Ngô Kha, Vietnam’s Civil Wars, and the Need for Forgiveness

When I taught English in Đà Nẵng and Huế in central Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s, my students introduced me to the songs of Trịnh Công Sơn and I’ve been a fan ever since. I have since written some articles and am currently writing a book about him. In this article, however, I focus on Ngô Kha, one of Trịnh Công Sơn’s talented friends. Because Trịnh Công Sơn, who passed away in 2001, is probably Vietnam’s best-known composer of popular songs, his talented friends are often mentioned in books and articles about the singer. Information about these friends’ own lives and accomplishments is harder to find. In this article I attempt to correct that imbalance by focusing on Ngô Kha, though Trịnh Công Sơn’s name will inevitably come up because I believe one understands Ngô Kha better by learning how he resembled and how he differed from his famous friend.

Though I wanted to correct the aforementioned imbalance, I hesitated because I feared opening up old wounds. Ngô Kha was a poet, teacher, officer in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, and leader of protests against the military regimes in Sài Gòn. In 1973 he was executed by men acting on the orders of Liên Thành, the chief of police in Thừa Thiên–Huế Province. Liên Thành, who lives in California, has accused three of Ngô...
Kha’s close friends, who all joined the National Liberation Front [NLF] in 1966, of returning to Huế during the Tết Offensive and identifying Huế citizens for execution. I worried that in talking about Ngô Kha and his friends I would antagonize the many Vietnamese in the diaspora who do not want to hear anything except condemnation about people who they feel helped bring about the downfall of the Republic of Vietnam. I also worried that admirers of Ngô Kha in Huế and elsewhere, should they come across my article, might not wish to be reminded of the gruesome way he died. It is enough, Ngô Kha’s admirers may feel, that the Socialist Republic of Vietnam named him a martyr [liệt sĩ] in 1981 and that in Huế a street, an elementary school, and a scholarship fund for poor students bear his name.

What persuaded me to write about Ngô Kha was Viet Thanh Nguyen’s discussion of war and the ethics of remembrance. “How can we,” Viet Thanh Nguyen asks, “recall the past in a way that does justice to the forgotten, the excluded, the oppressed, the dead, the ghosts?” Ethical memory, he argues, involves remembering not only our own but all those who suffered in a war,
but typically war memorials remember only our own. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., for example, remembers fifty-eight thousand Americans. Three million Vietnamese, four hundred thousand Laotians, and seven hundred thousand Cambodians who died in the war are forgotten. In Biên Hòa there is now a grand martyrs cemetery built and maintained by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. On the other side of Highway 1A there is a cemetery, now in complete disrepair with graves defaced, that was once the National Cemetery of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam [Nghĩa Trang Quân Đội Việt Nam]. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington and the neglect of the RVN cemetery are, Viet Thanh Nguyen suggests, examples not of just memory but of unjust forgetting—of disremembering.

Ethical memory, Viet Thanh Nguyen says, involves a kind of forgiving that Jacques Derrida calls “pure forgiveness” that arises, Viet Thanh Nguyen says, from “the paradox of forgiving the unforgivable.” It involves “an ethical awareness of our simultaneous humanity and inhumanity, which leads to a more complex understanding of our identity, of what it means to be human and to be complicit in the deeds that our side, our kin, and even we ourselves commit.” Derrida himself calls his notion of pure forgiveness “excessive, hyperbolic, mad,” and Viet Thanh Nguyen admits that he felt that way about it at first—how can one forgive mass bombing, genocide, etc.? But later he decides he can “forgive, in the abstract, what America and Vietnamese—in all their factions and variations—for what they have done in the past.” But he “cannot forgive them for what they do in the present because the present is not yet finished. The present, perhaps, is always unforgivable.” I write about Ngô Kha in this spirit of pure forgiveness, fully aware that because I worked in Vietnam during the war in programs supported by the US government, I can be considered among those who need forgiveness.

Ngô Kha: Army Officer, Charismatic Teacher, Protest Leader

Ngô Kha was from Huế, a city that before 1954 was rather traditional—more insular and conservative—than Sài Gòn or even Đà Nẵng. But after the Geneva Accords ended the First Indochina War in 1954, Huế became more worldly as students and teachers returned from studying abroad, bringing
new ideas with them. Huế became a university town when the University of Huế was founded in 1957. In that same year the Huế School of Fine Arts [Trường Mỹ thuật Huế] was established. In 1958 the first issue of a scholarly journal called “Đại Học: Tạp Chí Nghiên Cứu Viện Đại Học Huế” [University: A Research Journal of the University of Huế] was established. It was edited by a northern Catholic intellectual named Nguyễn Văn Trung who had recently returned from study in Belgium. This journal featured many articles on existential philosophy, some written by Professor Nguyễn Văn Trung himself. There were also articles about Sartre, Camus, Merleau-Ponty, and other Western writers and philosophers. Intellectuals in Huế became intrigued with various “-isms” associated with Euro-American modernism—existentialism, cubism, surrealism. We see modernism in French literature which became surreal in, for example, the poems of Jacques Prévert, Paul Éluard, and Louis Aragon—all poets whose works, according to the French teacher (and Trịnh Công Sơn’s friend) Bưu Ỷ, were read by Trịnh Công Sơn and his coterie of friends, which included Ngô Kha. Two world wars shattered the faith of Europeans and Americans that life was coherent and comprehensible, which led to works that were obscure, hard to decipher. Trịnh Công Sơn’s songs and Ngô Kha’s poems are also obscure. Artists and writers are obscure for different reasons; sometimes it is to avoid censorship, but clearly both Trịnh Công Sơn and Ngô Kha were influenced by European-American modernism generally and by surrealism in particular.

Ngô Kha was born in Huế in 1935 and studied at the prestigious National Academy [Trường Quốc Học] from 1954 to 1957. Then he studied at the Faculty of Pedagogy of the University of Huế, where he specialized in Vietnamese literature and culture. Ngô Kha graduated first in his class in 1959. In 1962 he received a Bachelor of Law degree from the University of Huế. While studying law he was also writing poems and teaching Vietnamese studies at the National Academy and three other secondary schools in Huế. Ngô Kha’s former students and others who knew him report that he was a charismatic teacher but not one who stuck to a lesson plan. He recited poems, talked about current events, and got students involved in demonstrations against the military regimes of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu. Ngô Kha was a very effective organizer of student protests. An admirer of Che Guevara, he wore a black beret at a rakish angle like the
Latin American revolutionary. He was smart, a moving poet and eloquent speaker who backed up his words with action. Ngô Kha’s students demonstrated their devotion to him by taking to the streets to demonstrate for his release after he was arrested at the beginning of 1975, an incident I describe in the following section.

In 1962 he was drafted into the army and went to Thù Đúc near Sài Gòn to attend officer candidate school. When he graduated he became an assistant press officer in the Đà Nẵng headquarters for the Army General Staff in the I-Corps Tactical Zone. Those who have written about Ngô Kha do not agree as to who got him this relatively safe job. The poet Ngô Minh says it was Ngô Kha’s sister Ngô Thị Huân, a nurse in the Sài Gòn army. Nguyễn Dác Xuân says it was “a người anh, the general Ngô Đu” who got him the job.
“so he wouldn’t have to carry a rifle and go to battles.”\textsuperscript{22} The phrase người anh is ambiguous: it could refer either to a brother [anh ruột] or a cousin [anh họ]. Nguyên Đắc Xuân must mean cousin. Although Ngô Kha did have a brother named Ngô Du, he was not a general. Nguyễn Duy Hiền lists all six of Ngô Kha’s siblings and says this about his brother Ngô Du: “Ngô Du (who is dead) is not the general Ngô Dzu of the Sài Gòn army as some documents wrongly indicate.”\textsuperscript{23} Ngô Kha’s brother Ngô Du was an assistant leader of Hương Trà District in Huế who was later killed during the Tết Offensive. To be sure that Nguyên Đắc Xuân believes that a cousin and not a brother was Ngô Kha’s protector, I asked my brother-in-law, who lives in Huế, to contact the historian. He confirmed that by “người anh” he meant cousin.\textsuperscript{24}

This cousin of Ngô Kha’s later became a powerful general. His name is sometimes written “Ngô Dzu,” not “Ngô Du,” probably to discourage foreigners from pronouncing his given name like the English word “do” when it should be pronounced like the English word “zoo” (northern dialect) or “you” (southern dialect). During the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive in 1972, Ngô Dzu was the Army of the Republic of Vietnam [ARVN] commander of Tactical Zone II and worked with the famous US advisor John Paul Vann in the battle for Kontum and the central highlands. In the early 1960s, however, he had only recently been promoted to general and was not assigned to Tactical Zone I, which included Huế and Đà Nẵng. It seems likely, however, that he was Ngô Kha’s protector. Around 1964 Ngô Kha was detached [biết phải] from the army and allowed to return to teaching in Huế, where he continued to be active in the struggle movement.\textsuperscript{25} Ngô Kha must have tested his cousin Ngô Dzu’s patience. Both Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Hoàng Phù Ngọc Trưởng report that Ngô Kha supplied those in the struggle movement with military intelligence regarding the ARVN’s plans both when he was a press attaché in the ARVN and later when he was detached to teach in Huế. As I will explain, information they received from Ngô Kha enabled Hoàng Phù Ngọc Trưởng and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân to avoid being imprisoned.\textsuperscript{26}

