Voices in the Shadow of Independence:
Vietnamese Opinion on Some National Issues
in the Period of 1979 – 1986

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
the Center for International Studies of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

Huong T. D. Nguyen

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This thesis titled

Voices in the Shadow of Independence:

Vietnamese Opinion on Some National Issues

in the Period of 1979 – 1986

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ABSTRACT

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Vietnam witnessed profound societal changes after the Vietnam War and before the Renovation period in 1979-1986. Border conflicts and the socio-economic crisis had a variety of impacts on the material and spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. This thesis examines people’s opinion concerning several specific issues, such as perceptions of the outside world, the nation, the legacy of war, and societal change in both the north and south of the country. In order to investigate people’s opinion, this thesis draws on various forms of documents, including literature, newspapers, memoirs, and academic papers. Different from the portrayal provided by non-Vietnamese scholars of a corrupt and dissident society, people living Vietnam during this period expressed a belief and faith in the government and a hope for a brighter future. Collecting contemporary public narratives and attitudes, this thesis contributes to our understanding of Vietnamese society during a period of significant transition.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

William H. Frederick

Associate Professor of History
Tôi viết bài thơ này tin tưởng bao nhiêu
Trên cái chết là vô cùng sự sống
Trên mất mát là vô cùng hy vọng
Làm một con người khó lắm ai ơi!
Giữa những năm Tám mươi của thế kỷ Hai mươi

(Tôi viết bài thơ này tin tưởng bao nhiêu
Trên cái chết là vô cùng sự sống
Trên mất mát là vô cùng hy vọng
Làm một con người khó lắm ai ơi!
Giữa những năm Tám mươi của thế kỷ Hai mươi)

(I write this poem with full of confidence
Above death is eternal life
Above loss is eternal hope
Being a Human is difficult!
In the mid-1980s of the twentieth century)

Tế Hanh, “Bài ca sự sống” (Life Song, 1980 – 1983)
To my family
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As with any scholarly work, this thesis has benefited from the attention, support, and effort of a number of other individuals.

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Last but certainly not least, I owe a debt of gratitude to my family. My mother and my brother always had a kind word of encouragement and supported my studies fully. I could not have made it this far without them. Cảm ơn mẹ và anh,
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I cannot remember the exact day, but I know it was in the summer of 2008. I was sitting in my professor’s house, talking with him about coming to study in the US. Up to that point, he was the only professor in the History Department at the Vietnam National University in Hanoi who had earned his Ph.D. in a non-socialist country. Many of the students who took this particular professor’s classes admired him for his knowledge of the history of Vietnam and his familiarity with both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese scholarship. To prepare for studying history in a new country, I began thinking of some topics that I could potentially research during my time out of the country. Hoping to get some ideas, I asked for my professor’s advice.

Without any hesitation, my overseas-educated professor proclaimed, “You can write about anything in which you are interested. I know that you want to study modern history. The Vietnam War is fairly well studied in the US. The best period I would recommend for you to write about when you are abroad is the post-1986 period, after the Renovation Policy. It will also ensure your safety when you return home in the future.” I was at the time very grateful for his thoughtful concern for my future career and political safety. I was also aware of, though I did not discuss it with my Vietnamese professor, the “taboo” associated with the post-war – pre-Đổi Mới period. This was my introduction to the period of 1975-1986.

I went to the US with various questions about history and modern Vietnam, including what happened after the war and before the Đổi Mới period. During my studies
here, I realized that many issues relating to the history of Vietnam have largely been ignored by previous historians. I also came to recognize that conducting research on the 1979-1986 period remains a sensitive topic within Vietnam. As a prospective scholar, I have tried to focus on the unheard voices in an effort to reveal the forgotten past. Reading literature on Vietnam of that time, I have learned a great deal about my own country before the renovation period, as well as the struggles that my family and my people faced and overcame.

**Historical Context of the 1979-1986 Period**

Vietnam witnessed profound societal and cultural changes between 1979 and 1986. The year 1979 became significant in modern Vietnamese history with the victory of the joint Cambodian – Vietnamese army against Pol Pot’s forces in early January. On 17 February 1979, the government of Vietnam announced that China invaded the northern border of Vietnam. These two conflicts had a significant impact on those living in the newly reunified Vietnam. Also, the year 1986 marked the official birth of the Renovation Period (Đổi Mới), which was the starting point of current development in Vietnam. The Sixth Congress of the CPV, held in Hanoi in December 1986, analyzed their previous mistakes, and proposed a renovation policy, which included political, legal and economic reform. As a result, the period before 1986 is also known as the night before the renovation. The post-war – pre-Doi-Moi period is also commonly called the “subsidy period” (thời bao cấp). This term is often used to describe the decade of high socialism when the government controlled everything.
After reunification, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam governed both the northern and southern parts of its territory, and the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) was the sole official political party controlling the whole of Vietnam. The legacy of protracted war, social problems, and natural disasters posed serious challenges to the Vietnamese government. Political and economic isolation, stemming from the U.S. embargo, further weakened the new Vietnamese state. Moreover, the war along the southwest border against the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia and the conflict along the northern border with China caused additional difficulties for the country. The situation became more severe due to subjective reasons such as hastiness, dogmatism, and voluntarism in developing the country without regard for the objective conditions within Vietnam.

In this decade of high socialism, certain legacies from the war with the United States remained and the nation struggled to deal with underdevelopment, decreases in foreign aid, and the overall destruction that the war had caused. Additionally, the government struggled to answer the public’s high expectations for change. Core socialist policies, such as central planning, state price controls, priority towards heavy industry, and agricultural co-operativization, were increasingly called into question by the end of the period. The Vietnamese economy in the 1979-1986 period was based primarily on small-scale production. The post-war reconstruction of industry and commerce still remained concentrated in the heavy industrial sector, which had little effect on overall economic growth. Collectivization of agriculture implemented in the north of Vietnam between 1958-1975 constituted the only possible “socialist” alternative to “capitalism” in the south, and was therefore legalized at the national level in 1981. The price, wage, and
currency reform in 1985 resulted in the more serious socio-economic crisis, causing the inflation rate in 1986 to rise up to a record high of 774.7%.

The “subsidy and procurement” management system was not as effective following independence as it was during the war. Not until the end of 1986, when the Renovation Policy Đổi Mới was launched by the Sixth Congress of Communist Party of Vietnam, did a gradual process of general development and regionalization and globalization begin to bring about changes in the country.

The 1979-1986 period was the first time in which people learned that the determination and spirit that had achieved victory during the war was not enough to bring prosperity to the Vietnamese people in the post-reunification period. It took the Vietnamese people years to realize this seemingly simple concept. During this period, food, goods, and services were purchased with food stamps or coupons. Those with a position in government received more coupons and had access to special shops. For those without special status, they could expect to spend hours waiting in line to buy rice and other basic commodities. Most residents of Hanoi considered themselves lucky if they had access to rice everyday (normally people ate rice mixed with sweet potato, corn, or sorghum). Their desires were small: owning only two complete changes of clothing was common, and a hot-water thermos, a radio, or a bicycle seemed like luxuries.

Only a few years after the war, people recognized a startling contradiction in their lives: life in peacetime was much more complicated than it was during the war. In war,

fighting was all one had to worry about and all other issues were viewed as being peripheral. In peace, people were forced to confront more complex issues relating to their day-to-day lives. Also, people struggled to understand how to live as an independent and united nation in the world. Innumerable questions of all kinds and shapes rose up from the depths of society which were either not present or were ignored during the war. In this specific period, people changed their views on national issues.

**Significance of the Topic**

After the Vietnam War ended, Vietnam was no longer viewed as a significant topic of discussion in the global arena. Particularly after the end of the Cold War period, Vietnam, as a communist country in Southeast Asia, attracted much less attention. Viewing the situation from the outside looking in, foreign scholars in the 1980s thought Vietnam was simply a corrupt country with a population of discontented and oppressed people. They believed that as a result of the great challenges it faced, Vietnam would not be able to overcome its situation and improve itself in any meaningful way. However, in reality life during the 1979-1986 period was much more complicated than others have acknowledged. In order to properly understand what life was like in Vietnam during this period of great challenges we must examine the Vietnamese perspective.

The serious socio-economic crisis between the late 1970s and the late 1980s had a variety of impacts on the material and spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. Apart from political, economic, or military history, the study of people’s opinion is a critical approach to understanding Vietnamese history of this period. Vietnamese views of
national issues, such as their nation, war, the government, and society in both the north and south of the country, provide a glimpse as to the social atmosphere of the time and equally importantly gives a voice to the people that lived through the period.

Studying Vietnamese opinion in the years 1979-1986 provides a better understanding of post-war Vietnam, which has largely been ignored by previous studies. As a transitional period from continuous war to peace and development, these years mark a significant milestone in modern Vietnamese history. Furthermore, this period has left behind various legacies for present day Vietnam, especially in terms of customs and social relations. The attitudes of the Vietnamese people provide an important source for understanding the local conditions before the Renovation Policy. By examining people’s opinion of the period, we gain a better understanding of Vietnamese history from a bottom up perspective, which has commonly been ignored by both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese historians.

The Term “Opinion”

In this thesis, the term “opinion” refers to Vietnamese people’s views, attitudes, and desires expressed in written documents in the contemporary context. It is important to remember that people might have expressed their opinions by some means, but they did not always comprehend or pay enough attention to the effect these opinions had on society. In many circumstances, Vietnamese authors unintentionally articulated their opinions in their literary works. Occasionally opinions were just in the form of authors’ feelings regarding the issues emerging in their works of art. Therefore, it is necessary to
read between the lines of Vietnamese literature and other forms of art to properly grasp
the 1979-1986 Vietnamese opinion.

It is important to recognize that in the 1979-1986 period contemporary literature
was tightly controlled or directed by the government. As such, opinions supporting the
CPV frequently appeared in Vietnamese literature during this period. Moreover, as an
old Vietnamese saying goes, “It is better to be similar and bad than unique and good.”
Many Vietnamese preferred to stay quiet and not risk their personal freedom rather than
profess any complaints about their situation. However, this period did witness an
expression of alternative voices outside of those professed by the Vietnamese
government.

Also, Vietnamese opinion should be understood as the thinking of people who
lived in Vietnam during the 1979-1986 period. When experiencing and witnessing
hardships, they raised their voices in different written documents published in these
years. Opinions of overseas Vietnamese at the time, and Vietnamese in the country after
the period are used as additional sources of analysis.

**Literature Review**

To my knowledge, no research on Vietnamese opinion in the 1979-1986 period
has been conducted. Due to Vietnam’s limited interaction with the world, and also due to
domestic censorship, the years 1979-1986 are difficult to study, especially from outside
the country. After the Vietnam War, only a few foreigners were allowed to stay in
Vietnam, the majority of whom were experts from the Soviet Union, China, and other
socialist countries. During the early years of the 1980s, there was only a limited number of Westerners in the country. For example, there were seven or eight people from the non-socialist community living in Hồ Chí Minh City in 1985, working for the UN and other international organizations. However, these people, in large part, were not allowed to interact with the Vietnamese, and their inability to speak Vietnamese largely prevented them from interacting with most Vietnamese.

