression. We people of literature and arts alongside our Vietnamese countrymen decisively stand up to get rid of colonialism, finally. Can you believe that the French rulers prohibited us to exhibit in Hà Nội (perhaps in 1941)? The subject matter of these paintings was women, fruits and landscapes.²⁸

Tô Ngọc Vân's new point of view was of course highly regarded by the Party, who in 1950 appointed him Director of the Fine Arts School of Việt Bắc in the Resistance Zone. Vân had a major impact on many other artists, who moved away from the nude and still life, considering these two topics bourgeois and light-hearted and, therefore, unworthy of revolutionary art. Although art students took life-drawing classes using naked models, no nude paintings were displayed publicly from that time on, until 1990 when the Reform policy offered some relaxation in art. Similarly, this ban applied to abstract art due to its relation to western modernism.

²⁸ Tô Ngọc Vân, 'Thư Gửi Họa Sĩ Picasso', (Letter to Painter Picasso), published in *Mỹ Thuật* n.48 (37) (1/2002), p.37.

When Hồ Chí Minh's government evacuated to the mountains of Việt Bắc and conducted the Resistance War of 1946-1954, nearly all artists, writers and intellectuals followed him and supported the Việt Minh, to answer 'the call of the Fatherland.' Those artists, who left Hà Nội for the Resistance War, were mainly middle class and had a French education. For instance, Tạ Ty (1922-2004), later a famous avant-garde artist, joined the Việt Minh with the aspiration:

We would like to see our nation being totally independent. We fellowmen should raise our heads and not bend ourselves in slavery."²⁹

Bùi Xuân Phái (1920-1988) and Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm (1922) came "to the resistance zone with the romantic dreams of the changes brought about by the Revolution,"³⁰ with writers and composers like Phan Khôi, Phạm Duy, Văn Cao also taking part in the war.



Figure 9: Tạ Ty: *Longing for Hà Nội*, 1947, courtesy of the artist.

The continuation of Romanticism reflected the background of the artists. *Longing for Hà Nội* (1947) by Tạ Ty (fig.9) was painted during his time in the Resistance Zone in the jungle. The title recalls nostalgia for a romantic Hà Nội, yet, at the

²⁹ Tạ Ty, *Những Khuôn Mặt Văn Nghệ Đã Đi Qua Đời Tôi* (Faces of Literature and Arts Passing through My Life), 1990, Thăng Mỗ, California, p. 121.

³⁰ Bùi Thanh Phương & Trần Hậu Tuấn, *Bùi Xuân Phái Life and Works*, 1998, Fine Arts Publishing House p. 22.

same time, displays the vigorous and rebellious spirit of young artists. In 1948, Tạ Ty, Bùi Xuân Phái (1921-1988) and Văn Cao (1923-1995), with other artists, held an exhibition. Pham Duy, a Vietnamese composer of his generation, deemed two of Tạ Ty's Cubist paintings, *Leaving the Cities* and *War Songs*, "more vigorous than Bùi Xuân Phái's impressionist paintings."³¹

The situation gradually moved into a new phase when the Resistance War escalated and the Việt-Minh received more aid from China, which saw the impositions of Chinese doctrines applied to the Vietnamese situation. One of them was the 'three together' model that cadres had to live, eat and work, with and for, the peasants without any compensation.³² Vietnamese Communist cadres were sent to China for training and Chinese Communist experts were sent to Việt-Nam as advisers during the period of land reform from 1950 to 1954, again using a Chinese model.³³

Việt-Nam and China have had a very complicated relationship over the centuries, despite sharing the philosophies of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Việt-Nam has seen China as a mentor in culture and politics; however, the threat of China taking over its tiny neighbour and assimilating the culture has existed in the Vietnamese mindset throughout history. Vietnamese see their history as a, "history of creating the nation and defending the nation"³⁴ and that defence incorporates resistance against China. In the 11th century, Lý Thường Kiệt, a General who repelled Chinese expansion, wrote a poem that has been seen by many Vietnamese historians as the first Vietnamese Declaration of Independence:

The southern Emperor is to reside in the southern land
This has been clearly marked in the Book of Heaven.
If unruly troops from afar dare to encroach

³¹ Pham Duy, 1990, *Diary of the Resistance War Time*, Pham Duy, Midway City, California, p. 181.

³² King C. Chen, *Vietnam and China 1938-1954*, Princeton University Press, p. 259

³³ See Hoang Van Chi, 1964, *From Colonialism to Communism*, Paul Mall Press.

³⁴ In 1954, when Hồ Chí Minh visited the temple of Hùng kings in Vĩnh Phú, he declared, "Hùng Kings founded the nation, we should protect it."

They will certainly face annihilation.³⁵

Yet, there was a strangely mutual period in the relationship between Việt-Nam and China during the two wars. Indeed, in 1959, Hồ Chí Minh used the slogan “Việt-Nam and China are two brother nations having close relations like lips and teeth.” The saying was then repeated, endlessly through the media in the North, until the war on their common boundary occurred in 1979. Maoism provided a Chinese or Asiatic form of Marxism and in his research on the relationship between Việt-Nam and China, King C. Chen pointed out why and how Việt-Nam imitated the Chinese revolutionary lessons, which he named, “A Chinese model for Vietnam.”³⁶ The historical, cultural and geographical ties with China and its strategically important position relative to Laos, Cambodia, and even Thailand, were undoubtedly regarded by Peking as a special showcase for the Chinese revolutionary model for Asia. Việt-Nam recognised these conditions as points in common, and China saw itself a model for Việt-Nam. In preparation for the ‘general mobilization of manpower,’ Hồ Chí Minh’s government organised a ‘conference season’ in which more than 12 conferences were held in the spring of 1950. One of them was the *National Congress of the Arts and Letters*. In March of the same year, a group of Chinese ‘cultural workers’ was sent to Việt-Nam.³⁷

Publications within Việt-Nam rarely mention the presence of Chinese cadres and their interaction with their Vietnamese counterparts. Dissident voices outside Việt-Nam, however, suggest a dissatisfaction caused by the Chinese intrusion.

The ever-increasing amount of military and civilian aid from China enabled the Việt Minh to strengthen its position. But it became more complex and tensions grew. Many people left the resistance and returned to the French-occupied Zone as large numbers of Chinese advisers arrived and were attached to every unit at all levels. The friendly, even cosy atmosphere which had previously existed

³⁵ Translation by Nguyen Ba Chung, ‘Imagining the Nation’, *Boston Review*, February/March 1996.

³⁶ King C. Chen, *Vietnam and China 1938–1954*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969, p.216.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

disappeared with talk of orthodox class warfare. Marxism had come to Việt-Nam via Maoism. (1950-52).³⁸

The victory at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 and the fall of Saigon in 1975 have added various layers, psychological and ideological, to the interpretation of this period of history. Proponents of Marxism see the outcome of visual arts of this period as exemplary, in their echoing of official policy. Those who believe this is not the case are already on the ‘other side’ and, subsequently, their revelations, if not accusations, usually bear more bitterness than analysis. It is, therefore, difficult to find credible and objective resources of this period, however, from an artist’s point of view Tạ Ty told his story of ‘criticism and self-criticism’ in the Resistance Zone, at this time:

After some hours discussing the tendency of art creation to serve the Resistance, the organizer placed my painting, *Rain in the Mountains*, on a bamboo easel; he then invited people to give their opinion about the work. One by one, each raised his or her voice in different ways and I tried my best to explain that the target I was aiming for in my painting was one of “revolutionary content.” Nevertheless, it seemed that the scenario had been plotted beforehand, the cadre asked some buffalo boys and old peasants to make some criticism. I felt uneasy defending myself against their honest revelations, as they did not have any knowledge of painting. I was nearly driven mad, but I kept my demeanour until the end of that session.³⁹

The straightjacket of indoctrination, under the encouragement of Chinese cadres, eroded the morale of artists who had joined the Resistance and Tạ Ty left in June 1950 for Hà Nội, which was still under French control. He wrote in a letter to a friend “After spending some years with the guerrillas, I found that my way of thinking did not match theirs.”⁴⁰ Tạ Ty was not alone in making such a decision; many other artists, writers and composers gradually left the guerrillas. To name a few: Đinh Hùng, Vũ Hoàng Chương, Hoàng Công Khanh, Phạm Duy, and even Sao Mai, a winner of the Guerrillas Literature Award (Giải thưởng văn học kháng chiến).

³⁸ Bùi Tín, *Following Ho Chi Minh*, University of Hawaii Press, p. 14

³⁹ Tạ Ty, 1990, *Những Khuôn Mặt Văn Nghệ Đã Đi Qua Đời Tôi* (Artists That I Have Known in My Life), Thăng Mỗ Publisher, California, p 101.

⁴⁰ Exchanged letter with Tạ Ty, 14 August 2002.

The victory in Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 was followed by the Geneva Accord which divided Việt-Nam into two parts: the North, advancing toward Socialism, and preparing for the second Indochina war, the South, moving toward western democracy.