I have said that Ngô Kha was an effective organizer of student protests in Huế, but people in Huế, particularly Buddhists, had a lot to protest about and so it probably was not too difficult for someone to get them stirred up. Intellectually Huế showed signs of becoming an exciting city but politically it
was troubled. From 1955 to 1963 the country was ruled by President Ngô Đình Diệm, a fervent Catholic, with help from his brothers Ngô Đình Nhu, Ngô Đình Thục, and Ngô Đình Cẩn. Ngô Đình Nhu was Ngô Đình Diệm’s advisor and also head of the secret police and promoter of the family’s Căn Lao Party. Ngô Đình Cẩn had no official title but was the de facto governor of an area stretching from Phan Thiết in the South to the seventeenth parallel. Ngô Đình Cẩn ruled the region, which included Huế, like a warlord. Ngô Đình Thục, the oldest living brother of President Ngô Đình Diệm, was a Catholic priest. In 1961 he became archbishop of central Vietnam. The president of the University of Huế, Cao Văn Luyện, was also a Catholic priest. The result was an overwhelming Catholic presence in a region where most of the people were Buddhists who resented the fact that President Ngô Đình Diệm had left in place a French decree (Decree Number 10) which classified Buddhism as an association rather than a religion. And they resented having to sing, at flag ceremonies and in movie theaters, a song called “Venerating President Ngô” [Suy Tôn Ngô Tổng Thống], which contained these lines:

All the people of Vietnam are grateful to President Ngô
President Ngô, long live President Ngô
All the people of Vietnam are grateful to President Ngô
Please God convey Your blessings upon him.

Buddhists in Huế feared the elevation of Catholicism into a national religion. These religious tensions boiled over in 1963 when officials in Huế refused to let Buddhists display Buddhist flags in the days preceding Vesak day, the celebration of the Buddha’s birthday [ngày Phật Đản], despite the fact that the streets had recently been filled with Vatican flags for the anniversary of Ngô Đình Thục’s investiture as Archbishop. On the night of May 8, Buddhists went to the Huế radio station to hear the broadcast of a special Vesak day program, which included remarks by Thích Trí Quang. When the broadcast was delayed, protestors grew rowdy. When an army major ordered his troops to restore order, bombs went off, shots were fired, and nine protestors were killed. This event intensified the Buddhist Struggle Movement and enhanced Thích Trí Quang’s reputation.

The struggle movement entered a climactic phase in 1966. US policy had changed. In 1963, US leaders wanted to stop President Ngô Đình Diệm from
oppressing the Buddhists; in 1966, however, they wanted a Vietnamese general in the I-Corps Tactical Zone who was willing to squash the Buddhist Struggle Movement because it was destabilizing the Sài Gòn military regime. What provoked protestors in 1966 was Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ’s decision, announced on March 10, to remove General Nguyễn Chánh Thi, the military commander of the I-Corps Tactical Zone, a region that included the five northernmost provinces of South Vietnam. Nguyễn Cao Kỳ removed the general, a Buddhist from Huế, because he was popular in the region and had developed a good relationship with Thích Trí Quang, a leader of the Buddhist Struggle Movement. Because Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ feared this movement and distrusted the loyalty of ARVN commanders and their soldiers in the region, he had already, on April 5, gotten the Americans to fly one thousand nine hundred elite troops loyal to the Sài Gòn government, along with tanks and armored personnel carriers, into the Đà Nẵng airport.29

What Stanley Karnow calls a “civil war within a civil war” developed: a confrontation between different units of the South Vietnamese army.30 ARVN soldiers stationed in Huế and Đà Nẵng remained loyal to local commanders and fought troops flown in by Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and the Americans from other regions. In other words, local troops joined forces with the Buddhist Struggle Movement. According to General Lewis Walt, commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force stationed in Đà Nẵng, “It was as if California, with Los Angeles and San Francisco, had seceded from the United States.”31 In Đà Nẵng there were violent clashes in May when rebel forces took refuge in three pagodas in the southern part of the city. Monks threatened to immolate themselves if the pro-Nguyễn Cao Kỳ forces attacked. Many women and children were wounded in the fighting. Neil Sheehan reported in The New York Times that after this confrontation “more than 40 bodies, draped with Buddhist flags, lay in an anteroom off the sanctuary of the [Tịnh Hội] pagoda.”32 By May 23, however, the rebel forces in Đà Nẵng had surrendered and the battle moved to Huế.

When this civil war within a civil war broke out, Ngô Kha became a core member of a group that organized ARVN soldiers in Huế into a battle group to resist ARVN forces loyal to Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, forces which, after subduing the struggle movement in Đà Nẵng, were
advancing toward Huế. This unit was called the Nguyễn Đại Thúc Battle Group [Chiến đoàn Nguyễn Đại Thúc] to memorialize an ARVN officer who was killed on May 17 when he tried to kill an ARVN General named Huỳnh Văn Cao, the new I Corps commander. Ngô Kha and others in the struggle movement considered Nguyễn Đại Thúc a martyr in a noble cause.

Nguyễn Đặc Xuân says that Ngô Kha’s Nguyễn Đại Thúc Battle Group, whose members wore purple scarves to identify themselves, performed heroically and slowed the advance of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ’s troops toward Huế. Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tường says that Ngô Kha told him that he would try to delay the arrival of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ’s troops in Huế to give him a chance to escape into the mountains. This message was passed on to Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tường by Trịnh Công Sơn’s sister Trịnh Thị Vĩnh Thủy, who a year later became Ngô Kha’s wife. Ngô Kha warned his friend that as soon as Nguyễn Cao Kỳ’s troops arrived in Huế they would search out people in the struggle movement that they considered dangerous. I doubt that this battle group was very effective against tanks and armored personnel carriers, but both Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tường and his brother Hoàng Phú Ngọc Phan, along with Nguyễn Đặc Xuân, did manage to get out of Huế and escape capture, much to the regret of police chief Liên Thành. He says he failed to capture these three men because he was new to intelligence work and so lacked competence and experience. He had not yet developed, Liên Thành says, the “coldness” [lạnh lùng] that an intelligence officer needs to do his job. Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tường had been his teacher and, Liên Thành says, he had learned from his father and from Vietnamese culture generally that one must respect one’s teachers. Not wanting to arrest his former teacher himself, he assigned the task of arresting Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tường and his friends to an assistant. Letting these three men escape was, Liên Thành says, “a very big mistake, one that I have regretted all my life.” We know from his treatment of Ngô Kha, who was also a teacher of Liên Thành, that the police chief later developed sufficient coldness to be ruthless even to a former teacher. It is possible Ngô Kha received no mercy from Liên Thành because he was a close friend of the three men that he let get away. Certainly in his books Liên Thành makes no attempt to hide his desire for revenge against anyone connected, no matter how tenuously, to the communist underground.
It is unclear how much the Nguyễn Đại Thúc Battle Group delayed the arrival of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ’s troops in Huế. What is certain is that Ngô Kha’s actions in 1966 got him arrested and put in jail on the island of Phú Quốc. Nguyễn Đức Xuân says that without General Dzu’s intervention Ngô Kha would have gotten the death penalty. The exact length of time Ngô Kha was imprisoned on Phú Quốc Island is unclear. We know that he was imprisoned in May or June 1966, and that he was married in Huế in the summer of 1967, so it seems he could not have been in prison longer than a year or so.

On May 26, 1966, after a public funeral for Nguyễn Đại Thúc, protests intensified in Huế. A group of students—ignoring Thích Trí Quang’s pleas to avoid violence—destroyed the US Information Service’s library. A few days later, they destroyed the American Consulate. At Thích Trí Quang’s suggestion, the people of Huế placed family altars in the streets to block the progress of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ’s forces. This was largely a symbolic act. Nguyễn Cao Kỳ’s forces removed them and eventually took control of the city on June 19.

Ngô Kha’s Activities Before His Death in 1973

After he was released from the prison in Phú Quốc, Ngô Kha returned to Huế and resumed teaching at the National Academy. The late 1960s and early 1970s were important years both politically and artistically for Ngô Kha. During this period he and Trịnh Công Sơn spent a lot of time together and influenced each other in various ways. In the summer of 1967, Ngô Kha married Trịnh Công Sơn’s sister Trịnh thị Vĩnh Thúy. (The marriage did not last, but it represents another connection between the two men.) On January 31, 1968, the Tết Offensive began and Huế was occupied by communist forces for about three weeks. Then the Paris Peace Talks opened in May 1968, and though it was five years before an agreement was signed, the announcement that talks were starting brought hope to Vietnamese everywhere.