Beginning in the 1980s, a number of foreign scholars from outside the country focused attention on the post-war period in Vietnam. However, for the most part, these historians concentrated on the political and economic problems of the country, rather than the views of the general population. The majority of literature published outside Vietnam in this period was written by American, Australian, Soviet, and Chinese historians, and some by overseas Vietnamese. Due to local conditions and the limited access to documents, it was complicated for foreigners to explore Vietnamese materials. Publications by William Duiker (*Vietnam since the Fall of Saigon*, 1985), Carlyle Thayer (*Vietnam since 1975*, 1980), David Marr and Christine White (*Post War Vietnam: Dilemmas in Socialist Development*, 1988), and Robert Emmet Long (*Vietnam Ten Years After*, 1986), relied primarily on documents which were published outside the country, such as reports from the IMF, UN Monthly Bulletin of Statistics, FEER Asia Yearbook, or newspapers and magazines such as *Asian Survey*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *Indochina Issues*, and *Foreign Affairs*. Current publications concerning this period are limited by the scarcity of reliable documents.

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Kyle Horst (Associate Resettlement Officer, the only American working in Ho Chi Minh City in late 1984 and 1985 for the Orderly Departure Program under United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), interview with the author, December 2009 in Washington, DC.
Concerning Vietnam in the 1979-1986 period, political systems, economic development and the renovation were the most significant topics for foreign scholars. For the most part, these scholars concentrated on how the communist party controlled the country and what the socialist economy accomplished or did not, largely ignoring the social or cultural life of the general population. The legacy of the Vietnam War was another important topic. A number of scholars attempted to interpret the aftermath of the war in Vietnam from different angles.\(^4\) The conflicts between Vietnam and its neighbors also attracted the attention of a variety of scholars. From outside the country, they spoke of “resistance against the aggression of Pol Pot,” “Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia,”\(^5\) or “Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia,”\(^6\) which provoked Chinese retaliation.\(^7\)

It is necessary to emphasize that in literary works on Vietnam in the 1979-1986 period written by foreign scholars, Vietnam appeared as an extremely poor and corrupt country.\(^8\) It seemed imprinted in outsiders’ minds that Vietnam was exemplified by a poor and mismanaged economy, a lack of material and spiritual life, and little hope for improvement in the future. As David Marr stated in the 1985 film “Vietnam under communism,” there would be no potential or positive change in Vietnam in the next ten

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\(^5\) David Dellinger. \textit{Vietnam Revisited: From Covert Action to Invasion to Reconstruction}.

\(^6\) Robert Emmet Long. \textit{Vietnam Ten Years After}.

\(^7\) Carlyle Thayer and David Marr. \textit{Vietnam since 1975 – Two Views from Australia}. Centre for the Study of Australian – Asian Relations (Griffith University, Australia, 1982), 36.

years. Vietnamese people were supposedly discontented with their government during this period.

Additionally, outside scholars tended to focus on the negative aspects of the socialist regime in Vietnam. For example, according to Võ Nhân Trí in *Vietnam’s Economic Policy since 1975*, “socialist Vietnam’s experience is not only catastrophic in economic terms but also very costly in human terms,” (which is explained as a sizeable number of people who slowly died in jails, in so-called New Economic Zones, or were boat people).\(^9\)

To a certain extent, research by scholars from outside of Vietnam has viewed the Vietnamese political and economic system as monolithic. As outsiders, they did not understand the complicated pros and cons of life in Vietnam at the time, or the effects on society of those changes. In other words, their portrayal of Vietnam was very politically and economically oriented, and lacked any discussion of the lives and experiences of ordinary Vietnamese citizens.

Until recently, Vietnamese scholars have not paid very much attention to this dark period in Vietnamese history. Twenty years after the Đổi Mới policy, there appears to be a greater focus on the subsidy period and a number of personal memoirs have been released detailing issues dealing with economic management, administrative systems, peoples’ everyday lives, and social relations. However, the few publications that exist are mainly examinations of the contemporary economy and material life (e.g., *Tư duy kinh tế Việt Nam 1975- 1989* [Vietnam Economic Ideology 1975- 1989], 2009). There are also

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reportages, newspaper editorials, short stories, and poems in newspapers and books, and DVDs of the most popular songs during the 1979-1986 period. Since 2005, a number of prominent newspapers, such as *Tuổi Trẻ (Youth), Hà Nội Mới (New Hanoi), Tiền Phong (Vanguard), Lao Động (Labour)*, among others, have published narratives on everyday living conditions during the first decade following national reunification. The articles also covered controversial topics, such as the works by Phạm Thị Xuân Khải and Phùng Gia Lộc, two well-known writers whose careers were adversely affected by their depiction of pre-Đổi Mới life. In 2006, the novel *Gia Đình bé mọn (Small Family)* by Dạ Ngân, on Vietnamese life before 1986, was well received. There have also been a variety of discussions in online forums, attracting the attention of both the middle-aged generation and the younger generation, who were too small to recall any details about the 1979-1986 period.

Perhaps the most explicit attempt to review narratives of the 1979-1986 period was a special exhibit that the Museum of Ethnology (VME) mounted in collaboration with the Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution during the second half of 2006. The exhibit, entitled “Cuộc sống Hà Nội thời bao cấp (1975–1986)” (“Life in Hanoi under the Subsidy Economy”), featured nearly two hundred objects on loan from different museums and private individuals, who had either saved or collected them. By Vietnamese standards, the museum exhibit was very well attended (over 350,000 visitors over a sixteen-month period, more than half of whom were Vietnamese rather than foreigners). Periodic surveys of those present, the comments written in the visitor’s book, and media

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10 Many of these articles were later published in book form, such as Trần Mạnh Chung et al. *Chuyện thời bao cấp (Stories of the Subsidy Period)* (Hanoi: News Agency Press, 2009); Hàng Chức Nguyên et al. “Đêm trước đổi mới (“Night” before Renovation)” (Ho Chi Minh City: Youth Publishing House, 2006).
coverage of the exhibit provide some information on Vietnamese attitudes of this interesting period.

It is important to recognize that, written more than twenty years later, these memoirs do not seem to accurately reflect the experiences of the general Vietnamese populace during the first decade after the war. While these narratives provide some background concerning the economic and societal issues of the period, these authors tended to have non-critical views when recalling the difficulties of life during the period. Therefore, they did not properly describe contemporary opinion.

There may not be a simple answer for why the 1979-1986 period has largely been ignored by the Vietnamese themselves. Mainstream historians, while focusing mainly on positive aspects of the national history, have not paid enough attention to this dark period. As well, it may also be that this period is too close to the present and thus, according to a conception in Vietnamese historiography, a greater amount of time needs to pass before Vietnamese will become comfortable discussing this period. Additionally, in studying the post-war period, scholars would be forced to acknowledge the economic and social mismanagement of the CPV, which could cause their work to be censored. As a result Vietnamese scholars tend to concentrate on less controversial topics which require less revision.

Concerning contemporary publications, all research was conducted under the guidance of the Politburo of the Central Committee Communist Party of Vietnam. In the early 1980s, writers labeled their literature with such names as “dutiful literature” (Hoàng Ngọc Hiền), “praised literature” (Nguyễn Ngọc), “illustrating literature” (Nguyễn Minh
Châu), “royal literature” (Lại Nguyên Ân). Vietnamese literature in the 1979-1986 period can commonly be divided into three categories. The first category consists of senior writers who wrote before 1945 and the beginnings of protracted war with the French. The second category consists of the “war generation” who matured during the thirty-year-resistance against French and American forces. Finally, the third category consists of young authors who wrote after the end of the war in 1975. Although their styles were formed in different contexts, a great number of writers shared common views in the 1980s. While many senior writers stayed with their familiar topics in wartime (the first literature trend), middle age and younger authors more naturally approached current issues of the country (the second trend). Particularly after 1975, authors played an important role in reflecting the national situation and expressing people’s aspirations and opinions towards some aspects of the post-war life.

As products of art by people living in an organized society, Vietnamese literature certainly performed political duties assigned by the CPV. To a large extent, Vietnamese literature in the 1980s was strongly influenced by politics, particularly the political line of the CPV. Vietnamese authors were well aware of what could and could not be written about. As members of the Vietnamese intelligentsia, writers were well aware of the important role of the CPV in leading the country in the past and present. To the writers in the northern part of the country particularly, the key role of the CPV in the fight for reunification of the country served as a reliable model for future achievements in building
“a ten times more beautiful land” and developing the country. In their minds, writing for the CPV, in some cases, even became their social responsibility.

As Lê Ngọc Trà stated in the Literature and Art Journal about the 1980s literature, “Writers’ assignments today are fundamentally to reflect the real life in harmony with the CPV’s political line. This came to be understood by the majority of writers and therefore was not difficult for them.” He emphasized the effects of politics on literature,

The majority of writers, intentionally or unintentionally, chose the safest option, which was to focus on reporting and reflecting as much as possible, without embellishing thereby sullying the real life. About you, yourself, what you think, how you worry—you either ignore it or cover it, or innocently believe that it is a topic so insignificant that it is not worth describing. Apparently, only the Party’s thoughts are enough; the party says and literature repeats, then writers are safe but literature becomes poorer.

Trần Mạnh Háо, in his novel Ly Thân (Separation), shared a similar opinion in a more direct way, “some of our writers always watch the superiors’ behaviors to write to please them. Our previous and current generation of writers always suffered from a complex fear of the rulers.”

Another factor that influenced Vietnamese literature of the 1979-1986 period was editorship and censorship. According to Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, in the 1980s all articles in

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11 Hồ Chí Minh’s saying in May 10, 1969.
12 Lê Ngọc Trà, “Về vấn đề văn học phản ánh hiện thực” (“About social reflection literature”), Literature and Art Journal (16 July 1988). Lê Ngọc Trà (b.1945) graduated from Hanoi College of Education in 1968. He earned a doctoral degree from Moscow University in 1980. After returning to Việt Nam he taught at Ho Chi Minh City College of Education from 1981 to 1985. Lê Ngọc Trà currently is Distinguished Professor of Literature at the Institute of Education, Ho Chi Minh City College of Education. For further information see Dan Duffy’s introduction http://www.vietnamlit.org/wiki/index.php?title=L%C3%A1m_Ng%E1%BB%8Dc_Tr%C3%A0 (accessed May 10, 2010)
13 Ibid.
newspapers, journals, and books had to go through three different steps of censorship: the editorial board of the article or book, the Art Council of the Publishing House, and the Propaganda and Training Section of the CPV (or local publishing committee under direct command of the propaganda section). As a result of this, everything from general ideology and major themes to the smallest detail or a single sentence could be censored if it was defined as “sensitive” or potentially “problematic.” Under this system of heavy censorship, Vietnamese authors had no option other than to revise their work in order to get it published. Particularly in the pre-renovation period, censorship by the CPV’s propaganda and training section unintentionally created an “official” trend of literature which focused on the positive and complimented the excellent leadership of the CPV. All other opinions or ideologies were hardly found in publications of the early 1980s. It was the censorship system that limited creative talents and the ability of authors to be more critical.

