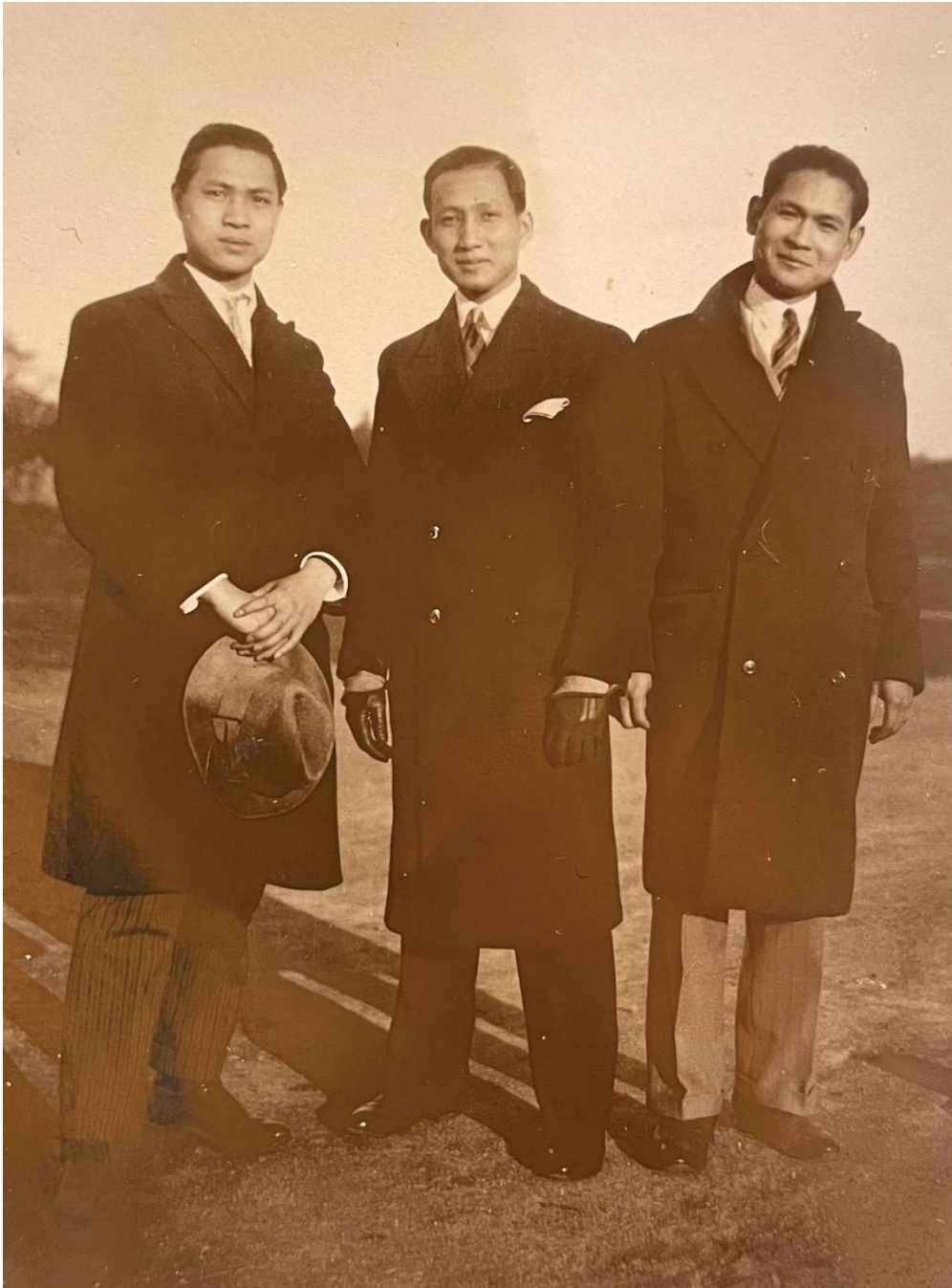


Mekong Review

February 2023

Personal embodiments

Will Nguyen



Will Nguyen's maternal grandfather, Tran Cong, flanked by two friends while studying in France circa 1938

It's one of the few photos I have left of my maternal grandfather and his colourful arc in life. He had apparently studied public administration in 1930s France and then returned to southern Vietnam in 1941. The rest of his life is largely a photographic gap, the majority of his photos incinerated when South Vietnam's impending fate became clear. He was ignominiously blacklisted in 1975 by the incoming communist government, though his lifetime of public service would spare him from the re-education gulag. He would spend the rest of his years in penury, while his children found ways to escape overseas in search of brighter futures.

The communists of today, however, record a very different version of my grandfather. An official 2011 report issued by his home province of Soc Trang in the Mekong Delta documents his achievements in service of the anti-colonial resistance in 1945. He was general secretary of the provincial-level administrative committee for the Viet Minh's War of Resistance against the French, and also headed the ethnic Khmer committee for the revolutionary authorities.

Memories of him and Vietnamese like him, who eagerly fought the French but not one another, are still contested in present-day Vietnam—"warring visions" as Thy Phu vividly called them in her book of the same name that explores how the Vietnamese experienced and utilised photography during the violent convulsions of the twentieth century. Mainland and overseas Vietnamese today are still grappling with such memories as we attempt to reconcile histories, ideals, truths and ourselves.

My grandfather contributed directly to the Vietnamese revolution—but only for the first half, his life representative of the contortions in time and space that the Vietnamese had to make as they contemplated the limits of ideology, geography and fraternity when the country was divided at the seventeenth parallel.