In 1969 Ngô Kha wrote two long poems: “Ngụ ngôn cừu người dăng trì” [Fable of an Absent Minded Person] (788 lines) and “Trường ca hòa bình” [A Long Poem for Peace] (1,004 lines). Vietnamese writers describe the first poem as surreal and obscure. Đỗ Lai Thúy says it is “unrealistic and
dreamlike, a surreal labyrinth of the subconscious.” Ngô Minh says it expresses Ngô Kha’s personal loneliness and his reaction to the horror of war. “A Long Poem for Peace” is less obscure. Many passages in it resemble Trịnh Công Sơn’s songs in his collections Kinh Việt Nam [Prayer for Vietnam] and Ta pháí thấy mặt trời [We Must See the Sun]. I will describe these similarities in the section “Ngô Kha, Trịnh Công Sơn, and Civil War.”

Contributors to the two books honoring Ngô Kha, one of which was published in 2005, the other in 2013, suggest that after writing “Fable of an Absent-Minded Person,” Ngô Kha abandoned surrealism and also abandoned any pretense of neutralism and began to support fully the positions of the NLF. He certainly was active in the struggle movement. In 1970 he was one of six people, among them Trịnh Công Sơn, who formed Self-Determination [Tự Quyết], a group of left-leaning intellectuals. Ngô Kha was also elected chair of another organization, The People’s Cultural Front of the Central Region [Mặt trận Văn hóa Dân tộc Miền Trung]. Both organizations published journals and organized demonstrations.

In early 1972 Ngô Kha was arrested, presumably for his anti-government activities, and tried in a military court in Đà Nẵng. He was released, his friends and supporters say, because he had committed no crimes and also because students in Huế and other parts of South Vietnam took to the streets to protest his arrest and demand his release. Nguyễn Duy Hiền says there were student demonstrations in Huế on March 7, 10, 11, and 14. Nguyên Kha’s mother, Cao Thị Uẩn, in a letter she wrote in 1974 to the President of the Republic of Vietnam demanding to know what happened to her son, mentions this arrest and quick release and hints that it may explain why, though guiltless, he was arrested a year later by police in Huế. Here is what she wrote:

During the 1971–1972 school year my son was arrested and taken to the Đà Nẵng Military Court but was released. Because of warm ties between teacher and student his arrest caused a reaction among students at the National Academy, the Nguyễn Du School, and other schools. They demonstrated against the government concerning the arrest of my son. That is why, although the Military Court ruled that he was innocent and released him, the local government [in Huế] harbored hatred for him.

Communist cadre clearly attempted to control and direct the struggle movement in Huế. Both Nguyễn Đặc Xuân and Nguyễn Duy Hiền say that
the People’s Cultural Front of the Central Region that Ngô Kha was chairman of was directed by the Huế City Party Committee [Thành ủy Huế].\(^{52}\) In other words, it could be considered a front organization working for the NLF. The unofficial office for this organization was conveniently located within the headquarters of the General Association of University Students at 22 Trường Đình Street in Huế.\(^{53}\) Although most cadre were forced from Huế after Têt in 1968, the NLF leadership left behind sympathetic individuals not publically known to have ties to the NLF who could operate openly. One of these, a man named Hoàng Hòa, a Huế university student preparing to be a math teacher, explains that his NLF handlers directed him to organize student activities, especially cultural events, that would fill students with patriotism and get them to oppose the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu-Nguyễn Cao Kỳ regime.\(^{54}\) He mentions that Ngô Kha recited poems and Trịnh Công Sơn sang songs at these events. Working undercover as Hoàng Hòa did was dangerous work. At the end of 1968 Hoàng Hòa was betrayed by a contact who shared messages he had written with the police. He ended up spending seven years in the infamous prison on Côn Sơn Island.\(^{55}\)

But Hoàng Hòa lived. Ngô Kha did not. On January 30, 1973, three days after the Paris Peace Treaty was signed, Ngô Kha was seized and beaten to death with a hammer by men acting on orders from Liên Thành, the commander of the police in Huế. He was first buried on the road to Thuận An beach but then Liên Thành, fearing his body would be discovered, ordered that it be dug up and buried in An Cựu, a village south of Huế. What happened to Ngô Kha was not known for years, but slowly information accumulated. In 2005 Nguyễn Duy Hiền presented the basic facts in an article in “Ngô Kha ngụ ngọn”\(^{56}\) and four years later Nguyễn Đắc Xuân wrote a more complete account of his death that appeared first online in 2009 and later in Ngô Kha hành trình [Ngô Kha: Poetic Journey].\(^{57}\) Nguyễn Đắc Xuân’s account is based on information obtained from people who knew Liên Thành, the police chief, and relatives of Ngô Kha, including a man named Phạm Bá Nhạc, an assistant to the chief of the secret police in Huế, whose stepmother was Ngô Kha’s sister.\(^{58}\) Nguyễn Đắc Xuân’s account is very detailed. For example, he names the two undercover policeman who, on Liên Thành’s orders, arrested Ngô Kha in the home of the widow of Ngô Kha’s brother Ngô Du (42 Bạch Đằng Street, Huế).\(^{59}\)
My account of Ngô Kha’s execution is based primarily on Nguyễn Đức Xuân’s account. I present it here because Nguyễn Đức Xuân cites sources who witnessed Ngô Kha’s arrest and because no one, to my knowledge, has challenged its veracity. For me it has the ring of truth. That he was arrested is clear. He was taken from his home in broad daylight in the presence of Ngô Kha’s sister-in-law. His arrest was also witnessed by a man named Nhât Huy, a friend of Ngô Kha, who happened to be in the area when he was arrested. He saw Ngô Kha being taken away on a Honda motorcycle, squeezed between two large men who were not, Nhât Huy says, in Ngô Kha’s circle of friends. Nguyễn Đức Xuân also provides details regarding Ngô Kha’s reburial that he learned from family members. He explains that Phạm Bá Nhạc, whose stepmother was Ngô Kha’s sister, asked Liên Thành to let him take Ngô Kha’s naked corpse, which, after having been dug up from its first burial site, was lying in the police interrogation center, and bury it in a proper
coffin in an area of Huế known as An Cựu. Liên Thành gave Phạm Bá Nhặc permission but told him he would be killed immediately if the news was leaked. Phạm Bá Nhặc was a GVN policeman who after 1975 spent time in a communist reeducation camp and later was allowed to leave the country under a program of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees known as HO (Humanitarian Operation), a subprogram of the Orderly Departure Program reserved for Vietnamese who had spent three years or more in a reeducation camp. Nguyễn Đdac Xuân could, of course, have made up this story of Ngô Kha’s death and reburial out of whole cloth, but this, to me, seems unlikely.

Credibility Issues

Nguyễn Đdac Xuân’s story may have the ring of truth, but credibility is an issue that must be discussed. Some people who live in Huế and many more who live in the diaspora do not like or trust Nguyễn Đdac Xuân or his friend Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tuồng. Nguyễn Đdac Xuân has been accused of presiding over people’s courts and identifying people for execution when he returned to Huế with communist soldiers during the 1968 Tết Offensive. Nguyễn Đdac Xuân admits he was in the city during the battle for Huế but says at that time he had been with the NLF for only a year and a half and had no authority to make decisions about who should be killed. Nguyễn Đdac Xuân had been active in the Buddhist Struggle Movement in 1969 and left Huế to join the NLF at the end of June 1966, when he learned he was going to be arrested by the police. He says that rumors that he identified people for execution during the Tết Offensive spread after a book by Nhã Ca, Giải khấn sở cho Huế [Mourning Headband for Huế], appeared in 1969. Nhã Ca was in Huế during the fighting there, and an important character in her account is a man named Đdac who, in one scene, threatens to kill a man named Trần Mâu Tý, who later is killed but not, apparently, by Đdac. This character named Đdac is not described as presiding over people’s courts. His name comes up in conversations among characters in the book who knew him before he left Huế in 1966 to join the NLF. They express the hope that he will vouch for them with his superiors and thereby save their lives. Vietnamese do not address or refer to people by their middle name, and Nguyễn Đdac Xuân insists that he is not the character Nhã Ca calls Đdac.
Clearly, however, Nhà Ca had Nguyễn Đắc Xuân in mind when she wrote about Đắc. On one page she mistakenly calls him Xuân when clearly she intends to refer to Đắc. In an article titled “The Consequences of ‘My Death’” [Hậu Quả Của ‘Cái Chết’ Của Tôi], Nguyễn Đắc Xuân says that when he encountered Nhà Ca by chance in Hồ Chí Minh City after 1975, he asked her why she named this man Đắc (his middle name). Nhà Ca told him that she didn’t know any liberation soldiers from the north and she needed someone to model her character on, so she chose him and named this character Đắc. She made up things about him, he says she told him, because she wanted to make her story more exciting. She had heard that he had been killed and so felt free to embellish his character. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân says he can’t remember the exact year he met Nhà Ca, but says it was before 1980. At this time Nhà Ca had only recently been released from a reeducation camp and her husband, the poet Trần Đạt Tú, was still imprisoned. They had six young children and Nhà Ca was peddling cakes on the street to support her family. It is possible she talked about embellishing her Đắc character to avoid antagonizing someone who could help or hurt her and her family.