With the decision to adopt to Socialism, the Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam, the North, continued to receive Chinese aid and pro-Peking elements emerged in the Party, among them Trường Chinh, who achieved the highest political profile. His application of Maoism can be traced in a range of strategies - from focusing on the peasantry in order to conscript manpower for guerrillas to views on formalism in visual arts. When Mao Tse-tung spoke at the art conference in Yan'an in 1942, his speech was translated into Vietnamese and printed by the State-run publishing house Sự Thật (the Truth). A denunciation of form in the visual arts, shared by Mao and Trường Chinh, can be easily noticed when examining the works and the historical contexts of Mao's 1942 talk and Trường Chinh's *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* at the second National Cultural Conference in 1948.

There are some things which are fundamentally reactionary in political terms, and yet can have certain artistry, for example, fascist literature and art. Insofar as a work is reactionary, the more artistic it is the more harm it can do to the people and the more it should be rejected. The common characteristic of all literature and art of the exploiting classes in their period of decline is the contradiction between their reactionary political content and their artistic form.⁴¹

Nonetheless, after 1954, when the Hồ Chí Minh's government came back to Hà Nội and ran the country, artists, given the choice to study in China or the Soviet Union (the West), consistently opted to study in the West as they understood this to be the site of modern artistic exploration. Out of 91 Vietnamese students sent to study in the Communist Bloc, only six elected to study in China: one in art theory and five in applied arts.⁴² Nguyễn Thái Hanh, who graduated from Central

⁴¹ Mao Tse-Tung, *The Problems of Literature and Arts*, p.53 (Vietnamese translation). English version can be found in "Mao Zedong's Talk At The Yan'an Conference on Literature And Art" *A Translation Of The 1943 Text With Commentary* by Bonnie S. McDougall, p.78.

⁴² See Appendix F, the list of Vietnamese artists who graduated from Communist Bloc.

Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, revealed that Vietnamese artists only thought of learning visual arts from the West, not from China.⁴³

As a direct result of the politically driven view on art, aesthetics and art history were reviewed under the lens of 'class.' Artworks were to be assessed according to their subject and the artist's political background: revolutionary or reactionary, bourgeois or working class. The history of Vietnamese art was also rewritten to conform to the Party's view. For instance, the role of Nguyễn Vạn Thọ, (known under his artist's name as Nam Sơn), co-founder of the Fine Arts College of Indochina in 1925,⁴⁴ was overlooked, because he did not join the Resistance War in 1946. Nam Sơn at that time was 56 years old with a wife and eight children to support.⁴⁵ His contribution and talent in the art history were not acknowledged until recently.

⁴³ Interview with Nguyễn Thái Hanh in June, 2005.

⁴⁴ Mentioned in Chapter 2, p.116 & 117..

⁴⁵ Nguyễn Văn Chiến, *Sự Kiện Nam Sơn, Xua Đi Sự Quên Lãng*(The Case of Nam Sơn, Deletion of Negligence), *Thăng Long Văn Hiến*, n. 8 September,2001, p. 38-53.



Figure 10: Nam Sơn, *Portrait of a Confucian scholar*, 1923.

Despite the ardent nationalism, the ‘new Vietnamese art history’ acknowledged only Victor Tardieu as the founder of the FACI⁴⁶. This ‘class-ism’ also controlled which artists or artworks would be selected by the Fine Arts Museum when it was established in 1966. Nam Sơn’s paintings were rejected on the grounds that he was a colonial public servant during the period of 1946-1954. Likewise, Nguyễn Sáng’s lacquer paintings were not displayed in the Museum until the late 1980s because he was involved in a scandal caused by asking for more creative freedom in art.

Following the guidelines in *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*, in which Trường Chinh stated that, “propaganda was also art and that a work of propaganda of high achievement would become a work of art.”⁴⁷ Posters became the most popular and effective means for propaganda and Chinese posters were reprinted with Vietnamese translations and in the corner of those posters can be seen a statement of their origins. Designing political posters was not taught at the Fine Arts College of Indochina; therefore, Vietnamese artists learned how to design posters by trial and error, which is why some early posters look very painterly (figs.11-12).

⁴⁶ *Mỹ Thuật Việt-Nam* (Việt-Nam’s Art History) by Nguyễn Phi Hoanh is one example for this view.

⁴⁷ Trường Chinh, *Chủ Nghĩa Mác và Văn Hoá Việt-Nam* (Marxism and Vietnamese Culture), Sự Thật Publishers, 3rd edition, 1975, p. 90.



Figure 11: *To mine more coal for the Fatherland*, collection of Samuel Stern.

Figure 12: *Angry waves*, poster after Chinese, collection of John Bineham.



Figure 13: Nguyễn Bích, poster, text in the top corner “We’ve destroyed 5,000 enemy troops, shot down 50 aircrafts, 7 military warehouses, 5 tanks”, text at the bottom “[We’re] determined to constantly fight all hardships and destroy the entire enemy in Điện Biên Phủ.” , photograph by the artist.

Army cadres in factories or government workplaces conducted long sessions in political studies. Their policies were turned into narratives slogans on Chinese and Vietnamese posters and became a common trait. The masses were the focus, with peasants and workers the basic classes who received total support from soldiers. In comparison to Soviet posters, which inherited Russian Constructivism 1913-1920,

the Chinese and Vietnamese posters lack skill in using images for communication and created layers of meanings with text, consequently, they compensate by adding too many words in most cases (fig.13).

The cult of leadership was another aspect that Vietnamese posters shared with Chinese. In a similar way that Mao Tse-tung images were displayed in Chinese posters, Hồ Chí Minh was often portrayed being warmly greeted by peasants or minority people when he visited them (fig.14), or prominently displayed on large placards carried by a crowded procession. The series of posters were made around 1955-56, as part of a campaign to popularise Hồ Chí Minh,⁴⁸ which achieved such success that when he died in 1969, nearly every family in North Việt-Nam placed his portrait on an altar called “altar of the Fatherland.” Hồ Chí Minh was deemed as “the old National Father” and his image is still used widely in posters to promote different collective activities. The cult of Hồ Chí Minh is also reflected in sketches, paintings, sculptures and public monuments by northern Vietnamese artists, both voluntarily and commissioned by the Party. Diệp Minh Châu (1919-2002, who created a Hồ Chí Minh portrait with his own blood (fig.16), did the first and possibly most controversial.

Posters were extensively used in the war, particularly to inform the masses of the State policy and to enhance the military morale. They shared with other branches of the arts in this period the revolutionary romanticism adopted from China, particularly through Chinese cultural cadres who were sent to North Việt-Nam in the late 1940s and the 1950s.⁴⁹ Revolutionary romanticism was described as,

To convey the most romantic and glamorous views of the motherland; social, economic and political triumphs; the strength, courage and resourcefulness of the people; and the wisdom of their leaders.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ It was also at this time that the book, *Những Mẫu Chuyện về cuộc đời hoạt động của Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh* was published in Hà Nội as part of making him into a Father of the Nation. Trần Dân Tiên, who was actually Hồ Chí Minh, himself, is the author of the book.

⁴⁹ King Chen states in his book *Vietnam and China* that there were around 350 Chinese cadres, mostly in cultural field, entering Việt-Nam in 1947, p.187.

⁵⁰ Stefan Landsberger, 1995, *Chinese Propaganda Posters: from Revolution to Modernization*, An East Gate Book, p.38.

The leaderships of both nations wanted to promote a national cause for the population so that they would overcome hardships on the way to Socialism; however, one could draw a parallel between the role of revolutionary romanticism and religion which, as Marx claimed, was “the opium of the people”.⁵¹

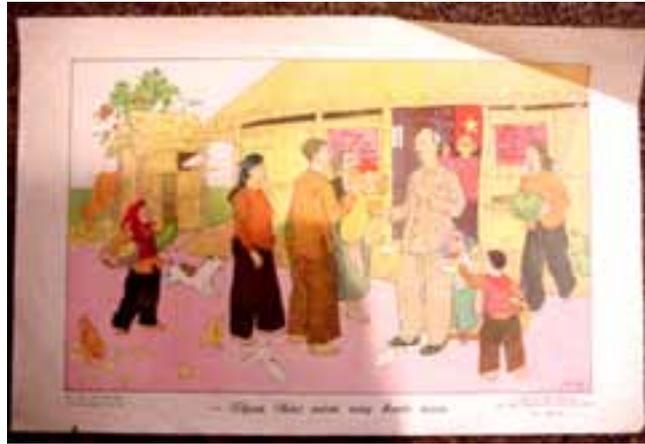


Figure 14: Poster “Dear Uncle, We Have a Good Crop This Year”, Courtesy of Mona Brand, Sydney.

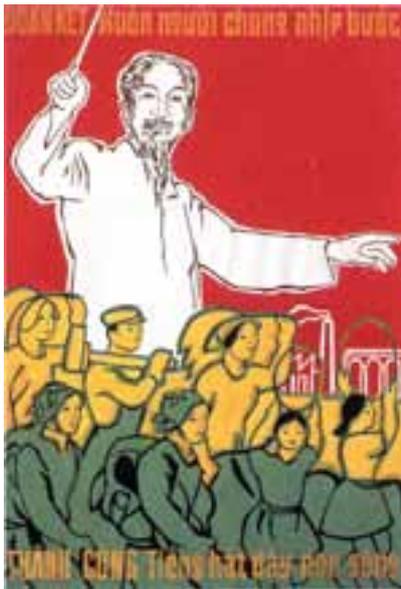


Figure 15 (left): political poster, “To unite, hundred thousands of people march on. Success, songs will be heard all over the nation.”,



Figure 16: Diệp Minh Châu, Portrait of Hồ Chí Minh and southern Children, 1947.