It is necessary to recognize historical reasons for this censorship system in Vietnam. For several decades in the late twentieth century, the communist government only allowed artists to publish artwork that was directly useful to the resistance movement. A verse of Hồ Chí Minh (written in the revolutionary years of the early 1940s) became people’s writing creed for years: “Poems today should contain vigor / Poets should also attack.” Literature was used as an effective weapon during wartime to encourage people to overcome hardship in order to gain independence for the nation. Literature fulfilled this function during the Vietnamese wars of the twentieth century.

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After the war ended, this ideology continued to control Vietnamese literature. Leaders of the Propaganda and Training Section of the CPV censored all literary works, and only the “right-margin” ones that followed the political line, were published. This restriction meant that Vietnamese literature in the early 1980s often promoted a very one-sided political position.

Not until 1987 – 1988, after the official birth of the Renovation policy, and N.V.L’s public announcement of the loosening of censorship law, did writers have a more comfortable environment to express their opinions concerning national issues.\(^{16}\) A number of articles with strong criticism appeared in the *Literature and Art Journal* in 1987–1988. Written by Vietnamese intellectuals, these articles reflected a critical view of the censorship system and its effects on public attitudes and the quality of Vietnamese literature. Even though published in the 1987–1988 period, this criticism was inspired by materials from the previous period. Complaints and alternative views from the 1979-1986 period could therefore be found in later publications, especially literature in the 1987 – 1988 period.\(^{17}\)

Moreover, the complexity and hardship experienced by those living in the post-war period was another explanation for the poor and one-sided situation that dominated literature in the early 1980s. According to Thân Trọng Mẫn’s article, which was written overseas, “since real life was not very comfortable, meanwhile in need of a revolutionary spirit, the literature trend of ‘social reflection’ embellished reality. Writers had to deceive

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\(^{16}\) N.V.L. are the initials of Nguyễn Văn Linh, General Secretary of the CPV from 1986-1991.

\(^{17}\) For example, the reportage “Cái đêm hôm ấy… Đêm gì?” (“The Night of That Night… What a Night?”), written by Phùng Gia Lộc in 1987 reported an event in November 1983; “Đơn xin xóa án cho cha” (“A Petition to Absolve my Father”) written by Anh Động in 1988 about an event in 1984.
their readers as well as deceive themselves in order the please their superiors. Therefore, they produced a large amount of congruent, forced, and unnatural artwork, which would effect their reputation negatively in the long term."\(^{18}\)

Inside Vietnam, a popular writer of the 1980s, Nguyễn Minh Châu, explained the difficulties inherent in the everyday life and the consequences this had on literature, “The pragmatic thoughts in other fields of life are infusing artists’ minds, decreasing their aspirations for exploration and creation.”\(^{19}\) Lại Nguyên Ân further developed Nguyễn Minh Châu’s opinion, stating that “the simple, primitive and heavily pragmatic understanding of the social function of literature led to a guideline which demands literature follow the temporary and partial policies. As a consequence, literature was separated from fundamental and long-term issues of human life, society, history, and the nation. In the meantime, it encouraged untalented writers to illustrate the political line, and discouraged conscious and thoughtful writers from exploring and suggesting important social problems.”\(^{20}\) These opinions suggest that writers were well aware of the negative impact censorship and government intrusion had on Vietnamese literature and that some felt it necessary to speak out in order to change the situation.


\(^{19}\) Nguyễn Minh Châu, Trang giấy trước đèn (A Paper under Light) (Hanoi: Social Sciences Press, 2002), 76. Nguyễn Minh Châu (1930-1989) was a fiction writer and essayist. According to the critic Hoàng Ngọc Hiền, he was the earliest champion of Đổi Mới literature, with "Viết về chiến tranh" (“Writing about War,” essay, 1978), exerting great influence among writers. He was also a colonel in the North Vietnamese Army during the wartime. For further information see Linh Đinh’s entry http://www.vietnamlit.org/wiki/index.php?title=Nguyen_Minh_Chau (accessed May 10, 2010).

Research Methods

This thesis draws on written documents published in the 1979-1986 period in order to investigate the people’s opinion of the time. Although the existence of press restrictions during this period means that it may be impossible to fully understand opinion through published sources, this thesis attempts to interpret history as portrayed by published materials. Materials are selected with special attention to the diversity of geographical origin and political trends (people from different social classes in the North and the South of the country, urban and rural areas are all examined).

In order to examine the opinion of the populace, materials are critically studied to reveal the historical fact behind the stories. Among the sources for this thesis, there are three main classifications. Due to the limited sources that I can access for this thesis, literature (including novels, short stories, poems), reportage, scripts, and memoirs, are fundamental sources in providing the contemporary voices of the people. Newspapers and journals provide different circumstances and the diverse views of the public. Other sources of information, including research papers, music lyrics, and governmental documents, etc. serve as complementary materials.

Given the existence of the censorship system, newspapers would not serve as a reliable source. Similarly, research papers and journal articles are unable to provide a fair-minded analysis regarding national issues. Other kinds of materials were, to a large extent, directed by the CPV. In this context, literature is a primary source as it provides the richest source for examining people’s opinion during this period. Although literature also followed the political line of the CPV, the fact that these pieces of literature were
works of fiction allowed it to comment on life during this period in a more indirect fashion. Through direct or indirect means of expression, such as literary metaphors, characters’ worldviews, and their problems, literature writers found different ways to express their views regarding national issues.

In literary works, not only is the world observed by authors described or illustrated, but the writers’ ideological and sentiment world, in which personality of the artist determines the form and shape of the publication. From this perspective, reading literature from the 1979-1986 period provides a sense of contemporary life with its colorful manifestations. Vietnamese literature in the early 1980s reflected the people’s opinion of the times, both contentment and discontentment. In all genres of literature, including short stories, novels, poetry, and drama, writers’ attitudes provide crucial materials to understand society and people in a historical period. In other words, literary works became a means of interpreting the socio-cultural and historical atmosphere.

In many cases, data available online was not very helpful in searching for the writers’ backgrounds. Only a small number of writers who were popular in the 1980s remain active today, and therefore have information available online. For the remainder of the authors, with only the name and title of their 1980s publications, it is hard to identify people who expressed these opinions.

Given the limitations of source materials, especially accessible documents in the US, this thesis does not claim to provide a completely representative analysis of Vietnamese opinion of the time. Instead, it attempts to provide a general sense of the views of Vietnamese people during the 1979-1986 period through several voices. In
many circumstances, the real situation is likely much more complex, but the limited documents available makes it difficult to provide a complete description of people’s opinion of the period. Questions are raised instead.

Although this thesis only discusses some voices from the general population (and not always the most representative ones), it attempts to fill in some historical gaps of the period. Documenting the limited sources available is important as it helps explain why there are such large gaps in the historical literature on post-war Vietnam. Analyzing the views of the average Vietnamese citizen increases our understanding of Vietnam and its people during a turbulent period in its history. Vietnam continued to experience difficult times even after the Vietnam War had ended, and they had fallen outside the consciousness of the rest of the world.
CHAPTER 2: VIETNAMESE OPINION ON SOME POLITICAL ISSUES

Views of the Outside World

During the 1979-1986 period, Vietnam viewed the world as separated into two distinct camps: socialist and capitalist. While the socialist camp primarily consisted of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), China, Mongolia, Cuba, and nations in Indochina, the capitalist system included Western countries (basically the US and Western European countries). According to the view of the Communist Party of Vietnam, socialism and communism were defeating capitalism in the battle for global influence. In all fields—politics, military, and economy—socialist countries were winning world power.21

From the Vietnamese perspective, in spite of the frenzied activities of imperialist states, such as those of the neo-colonialist Americans against the Vietnamese people in the Vietnam War and the cooperation between China and the U.S., which posed a constant and serious threat for Asian security and stability, socialism continuously improved and presented its advantages over capitalism. The representatives attending the Fifth Congress of the CPV agreed that several economic issues in socialist countries were more severe than those of capitalist systems; however, socialism had been playing the leading role in determining the direction of human development.22

22 Ibid., 7-15.
Publications in the 1979-1986 period provide us with a variety of views from Vietnamese leaders and intellectuals regarding the roles played by different nations in the socialist system. To many people, the USSR served as the leader of the socialist world and as such was viewed as the primary party responsible for promoting communism in the world. According to Foreign Minister Nguyễn Cơ Thạch, the Soviet Union respected Vietnamese independence and helped Vietnam the most during forty years of war. Without Soviet aid and support, Vietnam would not have gained its independence. The USSR, therefore, was viewed as the most reliable friend of Vietnam.  

In the early 1980s, the Vietnamese viewed the Soviet Union as a good model in every aspect of Vietnamese life, from revolutionary theory, state management, to cultural activities or lifestyle. Classic publications by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and V. I. Lenin can be easily found in almost every book written by Vietnamese scholars during this time. Lê Như Hoa, an official of the Cultural Studies Institute, before introducing Vietnamese festivals, cited Soviet public festivals to illustrate the function and effects of good festivals on society. Thu Linh and Đặng Văn Lung (Institute of Literature) similarly described the International Labor Day celebration, 1 May 1981, in Red Square in Moscow as a classic model for a historic national event. In their opinion, it was only

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23 Nguyễn Cơ Thạch, interviewed by Nhân Dân (People’s Daily News), cited in Phạm Văn Đồng, et al. Vì Sao Mỹ Thất bại trong Cuộc Chiến Tranh Xâm Lược Việt Nam (Why was the US Defeated in the Invasion of Vietnam) (Hanoi: Truth Publishing House, 1986), 63. This book was well edited in order for leaders to express only useful and safe opinions for the nation and the people in interaction with foreigners. Opinions of Vietnamese leaders therefore sometimes did not sound direct, or even logical as they represented the whole country. In spite of being too political, in the role of national leaders, or great individuals of the historical period, their general opinions of the era and national countries represented the views of the decision makers, who, to a certain extent, directed the history of Vietnam.

the Soviet people who were able to organize such a beautiful festival and only such a festival was able to nurture and enrich the spirit of new socialist people.\textsuperscript{25} As an active member of the socialist community, Vietnam celebrated, by meetings, parades and film screenings, all significant events relating to the international socialist world such as the Great October Socialist Revolution (25 October 1917), Labor Day (May 1), and Victory Day against Fascists (9 May 1945).