In the Vietnamese diaspora the most persistent and prolific accuser of Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tướng is Liên Thành, the police commander that Nguyễn Đắc Xuân says ordered the brutal killing of Ngô Kha. According to Liên Thành, both Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tướng were members of a Security Force to Protect City Districts [Lực lượng An ninh Bảo vệ Khu phố], a force which, he says, “brought death and suffering to the people of Huế for twenty-two days during the Tet Offensive.” Liên Thành says that Nguyễn Đắc Xuân was the leader of this group and refers to him as the “Number One Killer during Tet 1968.” Liên Thành alleges that among the terrible deeds committed by this group was the capture and killing of Dr. Horst Gunther Kranick and his wife, as well as two other German doctors, Dr. Raimund Discher and Dr. Alois Altekoester. Liên Thành accuses Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tướng of presiding over people’s courts in the Gia Hồi area of Huế and ordering the death of 204 people. Those he accused, Liên Thành says, were buried alive. Alje Vennema, a Dutch medical volunteer in Huế in 1968, says that both Hoàng Phủ Ngọc
Tuồng and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân were in Huế and both presided over people’s courts.75 Vennema, however, did not witness people’s courts. He does not explain clearly who told him about them, but implies that his source was a twelve-year old boy named Luong who was the cousin of a young woman named Kim, a member of the Nguyễn family.76 Vennema’s account differs from Liên Thành’s. He says that Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuồng presided over a tribunal held in a small seminary at the “St. [Saint] Xavier Student Center” which is on the south side of the Perfume River.77 Liên Thành, however, says that the tribunal that Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuồng presided over was in Gia Hới, a district on the north side of the river.78 Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan (Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuồng’s brother) were also present, Liên Thành says.79

Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuồng, however, says he was not in Huế during the Tết Offensive, explaining that he left Huế to join the NLF in the summer of 1966 and did not return to Huế until 1975.80 The poet Ngô Minh, a former soldier in the North Vietnamese Army from Quảng Bình who now lives in Huế, insists that Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuồng was at the NLF’s vanguard command office [Chỉ huy sở Tiền Phương] on Kim Phụng Mountain southwest of Huế during the Tết Offensive. He suggests that Huế residents may blame Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuồng for the executions because while in the mountains he recorded an appeal [Lời hiệu triệu] calling Huế residents to rise up and join the revolutionary forces. This recording was played all over Huế when the offensive began.81

In her introduction to her translation of Nhã Ca’s Mourning Headband for Huế, Olga Dror discusses charges that have been leveled against Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuồng and their rebuttals to them. After the fighting ended, over two thousand eight hundred bodies were dug up in Huế. Dror discusses evidence regarding who was responsible for the deaths of these people, but, as she explains, no one can say for sure how they died. Nor can anyone say for sure whether Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuồng are telling the unvarnished truth about their actions during the Tết Offensive. They were and remain to this day in a difficult position. They elected to return to live in Huế after 1975 among people who had lost loved ones in the fighting. Some relatives of the deceased blame the two men for their deaths. Both men are also members of the communist party and must
write articles and give interviews that would not displease their superiors. In seeking information about Ngô Kha, it is very difficult to find sources that stand above the fray and are therefore trusted by people with different backgrounds and political views.

I should note that recently Nguyễn Đắc Xuân has been more candid and has admitted that he played a role in the purges during the Tết Offensive, though he insists it was an indirect role. Surprisingly he made this admission to Mark Bowden, an American who interviewed him while doing research for his book *Huế 68*, a thorough account of the Tết Offensive based on interviews with both Vietnamese and Americans. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân was an important source for Bowden, who interviewed him and paid to have his book *Từ Phú Xuân đến Huế* [From Phú Xuân to Huế], an account of the battle for Huế, translated into English. According to Bowden, “Xuân believed in the necessity of some retribution but watched it spin into bloodlust.” “I was not a general, I was only a civilian,” Nguyễn Đắc Xuân told Bowden. “I’m very sorry that in the war, we couldn’t avoid many mistakes... There is cruelty that happened due to naiveté.”

Since at least 2008 Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tưởng, who is now eighty-one years old, has also been more candid. When interviewed in 2008 he again denied that he was in Huế during the Tết Offensive in 1968 but admitted that he had become disenchanted with the current government because, he explained, it cannot “reconcile the people” and because it employs a “communist system.” When asked how the country could become unified, he said that Vietnamese must “reevaluate history, forget the bitter past full of hate, and truly respect and love each other.”

And just as I was finishing this article on Ngô Kha I came across a Facebook entry by Nguyễn Quang Lập, a close friend of Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tưởng’s wife. Included is a letter that Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tưởng has dictated to his daughter. Titled “Last Words on a Really Sad Story” [Lời cuối cho câu chuyện quá buồn], it is written, Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tưởng says, for people who love him, not for people like Liên Thành and his group. In this letter, dated February 1, 2018, he says that there is one thing that he must mention or “I will not be able to close my eyes peacefully. That is the story of Tết 1968.”
In his letter Hoàng Phú Ngọ Tưởng again insists that he was not in Huế during the Tết Offensive. What made people think he was there, he says, was an interview in the early 1980’s with an Australian journalist named William Burchett. In this interview he talks as if he were an eye witness to the events he described in that interview. He explains in his letter that he was not there—that he was describing not what he saw but what his friends had told him. He gives this example: “In particular, when I talked about the American plane attacking a small hospital at Đông Ba and killing two hundred people, I said ‘I walked along lanes in Huế at night and stepped on something I thought was mud and then turned on a light and it was all blood.’” Others told me about these things, he says in his letter. I did not personally experience them.

Hoàng Phú Ngọ Tưởng says in his letter that he regrets blaming only the Americans for the massacre in Huế. In 1981 when he was interviewed he was, he explains, still enthusiastic about the revolution but now he realizes his mistake. “One cannot take the crimes of the Americans,” he says, “to cover up the mistakes that occurred in Tết 1968.”

Finally, he talks about how pained he is as a “son of Huế” when he thinks about the “unjust killings” by the “uprising troops [quân nội đày] on the Huế front” during the Tết Offensive. “That is,” he says, “a mistake that cannot be supported by any reasoning, when looked at from the point of view of national conscience and the standpoint of revolutionary war.”

We will probably never know for sure whether Hoàng Phú Ngọ Tưởng was in Huế during the Tết Offensive, and if he was there whether he presided over people’s courts. My belief, after reading many articles by both Hoàng Phú Ngọ Tưởng’s attackers and defenders, is that he was not present in Huế during the Tết Offensive but remained at the NLF’s vanguard command office [Chi huy sở Tiền Phương] on Kim Phụng Mountain in Hướng Trà District. Đặng Tiễn, a respected scholar who lives in France, came to the same conclusion in an article in Thông Luận [Discussion] written in 1995.

Ngô Kha, Trịnh Công Sơn, and Civil War

The fog of war creates credibility problems, but no one denies that the city of Huế, once serene and peaceful, one of the most Buddhist cities in the country, became a violent place, a place of “twenty years of civil war” — Hai mươi
năm nội chiến từng ngày—as Trịnh Công Sơn sang in “Gia tài của mẹ” [A Mother’s Legacy]. People, especially young men who faced the draft, had to make hard choices. One thinks of the legacy of one mother—Ngô Kha’s mother—who in her 1974 letter to the President of the Republic of Vietnam and other officials demanded to know what happened to her son. “I’m now 80 years old,” she wrote. “I don’t have many more years to live. I’m sad because one son died during Tết Mậu Thân in Huế (Ngô Du). I rely now on only one son—Ngô Kha—whom the government has arrested and won’t release any information. How can I live?”

Communist leaders do not like it when people call the Vietnam war a civil war. Trịnh Công Sơn’s song “A Mother’s Legacy” still cannot be publically performed primarily because it calls the war a civil war. Communist officials do not like Trịnh Công Sơn’s anti-war songs because in them he opposes war generally and doesn’t distinguish a non-righteous [phi nghĩa] war from a righteous [chính nghĩa] war. In other words, he opposed war in a general [chung chung] way and did not embrace their war for national liberation. Nguyễn Đặc Xuân says that this was an issue that came up in a meeting in Huế in 1975, a meeting to decide Trịnh Công Sơn’s fate in the new communist regime. Ngô Kha’s influence on Trịnh Công Sơn was crucial to the defense that Nguyễn Đặc Xuân and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tưong presented to help their friend. They argued that yes, it was true: in early songs, especially those he called “Ca khúc da vàng” [Songs of Golden Skin], Trịnh Công Sơn did oppose the war in a general way [phản chiến chung chung]. But that was before he came under Ngô Kha’s influence. In songs written after the Tết Offensive, songs in the collections Kinh Viêt Nam and Ta phải thấy mặt trời, he fully supported the goals of the NLF. This argument worked: it was decided that Trịnh Công Sơn’s contributions outweighed his offenses, and that in the end he “stood completely on the side of the Revolution.”

Comparing Trịnh Công Sơn to Ngô Kha helps us understand both men better. My sense is that neither man stood completely on the side of the Revolution, but that Ngô Kha was closer to joining the NLF, perhaps in part because he knew he was in danger if he remained in Huế. Three people who worked for the NLF have said that Ngô Kha expressed interest in joining the communist movement. The poet Ngô Minh says that he once asked Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tưong why “the organization” didn’t help Ngô Kha “lên
xanh” [go into the green, climb into the mountains]. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuong replied that the organization had contacted Ngô Kha but before Ngô Kha could go he was arrested. It is also possible, he said, that Ngô Kha hesitated because he couldn’t decide whether to “go into the jungle” [lên rừng] or remain in Huế and continue struggling with his friends. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuong added that “the enemy’s secret police [mật vụ dịch] were following his every step and so he couldn’t get away.”