The Party’s extreme intervention in the arts gradually became so stressful to intellectuals and artists that in 1956 they requested more creative freedom in

⁵¹ Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, translated from German by Annette Join and Joseph O’Malley, Cambridge University Press, 1970, p 131.

several publications. This action came to be known to the public as Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm scandal.

The scandal emerged in the context of disputes in international relations in North Việt-Nam and the Party's failures in the land reform. At the 20th Soviet Congress in 1956, Khrushchev denounced Stalin and heaped blame on the cult of leadership that Stalin manufactured throughout his years. On the other hand, China's 'Let A Hundred Flowers Blossom' campaign unleashed public criticism towards the Chinese Communist Party's shortcomings. Encouraged by these international events, particularly by Mao Tse-tung's announcement of:

The policy of letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend is designed to make the arts flourish and the sciences advance; it is designed to enable a socialist culture to thrive in our land. Different forms and styles in art can develop freely and different schools in science can contend freely.⁵²

Vietnamese scholars and artists believed that they were doing the right thing for the sake of Việt-Nam.

Sandwiched between these two international frictions, North Việt-Nam's concern for its political stability turned out to be an over-reaction. By deceptively accusing artists and writers of being 'reactionary, disloyal and anti-communist', it was believed that Trường Chinh staged the scandal in order to lure public and Party attention away from the humiliating result of Land Reform,⁵³ in which many peasants were falsely labelled landlords and were, hence, executed. In addition, an armed revolt by peasants occurred in November 1956 in the Quỳnh Lưu district of Nghệ An province where the atrocities of Land Reform were unbearable. Trường Chinh was denounced and subsequently removed from his position of General-Secretary of the Party.

⁵² Mao Tse-tung, 1961, *On Art and Literature*, Peking: Foreign Language, p.137.

⁵³ Văn Cao's opinion, cited from Vũ Thư Hiên, 1997, *Đêm Giữa Ban Ngày* (Night During the Day), Văn Nghệ Westminster, California, USA, p. 540.



Figure 17: Cover of the *Giai Phẩm* (Art Works) magazine with list of writers.

In the spring of 1956 the magazine *Giai Phẩm* (Art Works) (fig.17) began to publish articles voicing criticism of government policies. A few months later, the review *Nhân văn* (Humanism), published by the Association of Resistance Arts and Literature, edited by Phan Khôi, a scholar and well-known journalist, joined the forum with a campaign asking for more freedom in arts based on ‘art for art’s sake.’ He particularly criticised the unreasonable intervention of the Party in the academic curricula in science and the arts. Other publications like *Đất Mới* (New Land) and *Văn* (Literature) also published articles in the same tone. Collaborating with the editorial staff were many writers, artists and intellectuals in the North. Intellectuals like Trần Đức Thảo, a Master in Philosophy (having held a teaching post at the Sorbonne before returning to Việt-Nam to fight against the French), Nguyễn Mạnh Tường, a lawyer, and Đào Duy Anh, a prominent lexicographer, are some of the dominant figures in this group. In the autumn issue of *Giai Phẩm*, Đào Duy Anh expressed his view in an article entitled, *In Order to Develop Academic Studies*, which illustrated the intellectuals’ frustration when they had to deal with political leaders:

As there is not yet published a policy on intellectuals, political cadres, even those of high positions, tend not to trust intellectuals. As a result, intellectuals in reality are not supported in their academic issues, on the

contrary, they feel that they are suppressed or held back by political cadres.⁵⁴

The first two issues of *Nhân Văn* sold 2000 and 6000 copies respectively on the first day of sale but after six issues its publication was banned in 1957. Allegations were made of its alignment with revisionism and that it constituted dangerous and destructive activities aimed at serving only the capitalists.

The request for freedom in the arts was suppressed by the Party under the name of proletarian dictatorship, which was interpreted by the Party as, “the right to be masters, to repress internal exploiters and to oppose external enemies.”⁵⁵ In this instance, the Party placed the request for autonomy in the arts in the same basket as reactionary forces comprised of landlords and the bourgeois,⁵⁶ whose intention, in the Party’s view, was not any different to that of the regime in the South and their American ally. The Party decided to react severely in order to solve the problem once and for all, by placing all members of the group in jail or under home detention. Surprisingly, nearly all these detainees had a strong record of fervent support for the Resistance in the early days.

Among those who contributed to the ‘scandal’ was, Trần Dần (1924-1997) a writer and Symbolist poet before joining the Resistance and the Party in 1950. Trần Dần portrayed the partition and a desire for reunification in a long poem called, *Ultimately Winning*, using symbolic language with a fascinating rhythm.

I walk away

Without seeing streets

Without seeing houses

Only to see rain dripping

On red flags

⁵⁴ Đào Duy Anh, ‘Muốn Phát Triển Học Thuật’ (In Order to Develop Academic Studies), published *Giai Phẩm*, v. 3, 1956, reprinted in *Hundreds of Flowers Blossomed*, Quê Mẹ, Paris, p.285.

⁵⁵ Lê Duẩn, *We Must Foster New Thoughts to Build up Socialism*, speech at the meeting on 10/ 03/ 1961, printed in *On the Socialist Revolution in Viet Nam*, p. 65.

⁵⁶ Qua Cuộc Đấu Tranh Chống Nhóm Phá Hoại “*Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm*”(Report on the Struggle against the Destructive Group *Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm*), 1958, *Việt-Nam Association of Literature and Arts* , p.17.

His repeating phrase⁵⁷ must have upset the authorities as it was quoted in later reports more than once in an accusatory voice.⁵⁸ However, *Ultimately Winning* is also an excellent example of modern Vietnamese poetry, in its use of contemporary language and symbolism, to cover a significant political situation with emotional imagery and rhythm.

Another prominent figure in the Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm group was Văn Cao, whose song, *Forward March*, became the Vietnamese anthem in 1945 and is current, today. He is also the author of a number of heroic songs which brought him membership of the Party. Văn Cao was also a self-taught painter, deemed by Tạ Tỵ as, “such a talented painter, he could have gone further.”⁵⁹ Because of his in-laws’ political background the Party gave him a negative record; he married the daughter of the owner of the printing house where he had his songs printed. In the poem entitled, *Do You Hear?* published in the journal *Giai Phẩm Mùa Xuân* (Art Works of Spring Issue, 8/10/1956, Văn Cao wrote:

When can we listen to a love song
When can we enjoy a still life in peace without harassment
When
When would they all leave.⁶⁰

This verse implies the censorship of love songs and still life paintings, which were labelled as petit bourgeois by the Party. Văn Cao avoided jail, but he was sent to a labour camp. Reflecting on Văn Cao’s sentence, the writer Xuân Vũ, a southerner regrouped to live in the North during the war, lamented, “Văn Cao did not compose for thirty years, but when he did, it was not Văn Cao anymore. How severe was the loss for our nation?”⁶¹ In an interview not long before he died, Văn Cao said, “They

⁵⁷ Trần Dần repeated this phrase four times in his 298-verse poem. That frequency turns the image into the main theme of the poem.

⁵⁸ Qua Cuộc Đấu Tranh Chống Nhóm Phá Hoại “Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm” (Report on the Struggle against the Destructive Group Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm), dated 4 June 1958.

⁵⁹ Quoted by Tạ Tỵ in a letter 24 July 2001 to Boi Tran Hunyh.

⁶⁰ Cited from *Trăm Hoa Đưa Nở Trên Đất Bắc* (A Hundred Flowers Blossom), Quê Mẹ, Paris, p.222.

⁶¹ Xuân Vũ, *Những Nghệ Sĩ Miền Bắc Như Tôi Biết* (The Artists of the North That I’ve Known), Đại Nam, California, p. 115.

banned my painting, my art and my participation in culture, because I was a spokesman for those who love liberty. Thirty years without poetry was like thirty years in prison.⁶²

Another victim in this scandal was Bùi Xuân Phái (1920-1988) who worked as an illustrator for newspapers and magazines. He illustrated the story, *The Old Horse of Trịnh Lord*,⁶³ with a cartoon depicting a writer being piled up with a dozen hats, each representing a policy (fig.18). Phái was sacked from his teaching post at the Fine Arts College of Việt-Nam, but that punishment was not as bad as the isolation that he suffered.



Figure 18: Satirical cartoon, “- Why can’t you produce some creative works?
– Just look at what I have on my head!”

People avoided any contact with him, even refusing to let him stay over-night in a mountainous village where tigers were often seen stalking travellers at dusk.⁶⁴

Another non-conformist artist was Trần Duy (1920-) who arrived on the scene with a cartoon called, *A Method of Producing Art*, published in the magazine, Văn

⁶² Murray Hiebert, *Anthem of Sorrows*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 September, 1991, p. 52

⁶³ By Phùng Cung. *Con Ngựa Già của Chúa Trịnh* (The Old Horse of Trịnh Lord) implies the sinecure and pomposity of rulers.