For many southerners, as well as northerners who came south, there was a clear legitimacy gap between anti-colonial resistance against the French (1945–54) and the civil war between North and South Vietnam (1955–75). Such moral nuance has allowed for those like my grandfather, who believed in a republican future for Vietnam, to have their historical legacies simultaneously erased and documented, vilified and glorified by Vietnam's single ruling party, the country's sole arbiter of truth.

"As such," Phu explained, "for the Vietnamese diaspora the acts of collecting and archiving [photos and memories] can be seen as symbolically defiant and reparative gestures, [when] the Vietnamese state's bifurcation of family loyalties in the postwar period... makes the very preservation of kinship ties a suspicious and punishable act."

I had not known about my grandfather's revolutionary history when I finished studying public policy in Singapore and returned to southern Vietnam in June 2018. But the Vietnamese government would document my own acts in a similar way—this time, in internal security files and investigation forms, rather than reports on the "tradition of revolutionary struggle of the peasant class".

Like my grandfather, I did not see any meaning in opposing fellow Vietnamese. For years, I had studied the Indochina Wars and internalised how infinitely complex (and hellish) the endeavours were for *all* Vietnamese. The logistics and minutiae of the Ho Chi Minh Trail alone are a wonder of human organisation and success. Unlike many overseas Vietnamese in my parents' generation, I had long ago resolved to myself that the current government was a legitimate one—albeit with plenty of room for improvement.

In June 2018, two controversial bills, considered by many Vietnamese as threats to the country's physical and intellectual sovereignty, were being considered before the National Assembly. Protests broke out in major cities across the country over a span of two months, in what has become known as the 'summer of fire', the largest political upheaval Vietnam had seen since Saigon changed hands on 30 April 1975. I participated in the demonstrations wholeheartedly, helping citizens push through police lines as they marched towards the heart of Ho Chi Minh City. I was subsequently beaten and arrested when police mistook me for one of the protest's organisers.

"I was protesting with fellow Vietnamese because the Cybersecurity Law would stifle intellectual thought and harm Vietnam's long-term development," I explained to the internal security officer. "Disagreeing with a government's policies doesn't mean desiring that government's overthrow."

It was a nuance that would save me from being pinned with the far more severe charge of overthrowing the state, which carried the penalty of more than ten years in prison rather than two to seven years for 'disturbing public order'. The police had raided my hotel room, confiscated my electronics and found on my laptop 'North/South', a published essay I had written documenting my search for truths among overseas and mainland Vietnamese. Security officers interrogated me about it for two days, and ultimately understood that my approach to Vietnamese history, politics and the government was not a combative one, but one of curiosity and reconciliation. I was eventually deported to the US in July 2018.

During the war, "socialist ways of seeing", Phu noted in her book, were defined by "conditions of scarcity". Photographers from the West had the tech and the finances, but Vietnamese photographers had to make do with what they had. It's a difference that's been imprinted on post-war Vietnamese generations, beyond photographers, who grew up in their respective socialist and non-socialist spheres. While I wasn't fully cognisant of it at the time, the politics of paucity animate many of my interactions with mainland Vietnamese, in prison then and in my democracy work today.

"You might know a little about a lot of things, but I know a lot about this one thing," my assigned police investigator said with a tinge of both jest and resentment. We were discussing Vietnam's authoritarian system and whether it was the best fit for the Vietnamese people. Maybe he does, I conceded, but then why wasn't he, a member of Vietnam's police state, allowed to venture overseas? Why is state media so heavily controlled, the internet so heavily censored?

He had acknowledged my education, my travels, my ability to read a dead Vietnamese language that he could not, and my deep affection for Vietnam and its welfare. But in his riposte, he was prodding at something deeper, a perceived arrogance: *You, whose family abandoned this country to live in relative wealth, who are you to say you know more than I what's better for Vietnam?*

It's a common sentiment from mainland Vietnamese, even if the frameworks it erects are not particularly accurate. One deeply memorable Facebook exchange I had with a mainland Vietnamese living in the United States was made with such candour that it shifted my mindset altogether: "I grew up in Vietnam, I know how corrupt the country is. But I also can see how the government actually did things to improve the economy and social justice. It might not be on the same expectation level as people here wanted, but it's not like everything is horrible."

“Imagine when all you hear about your motherland in the US is: Vietnam is horrible, there are no human rights, no free speech, no this or that. How is that going to make a Viet person from Vietnam feel? We might grow up in a poorer country with a different starting point, but we still have pride and [are] proud of what we have. Even though that might not be enough for some Viet people here. But it is enough for us. And we are still trying to make it better. It is an ongoing process.” I didn’t ask him what he was doing in the US.

These two exchanges highlight the main underlying tensions between overseas and mainland Vietnamese: a misunderstanding of one another’s histories and a Maslow’s hierarchy-based need to achieve a material dignity before a moral one.

The second exchange, in particular, hammered home for me the fact that my advocating human rights to and for mainland Vietnamese can come across as privileged and far removed from their everyday concerns, a charge that was also levelled at Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, South Vietnam’s former first lady. A chapter I found especially piquant in Phu’s book compares Madame Nhu with Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, minister of foreign affairs for the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam. The two practised their own versions of “revolutionary Vietnamese woman”-hood, with “vulnerable and determined” in the end triumphing over “‘cool’ and ‘aloof’”. As someone who has always taken a long view of history, I make a personal note.

Ultimately, national reconciliation between mainland and overseas Vietnamese is the resolution of this paucity of dignity, moral and material. As it stands, each side tries to build its own material dignity, while wielding historical and political disputes to deprive the other of moral dignity. Breaking the present cycle of enmity will hinge on fully learning—and respecting—one another’s history, and helping one another prosper economically