Many Vietnamese living in the diaspora believe that the creative works and actions of both Ngô Kha and Trịnh Công Sơn increased anti-war sentiment and contributed to the defeat of the GVN. A few Vietnamese living abroad go further and suggest that Ngô Kha and Trịnh Công Sơn were communist underground agents. The leading proponent of this view is Liên Thành, the police commander who ordered Ngô Kha’s brutal execution and accuses Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuong and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân of identifying people for execution during the Tết Offensive. He believes that both Ngô Kha and Trịnh Công Sơn were part of what he calls “a giant net of communist underground agents who had sold their souls to the devil.”

Liên Thành was in charge of “intelligence security” [an ninh tình báo] in Huế and Thừa Thiên Province and worked with the CIA’s Phoenix Program [Chương trình Phượng Hoàng] to eradicate members of the communist infrastructure. He has written two long books: Bìến Động Miền Trung [Disorder in the Central Region] (482 pages), first published in 2008 and now in its eleventh edition; and Huế—Thảm Sát Mẫu Thần [Huế—The Massacre of Tết Mẫu Thần] (766 pages), published in 2011. I perused Liên Thành’s works to see whether he describes the arrest and execution of Ngô Kha but he does not. In fact, he does not discuss Ngô Kha at all in Bìến Động Miền Trung, though he devotes many pages to accusations that Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuong and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân identified people for execution during the Tết Offensive. A strange twist in this story is that both Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuong and Ngô Kha were Liên Thành’s teachers. Liên Thành does not discuss Ngô Kha’s teaching, but in Bìến Động Miền Trung he says that Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuong was a great teacher. At the National Academy, he says, students skipped their English and Natural Science classes but never missed Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuong’s Vietnamese studies class because “no teacher could teach this course as well as he did.” This praise surprises the reader because on
the previous page he has accused Hoàng Phủ Ngộ Tướng of committing genocide. In civil wars the social fabric that holds communities together is disrupted and teachers and students—and even siblings from the same family—may end up on different sides.

This civil war in Vietnam was not a religious war but it had a religious dimension. Catholics were more likely to be anti-communist than Buddhists. Monks frequently led the anti-government protests in Huế in 1963 and 1966 and most of the participants in these protests were no doubt Buddhists, not Catholics. Ngô Đình Diệm, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu were all Catholics and many Buddhist residents in Huế distrusted their motives. Rulers in Sài Gòn, as we have seen, questioned the loyalties of Buddhist generals and police officers posted to the I-Corps Tactical Zone. It is worth noting, however, that the fiercely anti-communist Liên Thành was raised a Buddhist. His mother was, he explains, a very devout disciple of

**FIGURE 4:** Liên Thành standing in front of an American advisor to the Phoenix Program.
a monk named Thích Thiên Lạc, known locally as Thầy Ngọan, and she arranged for him to perform a quy y ceremony for Liên Thành and his siblings. This ceremony involves pledging to accept the Three Jewels of Buddhism [Tam Bảo]—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha [Phật, Pháp, Tăng già] and also to obey the Five Precepts (Skt. *pancasila*): to refrain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and taking intoxicants. After making this pledge, the monk gives the person a Buddhist name [Pháp danh].

Liên Thành’s relationship to Thầy Ngọan became an issue in December 1970 when he interrogated a recently captured high level communist operative and learned that Thầy Ngọan was working for the NLF and that his pagoda, An Lăng, located two kilometers southwest of Huế, was a refuge and meeting place for communist cadre. Aided by two platoons of heavily armed police [Cảnh Sát Dã Chiến] in commando cars, Liên Thành raided An Lăng Pagoda, killed three NLF soldiers, and arrested Thầy Ngọan. When Liên Thành’s mother learned that her son had arrested Thầy Ngọan, she had another son relay him this message: “Release Thầy [Ngọan]. Since when does someone go and capture the monk that conducted his quy y ceremony and gave him a Buddhist name? Only a child who has no filial piety [con bất hiểu]!” But her plea fell on deaf ears. At a meeting of the Provincial Security Council [Hội Đồng An Ninh Tỉnh] to decide Thầy Ngọan’s punishment, one member proposed six months in prison, another one year, but Liên Thành convinced them to imprison him two years on Côn Sơn Island.

An interesting sidelight to this story is that the commander of the two commando cars in this raid was Trịnh Công Hà, Trịnh Công Sơn’s brother. Trịnh Công Hà was an old friend of Liên Thành’s since their school days, and both were members of the Huế Judo Club. (Liên Thành says he was a black belt, Trịnh Công Hà a brown belt.) Huế was not a small town in the 1960s and 1970s, but it struck me as being like a small town. Everyone seemed to know everyone else. But that did not mean that they understood, or wanted to understand, the political views of their friends and neighbors. Because of his job, Liên Thành did want to know everyone’s political views—and he was especially interested in Trịnh Công Sơn’s. He does not discuss Trịnh Công Sơn in *Biên Đông Miền Trung* but in *Huế—Thảm Sát Mẫu Thần* he includes a long article that he posted on the web in May 2009. Liên Thành says he was moved to write this article, “Trịnh Công Sơn và những...”
hoạt động nằm vùng” [Trịnh Công Sơn and Underground Activities],\textsuperscript{111} after reading two articles that appeared on the web in 2009. The authors, both friends of Trịnh Công Sơn and both formerly soldiers in the ARVN, criticize Trịnh Công Sơn for his leftist views and his failure to support the Republic of Vietnam.\textsuperscript{112}

Liên Thành mentions Ngô Kha’s name seven times in his first article about Trịnh Công Sơn, but only in passing. For example, in one section of his article he describes four places—homes and cafes—where, he alleges, members of the communist underground met. Ngô Kha’s name appears on the list of people who frequented two of these places, a café that he calls “Quán Bị Tôi” [My Friends’ Café] but was actually “Quán Bị” [Friends’ Café] and a grass hut owned by Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuương and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan’s parents that the brothers and their friends called “Tuyết Tình Cốc” [A Hut for Those Who Are Done with Love], a location in a popular novel by the Chinese writer Kim Dung [Jin Yong]. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tuương’s brother Phan and his friends had failed their law school exams because they were demonstrating against the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu-Nguyễn Cao Kỳ regime and so avoided girl friends to concentrate on their studies in this thatched roof hut.\textsuperscript{113} Some of the people who met at these places mentioned by Liên Thành were members of the communist underground, but many clearly were not. For example, a friend of mine—the writer Thể Uyên (Nguyễn Kim Dũng)—visited the Quán Bị and stayed at Tuyết Tình Cốc on a visit to Huế in 1965.\textsuperscript{114} I traveled with Thể Uyên to Vietnam in 1992 on a research grant and co-authored an article with him. He was the nephew of Nhật Linh (Nguyễn Tựu Tam), a very famous and progressive—but anti-communist—writer. Thể Uyên was an officer in the ARVN who spent three years in a reeducation camp before coming to the United States. He clearly was not a communist underground agent. To my knowledge no one has suggested that the Huế novelist Túy Hồng (Nguyễn Thị Túy Hồng), who, according to Liên Thành, often attended gatherings at Tuyết Tình Cốc, was a communist agent. She came to the United States in 1975.

Ngô Kha, according to Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan, was not a communist agent. “Here is the truth,” he says: “Ngô Kha was not an underground Việt Công agent. He acted like anti-American and anti-war protestors around the world. And this is why later, after 1975, his friends in Huế ran into
difficulties when they tried to follow regulations and have him named a martyr [liệt sĩ].” Liên Thành, operating on the principle of guilt by association, catches a lot of innocent people in that giant net he casts on his hunt for those who have “sold their souls to the devil.” Of course, according to Liên Thành, Hoàng Phú Ngọc Phan is one of those devils. In Huế—Thảm Sát Mẫu Thần, he accuses Hoàng Phú Ngọc Phan of being a member, along with Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, of the group that killed the German doctors in the incident described previously. Hoàng Phú Ngọc Phan denies killing anyone and says that if Liên Thành presents irrefutable proof that he did, he will commit suicide in front of him.

Regarding Trịnh Công Sơn, Liên Thành’s most stunning and perhaps most damaging accusation is not that Trịnh Công Sơn was a communist underground agent but that he, in return for favored treatment, agreed to supply him with information about other agents, many of whom were Trịnh Công Sơn’s good friends. In “Trịnh Công Sơn và những hoạt động năm vùng,” Liên Thành says that he gathered evidence that Trịnh Công Sơn was associating with known communist agents and when he confronted the singer-composer with this evidence, he agreed to supply him with information about communist underground agents [Việt Cộng năm vùng] in Huế. In return, Liên Thành says he gave Trịnh Công Sơn a paper, called an “Order for Special Assignment” [sự vụ lệnh công tác đặc biệt], that enabled him to avoid the draft and kept him from being arrested at anti-war demonstrations and music concerts. This paper was the carrot, Liên Thành says. The stick was imprisonment for four years on the island of Phú Quốc, a sentence that he could arrange because of his high rank in the security forces—Chief Commander of the National Police, General Secretary for Administration of the Provincial Phoenix Program, General Secretary of the Provincial Security Council.