⁶⁴ Bùi Thanh Phương & Trần Hậu Tuấn, 1998, *Bui Xuan Phai, Life and Work*, Fine Arts Publishing House, p. 60.

(Literature) n. 30 on November 29 1957. The cartoon shows an artist being asked to add more and more political illustrations into his still life until it ends up a total mess. He also contributed articles such as, *The Giants* (who had no hearts) and *Sincerely Fighting for Freedom and Democracy*. Before the many members of the group were arrested, a high profile member of the Politburo approached Trần Duy, and eventually managed to get the artist to recant his position. In an interview more than 40 years later recalling his involvement in the scandal and decision to stop ‘in time’, Trần Duy claimed:

People have been indebted to the Party for their national independence; no one but the Party can get rid of French colonialism. Therefore, there should not be any rebellion.⁶⁵



Figure 19: Nguyễn Sỹ Ngọc, *A Bowl*, 1951.

Two other artists involved in the scandal were: Nguyễn Sáng (1923-1988) and Nguyễn Sỹ Ngọc (1918-1990). Although they had joined the Việt Minh in the 1940s, they were still inflicted with punishment: Nguyễn Sáng was barred from employment at the Fine Arts Association and Nguyễn Sỹ Ngọc spent two years in labour camps.

⁶⁵ Interview in December 2004 with Boi Tran Huynh.

Their paintings represent patriotism and artistic achievements: Nguyễn Sáng with *The Enemy Burnt Down My Village* (1954) and Nguyễn Sỹ Ngọc with *A Bowl* (1951) (fig.19). Nguyễn Sỹ Ngọc also appeared in articles related to the Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm scandal, explaining that the Party should reconsider the way it controlled the arts. He wrote:

A work of art is produced when it is the result of the artist's mind and heart. It can not blossom or flourish when it is controlled by another mind or heart.⁶⁶

The government's conclusive report on the fight against the subversive gang, Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm, prepared by the Vietnamese Association of Literature and Arts was read at the conference on June, 4th 1958 and was then printed as a formal document for rectification studies among writers and artists. It is a 92 page critique, condemning writers and artists:

On the contrary, the false argument that literature and art should be independent from politics and the request for an absolute freedom for art, returning to art for art's sake is actually to take literature and art into a *decadent* path, to serve reactionary politics fighting against the fatherland, the people and the Socialist revolution.⁶⁷ [Emphasis added]

The report determined the right path that writers and artists must follow:

Absolutely the new Vietnamese literature and art must *be a Socialist one for its content, national for its form*, as our Politburo stated in the letter to the 2nd National Conference on literature and art.⁶⁸

The phrase, *a Socialist one for its content, national for its form*, was originally printed in italics. The Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm affair and its aftermath subjected writers and artists to severe scrutiny by the government using all the administrative devices at their disposal. From then on, artists were always reminded that they had to be subject to a proletariat dictatorship.

As a consequence of the Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm affair and tougher control in the arts by the government, artists tended to present an 'official' art which was either

⁶⁶ Nguyễn Sỹ Ngọc, 'Làm Cho Hoa Nở Bốn Mùa' (Let Flowers Blossom Four Seasons) *Giai Phẩm Mùa Đông*, Cited from *Trăm Hoa Đua Nở*, p. 229.

⁶⁷ *On the Fight against the Sabotage Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm in Literature and Art*, p. 71.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

commissioned by the State, or could be shown in public. On the other hand, they hid ‘personal’ art, which was true to their own beliefs, but did not correspond with Party policy. It is difficult to categorise this as dissident art since they simply express humanistic values that were condemned in the doctrines as bourgeoisie emotions. Some of these works were not discovered until some 40 years later as in the example of Trần Dân, who after having been interrogated and attempting suicide, turned to painting. However, he hid his works in a chest that were discovered long after his death.⁶⁹

The Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm scandal was wrapped up by the government so quickly that it was hardly known to outsiders, even to those who lived in Hà Nội. An Australian couple, Mona Brand and Len Fox, came to Hà Nội to work for the English radio and publications of the new Republic Democratic of Việt-Nam in 1956-1957. From Brand’s book, *Enough Blue Sky*, and my conversations with her in March and May 2002, she claimed that she had heard nothing about the scandal during her time in Hà Nội.⁷⁰ Brand also claimed that she had never been invited to any exhibitions in Hà Nội, despite the fact that Len Fox was an enthusiastic painter, who illustrated Vietnamese books for Thế Giới publisher in Hà Nội. He often visited neighbourhoods to do outdoor sketching and frequently became a target for curious crowds who called him ‘Mr. Liên-Xô’.

Through the Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm scandal, the Party reconfirmed its control over the arts and intellectual life. Hội Mỹ Thuật Việt-Nam (the Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association) (VFAA) was founded in 1957 for the purpose of rallying artists into the workforce under direct control of the Party. The VFAA had, and still has, branches in all provinces and cities and comprises a huge web ultimately controlled by the Ministry of Culture and Information. Art administration personnel were

⁶⁹ Trần Trọng Vũ, *Đau Lòng Số Bụi Những Bức Thư Không Gửi* (Letters Never Been Sent), April, 2003
<http://www.tienve.org/home/activities/viewTopics.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=742>

⁷⁰ Mona Brand, *Enough Blue Sky, Autobiography of Mona Brand, an Unknown Well-known Playwright*, Potts Point, NSW: Tawny Pipit Press, 1995.

carefully nominated to guarantee policy cohesion and implementation. For instance, Trần Văn Cẩn (1910-1994) president of the VFAA from 1957 to 1983 and Director of the Fine Arts College of Việt-Nam from 1955 to 1964, was deemed, “a true leader of the movement of Socialist Realist plastic arts in Vietnam, intimate with the realities of life, combat and production.”⁷¹

In 1958, rectification programs for artists were organised by VFAA, in order to mend the loss of the land reform and ‘mistakes’ that radical intellectuals, writers and artists committed in the previous two years, as well as to ensure that artists, “get out of their ivory towers.”⁷² Artists were sent to villages and factories to live and work with peasants and workers and to portray them as ‘new masters’ of the new society. A number of works produced in this period can be seen to strictly conform to the requested theme of Socialist construction.



Figure 20: Nguyễn Đức Nùng, *Dawn in a State Farm*, 1958.

⁷¹ Quang Phòng & Quang Việt, 2000, *Mỹ Thuật Thủ Đô Hà Nội* (The Fine Arts of the Capital Hanoi), Fine Arts Publishing House, p.123 (Vietnamese), p. 419 (English)

⁷² A common term used by Communist Cultural Officials.

Dawn in a State Farm, 1958 (fig.20) by Nguyễn Đức Nùng (1909-1983) became well known as representative of a new Socialist artwork in that context. The artist graduated from the Fine Arts College of Indochina in 1938 and joined the Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association in 1957. *Dawn in a State Farm* is outstanding in the artist's execution of the lacquer medium, which under Nguyễn Đức Nùng's hands has the full range of oil paints, in colour and plasticity. A golden rising sun made from real gold brightens the sky and a male peasant, portrayed with his bare muscular back, is scattering seeds over the field. He looks at the rising horizon as if looking forward with revolutionary optimism to the newly built Socialism in his nation. The artist' interpretation of Socialism gained the painting more credit than it would have with any another theme, as peasants and workers were seen as the two crucial classes in building the new nation. All the hardships and devastation during the war did not hinder the development of lacquer painting, a difficult medium; furthermore, the government commissioned artists to work in this medium and allocated the costly materials in advance. The focus on lacquer as an artistic form grew from the success it gained in colonial days and the intention of preserving tradition for the purpose of a 'national form'.



Figure 21: Ngô Minh Cầu, *Going to the Countryside for Agricultural Production*, 1957.

Despite the destructive outcomes from the land reform that led to the rectification campaign, most artworks produced in 1957-1958 reflect a positive image of peasantry in the light of revolutionary romanticism, such as, *Farmers' Work-Exchanging Team in Mountainous Regions* (lacquer) by Hoàng Tích Chù (1912-), *Going to the Countryside for Agricultural Production* (silk) by Ngô Minh Cầu (1924-) (fig.21), *Village in the Afternoon* (lacquer) by Mai Văn Nam, *Scooping Water into the Rice Fields* (lacquer) by Trần Văn Cẩn. The art of silk painting continued to develop along the lines of Socialist Realism and peasants were shown to be strong, energetic and optimistic, regardless of the subtle characteristics of the medium. For instance, the silk painting *Reading the Victory News* (1968) (fig.22) by Lương Xuân Nhị is illustrative and theatrical in its clarity.



Figure 22: Lương Xuân Nhị, *Reading the Victory News*, 1968.

Despite his strong advocacy for peasantry, Socialist Realism did not advance the art of, the once well-known Nguyễn Phan Chánh. The peak of his career was established long before Socialist Realism's introduction, when he exhibited his silk paintings in Paris in 1931, which helped establish him as the father of Vietnamese modern silk painting. (fig.23) Chánh spent most of his time during the Resistance

War painting posters in his rural hometown Nghệ An.⁷³ In the early 1960s he commenced silk painting again and depicted images of female guerrillas, or female peasants working in the fields, however, his art did not have the grace and integrity that it once had in the 1930s. The intention of, ‘making a painting revolutionary,’ loaded with details and characteristics implying joy in the new society, had an illustrative effect, rather than the integrity of an autonomous work (fig.23).