While the Vietnamese viewed the USSR positively as the leader of the socialist world, they had a much more negative view of the Chinese, believing they had betrayed socialist principles. China was frequently discussed among Vietnamese researchers, writers, and the general populace in the 1979-1986 period. The Vietnamese believed the Chinese were involved in various schemes designed to expand their military, political, and economic strength in the region. They also criticized the Chinese for their friendly relations with the US.\textsuperscript{26} In the Vietnamese view, China acted like a chauvinist nation in spite of speaking like a socialist one. Vietnam viewed China as putting on the coat of Marxism-Leninism in pursuit of hiding its own nationalism. Putting itself at the center of the world, China made every effort to control the global communist movement, hoping to become the leader of all communist parties in the world. In other words, Chinese strategy was to become the most powerful nation in the world, and gain control over all communist and third-world countries.\textsuperscript{27} From the Vietnamese government’s perspective,

\textsuperscript{25} Thu Linh and Đặng Văn Lung, Lễ Hội Truyền thống và Hiện đại (Festival: Traditions and Modernity) (Hanoi: Culture Publishing House, 1984), 180.

\textsuperscript{26} Phạm Xuân Xứng, Phan Thị Hậu. Hỏi và đáp về Tình hình thế giới và Chính sách Đối Ngoại của Đảng (Questions and Answer about the World and Foreign Policy of the Party), 35.

the fact that China and Vietnam had once had a close relationship made the worsening of relations all the harder to bear. However, Vietnam believed that China was wholly responsible for the deterioration of relations.\footnote{Nguyên Vọng Thiết Tha của Nhân dân Việt Nam: Độc lập, Tự do, Hòa bình, Hữu nghị” (“The Great Desire of Vietnamese People: Independence, Freedom, Peace, and Friendship”), Nhân dân (People’s Daily News), (23 July, 1978).}

On the other hand, the capitalist system commonly appeared in negative terms. In other words, the Vietnamese seemed to use dark lenses to view Western countries. In the Vietnamese opinion, the United States was the leader of the capitalist powers. The image of the US in the world was negative. Bùi Đình Thanh, a historian from the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, argued that the contemporary presidency of Reagan was the most reactionary government ever in American history.\footnote{Bùi Đình Thanh, “Mĩ và Đông Nam Á trong những năm 80” (“The US and Southeast Asia in the 1980s”) in Nguyễn Khánh Toàn, Vẻ Lịch sử Đông Nam Á Hiện đại (About Modern History of Southeast Asia) (Hanoi: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 1983), 58.} President Reagan’s economic policies made even supportive capitalists confused and disappointed. The economic crisis in 1980-1982 left behind a variety of severe legacies, such as a decrease in economic development rate, a waste of work forces, an increase in unemployment, and difficulties in laborers’ living conditions. The Vietnamese believed that the American illusion about the US government, which had already been dark during the Vietnam War era, was getting even worse afterwards. According to Khổng Đoãn Hội,\footnote{In the book by Khổng Đoãn Hội, Đế quốc Mỹ sau Việt Nam (Imperialist America after Vietnam) (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1985), citations were selected from American and French newspapers in pursuit of portraying a dark picture of the US. The author seemed to be biased and very politically oriented in his book. He authored a number of articles and books, including Chu Nghĩa Mao không có Mao (Maoism without Mao, Hanoi, 1982), Vẻ Mối Quan hệ giữa Công nghiệp và Nông nghiệp trong Giải đoạn Hiện nay (On Current Relations between Industry and Agriculture, Hanoi, 1983), Kẻ thù Trực tiếp và Nguy hiểm (Direct and Dangerous Enemy, Hanoi, 1983), Dời mới Tư duy Kinh tế (Renovating Economic Ideology, Hồ Chí Minh City, 1986), Những vấn đề cơ bản của chỉ huy bộ đội trong chiến đấu (Basic Issues Regarding the Command of On-Duty-Soldiers, Trans. from Russian, 1981). Unfortunately, there is no other information on Khổng Đoãn Hội.} the main goal of
American leaders in the early 1980s was to develop a strong military force to win more advantageous influence than the USSR and establish a new world order in a favor of the US. Its strategy would be achieved by a global military base network, economic embargos, and psychological warfare. The United States’ eventual goal stated in various presidents’ policies, doctrines, and theories, was to impose American imperialism at the global level.\(^{31}\)

Regarding foreign relations, Khổng Doãn Hợi argued that the US slandered various national liberation movements in the world as “international terrorism,” controlled directly by Moscow. In his view the US viewed all national liberation movements as being planned or directed by the Soviet Union. Thus, the US expanded its military presence in the Middle East, Central America, South Africa and South Asia in an effort to protect US influence.\(^{32}\)

Especially in Asia, the collusion between the US and China, viewed as two of the biggest reactionary powers in human history, in the opinion of Thái Văn Lan, resulted in a more and more severe situation, seriously threatening the world and Asia’s peace and stability.\(^{33}\) During the final years of the Vietnam War, the US found China to be a reliable ally largely because it was in competition with the Soviet Union and other global revolutionary movements. Thus, the US was taking advantage of China to maintain

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31 Nguyễn Khánh Toàn, *Về Lịch sử Đông Nam Á Hiện đại* (About Modern History of Southeast Asia), 56.
32 Khổng Doãn Hợi. *Đế quốc Mỹ sau Việt Nam* (Imperialist America after Vietnam), 73.
To Japan, the American–Japanese alliance laid the foundations to establish an industrial–military alliance. Thái Văn Lan also argued that the two significant issues that emerged in American diplomacy were to maintain Cambodia as a tense issue in the world; and to maintain the contradiction between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Indochina for the purpose of “using Vietnamese to attack Vietnamese.” Moreover, according to Nguyễn Khánh Toàn, the US also colluded with reactionary political groups in intervening into domestic affairs in Cambodia and internally ASEAN. Regarding Southeast Asia, Huy Hồng believed that the US evaded common proposals of ASEAN, as well as direct interaction with ASEAN as a united economic association of the region. Therefore, an equal and fair-minded economic relationship between the US and ASEAN seemed unlikely.

From the Vietnamese perspective, Asian nations were attempting to seek peace and abate the tense atmosphere in the area. In fact, Asia was facing an unacceptable paradox: natural potential versus human destitution. Asia was attempting to establish a better economic order and expected to contribute to the new balance of the world. However, as Phạm Đức Trong, one of the best-known experts on Southeast Asian studies at the time, stated, Asia still relied on Western powers. Japan was the only

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34 Ibid.
35 Khổng Doãn Hợi. Đế quốc Mỹ sau Việt Nam (Imperialist America after Vietnam), 86.
38 Huy Hồng, “Chính sách của Mỹ với ASEAN trong thời kì sau Việt Nam” (“American Policy to ASEAN in the Post-Vietnam-War Period”) in Về Lịch sử Đông Nam Á Hiện đại (About Modern History of Southeast Asia), 149- 150.
developed nation in Asia with a large industrial sector, but Japanese imperialism with class issues was a direct danger to the regional peace and security, especially when supported by its allies, America and China. India, in spite of its great efforts towards independent economic development, was faced with various dilemmas. China had great potential to contribute to the socialist revolution; nevertheless, Beijing was opening its doors for imperialism and likely becoming a dependency.39

At a lower level, Southeast Asian nations played an important role in the liberation movements of the developing countries, Western expansion into Asia, as well as the global economy. According to the authors of Kinh tế các Nước trong Tổ chức ASEAN (Economy of Nations in ASEAN), ASEAN relied more and more seriously on American military, political, and economic support; and emerged as a vital overseas economic base for Japanese capitalism. Moreover, Southeast Asia was a dense area for Chinese capitalists, whose expanding nationalism would obstruct the regional economic development and social stability.40

Regarding Vietnam’s international relations, the Vietnamese accused Western powers of playing China against Vietnam, which had a negative impact on the relationship between Vietnam and the Western world.41 Vietnamese foreign relations

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39 Phạm Đức Dương, “Việt Nam - Đông Nam Á – Châu Á: Đầu ăn ngày xưa và những Quan hệ ngày nay” (“Vietnam - Southeast Asia – Asia: Past Connection and Present Relationship”) in Về Lịch sử Đông Nam Á Hiện đại (About Modern History of Southeast Asia), 50. Phạm Đức Dương was the Chairman of the Southeast Asian Studies Section, Committee for Social Sciences of Vietnam in the post-1975 period, and became the Director of the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies since its foundation in September 1983.

40 Lê Hồng Phúc, et al., Kinh tế các Nước trong Tổ chức ASEAN (Economy of Nations in ASEAN) (Hanoi: Social Science Press, 1983), 7. The authors, including Lê Hồng Phúc, Hoa Hữu Lân, Hoàng Thị Lịch, Hoàng Thanh Nhàn, were scholars of the World Economy Section, Committee for Social Sciences of Vietnam.

41 Nguyễn Cơ Thạch, interviewed by Nhân dân (People’s Daily News), cited in Vì Sao Mĩ Thất bại trong cuộc chiến tranh xâm lược Việt Nam (Why was the US defeated in the invasion of Vietnam), 63.
with the outside world were basically built up from relationships with the socialist camp. For instance, a 1980 international conference in Hanoi, entitled “Vietnam and the World,” included participants only from the socialist community.\textsuperscript{42}

To Vietnamese people, the relationship among the three countries of Indochina was a special brotherhood which had naturally formed during the common resistance against French and American forces. After the war, the relation developed in a new direction: comradeship among socialist parties. The fight for regional peace and security in the late 1970s and early 1980s, particularly the victory on 7 January 1979, was claimed as a common triumph of the three countries. To a broader extent, all achievements of the Cambodian people were shared by Laotians and Vietnamese and vice versa. This impression could be found with ease in contemporary publications. For example, coverage of the daily news of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), \textit{Nhân Dân (The People’s Daily News)}, provided information on various events of the three countries, such as “National Flag Flown at Half-Mast for three Days in Mourning of Chan-Sy\textsuperscript{43} (\textit{Nhân Dân}, 31 December 1984); “Greeting Cambodian people as entering the 7\textsuperscript{th} Year of People’s Republic Regime” (Anh Xuân, \textit{Nhân Dân}, 2 January 1985); “Ceremonial Meeting on Occasion of the 30\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary of Laotian People’s Revolution in 21 March 1985 at Ba Đình Hall” (\textit{Nhân Dân}, 22 March 1985), etc. Although these articles impacted the way in which people understood Vietnamese relations with Cambodia and


\textsuperscript{43} Chan-Sy was Prime Minister of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea, Vice President of the Council of Ministers, and Member of the Politburo of the Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Party KPRP at the time.
Laos, the real opinion of average Vietnamese citizens about these “common accomplishments” is unknown.