I do not know what to make of Liên Thành’s account. In his article about Trịnh Công Sơn and in his books, he brags about his successes in capturing intellectuals in Huế who he determined were working for the NLF. Certainly some intellectuals were underground agents for the NLF and certainly terrible acts were committed by people on both sides of the conflict, but because Liên Thành writes with such undisguised anger and contempt for anyone associated with the NLF, his books read like propaganda tracts, not objective historical accounts. His book Biên Động Miền Trung is published
by the Committee to Prosecute Crimes of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Liên Thành is chairman of this committee, which he established in January 2010. His other book, *Huế—Thảm Sát Mẫu Thần*, is self-published.¹²⁰

Liên Thành charges Trịnh Công Sơn with two crimes. One was helping his friends Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tưởng and his brother, Hoàng Phú Ngọc Phan, leave Huế and join the NLF, a departure which was, Liên Thành says, “directly arranged by the Huế City (Communist) Committee [thành ủy Huế].”¹²¹ The other crime was associating with known communist agents in Huế, particularly with a man named Lê Khắc Cầm, who liked to read and translate English and French literary works. Liên Thành says that Lê Khắc Cầm was “the cadre that directly controlled and guided” Trịnh Công Sơn.¹²²

Lê Khắc Cầm and Trịnh Công Sơn were obviously friends and they both worked together on a Christmas 1974 issue of *Đứng Dậy* [Stand Up] containing articles by friends and former students demanding that the government explain what happened to Ngô Kha.¹²³ Trịnh Công Sơn wrote the rough draft of “Tuyên cáo” [Declaration], eventually signed by forty-six teachers, writers, and artists, that appears at the beginning of the issue and also a letter addressed to Ngô Kha titled “Lá thư gửi cho người đang ở trong tù hay đã bị thục tiêu” [A Letter for a Person Who is Now in Prison or Has Been Exterminated].¹²⁴ This letter created a stir when it was republished in books and journals in 1976 and 1977 because it suggested that Trịnh Công Sơn was more fully engaged in the political struggle than was commonly known.¹²⁵ At first some readers, including Nguyễn Đức Xuân, did not believe Trịnh Công Sơn wrote it because it contained communist jargon—phrases like “people’s collective” [*tập thể nhân dân*] and “the problem of structural organization” [*vấn đề tổ chức cơ cấu*]. But it is clearly authentic: Nguyễn Đức Xuân did some investigating and found out that Bửu Ý has Trịnh Công Sơn’s handwritten drafts of both the “Declaration” and his letter to Ngô Kha.¹²⁶

In the letter Trịnh Công Sơn has harsh words for the “công an mặt vu trì thức,” the secret police targeting intellectuals. “Kha,” he asks, “do you remember that once before we were the victims of an informer in this group?”¹²⁷ He describes the present situation as being terrible but suggests this is a good thing because people will see they have nothing more to lose. “When people realize,” he says, “that they don’t have anything left to be seized, that they can’t be
exploited anymore, then they rise up and take to the streets.” Trịnh Công Sơn uses the image of ripe fruit to suggest the end of the current regime is near:

Kha, probably you remember that we used to tell each other that we must wait for the day when the facts of the situation are like ripe fruit. Could it be that today the fruit we waited for is ripe? The fruit of poverty, hunger, death, unemployment, ruined fields and gardens, etc. which are all mutually affected by a society torn to pieces, by factionalism, by corruption, division, imprisonment, torture . . . So, Kha, has not the time come for a new opportunity to appear?129

Trịnh Công Sơn wants to give Ngô Kha hope but not provoke him to do anything rash. His warnings suggest that he is well aware of his friend’s fiery personality. “We know you are eager like an uncontrollable horse,” he tells his friend, “but try to be calm and cool, don’t be overhasty [nôn nóng] like in the old days.”130 He repeats this warning not to be overhasty two pages later.

**FIGURE 5:** The cover of Đứng Đầy [Stand Up].128
Trịnh Công Sơn is clearly the author of this letter—but does this mean he was a member of the communist underground and Lê Khắc Cẩm was his handler? Nguyễn Đặc Xuân, in his article about Trịnh Công Sơn’s letter, says that he asked Lê Khắc Cẩm: “Was Trịnh Công Sơn a revolutionary agent [cơ sở cách mạng]?” “That’s hard to say,” Lê Khắc Cẩm replied. “But Sơn knew that I was an agent of the City Party Committee. To work with me means that he was working for the Revolution.”\textsuperscript{131} When asked about the revolutionary language in Trịnh Công Sơn’s letter, Lê Khắc Cẩm says it could reflect the fact that “at that time we, including Trịnh Công Sơn, read a lot of books and newspapers sent from the war zone and also every night listened with admiration to the Hà Nội radio station. There’s nothing surprising about someone being influenced by revolutionary language.”\textsuperscript{132}

Clearly Trịnh Công Sơn and Lê Khắc Cẩm were friends, but it is interesting that Lê Khắc Cẩm, who Liên Thành claims was Trịnh Công Sơn’s handler, tells Nguyễn Đặc Xuân that he does not know whether Trịnh Công Sơn was or was not a revolutionary agent. If he knew he was an agent, it would seem that in 2011, when Nguyễn Đặc Xuân interviewed him, he would have no reason to withhold this information.

The crimes Liên Thành accuses Trịnh Công Sơn of committing would not seem to be crimes that would get someone imprisoned indefinitely on Phú Quốc Island, but no doubt Trịnh Công Sơn knew that Liên Thành had the power to do what he wished and that, as he told Trịnh Công Sơn, there would be no trial. He could order him imprisoned, saying the “security situation” justified it. If Liên Thành’s story is true, if Trịnh Công Sơn did agree to be some kind of double agent, it could have been because he sensed he had no choice, that if he wanted to continue to write and sing songs opposing the war he had to make some deal with Liên Thành. It is significant that Liên Thành says that although Trịnh Công Sơn gave him names of some Việt Cộng agents, he revealed “only one-tenth of what he knew.” “There were very important matters,” Liên Thành says, “that Trịnh Công Sơn participated in and knew clearly and thoroughly, but kept quiet about, never told us.” (Liên Thành says he learned about these matters from other sources.)\textsuperscript{133}

Mysteries remain regarding both Ngô Kha and Trịnh Công Sơn, but what seems undeniable is that Ngô Kha and Trịnh Công Sơn inspired and influenced each other. Many passages in Ngô Kha’s “Long Poem for Peace”
resemble passages from Trịnh Công Sơn’s songs in the collections Kinh Việt Nam and Ta phải thấy mặt trời—songs like “Ta quyết phải sống” [We Are Determined that We Must Live], “Huế, Sai Gòn, Hà Nội,” and “Việt nam ơi hãy vùng lên” [Vietnam Rise Up]. Here are the opening lines of Ngô Kha’s “Long Poem for Peace”:

Brothers and sisters meet happily as if just beginning life
On this day when Vietnam gives birth to a new language
Thirty million fellow citizens rise up
Waiting like the great trường sơn mountains
For peace to return in people’s hearts

Here are lines 50–57:

We advance together
Singing the song of a Reunified Vietnam
In the midst of historic change
We go from Nam Quan to Cà Mau
From the Mekong, the Perfume river, the Red River
Phú Quóc, Côn Lôn, Ba Vì, Tam Đảo
From Huế, Sài Gòn to Thái Bình, Hà Nội
Our voices echo beneath the sky

Note the similarities between the above lines and these lines from Trịnh Công Sơn’s song “Huế Sai Gòn Hà Nội”:

From the Center, the South, and the North people wait to light torches hailing freedom
On the road there are prisons where we’ll build schools and markets
Our people will till the fields and we’ll be well clothed and fed
As hands work to build the country the old hatred fades

And these lines from Trịnh Công Sơn’s song “Ta thấy gì đêm nay” [What do we see tonight?]:

What do we see tonight?
A hundred flags flying
The forests and mountains spread the news to every region
The wind of peace blows in a thousand directions

Both Ngô Kha in his long poem and Trịnh Công Sơn in his songs talk about the wonderful things that will happen when peace comes: the bombing
will end, hate will turn into love, and eventually the country—all three regions—will be unified. The Paris Peace Talks opened in May 1968. These talks dragged on for five years—the final agreement was not signed until January 27, 1973—but their beginning was cause for great optimism in both Vietnam and the United States.\(^{137}\) Trịnh Công Sơn’s language sometimes sounds militaristic. His songs in *Kinh Việt Nam* and *Ta phát thấy mặt trời* are movement [*nhạc phong trào*] songs—songs to mobilize people. His intent in these songs, however, it seems to me, is to appropriate the energy inherent in militaristic language and channel it into peaceful projects. Like Martin Luther King in his famous drum major speech, Trịnh Công Sơn wanted to be a drum major but a drum major for love, a drum major for peace and reconstruction, not war.\(^{138}\) “We become part of a proud revolution [*cách mạng*],” Trịnh Công Sơn sings in “Việt nam oai hùng vinh lên.” But then come these lines: “We will seize a hundred building sites / We will build a thousand peaceful streets.”