Figure 23: Nguyễn Phan Chánh, *After military duty*, 1964.

The Ministry of Culture and Information was in charge of all cultural activities in the DRVN, including publications, exhibitions and propaganda. Moreover, in order to create a new Socialist culture for a young independent nation, this institution helped divert old religions into a new belief officially represented by the Party - Socialism. The government did not officially denounce the cult of ancestor worship, but administrative actions were taken to gradually erode it from people's

⁷³ Trần Văn Cẩn, ‘Nguyễn Phan Chánh, Ghi Chép và Nhớ Lại’ (Nguyễn Phan Chánh, Remembrance), published in *Nguyễn Phan Chánh Hồn Quê Trên Lụa* (Nguyễn Phan Chánh, Rural Spirit on Silk) 1998, Hồ Chí Minh City Publishing House, p.18.

awareness under the name of, ‘eliminating superstitions.’⁷⁴ Under its umbrella, there were, and still are, departments of Culture and Information at provincial, city, and district levels. Officials in these offices are often art graduates, working under the direction of an officer, who is a Party member with government policies at hand.

The new policies emphasised the formation of the new ideology and included a review of all cultural artefacts of the past, through the lens of Marxism-Leninism, in their attempts at decolonisation. One of the results included the elimination of *The Self-Reliance Literary Group’s* (Tự Lực Văn Đoàn) publications - done quietly but no less thoroughly. This literary movement, as mentioned in Chapter 2 (p.90), embodied a desire for individualism, which was seen as harmful to the construction of Socialism. As a result of this view, no works by *The Self-Reliance Literary Group* could be found in the North from 1960 to 1975, as the publishing industry and the distribution of books, was totally controlled by the State. *The Self-Reliance Literary Group’s* publications in North Việt-Nam, therefore, were not mentioned in textbooks or seen on family bookshelves, it was as if they never existed. Often, eager readers would distribute handwritten copies to their friends, who then meticulously copied them at night. When northern soldiers and political cadres discovered these publications omnipresent in bookshops in the South in 1975, after the fall of Saigon, curious cadres had enough time to secure some before they were thrown into paper mills for recycling.⁷⁵

Nguyễn Phạm Xuân, from the Linguistic Institute in Hà Nội, in an interview by Australia’s SBS Radio,⁷⁶ revealed that only researchers at a high level could have access to *The Self-Reliance Literary Group* publications at the Literature Institute, provided they had already obtained permission for their research. Exclusion of this

⁷⁴ Trường Chinh, *Chủ Nghĩa Mác và Văn Hoá Việt Nam* (Marxism and Vietnamese Culture), p. 67.

⁷⁵ From an interview by Boi Tran Huynh with Mr. Đỗ Bá Nghiệp, Director of Đồng Nai Museum in 2001.

⁷⁶ Interview by Phượng Hoàng on 22nd September, 2003

literary movement was part of the Cultural Revolution that manipulated a new pattern of thinking for the new Socialist generation.

Russian influence and Socialist Realism

In April 1955, the FACIs premises were used to open up a new art school called Tô Ngọc Vân's course, so named in honour of his ideological credentials as an artist and sacrifice in the battlefield. In 1957, the government officially established the Fine Arts College of Việt-Nam, which was under the management of the Ministry of Culture and Information. The growth of the Fine Arts College of Việt-Nam corresponded with the expansion of North Việt-Nam's relations with the Soviet Union in the early 1960s, particularly when Lê Duẩn (1907-1986), a founding member of the Indochina Communist Party in 1930 and a pro-Soviet figure in the Politburo, soared into power in the 1960s. Under his direction, political indoctrination was increased.

Like a beacon, Marxism-Leninism, the most radically revolutionary doctrine and the only one that is scientific, has shown our Party how to solve all problems of the Vietnamese revolution and work out correct revolutionary lines and methods. We were thus able to defeat the reformism of the bourgeoisie and the narrowly nationalistic tendency of the petty bourgeoisie as well as its claim to "stand above classes." We also foiled the provocations and sabotaging attempts by the Trotskyistes and other counter-revolutionary elements, overcame political wavering and Right and "Left" deviations within the Party, and successfully performed all revolutionary tasks in all periods.⁷⁷

In 1948, Trường Chinh had mentioned Socialist Realism in his paper (98 pages), *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*, which in North Việt-Nam now had incorporated into it, terminologies, imported from the Soviet Union. They were translated literally from Russian into Vietnamese: narodnost (tính nhân dân) is the orientation towards the people; ideinost (tính tư tưởng) represents ideological content; klassovost (tính giai cấp) relates to class content; partiinos (tính Đảng) indicates

⁷⁷ Le Duan, *the Vietnamese Revolution Fundamental Problems Essential Tasks*, p.153.

Party consciousness, which Lenin had called for in his article, *On Party Organisation and Party Literature*, in 1905.⁷⁸

Party Consciousness in arts was proclaimed in four points:

1. Artists and writers must recognise that arts must serve politics; serve the Party's policies; artists must be loyal to Communism and fight ceaselessly for Communism; must love the Fatherland, love Socialism and fight for a Việt-Nam of unification, peace, democracy and prosperity.
2. Artists and writers must, by their own activities, endorse the leadership of the Party; strengthen the people's trust in the Party; protect the purity of Marxism-Leninism, especially in literature and art, against revisionism and bourgeois nationalism.
3. Artists and writers must be in the attacking position, to fight against reactionary ideas from feudalists and imperialists
4. Communist artists and writers, as other Communist members, must be responsible for their service in front of the Party and people.⁷⁹

In order to strengthen ideology in art education, a number of Soviet art lecturers were appointed to teach at the Fine Arts College of Việt-Nam. The art critic Thái Bá Vân names some of these teachers:

From 1960, Mr. Kuznesov from the Soviet Union came to the Fine Arts College of Việt-Nam to teach painting, Mr. Ghivi taught sculpture, and Mr. Iakovlev taught Marxism-Leninism at the College of Theories of the Ministry of Culture. Then Soviet and Chinese books, magazines and films flooded Hà Nội.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Art under Stalin*, p. 91.

⁷⁹ Hà Xuân Trường, 'The Formation of Proletariat Literature and Art', p. 18, from quarterly *Nghiên Cứu Mỹ Thuật* (Studying Arts), Jan-Feb-March, 1974.

⁸⁰ Thái Bá Vân, 'Nguyễn Phan Chánh và Chơi Ô Ăn Quan', (Nguyễn Phan Chánh and Girls Playing with Game of Pebbles), *Mỹ Thuật TP Hồ Chí Minh*, n. 6 (12-1992), p. 11.



Figure 24: A. A Tyurenkov's, *Lenin*, 1970s, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyen Huynh

The statue of Lenin by A.A Tyurenkov was erected in the early 1970s in Reunification Park in south of central Hà Nội; it is the only public monument to a foreign politician in Việt-Nam (fig.24). Whereas other Lenin statues, elsewhere, in the world were demolished, Hà Nội's Lennin still stands. Soviet influence was building in the 1960s and 1970s, and the number of artists and art critics who graduated from the Soviet Union, came to 40 by 1975.⁸¹ Most of them held central positions in art education and art administration, to name a few: Nguyễn Phước Sanh (Vice-Director at the Fine Arts College of Việt-Nam from 1967-1975 and then Director of Fine Arts College of Hồ Chí Minh City from 1975 to 1988) (fig.25), Nguyễn Kao Thuong (Director of Đồng Nai College of Decorative Arts from 1978-1980) and Nguyễn Thanh Châu (Head of Hồ Chí Minh City branch of the Việt-Nam Fine Art Association).

⁸¹ Trần Khánh Chương, 'Đằm Thắm Hai Nền Mỹ Thuật Việt-Nga' (Sensitive Understanding between Russian and Vietnamese Arts, *Fine Arts*, n.46 (36), December 2001, p.14-15.



Figure 25: Nguyễn Phước Sanh, *Southern Scythe*, 1964, courtesy of the artist.

Nguyễn Phước Sanh (1930-2002) was a southerner who joined the Resistance force when he was a teenager, and was regrouped to Hà Nội in 1954. After the partition of 1954, Hồ Chí Minh established a favourable policy for southern cadres who left their hometown and families to regroup in the North, as these families in the South were potentially reliable bases for Communist cells in the following phases of communist expansion. Furthermore, these southerners would be the first soldiers to march south from Hà Nội when the second Indochina War started. This policy, as a saying goes, ‘killed two birds with one stone’, as it suited a strategic and psychological preparation for invasion of the South. Southerners in the DRV were given priority in allocated housing and study abroad in other Communist bloc countries.



Figure 26: *Victory of Nam Ngạn*, 1967, courtesy of Mr. Nguyễn Phước Sanh.