Having a long tradition of resisting foreign domination, the Vietnamese people appeared to be confident and polite when presenting themselves in relation to other nations. Following the Spring of 1979 Incident on the northern border with China, many Chinese counselors, technicians, and workers left their projects unfinished in Vietnam, including the Thăng Long Bridge in Hanoi. A popular writer of the time, Nguyễn Tuần, recorded Vietnamese people’s reactions at that moment. “A long time ago we rode our bike on the colony’s bridge,” one journalist stated in a conversation with his colleagues, “now we do so on our bridge that we built ourselves with the whole hearted support of our friends and [the socialist] camp.” One of his friends replied, “How hard it was to build this bridge. We and the Chinese were working together. After only the ninth pier was done, the Chinese played a dirty trick, and 300 authorities left. Several months later, the Chinese surprisingly attacked our northern border. We won and continued the unfinished work. Then the Soviet experts helped complete the bridge.”

Moreover, the Vietnamese people were proud of their nation, in which altruism and human willingness to die for human peace had become a national moral standard and their infinite energy source. Writer Ma Văn Kháng illustrated this feeling through a story of a Vietnamese soldier-driver sacrificing his own life to save a newly married European couple in Cambodia. Overcoming a variety of dangers on the way, including the fatal interactions with remnants of Pol Pot’s army, the last recommendation of the young Vietnamese to the foreigners is to visit Angkor Wat, which, in his viewpoint, is a

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marvelous wonder of the world.⁴⁵ The spirit of sacrifice for the good, the noble, and the beautiful of a generation can be easily gathered from the story.

Despite the fact that the CPV and its publications portrayed a bright picture of Vietnam, depicting its friendly relations with other countries in the world, it was thought by Vietnamese that Vietnam was, to some extent, not yet at that position. In one of his essays, Nguyễn Minh Châu stated,

Looking outwards to the world, the Vietnamese nation, as an individual after decades of isolation with the human community, is looking inwards and asking “Who am I?” […] The world has been making huge steps forward on the economic and technological development path. Just compare with our Asian neighbors, who were at the same or even lower level of development with us thirty years ago. However, Vietnam is currently left far behind in terms of living standards and development.⁴⁶

Nguyễn Minh Châu’s statement presented the position held by some members of the Vietnamese intelligentsia. Nguyễn Minh Châu, however, looked forward to the future, “we strongly believe that under the leadership of our renovating Party, and current intellectual standards, we will live in harmony with the rest of the world, in pursuit of a happy and prosperous development for all of our sixty million people.”⁴⁷

**Views of the War**

In the period between 1979-1986, the war continued to influence different aspects of Vietnamese life. Although they may have fought on different sides, all Vietnamese
suffered from the war. Once the war was over they continued to deal with the legacies of 
this significant event. Equally influential, a part of the population was participating in 
two conflicts at the northern and south-western borders with China and Cambodia. 
People’s view of the war and its aftermath was expressed in a variety of narratives from 
different perspectives.

The national fight for independence and reunification attracted great attention 
from scholars during the 1979-1986 period. However, they mainly focused on military 
and political activities in wartime under the leadership of the CPV. A significant number 
of books were published in 1984 on the occasion of the 30th celebration of the Điện Biên 
Phủ victory, and in 1985 on the 40th celebration of the August 1945 Revolution, and 
finally the 10th celebration of the Liberation of the South of Vietnam. During the war, 
literature tended to romanticize the conflict, ignoring the pain and loss of life which 
characterized the period. However, in peacetime, literature provided a more complex 
narrative.

Opinions of the war can be gauged through an examination of works of literature. 
From this literature we gain a better understanding of the contemporary view of the 
conflict. These accounts vary among individuals and groups in cities and remote villages 
in the south and the north. The majority of the 1979-1986 literature refers to the Vietnam 
War and its aftermath. War heroes, human sacrifices, brave actions, violent attacks in the 
frontlines, and mothers, wives and children waiting for their sons, husbands and fathers, 
can be found with ease in a large amount of literary works in this period.48 A number of

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48 See Nguyễn Quang Sáng, Mùa Nước Nổi (The Flood Season) (Đồng Tháp: Service of Culture and Information, 1985); “Tiếng Lục Lạc” (Sound of the Tintinnabula) by Nguyễn Quang Lập (1984), “Miền
authors, film producers, playwrights were sensitive to the changes in the lives of soldiers and their families in the post-war era. Living in the post-independence period, the war was imprinted in their minds as if it had happened recently.

Regarding the Vietnam War, the view given by Communist Party leaders was different from those of the general public. Interviewed by a Japanese journalist, Lê Đức Thọ expressed his views as an individual and a political leader on behalf of his people. Wars, in his mind, contained many difficulties, such as human loss, material poverty, ferocious attacks, but the main difficulty lay in how to correctly start and end the war. The Americans intervened in Vietnam immediately after Vietnam defeated the French, and withdrew from Vietnam after the Paris Peace Agreement. “We defeated the US because we understood the global context, particularly the positions of the US and Vietnam, therefore we successfully took our opportunity to make a timely end to the war.”

The events that attracted the most attention from people in the 1979-1986 period were significant points of the war, such as the Tet Offensive in 1968, the bombing over Hanoi in 1972, the Paris Agreement in 1973, as well as the Mỹ Lai massacre in 1968. In the 1979-1986 period in Vietnam, Mỹ Lai was a specific example of a heinous crime that Americans committed in Vietnam and the enormous miseries Vietnamese suffered.


49 Lê Đức Thọ, interviewed by a Japanese journalist, cited in Vì Sao Mỹ thất bại trong cuộc chiến tranh xâm lược Việt Nam (Why was the US defeated in the invasion of Vietnam), 15.
However, by the early 1980s, Sơn Mỹ was building new schools and hospitals, as a symbol of the Vietnamese spirit and love for peace.\textsuperscript{50}

It is necessary to notice that during this period, Vietnamese literature was colored by the depiction of heroic actions by grand figures, thus it had an “epic style.” The individual self, if it appeared, belonged to or was absorbed into the collective. Nevertheless, although emerging from only a few literary works, which were sometimes even called “problematic” publications, non-heroic sides of the war and other personal concerns of the war reflected different opinions of the war held by the populace. This should be regarded as the first attempts to review the Vietnam War in particular, national history in general. From this perspective, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Bảo Ninh, and Đặng Nhật Minh played pioneering roles.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp appeared in Vietnamese literature as the most typical manifestation of the renovation movement with three famous short stories in \textit{Literature and Art Journal}, which are “Vàng Lửa” (Fired Gold, 1988), “Kiếm Sắc” (Sharp Sword, 1989), “Phẩm Tiết” (Chastity, 1989). In Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s literature, he played with history through multifaceted approaches and various refractions in order to question his people. As Nguyễn Ngọc put it, “sometimes decisively and fiercely—even shamelessly, sometimes fondly and poetically, [Nguyễn Huy Thiệp] turned things upside down in order to reveal the long hidden origins of those social realities described by other

\textsuperscript{50} Mạnh Việt. \textit{Mở lại tập Hồ sơ Sơn Mỹ (Re-considering Sơn Mỹ Case).} (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1978), 92-5.
writers.”\textsuperscript{51} In other words, “drawing on his artistic sensibility, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp was able to ‘hear’ within Vietnamese society the profound need, one growing everyday more pressing, to look at ourselves in the mirror to discover who we are.”\textsuperscript{52} His Tướng về Hưu (\textit{The General Retires}, 1988), for example, displays a phenomenon never before seen in previous literature: the alarm and confusion of a war hero faced with the chaotic reality of post-war society.

Another case of a different voice on the war is Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh (\textit{The Sorrow of War}) by Bảo Ninh. This novel, first published in 1987 with the title Thần phân của Tình yêu (\textit{The Fate of Love}), was the first publication exploring the war from an individual perspective. For the first time since the end of the war, the pessimistic side of war, including death, was discussed at length. Bảo Ninh saw and wrote about a different war than previously depicted, meanwhile strongly affirming the role of the individual in society, the right to life and happiness, and the suffering of individuals. Bảo Ninh’s experiences during the decade after the war inspired him to speak for people returning home from wars: Wars took away peace from their soul.

If Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh (\textit{The Sorrow of War}) by Bảo Ninh was a bomb in Vietnamese prose in the 1979-1986 period, Bao giờ cho đến tháng Mười (\textit{When the Tenth Month Comes}, 1984) by Đặng Nhật Minh was similarly the first film in Vietnamese cinema illustrating alternative views of the lives of soldiers and their families in peacetime. Đặng Nhật Minh’s film proved that life after reunification was more


\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
complicated with people’s attitudes and reactions to war and people at war. It was Đặng Nhật Minh’s alternative view that led to *When the Tenth Month Comes* being censored thirteen times before its release.  

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In the period 1979-1986, Vietnam was involved in two conflicts with its close neighbors China and Cambodia. Differences in time and places aside, the two conflicts have similarities, including the Vietnamese belief that they were involved in a just conflict, had a brave fighting spirit, and were humane to the enemy. The two conflicts, known as “red brotherhood at war” by Western scholars, occurred in relation with each other in a complex international context. Lê Hồng asserted in his 1979 article on “Understanding the Current Cambodian Issue” that “at the present, we cannot analyze the Cambodian issue without putting it in the context of Chinese strategy for dominating Southeast Asia.”

Studying the two conflicts became the foremost duty of Vietnam’s academic institutions during the period of 1979-1986, particularly in the year 1979–when the conflict arose. The Institute of History Studies, for instance, was assigned in 1979 a

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55 Regarding the conflict with China, for several years right after its outbreak in 1979, a great number of Vietnamese writers condemned Chinese expansionism and big nation hegemony. However, this topic then gradually disappeared in literary works. Only a few publications discussed the war with limited information. A 1997 official reference book for the university undergraduate and graduate history course spends only one half of a page (two paragraphs) in describing the Vietnam-China conflict in the 53-page chapter on the 1976-1986 period. (Trần Bá Đệ. *Lịch sử Việt Nam từ 1975 đến nay: Những vấn đề lý luận và thực tiễn của Chủ nghĩa xã hội ở Việt Nam* (*Vietnam since 1975: Theoretical and Pragmatic Issues of Socialism in Vietnam*) (Hanoi: National University Press, 1997). The only book to provide some details regarding this conflict from Vietnamese perspectives is *Sự thật về những lận xuất quân của Trung Quốc và*
crucial project entitled “Against the reactionary Chinese and its Pol Pot alliance in Cambodia,” which included five smaller projects regarding diplomatic and political issues. This was considered to be historians’ contribution to the people’s great resistance against foreign invasion. This was also a significant topic of a number of newspaper columns, journal articles, and other publications, including conference proceedings, short stories, poetry, dramas, film, etc.

Many contemporary publications on the conflict with China provided information of the Chinese conspiracy to invade Vietnam, as part of a large effort to conquer the whole of Southeast Asia. Sự thật về một chính sách bành trướng bá quyền (The Truth of an Expansionist and Hegemonic Policy), which claimed to detail the Chinese offensive against the Vietnamese, suggested that the February 1979 War was the peak in a series of Chinese schemes and crimes which had been taking place since the mid 1960s. Through various ruses, Chinese spies infiltrated the country to entice local people to comply with the Chinese conquerors. While Trần Thọ provided numbers and testimony by Chinese

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Quan hệ Việt-Trung (The Truth Behind the Sending of Chinese Troops and Vietnamese-Chinese Relations) by Nguyễn Huy Toàn et al. (Đà Nẵng: Đà Nẵng Publishing House, 1996).