But how do Ngô Kha and Trịnh Công Sơn differ? The struggle movement in Huế was in large part—but not completely—a Buddhist movement. Ngô Kha, was, it seems, a Buddhist, and Trịnh Công Sơn has described the important role Buddhism played in his life in several articles and interviews.\(^{139}\) In the 1960s, Buddhist monks in South Vietnam did not concentrate solely on cultivating inner peace; they wanted peace in Vietnam; they wanted to end the war. They were what are now called “engaged Buddhists.” Styles of engagement differ, however, and in Vietnam in the 1960s different styles were on display. Thích Trí Quang’s approach differed from Thích Nhát Hạnh’s. And Thích Tâm Châu, who was close to the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu-Nguyễn Cao Kỳ regime, had his own approach. In a book titled *Being Peace*, Thích Nhát Hạnh argues that “being peace” is “making peace.” “It is not by going out for a demonstration against nuclear missiles that we can bring about peace,” he writes. “It is with our capacity of smiling, breathing, and being peace that we can make peace.”\(^{140}\) To achieve world peace, Thích Nhát Hạnh emphasizes, one has to begin by cultivating inner peace. Trịnh Công Sơn, I think, would agree. He strove to be merciful and compassionate himself and to get others to admire these qualities as well. He wanted, as he sings in “Để gió cuốn đi” [Let the Wind Blow It Away], to “have a good heart.” He wanted people to love each other, he sings in another song, “though the night brings bullets, though the morning brings bombs.”\(^{141}\) Ngô Kha, however, was different. He
encouraged students to burn American vehicles and filled his pockets with stones to throw at policemen. He would be at that demonstration against nuclear missiles that Thích Nhất Hạnh mentions and probably would provoke the police to arrest him, or beat him, or shoot him.

What does the story of Ngô Kha teach us? One thing it teaches us is the horror of civil war. Americans think of war as “over there,” Viet Thanh Nguyen points out. Our Revolutionary War and Civil War are in the distant past and our memories of them, he adds, are now “rehearsed and sanitized by reenactors.” Ngô Kha’s story suggests how very personal and familial the Vietnam War was. Both Ngô Kha and Hoàng Phù Ngốc Tưởng were Liên Thanh’s teachers. Ngô Kha’s brother and his cousin, General Dzu, were in the ARVN and so was Ngô Kha himself. While in the ARVN, however, his Nguyễn Đại Thúc Battle Group fought the ARVN and so in his own person he embodied the civil war nature of the conflict. Of course, this civil war was not a pure civil war: It was also a battle between the United States and the communist nations of Russia and China. A photo in Liên Thanh’s book Biên Đông Miền Trung of the diminutive Liên Thanh dwarfed by a large US advisor for the Phoenix Program vividly reveals the international dimensions of this conflict (see figure 4). According to a Vietnamese proverb, “When buffaloes and cows fight, mosquitoes and flies die.”

There are also things to learn from Ngô Kha’s story about remembering and forgiving. Ngô Kha loved his country and lost his life doing what he thought had to be done to save it. He acted with a passionate, reckless courage. He deserves to be remembered by people on both sides of the conflict in Vietnam. People on one side have to sympathize with and remember those on the other side. Forgiveness is also necessary because without it we will have at best what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls “unjust forgetting,” a papering over of differences that ignores the past, as happens, for example, when former enemies agree on treaties but refuse to forgive, leaving resentment and hatred still simmering beneath the surface calm. Both winners and losers may forget unjustly and see themselves as victims and not victimizers, but defeat, Viet Thanh Nguyen says, “aggravates this sentiment.” Losers are more likely to see themselves as victims. Vietnamese refugees in the United States, who lost everything, he says, “tend to forget, particularly in public commemoration, the venality of the southern regime.” But the
winners too are forgetful. They see themselves as victims of foreign aggression and refer to the war as the American War. They are, Viet Thanh Nguyen says, “conveniently stricken with amnesia about what they did to one another.” They forget that the war was also a civil war.

The forgiveness that Viet Thanh Nguyen desires—not just for Vietnam but for the world—is pure forgiveness, the forgiving of the unforgiveable. Pure forgiveness may sound unreasonable and unrealistic—mad even—but isn’t it, he asks, more sensible and more realistic than perpetual war? If the species is to survive, he says, “we need a realism of the impossible.”

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ABSTRACT
This article describes Ngô Kha, a teacher, poet, army officer, and anti-government activist from Huế who was seized by undercover policemen in February, 1973, and never seen again. It describes his teaching, writing, friendship with Trịnh Công Sơn, and his antiwar activities, including his participation in a breakaway unit of the Sài Gòn army that fought Nguyễn Cao Kỳ’s forces in 1966. It highlights the sadness of Vietnam’s civil wars and the difficulty, in reconstructing wartime events, of finding unbiased sources. It concludes by proposing that “pure forgiveness,” discussed by the Vietnamese American writer Viet Thanh Nguyen, may be the only way to end perpetual war.

KEYWORDS: Ngô Kha, forgiveness, civil war, Trịnh Công Sơn, Liên Thành, Viet Thanh Nguyen

Notes

2. Other talented friends of Trịnh Công Sơn include the painters Bửu Chỉ (1948–2002) and Đình Cường (1939–2016); the historian Nguyễn Đức Xuân (b. 1937); the writer Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tuệng (b. 1937); and the writer, translator, and French teacher Bửu Ý (b. 1937).

3. Liên Thành’s full name is Nguyễn Phát Liên Thành.


14. ibid.
15. From 1968 to 1970 I taught English in Vietnam as a member of International Voluntary Services, which was funded primarily by a grant from the United States Agency for International Development. From 1971 to 1973 I taught English under the auspices of the Fulbright Program, which was funded and administered by the US Department of State.
17. Biographical information on Ngô Kha can be found in two collections of articles and documents: Hữu Nam and Phạm Thị Anh Nga, eds., Ngô Kha hành trình (hereafter referenced by title only); and Trần Thúc et al., eds., Ngô Kha: ngựa ngỗ câu một thế hệ [Ngô Kha: A Fable for a Generation] (Huế: Thuan Hoa, 2005).
18. The following authors describe how Ngô Kha motivated students both in and out of the classroom: Lê Văn Lân, “Ngô Kha, Lạy lòng trên bục giảng” [Ngô Kha, His Resounding Fame at the Lecturn], in Ngô Kha hành trình, 128–131; and Lê Văn Ngân, “Ngô Kha, người thầy củ, người bạn” [Ngô Kha: A Former Teacher and a Friend], in Ngô Kha hành trình, 252–256.
20. Nguyễn Duy Hiền mentions these demonstrations in “Ghi chép ngàn về cuộc đời nhà thơ—nhà giáo Ngô Kha” [A Short Note about the Life of the Poet and Teacher Ngô Kha], in Trần Thúc et al., eds., Ngô Kha nuova ngọn, 12–13.
24. However, in an article about how Ngô Kha died posted on the web in 2009, Nguyễn Đắc Xuân says that Ngô Dzu, “a general at the time of the Republic of Vietnam,” was an uncle [bác] of Ngô Kha’s. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Vài điều về Liên Thành, Tác giả Biên Động Miền Trung” [A Few Things about Liên Thành, the Author of Biên Động Miền Trung [Disorder in the Central Region]], Sachthien, November 25, 2009, http://sachthien.net/nuyenDacXuan/ NguyenDacXuan017.php (accessed October 30, 2016). A shortened version of this article, titled “Cái chết của Ngô Kha như tôi đã biết” [What I Know about Ngô Kha’s Death], appears in Ngô Kha hành trình, 220–222.
25. Ngô Minh says Ngô Kha was “discharged” [giảng ngư] from the army in 1964. (It seems he was “detached” from the army [biệt phái] rather than discharged
because in early 1972 he was tried in a military court.) However, Nguyễn Đắc Xuân says Ngô Kha did not get out of officer training school in Thù Đức until 1965 and then was assigned by his relative, General Dzu, to be a press attaché. See Ngô Minh, “Ngô Kha, một côi tang bông,” 279; and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân “Ngô Kha—Trịnh Công Sơn,” 237.


Thiên Đỗ explains that “the infamous Decree No. 10 put all religious organizations, except the Catholic and Protestant missions, in the category of public associations. Article 7 of the decree stipulates that “permission to establish an association can be refused without any explanation given.” See Thiền Đỗ, “The Quest for Enlightenment and Cultural Identity: Buddhism in Contemporary Vietnam,” in Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia, ed. Ian Harris (London: Pinter, 1999), 270–271.


33. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân suggests that Ngô Kha established this battle group, but Nguyễn Duy Hiền says that Ngô Kha was “one of a core group of people who led this break away [ly khat] unit of the Saigon army.” See Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Ngô Kha—Trịnh Công Sơn,” 237; and Nguyễn Duy Hiền, “Ghi chép ngắn,” 11.