Nguyễn Phước Sanh was one of these southern cadres. He was sent to the National Fine Arts College in Moscow to study sculpture. He graduated in 1965 and returned to Hà Nội, where he joined the staff of Fine Arts College of Việt-Nam and was assigned to be its Vice-Director in 1972-75. Having been inspired by Soviet war monuments during his time in Moscow, he started his career in Hà Nội with enthusiasm for a new Socialist sculpture, aiming for heroism. One of the first war monuments undertaken under his supervision was *Victory of Nam Ngạn* (fig.26), installed in 1967. Nam Ngạn is a village in Thanh Hóa province where the Hàm Rồng Bridge traverses the river of the same name. Nam Ngạn suffered from many American B52 air raids because it was a strategic transportation route between North and South. The more the B52 raids were carried out, the harder the local people worked to repair all the damage. *Victory of Nam Ngạn*, therefore, became a monument to the people in Nam Ngạn and their determination to win the war. Nguyễn Phước Sanh declared that the Hàm Rồng monument was the first one to prove the strength of monumental sculpture and its value to the Revolutionary

cause.⁸² *Victory of Nam Ngạn* heralded a new phase in war themed monuments in the North, it also set a mould for later war monuments: soldiers in challenging poses holding rifles skyward and raising arms with determination, their faces, alert. Soviet aid was also allocated to architecture, mainly in the State sector, such as the Polytechnic Institute, the main terminal building of Hà Nội railway station and housing apartments, using the pre-fabricated construction method. These buildings were aimed more at practicality than aesthetics, as their box-like design, testifies.



Figure 27 Hồ Chí Minh Mausoleum, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyen Huynh

The most notable architecture that bears the Soviet impact is the Hồ Chí Minh Mausoleum, built 1973-1975 (fig.27), and in spite of Hồ Chí Minh's will to have his body cremated and his ashes to be dispersed throughout the nation. The Mausoleum was constructed with the collaboration of Vietnamese architects and a Soviet team who was given, "control over the preliminary design, labour management, organisation of the construction equipment and general direction of the project."⁸³ Although the Vietnamese architects were attempting to assert a "modern, cultured, dignified and simple" vision against the Soviets' "majestic, symmetrical and solemn" one, the Hồ Chí Minh Mausoleum bears an obvious

⁸² Nguyễn Phước Sanh Interviewed by Boi Tran Huynh in March 2000.

⁸³ William S. Logan, *Hanoi: Biography of a City*, p. 200.

resemblance to the Lenin Mausoleum: a square cubic block sitting on a step pyramid, in symmetrical and straight lines.

Through ceaseless political sessions delivered to artists, the Party ensured that artists voluntarily departed from their “ivory tower” to associate with the masses. The popularisation of the arts was to bring art to everyone in society, especially to those without easy access to this sphere, which on the one hand, was an encouraging deed in terms of the broad benefits to the community. On the other hand, it put pressure on artists who felt they had to follow the masses and that the arts, therefore, were more a propaganda implement about what should be done and what not to do. These obligations placed artists in a dilemma between their individual aims and the masses, under the guidance of proletarian dictatorship.



Figure 28: Huỳnh Văn Gấm, *The Heart and the Barrel*, 1963.

The war theme became more inspirational and dominant in the late 1960s and 1970s when the National Liberation Front was established in December 1960, to wage a guerrilla war in the South. In 1963, Huỳnh Văn Gấm (1922-1987) created the lacquer painting, *The Heart and the Barrel* (fig.28), to commemorate the face-to-face political struggle by the Troops of Long Hair in Bến Tre, a province 120 kilometres southwest of Saigon. These troops, made up of only women, presented themselves in the 1960s to the American and South Vietnamese army, protesting against atrocities and demanded compensation for losses. Women in black pyjamas

and chequered scarves occupy two thirds of the canvas, leaving a small area for the Americans, one of whom is standing in a threatening way, faced by a kneeling Vietnamese woman. Extremely theatrical, in the poses of the figures and sharp contrast between 'good' and 'bad', the painting is an example of the preference for content over form and the artist's response to the call of the Fatherland.

Sustained artistic development and growth was difficult and deeply compromised. Most of the southerners in North Việt-Nam were conscripted and then sent back on active service to the South. Among them were artists who would praise and encourage military morale, by becoming soldiers and artists at the same time. Many of them, such as Nguyễn Thanh Châu (1939-), were born in the South and regrouped in 1954, moving to the North as part of the Việt Minh troops. After his graduation from the Fine Arts College of Việt-Nam in Hà Nội, he was sent to the National College of Fine Arts of Kiev in the Soviet Union where he studied for four years. On his return to Hà Nội in 1964, he was sent to the South along the Hồ Chí Minh trail. The artist-soldiers, or soldier-artists, experienced all the hardships of normal troops, in addition to their artistic tasks. They had to carry weapons and dried food along with a sachet protecting their papers and drawings. The longer the journey, the more baggage they would have to carry. Many painters asked their comrades to post their paintings back to Hà Nội if they died.

The morale was high. We soldier-artists felt thrilled with our task, witnessing the battle. On the other hand, our troops felt honoured at having soldier-artists in the company, our drawings glorified their sacrifice and even their death.⁸⁴

Many artists were born in the North and conscripted into the army and rarely did anyone dare to escape from conscription. The entire society in the North was conditioned in a way that anyone who did not adhere to the policy would be cut off from his or her food rations, moreover, the local community through suspicion and jealousy would isolate him or her. In an agricultural society like Việt-Nam, with a strong sense of the collective, any ostracism by the community would mentally

⁸⁴Nguyễn Thanh Châu Interviewed by Boi Tran Hunyh in December 2001.

crush a person. Hồ Chí Minh’s patriotic motto became popular and authoritative, “The war could last 10 years, 20 years or longer, but ultimately, we will win.” Another slogan, “all for the frontlines” illustrates the severity of the imperative that every effort be aimed at the war. Astoundingly, even arithmetic tasks in primary school textbooks were framed in terms of armed conflict, “If guerrillas killed five American enemy troops, and soldiers killed seven - what is the total?” Helicopters, fighter planes or tanks, were then interchanged with ‘troops’. Writer Phạm Thị Hoài noted:

A high mark in math equaled one dead American. A high mark in woodshop equaled one dead South Vietnamese lackey. The enemy’s blood formed a river in my report card, the enemy’s bones, a mountain.⁸⁵

The whole nation was not allowed to get tired, or mourn and in the early 1970s, the casualties became so severe that nearly every home had lost a loved one at the front. However, information about the death toll was not conveyed and was only spread by rumour from the wounded returning home from the frontline. Nobody was allowed to cry or lament over his or her loved one’s death.



Figure 29: *South Việt-Nam, Land, People.* Figure 30: Huỳnh Phương Đông, *A female guerrilla.*

⁸⁵ Phạm Thị Hoài, ‘The Machinery of Vietnamese Art and Literature in the Post-Renovation, Post-Communist and Post-Modern Period’, cited from the website of *UCLA Asia Institute* on <http://www.isop.ucla.edu/asia/article.asp?parentid=7568>

The mission of recording national heroism and the guidelines of realism, however, pushed artists toward illustration. Despite all the tragedies artists encountered in their southward journey (normally nine months) from Hà Nội to the Mekong Delta, or even just somewhere near Saigon, they produced only sketches illustrating people and landscapes, or more precisely, battle-scapes.⁸⁶ In 1963-64, a collection of war artists' sketches was published under the title, *South Việt-Nam, Land, People* (fig.29). Most of these works represented scenes in the South, where soldiers of the National Liberation Front (Việt Cộng), were deployed (fig.30).⁸⁷

After the 1975 reunification of the nation, these small sketches were enlarged into paintings for museums, but they remain enlarged sketches, not great works reflecting a Great War. The collective identity that the Party and the State wanted to impose on citizens framed everyone as, 'worker', 'peasant' or 'soldier,' who in all visual representations, were brave, optimistic, active and Socialist-driven.

In 1966, the Fine Arts Museum of Hà Nội (fig.31) was established, but only after other important museums dedicated to political issues had been set up. The Museum of Revolution was officially opened in 1959, the Museum of Việt-Bắc in August 1963, and the Museum of Xô Viết Nghệ Tĩnh a month later. Politics was the key priority in founding these museums. Rarely were the works of artists who fled to the South after 1954, selected and hung, particularly during the second Indochina war. The history, as well as the art history is written for the 'just cause'.

It was a challenge for artists in the North of Việt-Nam to find an individual path not linked to Chinese and Soviet influences within the guidelines of Socialist Realism. A number of artists related their inspiration to tradition, particularly folk art, in order to get a break, if not an escape, from rigid political orthodoxy.

⁸⁶ Vũ Hy Thiều's story is an example, which is published in *Patriots, The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides*, edit. by Christian G Appy, 2003, Viking Penguin, p.190-194

⁸⁷ Nguyễn Kim Loan, 'Họa Sĩ Cổ Tấn Long Châu' (Artist Cổ Tấn Long Châu), *Mỹ Thuật* (Fine Arts Journal), n. 86 (56), p. 39-40.



Figure 31: Fine Arts Museum of Hà Nội, photograph from Ibiblio.



Figure 32: Trần Văn Cẩn, *Children Playing Boy Soldiers*, 1949.