Nhân Dân, during the period of conflict in 1979, for example, had daily reports of the battlefield, some columns like “Quân và dân biên giới Anh hùng chiến đấu dũng mãnh” (“Heroic People and Valiant Soldiers at the Border”), Thời sự thế giới: Thế giới Đoàn kết vè Việt Nam chống Trung Quốc xâm lược (World News: International support for Vietnamese Fight against China).

See Tạp chí Cộng Sản (Communism Journal) in 1983, for instance, published a number of articles by northern scholars against Maoism, Chinese expansionism, and great nation policy.


spies about numerous crafty artifices in pursuit of economic and ideological sabotage. Phạm Tuất illustrated Chinese espionage in the context of a Hmong village in the border area in his 1982 short play “Những ngôi sao sát tay màu đỏ” (“The Red Iron Stars”). This play depicted a Chinese spy, who used to live in the village returning to Vietnam, after a time in China, as an “old friend” to tell other villagers that “the Hmong King of our Hmong people in Beijing sends me here to remind you of our relationship in the past.”

Similarly, Chinese spies were portrayed in short stories written by Anh Chính (“Hương Quế” – “The Smell of Cinnamon,” 1979), and Dương Thu Hương (“Chân Dung Người Hàng Xóm” – “Portrait of My Neighbors,” 1985). The appearance of publications highlighting supposed instances of Chinese spies reveals the effectiveness of CPV propaganda as it even came to influence contemporary literature, and reflected part of the truth.

Another impression from reportages, notes, and stories was that Vietnamese people were not intimidated by the Chinese – they were confident in the eventual victory of Vietnam. Local ethnic people kept working in the field, playing flutes and singing love songs on the riverside. Their attitudes showed no fear of the Chinese.

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61 Nguyễn Thành Lê et al. Một số đặc điểm của chủ nghĩa bành trướng Trung Quốc chống Việt Nam, Lào, Campuchia (Some Characteristics of the Chinese Expansionism against Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), 95-105.
63 Xuân Đức et al. Bão tháng giêng (Storm in January) (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1979).
communities believed that Kinh cadres\textsuperscript{66} would fight and help local people fight for peace in the mountainous villages. They in turn supported the national defense by warning border guards of suspicious people and helping to patrol the border night after night.

On the other hand, Kinh ethnic people from Hanoi and other provinces voluntarily stayed in border areas to devote themselves to national defense. Many joined the army and worked closely with local people, the majority of whom were ethnic minority groups like Hmong, Hà Nhi, Tày, and Red Dao. Despite their different cultures, the Kinh people largely won these groups’ support.\textsuperscript{67} Additionally, the support of these minority peoples motivated the Kinh to fight hard. Thanks to their fighting spirit, a single Vietnamese was depicted as being able to defeat 40 to 50 Chinese soldiers. Even when they were wounded, they stayed in their position and kept firing at the enemy.\textsuperscript{68} The close relationship between soldiers and local people was a significant topic in various documents in the 1979-1986 period.\textsuperscript{69} It is necessary to notice that, even in an armed conflict, Vietnamese people treated their enemy humanely. Anh Chính’s figure tears his

\textsuperscript{66} In Vietnam, the Kinh is the the majority ethnic group of Vietnam, comprising 90\% of the population.
\textsuperscript{67} Cao Tiến Lê, “Chén Rượu phía Bắc” (“The Glass of Wine in the North”) in Bão tháng giêng (Storm in January), 104.
\textsuperscript{68} Triệu Bôn, “Bão tháng giêng” (“Storm in January”) in Bão tháng giêng (Storm in January), 93.
shirt to bandage the wound of a Chinese soldier, who used to live in the same village with him.\textsuperscript{70}

It was a common understanding in 1979-1986 Vietnam that the conflict with Cambodia was a generous action to help liberate their neighbor country. An official statement made by Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng in response to an American journalist in 1985 noted, “our voluntary army entered Cambodia on the purpose of our legitimate self-defense rights against Pol Pot’s invasion at our southwestern border. In the meantime, we have helped Cambodian people fight against Pol Pot’s extermination, which killed millions of Cambodians.”\textsuperscript{71}

Vietnamese people expressed that they were fighting to gain justice and humanity, and to share misery and loss with their brother Cambodians. Journalist Trần Đình Bá shared his admiration of Vietnamese voluntary soldiers of the Lam River Infantry Division when reporting their achievements at the southwestern border and two year service in Cambodia. A variety of examples of their sacrifice were described: many soldiers fought until their last breath; one carried a 75 year old Cambodian woman on his back for 15 kilometers of forest and mountains to save her life; wounded soldiers gave their limited amount of medicine to Cambodian people; they starved themselves to share food with Cambodian villagers; and they helped local Cambodians reconstruct their houses, build new schools, and hospitals for orphans.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{70} Anh Chính, “Hương Quế” (“The Smell of Cinnamon”) in Bão tháng giêng (Storm in January), 120.
\textsuperscript{71} Phạm Văn Đồng, interviewed by an American journalist, cited in Vì Sao Mỹ Thất bại trong cuộc chiến tranh xâm lược Việt Nam (Why were the US defeated in the invasion of Vietnam), 11.
\textsuperscript{72} Trần Đình Bá, “ Kiên quyết với kẻ thù, thủy chung với bè bạn” (“Determination against the Enemy, Loyalty to Friends”), Quân Đội Nhân dân (People's Army Daily News) (5 December, 1980). Trần Đình Bá is a soldier-journalist for Quân Đội Nhân dân (People's Army Daily News) from 1975-1999. His articles regarding social problems have been well received throughout the country.
The fight at the border with Cambodia also served as a rich source of inspiration for many Vietnamese artists. In 1979, the poem “Khúc hát ru Em bé Cam pu chia” (“A Lullaby for a Cambodian Child”) by Nguyễn Trọng Tạo was set to music, and the song was selected as the first song of the musical cassette Cam pu chia: Chiến đấu và Hi vọng (Cambodia: Fight and Hope).\(^73\) Two years later, during his visit to Phnom Penh, poet Tế Hanh expressed his emotions as a foreign visitor witnessing a dark side of human life through his poem series. His heartfelt commiseration was dedicated to the victims of Pol Pot’s regime, in one case, to a Cambodian woman; on another occasion, to an eight year old boy with a naïve smile in the photo at the Tuol Sleng prisons.\(^74\) Even though many Cambodians were killed by Pol Pot’s regime and Cambodian society was nearly destroyed, to Tế Hanh thought, Cambodia would eventually restore itself, as the Apsara classical dance suggests.

The Apsara does not return to heaven  
She stays with people living in misery  
Until the evil is defeated  
Apsara reincarnates with smiles  
[...] The dance of humans and life.\(^75\)

**Responsibility for the Nation**

In modern Vietnam, the one hundred year fight for independence and unity played an important role in developing Vietnamese understanding of the nation. In the 1979-1986 period, the concept of “nation” implied diverse meanings for different types of

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\(^{75}\) Tế Hanh, “Apxara” (“Apsara Dance”), in Sức sống mùa xuân (Spring Vitality), 50.
people in the society. According to historian Phan Huy Lê, 1981 marked the 25th year in which the formation of the Vietnamese nation had been discussed by native historians with more than 40 publications. Originally the CPV assigned historians with the task of researching the formation of the nation in order to strengthen national unity. This research expanded the general knowledge of the Vietnamese people of the nation. According to this view, thousands of years ago, Vietnam was formed largely as the result of a need to resist foreign encroachment. In the last decades of the twentieth century, Vietnamese people were similarly constructing and defending the independent and united nation they had just gained. All Vietnamese were willing to devote their life to the nation’s welfare.

To Nguyễn Minh Châu, the concept of nation was approached through images of land and people that he observed for years. He wrote,

Our nation is experiencing a severe storm from which each hero stepping out is a philosophical person. This thought came to me after many times in many years I came and lived together with those heroes in that central part of the country. They overcame extreme misery of separation, starvation, and death caused by the enemies. After the wars, they returned to their ancestors’ villages, where wild grass covered old house foundations, weapon fragments and non-explosive bombs were spread everywhere, plus inclement weather and impoverished soil. The strip of land exists as the evidence of immortal human life.

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76 Phan Huy Lê, “Qua 25 năm thảo luận Vấn đề Hình thành Dân tộc Việt Nam” (“25 years of Discussion on the Formation of the Vietnamese Nation”) in Sử học trên Đường Phát triển (The Development of History) Institute of History Studies ed. (Hanoi: Social Science Press, 1981), 65. Phan Huy Lê is considered one of the best historians of Vietnam in modern times. He co-founded the History Department of the National University in Hanoi and is now the president of the Vietnamese Association of History Studies.

Nguyễn Khải’s preoccupation was with how to create sustainable development for the nation. The main character in his 1981 story, “Người gặp hàng ngày” (“I Met Him Everyday”), spoke for the author. Economy and technology were necessarily emphasized as important factors in social development. However, a society cannot sustainably exist without a social and cultural background. Therefore both responsible writers, like the main figure, and excellent economic managers, like his neighbor, played a pivotal role in the developing process of the country.

Looking forward toward the future of the nation, citizens were willing to construct the new socialist society. Each social class, including soldiers, peasants, workers, intelligentsia, and artists, performed their duties to their nation as outlined by their social roles.

To the people’s army, defending the nation was their foremost responsibility and they were willing to sacrifice their life for the nation’s peace and security. In their mind, the nation and defense of the nation was a duty which came above all other responsibilities. This became an obsession to soldiers even in a small single attack. In Ngô Đạt’s 1983 short story “Câu chuyện Tháng Hai” (“The Story of February”), Phàm is left alone in a violent fight surrounded by wounded soldiers in a point d’appui at the northern border. He spoke to himself and his dead comrades, “this point d’appui is our

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78 Nguyễn Khải, “Người gặp hàng ngày” (“I Met Him Everyday”) in Nguyễn Khải, Khoảnh khắc đang sống (The Living Moment), 18. Nguyễn Khải (1930-2008) served in the People’s Army from 1945 to 1988, when he retired as a colonel. His career as a writer started in 1959 with the novel Xung Đột (Conflict). He is a popular writer in Vietnam with short stories, novels, reportage, drama regarding the soldiers in wartime, rural life in modern society, and social changes.
nation. Losing it means losing our nation.”⁷⁹ This thought considerably empowers him to defeat the enemy.