36. Liên Thành, Biên Động Miền Trung, 145–146.
37. Ibid., 145. See also Liên Thành, Huế thầm sát máu thân, 211–213.
38. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân states that Liên Thành was a student of Ngô Kha, but he does not indicate when or in what school. See Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Vài điều về Liên Thành,” 220.
44. Thái Ngọc San, who spent a lot of time with Ngô Kha in Huế in 1968, says that Ngô Kha’s marriage had “just fallen apart” [vừa tan vỡ]. See “Bài ca bi tráng của phong trào đỏ thắm Huế” [AWoeful but Mighty Song of the Struggle in Huế], in Ngô Kha hành trình, 98.
45. Đỗ Lại Thúy, “Người Độc không đăng tri [A Reader Who Is Not Absent-minded], in Ngô Kha hành trình, 40.
47. Trịnh Công Sơn composed the songs in these two collections after the 1968 Tết Offensive. A printed booklet of words and music [tập nhạc] titled Kinh Việt Nam [Prayer for Vietnam] was published in 1968; A similar booklet titled Ta phải thấy mặt trời [We Must See the Sun] was presumably published in 1969. I say “presumably” because my copy of Ta phải thấy mặt trời does not include the date of publication; however on the second page are the words “finished at the end of October, 1969.” Both these song books were published by Nhân Bản [Humanism].
48. I refer to the two collections mentioned in notes 6 and 17.
50. Ibid., 12, note 8.
53. Lê Văn Thuyễn, “Anh Ngô Kha trong ký ức tôi” [Ngô Kha as I Remember Him], in Ngô Kha hành trình, 106.

55. The French called this island Poulo Condore and jailed Vietnamese political prisoners there during the First Indochina War. In 1970 Don Luce, former director of International Voluntary Services who was then working in Vietnam for the World Council of Churches, led a US congressional delegation to a part of the prison where prisoners were chained in small five-foot-by-nine-foot cages called tiger cages. (Luce used a map given to him by a former detainee to find these cages.) Côn Sơn island, also called Côn Lôn, is 143 miles from Hồ Chí Minh City, one of sixteen small islands in an archipelago of islands called Côn Đảo.


59. Ibid., 220–221.

60. Liên Thành, Biên Đông Miền Trung, 474.


64. As previously explained, Liên Thành regrets letting Nguyễn Dác Xuân, Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tưởng, and Hoàng Phú Ngọc Phan escape his clutches in 1966.


67. Olga Dror points out that Nhà Ca fixed this mistake in a later edition of her book. See Olga Dror, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Nhà Ca, Mourning Headband for Hue, lii.


70. Olga Dror describes how Nhã Ca and her husband suffered after 1975 and how they eventually made it to the United States in her “Translator’s Introduction” to Mourning Headband for Hue, xxi–xxiii).

71. Liên Thanh, Huế thầm sát, 173. This group was directed by a larger group called the Front Alliance of the Peoples Democratic and Peaceful Forces of Huế [Mặt trận Liên minh các Lực lượng Dân tộc Dân chủ và Hòa bình thành phố Huế]. The chair of this group was Lê Văn Hảo, a Huế University professor who left Huế shortly before the attack on Huế began. Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tường was the general secretary and Nguyên Đàc Xuân was given responsibilities for organizing young people. See Nguyên Đàc Xuân, interview with Dương Minh Long, and Liên Thanh, Huế thầm sát, 172–173, 688–689.

72. Liên Thanh, Huế thầm sát, 363.

73. Ibid., 228–230.

74. Ibid., 215.


76. Ibid., 23, 94.

77. Ibid., 92–94.

78. Liên Thanh, Huế thầm sát, 215; Liên Thanh, Biên Động Miền Trung, 146.

79. Liên Thanh, Biên Động Miền Trung, 139.


83. Ibid., 572, note 83.

84. Ibid., 306.

85. Ibid., 586, note 11.


87. “Lời cuối cho câu chuyện quá buồn” [Last Words on a Really Sad Story] https://www.facebook.com/notes/nguy%e1%bb%85n-quang-l%e1%ba%adp/l%e1%
88. This interview is available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaNr16RDzQ (accessed February 13, 2018).
89. Đồng Ba is the name of the main market in Huế on Trấn Hùng Đạo Street and also the name of a gate into the Citadel on Mai Thúc Loan Street. It is not clear which area Hoàng Púb Ngóc Tưởng is referring to.
90. “Hoàng Púb Ngóc Tưởng “Lời cuối cho câu chuyện quá buồn.”
91. Ibid.
92. Hoàng Púb Ngóc Tưởng’s comment about the pain he feels for unjust killings by uprising troops is a verbatim repetition of what he said in an interview with Thúy Khuê, a reporter for Radio France Internationale (RFI), on July 12, 1997. See “Nói chuyện với Hoàng Púb Ngóc Tưởng về biến cố Mẫu Thánh ở Huế” [Speaking with Hoàng Púb Ngóc Tưởng about the Events of Tết 1968 in Huế]. A transcript of this interview is available at: https://sites.google.com/site/namkyluctinhorg/tac-gia-tac-pham/s-t-u-v/thuy-khe/noi-chuyen-voi-hoang-phu-ngoc-tuong-ve-bien-co-mau-than-o-hue?tmpl=%Fsystem%Fapp%Ftemplates%Fprint%2F&showPrintDiaalog=1
93. Đặng Tiến, “Trường hợp Hoàng Púb Ngóc Tưởng” [The Case of Hoàng Púb Ngóc Tưởng]. This article can be found on the website mentioned in note 87.
94. Cao Thị Uẩn, “Thư đổi con.” Ngô Kha’s mother’s letter is included in Ngô Kha hành trình, 163–165. Her letter first appeared in a special edition of Điện đày [Stand Up], a mimeographed magazine edited by a journalist named Nguyễn Quốc Thái. This special edition consisted of fifty-five pages and was released in December 1974. It consisted primarily of letters by artists and writers in Huế addressed to Ngô Kha. The purpose of publishing these letters was to apply pressure on the government to explain what happened to Ngô Kha. Trịnh Công Sơn wrote one of the letters, which I discuss later in this section.
97. Two different song books titled Songs of Golden Skin [Ca khúc da vàng] were published. Early editions had twelve songs; later editions had fourteen songs. I have copies of both editions that I bought when I was in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Neither the edition with twelve songs nor the one with sixteen songs has a date of publication but both are fifth editions. Trịnh Công Sơn wrote and performed many of the songs in these song books before these printed collections appeared.
98. Nguyễn Đặc Xuân, Trịnh Công Sơn, 73, 83.
99. Ibid., 101.
103. See note 5.
104. Nguyễn Đặc Xuân mentions that Liên Thành was a student of Ngô Kha’s in “Cái chết của Ngô Kha,” 220.
105. Liên Thành, Biên Đông Miền Trung, 140.
106. Liên Thành, Biên Đông Miền Trung, 338.
107. Ibid., 363.
108. Ibid.
110. Ibid., 361.
111. Liên Thành, “Trịnh Công Sơn.”

117. Hoàng Phú Ngọc Phan, “Trình Công Sơn.”

118. Liên Thành, “Trình Công Sơn.”

119. I refer to the two books by Liên Thành cited in note 5.

120. Liên Thành, *Huế tham sát*.

121. Liên Thành, “Trình Công Sơn.”

122. Ibid.

123. The entire issue of this journal is reprinted in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 159–214.


125. It was republished in these books: Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Trình Công Sơn*, 153–162; and Lê Minh Quốc, ed., *Trình Công Sơn: Rơi lệ ru ngủ* [Trịnh Công Sơn: Shedding Tears, Singing Lullabies] (Hà Nội: Phú Núi, 2004), 26–35. It also appeared in these journals: *Thơ* [Poetry], a supplement to *Báo Văn Nghệ* [Journal of Literature and Art] (June 6, 2004); and in *Thành Niên* [Youth] 178 (June 26, 2004).


129. Ibid., 191–192, ellipses in original.

130. Ibid., 190.


132. Ibid.

133. Liên Thành, “Trình Công Sơn.”

134. The Annamese Cordillera, a mountain range that extends parallel to the coast from the northwest to southeast, forming the boundary between Laos and Vietnam.

135. “Nam Quan” is a pass on the Vietnam-China border. “Cà Mau” is the name of a city and province on the southernmost tip of Vietnam.

136. “Phú Quốc” and “Côn Lôn” (also known as Côn Sơn) are islands in the South China Sea. (Ngô Kha was imprisoned on the island of Phú Quốc in 1966.) For information on Côn Lôn see note 54. “Ba Vì” is a mountain range in the north. “Tam dào” is the name of another mountain range in north Vietnam, a range with three high peaks.

Martin Luther King delivered his sermon, titled “The Drum Major Instinct,” at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, on February 4, 1968, two months before he was assassinated. In this sermon he told the congregation what he wanted people to say about him at his funeral. “I’d like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question.”


“Hãy yêu nhau đi” [Love Each Other].


Viet Thanh Nguyen, “Just Memory,” 145.

Trâu bò húc nhau ruồi muỗi chét.

Viet Thanh Nguyen, Nothing Ever Dies, 280.

Ibid., 6.

Ibid., 290–291.