In the woodcut, *Children Playing Boy Soldiers*, dated 1949 (fig.32) for instance, Trần Văn Cẩn (1910-1994) combined the Đông Hồ woodcut characteristics and new anatomy-driven drawing. The three planes displayed equally without perspective, relate to *Mouse Wedding*;⁸⁸ where the contours of the children recall the strong contours that mark the characteristics of traditional woodcuts, as does the

⁸⁸ Described in Chapter 1.

repetition of shapes and guns and overall, there is a naivety to the work. However, colour theories from the European academy prevented the artist from using the traditional bright and contrasting colours. As such, *Children Playing Boy Soldiers* swings between propaganda and folk art.

Another inspiration was the visual representation of exotic minority people. The evacuation of populations out of cities to remote areas in the 1970s, led to contact with ethnic groups in the highlands. Moreover, Hồ Chí Minh's national policy on ethnic groups always insisted on, and acknowledged, 56 different ethnic communities in Việt-Nam's territory. Taking ethnic subjects was considered a combination of conforming to the State policy and a search for an alternative topic to 'workers, peasants and soldiers'.



Figure 33: Nguyễn Văn Bình, *Reading the Party's Message*, 1960s.

The image of minority people began to appear in works of art in a similar way that orientalism attracted the West. Exotic costumes, cultures and landscapes are mixed with themes of agriculture, handicraft or politics. In many instances, however, the exoticism took control and the artwork merely became an illustration for ethnology. *Reading the Party's Message*, by Nguyễn Văn Bình, (fig.33) represents a group of five handsome young men and women of the M'ngong people. The patterns and

colours of their new ethnic clothes are contrasted against a light blue background, as they stand at ease, holding agricultural tools while happily listening to a message.

NEW MODERNISM:

Despite the administrative and ideological apparatus that the government wanted to impose on art and artists, there still existed artists who did not align themselves with Socialist Realism and the artistic dictates of the State, such as Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm (1922-), Dương Bích Liên (1923-1988), Nguyễn Sáng (1923-1988) and Bùi Xuân Phái (1921-1988). All four artists fought in the Resistance War but began to diverge from Socialist Realism in the 1950s, causing them to be isolated by the Việt-Nam Fine Art Association and hindered from public exposure throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Quietly, the work of these artists shifted from a stern formula of the ‘tính’ (qualities), required by Socialist Realism, to a more original and expressive art. They were honoured in the late 1980s as ‘Masters of Modernism’, or ‘Four Great Pillars’.⁸⁹

While other artists followed the mainstream with works depicting workers, peasants, and fighting, Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm sketched ancient sculptural reliefs found in the communal houses (đình), and altered these motifs to create a new modernism with abrupt and broken lines, very much in the way Picasso borrowed motifs from ancient African art. Nghiêm’s series of *Ancient Dances*, (fig.34) with their repetition of shapes, have the festive atmosphere and joy of pre-colonial times. Nghiêm is also known for a series of paintings on the lunar zodiac, which he again, developed from folk art into his own style of modernism.

⁸⁹ Nora Taylor, 1995, ‘Bốn Hoạ Sĩ trên Ngã Tư của Chủ Nghĩa Hiện Đại’ (Quatre Peintres au Carrefour du Modernisme) *Mỹ Thuật TP HCM*, n. 14, p. 21-25.



Figure 34: Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm, *Ancient Dance*, 1970s.

There is no doubt that Nghiêm was primarily interested in form rather than content, however, Nghiêm provides a strong case that art can be nationalistic and Vietnamese without being subject to any doctrine. On the other hand, Dương Bích Liên, a contemporary of Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm, remains dedicated to the subject matter of colonial times. Despite the common tendency in art to promote collectivisation, combat, and production, he painted portraits of people he knew or landscapes that he envisioned.



Figure 35: Dương Bích Liên, *Portrait of a Woman*, 1968.

The people in these portraits, such as *Portrait of a Woman* (1968) (fig.35), seem to ponder their thinking, as individuals. His paintings express no conflict or fighting, instead, only people and their character. *Man and Woman on the Beach* (1957) (fig.36), shows minimalist representation in the application of lines and colours. While Socialist Realism always appeals to a preference for content over form or a combination between the two, this painting reveals indifference.



Figure 36: Dương Bích Liên, *Man and Woman on the Beach*, 1957.

The most miserable artist was probably Nguyễn Sáng. Born in Mỹ Tho, a small town on the Mekong River, he came to Hà Nội to study art and graduated from the FACI in 1945. He entered the Resistance War with all the enthusiasm youth could offer and his lacquer painting, *The Enemy Burnt down My Village* (1954) portrays this passion. He became a member of the Party but became involved in the Nhân

Văn – Giai Phẩm scandal in 1956-57. Although his name was not mentioned in the Association’s 92-page report full of accusations, he still got in trouble. However, leaving him out of the gang, the Party must have given favour to this southerner, who was also the designer of the first bank note in 1945 for the newly independent Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam and the first stamp bearing Hồ Chí Minh’s portrait in 1946 (figure 2, p.133). However, he had difficulty getting a permanent job, and his paintings, in spite of their patriotic themes and an indulgence to the Party, were only put on display in the Museum shortly before his death. Nguyễn Sáng’s lacquer painting, *Admission into the Party in Điện Biên Phủ* (1963) (fig.37) is reminiscent of heroic actions during the first Indochina War, with a clear declaration of the Party’s leadership.



Figure 37: Nguyễn Sáng, *Admission into the Party in Điện Biên Phủ*, 1963.



Figure 38: Nguyễn Sáng, *Admission into the Party in Điện Biên Phủ*, (detail).

Nguyễn Sáng retained Modernism in terms of not strictly adhering to realistic representation and propaganda. The scene depicts battlefield trenches, but more of the tension of war than the Party's call is depicted, by the overtly square-shouldered soldiers, implying the toughness and masculinity of warfare (fig.38).

The last name in 'Four Great Pillars' is Bùi Xuân Phái, who is well known for his Hà Nội streets paintings (fig.39), praised by an art critic as, “ ‘Phai’ streets, belong to everyone and he is the person who discovered them.”⁹⁰ However, this sort of acknowledgement only happened shortly before his death in 1988. Prior to that, they were not accepted in the 1960s for exhibition. Trường Chinh, in censoring, made a comment on Phái's painting:

What a painting! How dare he paint Hà Nội in this way: a deserted street? It does not have any manner of a Socialist society. Had he added a construction crane or workers, it could have made more sense.”⁹¹

⁹⁰ Cited from Minh Vu, 'Bui Xuan Phai, An Artist of Hanoi', *Nhan Dan* newspaper on the net, 11 June 2001.

⁹¹ Vũ Thư Hiên, 1997, *Night During the Day*, p. 268



Figure 39: Bùi Xuân Phái, *Tin Street*, 1967.

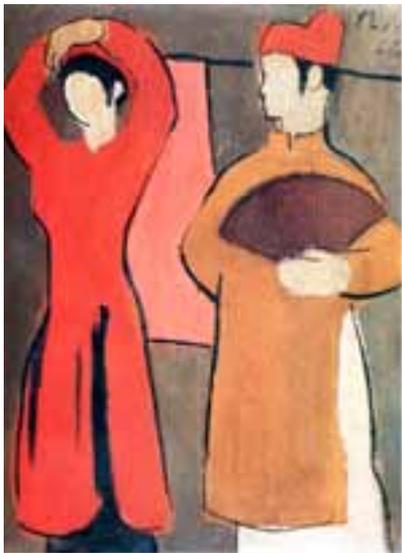


Figure 40: Bùi Xuân Phái, *Chèo*, 1960s.

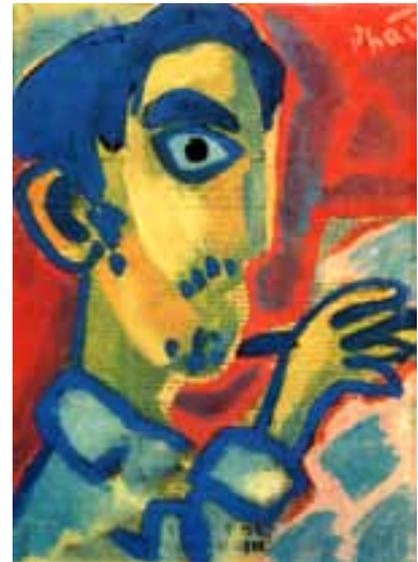


Figure 41: Bùi Xuân Phái, *Self-portrait*, 1960s.

The exhibition of these paintings was never allowed and Bùi Xuân Phái called them, “paintings facing the walls.”⁹² Phái is also well known for a series of paintings of ‘chèo,’ a traditional opera of the North (fig.40) when he became stage designer for the theatre. The characters are portrayed as witty, humorous yet naïve,

⁹² Vũ Thư Hiên, 1997, *Đêm Giữa Ban Ngày* (Night During the Day), Văn Nghệ, p. 268-9.

in a simple palette that Phái appears to have inherited from Vietnamese folk prints. He is also one of the few Vietnamese artists who consistently produced expressive self-portraits during the war (fig.41). They have the look of a bewildered, lonely soul. On a portrait drawing of Cézanne in his diary Phái wrote a Cézanne quote, “The world does not understand me and I don’t understand the world. That’s why I should be confined to myself.”⁹³

Art Collectors

These four artists, the ‘Masters of Modernism’ or ‘Four Great Pillars’, formed an underground art, which was discretely appreciated by their contemporaries and overtly revered by the younger generation in the 1980s. Nevertheless, they could hardly have done their work, had there not been benevolent patrons like Mr. Đức Minh and Café Lâm, who, despite the collectivist ideology of post-1975 totalitarian society, established in their unique ways, two remarkable private collections.