Similar thinking also came to the minds of forest wardens in the northern mountainous areas. When the Chinese penetrated deeply into Vietnamese territory, the whole team was determined to fight. As the leader stated, “Fight, my Comrades! No one commands us to fire, but our heart. Our nation is invaded; our people are killed by the enemy. That is our command. We must fight to hold every single piece of land of our nation.”⁸⁰

Another story was inspired by border guards stationed at the cross-roads area where China, Laos, and Vietnam meet. Tả Kho Khử village is located in a remote area, which is 200 kilometers away from the center of Mường Tè District, Lai Châu province. Lack of materials, local bandits, and no available means of transportation challenged everyone who lived in this area. Border guards in this area understood their isolation from the rest of the world, but their responsibility for the protection of the nation was much more vital. Many soldiers stayed in that mountainous village for twenty to thirty years without any holiday. Tô Minh Điền, growing up in a Red River Delta province, Thái Bình, wished to return home to repair his family’s nearly collapsed house and support his wife in taking care of their old mother and three small children on his ancestors’ land. In his twenty-second year on the mountain, he unflinchingly expressed his views, which were, as he stated, similar to those of other people living there. “All of us share a common outlook. We are national defense soldiers. Not only in this village,

⁷⁹ Ngô Đạt, Mach sống (Living Pulse), 3-15.
⁸⁰ Khuất Quang Thụy, “Mệnh lệnh trái tim” (“Command from the Heart”) in Xuân Đức et al. Bão tháng giêng (Storm in January), 54.
soldiers in other border posts, such as Len Xu Xin, Mường Nhé, Pai Ma, Ca Lăng, are the same. I myself know soldiers and policemen who have voluntarily lived here for thirty years, even though they had been offered other, more attractive positions. To me, the soldier’s responsibility to the nation is the most significant."  

Two thousand kilometers away, at the southwestern battlefield against Pol Pot’s army, people reportedly shared similar views of the nation. The 1979 short drama “Bức thư Biên Giới” (“Letter from the Border”) by Vũ Phương Anh, dedicated to “the heroic Cambodian people,” is about the 415th Regiment in the fight against Pol Pot’s army. In the letter announcing their son’s death to his wife, the commander of the regiment Hoài wrote, “It is another sleepless night of mine. Everyone here is the same. If it is necessary to stay awake, awake for the life of our nation, for our people’s happiness, everyone is always ready to do it. Here at the border, for our nation, everyone is willing to do anything without any hesitation, without any calculation. Our son is one of numerous soldiers devoting their lives for the nation, for people’s happiness from the past, the present to the future.”

Wars are very common in the history of Vietnam, therefore it is not a surprise that generation-to-generation Vietnamese writers have devoted their lives to writing about issues relating to the defense of the nation. To writer Nguyễn Minh Cháu, Vietnamese people were not only continuing their thousand-year tradition to fight for their independence, they also contributed to the reconstruction and development process of the

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81 Như Phong, “Nơi ngã ba biên giới” (“At the Three Way Border”) in Án tượng không dế quên (Unforgettable Impression), 93.
country afterwards. He wrote, “if the historical hero Gióng, after defeating foreign invaders flew back to heaven, our army now, after liberating the whole country would stay on earth with people to develop the central highlands, to do farming, mining, logging, etc.”

In fact, many soldiers returned to their hometown or village and contributed considerably to build a new life in their fatherland. To those people, constructing the whole country after war was now their foremost responsibility. Contemporary literary works report that on-duty army troops served as helpful support systems to build social constructions and to settle people in new lands. In the independent era, the relationship between military forces and people seemed to maintain the close connection that developed during the periods of war.

Making up a major part of the population, Vietnamese peasants contributed the most to form Vietnam’s cultural characteristics. Peasants in Vietnam are commonly believed to have a strong attachment to the homeland, rustic honesty, and loyal patriotism. As Kao Son simply portrayed the image of a Vietnamese peasant, “he is a pure peasant. The peasant is identical to a plough in that both are closely connected to the

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83 Gióng is one of the four immortal saints in Vietnamese culture. The legend goes that under the sixth king of the Hùng dynasty, there was a three-year-old child of an old couple in Phù Đổng Commune, today Gia Lâm, Hanoi. The baby could not speak or smile, sit or walk, just lay wherever he was placed. When the country was in danger of a northern invasion, Gióng suddenly rose and turned into a valiant man. After defeating the enemy, he reached the top of Sóc Mountain and flew into the heavens. For further information, see Ngô Sĩ Liên, Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư (Complete Works of Đại Việt History) (Hanoi: Social Sciences Press, 1998).


Quyঃnh, as a representative of Vietnamese peasants, overcomes all difficulties in life and bad reputation to return to his fatherland. Kao Sơn’s 1985 story presents a popular understanding among Vietnamese people that, for their whole lives, the peasants’ loyalty to the village, to the nation remains unchanged. In the 1979-1986 period, in spite of vast changes in real life, the attitudes of peasants toward the nation did not change. According to Trần Bạch Đằng, an expert in southern Vietnam, the respectful manners of peasants in the Mekong Delta lay in their deeper and deeper attachment to their nation.\(^{87}\)

With the determination to build up a country “ten times more beautiful,” Vietnamese people spread throughout the whole country to re-inhabit new lands. People from Hanoi, Hải Hưng (today Hải Dương and Hưng Yên), Thái Bình, Hồ Chí Minh city, etc. moved west, north or southward to exploit natural resources. Not only some families, but the whole clan, hamlet, village, with the party cell, schools and teachers, hospitals and doctors, moved together. For instance, Lâm Hà district (Lâm Đồng province today) was formed in 1978 by people from Hà Tây, Vĩnh Phúc, Hanoi. People of Vân village (Đan Phượng, Hà Tây) thought, “thanks to the liberation, we can pass such a long distance [from Hà Tây in the north to Lâm Đồng in the south]. Both North and South are

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a part of one country, which we call home. Thus we are willing to move anywhere.”

When settling down in a new land, newcomers were always welcomed by local people, many of whom were ethnic minorities.

Sharing the same thinking as Tô Hoài, Tùng Điển in his 1984 short story “Kì niệm phố bãi” (“Street Memories”) described a Hanoi family moving to a mountainous area in the northwest province Phú Thọ since the 1950s. After 1975, the whole family moved again southward to the Central Highlands to develop a new economy. In their mind, “the nation is now united; there is no northern or southern part.” If the mother thought when deciding to move northwest “whatever new land the government asks us to develop, we move,” twenty years later, her daughter had the same idea when she chose to settle in the Central Highlands. To the daughter, “we work hard wherever we live. The fact that we build a new economy here is no different than in the northwestern area.”

According to Vietnamese writers, not only were people from the delta moving to the mountainous areas, ethnic people, for instance those in the Central Highlands, were also willing to migrate to new lands. In their opinion, anywhere that they worked hard, sacrificed for the people’s prosperity and happiness is their homeland. All places in the Central Highlands, the North, the South or the Center is the motherland of all Vietnamese people. The wholehearted dedication to nation building was expressed through the

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90 Ibid., 73.
91 Ibid.
voluntary works in the forest area of a young Doctor of Forestry Studies or the willingness of a young mother to teach in a mountainous area instead of staying in the city.

The great devotion of people to their nation was a rich source of inspiration for artists. An artist in Nguyễn Thé Kiếm’s story learns from his own life of traveling throughout the country. If he used to favor natural scenery when he was young, he now felt more attached to the people of a nation which overcame great challenges. He admires their marvelous achievements, their incredible bravery, and steadfast determination to fight for national independence and then to develop the independent country.

Representing the Vietnamese intelligentsia, two professors in chemistry Nam and Huấn in Nguyễn Khải’s 1979 drama “Khoảnh khắc đang sống” (“The Living Moment”) expressed their wholehearted devotion to the nation by their tireless work at a university in the south. Their sole desire is to usefully contribute to their nation and people. To these people, individual reputation and prosperity are valueless. “A Vietnamese intellectual can sacrifice all of his honorable possessions for his nation,” this is how Huấn, representing communist intellectuals, defended his non-communist colleague Nam in a discussion with his son when his son asks about the possibility of Nam leaving the country.

Dedicated to the nation, Vietnamese people believed that the situation would soon improve. Even among difficulties and dilemmas, they were apparently optimistic and

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looked forward to a bright future. They fought and worked for the land of all Vietnamese people, for the happiness of themselves and the next generation. In Thái Văn Hóa’s 1980 song “Đất nước bên bờ sóng” (“The Nation on the Wave”), Vietnam emerges victorious after many wars and sufferings,

Violent storm of life has formed our solemn belief
[We] fight for today’s independence and freedom,
for tomorrow’s happiness […]
And we forever place our trust in our nation Vietnam.97

The last will of a soldier in the northern battlefield in the 1979 story “Mệnh lệnh trái tim” (“Command from the Heart”) by Khuất Quang Thụy implies the spirit of a collective army fighting for the land’s future. Thuật states before his last breath, “we have to think of the future. This land belongs to us forever.”98 In the fight for a brighter future for the nation, human loss becomes understandable. Commander Hoài ends his letter announcing their son’s death for his wife with a consolation: “the last thing I would like to say is that you should not worry too much about our private mourning, but think of the bright future of our motherland.”99

The hope for the future was specialized in potential development of economic life, on which Trần Bạch Đằng reported from his field trip to Nhị Long village, Càng Long District, Cửu Long province (present Trà Vinh province). Returning to the old battlefield seven years after the war ended, he could not recognize the land that twelve years earlier he knew by heart every shelter or river branch. The green village with fruit

98 Khuất Quang Thụy, “Mệnh lệnh trái tim” (“Command from the Heart”) in Bão tháng giêng (Storm in January), 68.
and vegetable gardens and rice paddies was embellished with two storey houses and TV antennas. Tiề̂n, a brave soldier in the Vietnam War and a wealthy farmer, stated in 1982 in a very serious manner “now only lazy people are poor.” The land and people in Nhị Long provided the author with a strong belief of potential strength of the economy at the local level.

Views of the Political Regime

Living in a socialist country under the control of a communist party, the concept of “socialism” seemed to be very abstract to many Vietnamese people. Their understanding of the socialist system appeared very simple: everything is good. They did not question publicly the nature of socialism nor critically study its theory. Instead they believed in what the CPV told them about its excellent characteristics and benefits for socialist people. People were aware of their social responsibility and made every effort to contribute to this process of building socialism for the whole nation. The tradition of solidarity in community was applied perfectly to this process. Staying out of this process meant self-isolating from the community, the nation, the village, and the family. After prolonged wars for independence and the practicing of collectivist values, many people did not want to be separate from their beloved community.

Through literary works in the period of 1979-1986, Vietnamese people expressed different views about the contemporary government, the CPV, and political situations in the country. It was a significant impression of people’s strong trust in the CPV’s

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100 Trần Bạch Đằng, “Chuyện ngắn ven bờ đ astrology” (“A Story from the Land Red Coconut”) in Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long: 40 năm (The Mekong Delta: 40 Years), 86.
101 Ibid., 89.
leadership. To some intellectuals, the CPV did successfully spread out its demagogic appeal to its kind and loyal people. As Hoàng Hữu Các reported, the Party did liberate the people, which was a great benefit to the people. Therefore, the people owed the Party a great debt of gratitude. Frequently, political speeches began with the phrase “Thanks to the Party’s goodwill.”