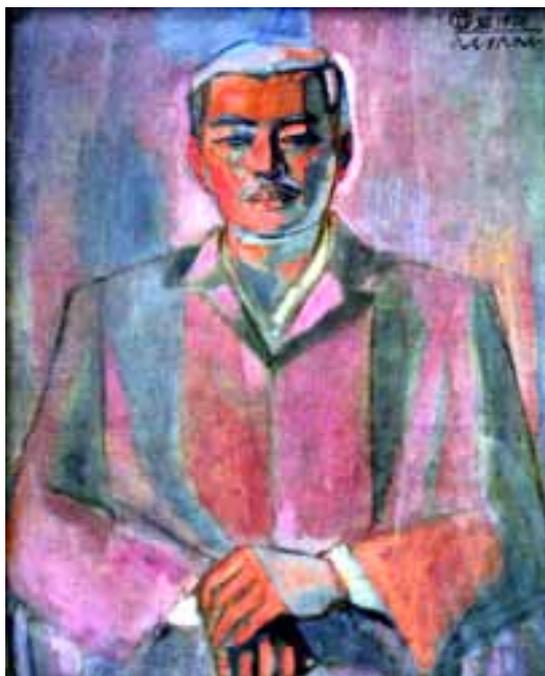


Figure 42: Nguyễn Sáng, *Portrait of Mr. Bùi Đình Thảo (Đức Minh)*, 1973, courtesy of Bùi Quốc Chí.

⁹³ Cited from *Bùi Xuân Phái Cuộc Đời Và Tác Phẩm* (Bùi Xuân Phái, Life and Works) 106

Mr. Đức Minh, a jewellery dealer before 1954, was born Bùi Đình Thảo (1920-1983). He started his collection in 1945 and kept expanding it until the late 1980s. Many paintings from his collection were borrowed to decorate the Presidential Palace in the early days of the DRVN, and were copied for the collection of the National Fine Arts Museum when it was first established in 1966. His home at 53 Quang Trung Street, Hà Nội,⁹⁴ a French-style villa on lake Thuyền Quang, became a special private ‘museum’ during the war and a meeting place for artists, who were well treated by Đức Minh with his love for art, kindness and tactful support. With his commissions, Nguyễn Sáng (fig.42), Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm and Bùi Xuân Phái could survive in a centralised economy when the government did not employ them. Moreover, his support offered the artists a chance to use their creativity and produce works that did not embrace the official policy. Đức Minh also provided artists with the best canvas and oil paint he could find at that time. A serious collector, he purchased many good paintings from wealthy families who were having financial difficulties with the introduction of Socialism and who, with the war and scarcity of food, could no longer continue their artistic patronage. Đức Minh prepared a thorough provenance for each work and kept a record of every purchase. By 1980, he had around 1,000 paintings in his collection. Before his death, Đức Minh offered his collection to the Hà Nội National Fine Arts Museum with only one condition, that his name be kept along with the collection, however, his offer was declined. When his wife was sick and needed medical treatment in Hồ Chí Minh City, he moved some of his collection to the South so that he could see them everyday, as “friends” that he could not part with.⁹⁵

No matter how generous Mr. Đức Minh was to the artists, many were still on the edge of starvation, given that tobacco and coffee claimed much of their income. Café Lâm became a place where they could have a meal, and especially, coffee on credit. In a society where everything was rationed, coffee was a luxury but, for

⁹⁴ This was the one he was allowed to retain after having handed over six other houses to the government. Interview by Boi Tran Huynh with Bùi Quốc Chí, December 2001.

⁹⁵ Nguyễn Quân, *Revive and Move on*, draft for the catalogue of Đức Minh’s Collection in process.

artists, it was always an inseparable companion to inspiration. Mr. Nguyễn Lâm set up his coffee stall early in the 1950s in the old quarter of Hà Nội. He had a special technique for preparing his coffee and an incredible generosity towards artists and writers, who brought him their paintings or poem in exchange for coffee. In that context, Café Lâm became a ‘collector’.⁹⁶

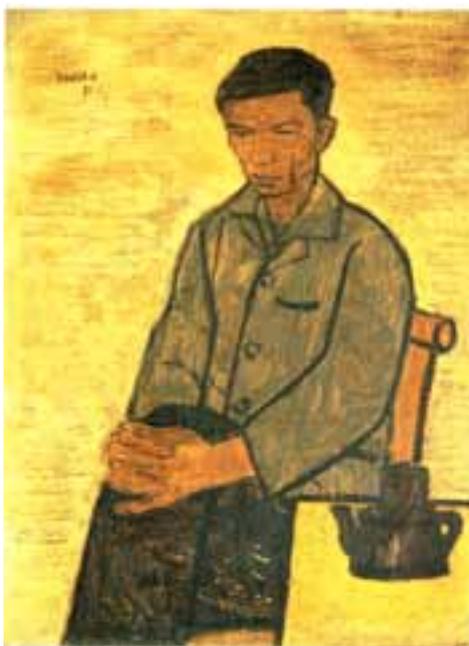


Figure 43: Văn Cao, *Portrait of Mr. Lâm*, 1971.

Đức Minh and Café Lâm had no close contact with each other in the course of collecting and dealing with artists. Nonetheless, they formed a distinguished private art sector in Socialist Việt-Nam throughout the period 1950 to 1980 and their collections were more comprehensive and contemporary than those of the national museums. These two collections represent a strong desire for another creative outlet other than that of the mainstream in North Việt-Nam, and provided a significant ambience for the development of new talent.

Conclusion:

The period of 1945-1975 witnessed great changes in aesthetics in North Việt-Nam. The advent of Socialism, the close consultation with the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China and the twenty-one-year war had an enormous impact

⁹⁶ Peter Kupfer, ‘Strong Coffee and Sublime Art’, *Asian Art News*, March/April 1997, p. 70-71.

on the processes of aesthetic change. In the context of national and international affairs, the arts were structured, directed and controlled by the State. The immediate outcome was a collective identity, deliberately constructed through Socialist Realism and by various administrative measures. From this point of view, the visual arts were subordinated to Socialism and nationalism for the sake of ideology and for the benefit of warfare. The Vietnamese Communist Party sought to popularise art by imposing a rigid orthodoxy and the superiority of figurative representations of workers, peasants and labour. In mobilising the nation to the struggle of unity, at any cost, against the US and its allies, Hà Nội was placed in a David and Goliath situation, or, in a Vietnamese term, like a grasshopper and a coach. The DRVN could not afford any deviation in individual expression when it needed a collective power. On its way to victory, North Việt-Nam had to skilfully manipulate international support from Communists, especially from China and the Soviet Union. In return, and as a result of that aid, Vietnamese art became a scapegoat to the Party's politics.

Modernity was rarely mentioned in the arts as modernisation was supposed to be included in Socialism through the alleged achievement of the three Revolutions: Revolution of the Technology, Revolution of Productive Relations and Revolution of Culture.

Nguyễn Quân, an art critic of the *doi moi* period, uses extremely diplomatic language in his paper, *The Door Opens in two Directions*, delivered at the Conference of Vietnamese arts in the 20th century:

Many new winds blew into this land, with the influences of the three sides, Communist China, the mighty Soviet Union and America from far the western world [South Việt-Nam]. But regarding the language of art, it was 30 years of great placidity; time was approaching a straight line, nothing was disturbed. The same aesthetics were included in the language of art, with a little adjustment: less individual romantics and more collective patriotism, less personal fervour for more propaganda of easy-understanding and emotional style.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Nguyễn Quân, 'Cửa Mở Hai Chiều' (The Door Opens in two Directions), essays in the *Conference of Vietnamese Arts In The 20th Century*, p. 40.

The insistence on content over form, of figurative over abstract, in Socialist Realism, directed Vietnamese art into a narrower path than that of the colonial era. First, too many restrictions were imposed on artists who were bewildered, if not overwhelmed, by taboos. These restrictions left a very humble space for creativity. Second, the scarcity of materials limited the practice for many artists. Third, there was no market, not only in terms of finance but also in terms of intellectual support. The government became the sole sponsor and their commissions were always bound with constraints. Finally, the polarity that policies of the State drew between western 'decadent' art and art of the Communist bloc hindered artists' engagement with artistic achievements, and created a suspicion whenever they encountered something new. These restrictions on production and appreciation are, in my view, the most harmful result of Socialist Realist theory on Vietnamese art; it shaped the fear and self-censorship in the artists' psyche.

A small number of artists managed to carve their name in art history despite constraints and obstacles. These artists, who later were acclaimed by a post-war generation as, 'Masters in Modernism', represent the strength of creativity and independent thinking. Their works are an understated continuation of Indochinese aesthetics and a search for Modernism in the wake of a political and war-driven society. The drive to modernity, then, was underground but ready to be activated in the post-war era.