To the majority of Vietnamese people in 1979-1986, the CPV, founded by Hồ Chí Minh, played the leading role in the prolonged struggle against colonialism and foreign invasions of the nation. The CPV was eventually successful after decades in bringing independence for their nation, freedom for the people as well as enough rice and clothes for their lives. After the war, the CPV worked hard to build a prosperous and just society, and to improve living conditions by providing enough high-quality rice and clothes for people. These statements, as they appeared in all documents of the CPV and speeches of leaders of the government, were exactly what people were looking forward to. People believed that the regime which had successfully liberated them in the past would be absolutely capable of leading the nation to other achievements. Therefore, they were legitimately proud of the CPV and its members. In 1979-1986, becoming a Party member was a great honor. Hence, eligible citizens strived for that reputation. It was thought that after becoming communists, people would belong to a class of morally pure people highly respected and beloved by the community. It was believed that communists who

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102 Hoàng Hữu Các “Đêm Trăng” (“A Sleepless Night”) in Người Dân bà Quỳ (The Kneeling Woman), 133.
acted improperly did so because of personal weakness and not as a result of any failing in the socialist system.\textsuperscript{104}

The column “Thinking of the Party, Nation, and People” of the Nhân Dân (People’s Daily News) attracts various readers of the newspaper. All opinions certainly supported the CPV with positive and optimistic views of the nation. For instance, a reader wrote in 8 February 1985 that “I am 75 years old, my trust, respect and gratitude for the CPV are even more passionate and intense than when I was young.”\textsuperscript{105} And this opinion is apparently common for a great number of people. As Trương Mỹ Hoa stated about the people in Hồ Chí Minh City in Nhân Dân (People’s Daily News) on 30 January 1985, “people from all over the country settle in Tân Bình district. They wholeheartedly trust and follow the leadership of the CPV.”\textsuperscript{106} As a published organ of the CPV, Nhân Dân (People’s Daily News) reflected only one-sided opinions in favor of the CPV.

Emerging from published literary works were images of the communist party and its members’ plans for directed economic, social, and cultural growth. At the provincial level, Trần Bạch Đằng argued that the Party branch in Tiền Giang province set an example of applying the general political line into local context in order to develop its economy. Tiền Giang’s Party branch reportedly succeeded in improving people’s living

\textsuperscript{104} Anh Động, “Tiếng Bước Chân” (The Sound of Steps), in Qua rồi thời bao cấp (The Subsidy Period is Over) (Hanoi: Association of Writers Publishing House, 2006), 164. Anh Động (b. 1941) lives most of his life in the south of Vietnam. His publications, including novels, short stories, film scripts, drama, and reflective essays, focus on social and cultural life in the south, such as Ven rừng tràm (At one Side of the Mangrove Forest, 1978); Bống núi Tô Châu (Shadow of Tô Châu Mountain, 1984); Tiếng trong Sam phó (Sounds of the Sam Phó Drum, 1986); Đồng sông lấp lánh (The Sparkling River, 1990).

\textsuperscript{105} Nhân dân (People’s Daily News), No 11178, (8 February 1985).

\textsuperscript{106} Nhân dân (People’s Daily News), No 11169, (30 January 1985).
conditions in the first decade after the war. Long An was another province in which the Party branch played the leading role in enhancing the local living standard. According to Trần Đình Bá’s 1985 article “Bù giá vào lương: Một chủ trương lớn để tiến tới xóa bỏ quan liều bao cấp” (“Expenses into Wage: A Great Policy to Eliminate Bureaucracy and Subsidy Process”), living conditions in Long An province changed very positively in the past four years in all aspects of life. Economic quotas for local consumption and state submission were reached. Also, social and cultural life was vibrant. Long An’s model was followed by other provinces in the country, such as Hải Hưng, Hải Phòng, An Giang, and Quảng Nam - Đà Nẵng. Long An’s accomplishments provided the author with a strong belief in the Party’s policies which would stimulate national economic growth.

From an alternative approach, Võ Đắc Danh portrayed a different picture of the regime and relations between the people and the CPV in the incident in Long Điền Đông A, Giá Rai district, Minh Hải province (present Bạc Liêu province) in 1986. Long Điền Đông A was a bright example of a strong and pure Party branch, highly productive in rice, salt, and fish—a successful agricultural cooperative. Local people were famous for their contribution to the revolutionary resistance, and for their sacrifices in the war. It is hard to find a family without a dead or wounded member in the village.

In the last few days of 1986, a foreign radio station broadcast that on 21 December 1986, hundreds of peasants protested against the unjust treatment of the local

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administration in front of the provincial committee building. The news report did complicate the matter, since the provincial leaders confirmed that the “foreign enemy” backed the people’s protest. In fact, the village’s leaders did make mistakes in economic management, which, to generous southerners, could be negotiated by just some conversations. However, the local leaders used security forces and militia, and without any reasonable explanation, arrested some so-called “problematic” elements.

Bảy Thân, as a prestigious senior, together with several people, represented the villagers to report the issues to provincial leaders. He was then accused of leading people to protest against the state and arrested. Hundreds of villagers defended his family and over eighty people followed the arrest to the provincial committee. On the way, the crowd broke into chants of “Against Oppression! Supporting the Communist Party of Vietnam! Forever Live Hồ Chí Minh!” The story was exaggerated by the different levels of authorities and all offenses were unfortunately attributed to Bảy Thân.

According to Bảy Thân, “the protest exploded as a result of various resentful and unjust events for a long time. Moreover, people here have a tradition of protest since the fight against America and its allies.” Interviewed by a group of journalists, many people expressed the same opinions of the regime, “in the war, we donated hundreds of bushels of rice, sacrificed our life without any hesitation or regret, now we are happy to negotiate with the government.” Local people remembered lessons taught by the CPV during wartime; that people should sympathize and unite to fight against injustice and

111 One bushel of rice is equal to 30 kg or 66 pounds of rice.
112 Võ Đắc Danh, Nơi ấy bây giờ (That Land at the Present), Văn (Literature Journal), Ho Chi Minh City, No. 1 & 2, (1988).
oppression. They protested, but they were clearly aware of the role of the CPV, they expressed a great deal of respect and gratitude to the CPV, they felt anguish when the closely emotional connection with the party was separated. Different from the common argument that the influence of the CPV in the southern part of Vietnam was not as strong as that in the North, Võ Đắc Danh’s story argues that the party had been influential for years in the South.

From another perspective, to many people, the CPV had a long tradition of solidarity, an intense patriotism, an international friendship, and dedication to fighting for the Vietnamese nation and the people’s interests. The national history in modern times written by contemporary historians is full of events organized by the CPV. Writing about the role of the CPV in different disciplines, as well as writing history of different aspects of life under the leadership of the CPV became a duty of historians, then gradually a trend in history writing of this era.

Interestingly, it was common knowledge in this period that various fields of studies contained a “communist party nature” (Tính Đảng). All scholarship in the early 1980s was strongly influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideology. In history studies, this feature meant to take the proletarian side and persistently build the new socialist world of the worker class. As history professor Phạm Xuân Nam, Vice Director of the Institute of History Studies in the early 1980s, stated, studying history in a Marxist – Leninist school, a historian should be well aware of his standpoints and his perspectives; otherwise, he

114 A large number of historical books published during this period are about the histories of provincial branches of the CPV from the north to the south of the country.
could not conduct good research. In literature, Lê Ngọc Trà argued that the nature of the party was understood for years as describing reality in harmony with the CPV’s policy. Nguyên Minh Châu added, writers needed not only artists’ sensitive hearts but also the brain and eyes of social scientists to scrutinize the complexities of contemporary life. On a fierce battlefield, writers were always ready to fight as soldiers, meanwhile write to nurture the human soul and strengthen the people’s spirit. Hồ Chí Minh’s wills and Party urges provide people with stimuli to work and fight.

On the other hand, writers acknowledged that the CPV never required literature to illustrate politics, but rather sought to enrich political life through its publications. Therefore, writers did not work simply for the purpose of political duty assigned by the CPV, but more importantly, they performed their duties for the Vietnamese nation and people. In spite of difficulties, they understood that the cost of present independence and unity was extremely high. Each individual, each family who had sacrificed during the wars in the past was shouldering all the responsibility for building socialism. And it was the writers’ duty to illuminate the belief and optimism of the Vietnamese people.

However, attempts to search for a dominant characteristic within works of art were not always successful. Trần Văn Thủy and his colleagues attempted to film a

\[^{115}\text{Institute of History Studies. Sứ học trên Đường Phát triển (History on the Development Process, 246-7.}^{115}\]


\[^{117}\text{Nguyễn Minh Châu, “Bên Lề Tiểu thuyết” (“Novel Writing on the Margins”), Văn nghệ Quân Đội (Army Literature and Art Journal), No. 1, (1984).}^{117}\]

\[^{118}\text{Nguyễn Văn Bông, Bên lề những trang sách (On the Margins of Books) (Hanoi: New Publication Publishing House, 1982), 160 -1.}^{118}\]

\[^{119}\text{Nguyễn Ngọc “Đề Cương đề dẫn thảo luận ở Hội Nghị Đảng viên bàn về Sáng tác Văn học Hội Nhà văn Việt Nam” (“Literature Writing Proposal of the Conference on of Communist Party Members of the Association of Vietnamese Writers”), Langbian no. 3 (1987).}^{119}\]

\[^{120}\text{Nguyễn Minh Châu, “Văn học và Cách mạng” (“Literature and Revolution”), Văn Nghệ Quân Đội (People’s Army Literature and Art), No. 3, (1981).}^{120}\]
documentary about actual people living in 1980s Vietnam in *Chuyện Tử Tế (How to Behave)*. A good teacher after his lectures at school becomes a grocery vendor. He refused to appear on the screen since “his soul is pure, he thinks that portraying publicly such a human fate like his is to smear his regime.”¹²¹ In other words, even though a teacher’s salary was not enough to support his family and he himself was suffering from privation, his immaculate mind did not allow any blemish, which could damage the reputation of his beloved state.

Nevertheless, however hard writers attempted to describe positive aspects of life to encourage enthusiasm of each member of the new society, all people were faced with a variety of difficulties in the 1979-1986 period. Even though it was stated in the Party’s official documents that the CPV would faithfully serve the Vietnamese people and forever fight for their freedom and happiness, different stories emerged in literature. They learned from reality that a part of the population throughout the country, including the Party members, was not working hard for the national welfare. Compared to the war period, when every individual worked for collectivist goals, many people in the early 1980s put most of their efforts into private interests. Therefore, if people of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam completely trusted the leadership of the CPV during the war and shortly after 1975, their belief in the CPV and its members in the 1979-1986 period partly decreased as the economic and social crisis worsened. The real distance between the government and its people gradually became further, and the spiritual

connection between the CPV and its followers became looser. In other words, a gap appeared between policy makers and the general public.

As Anh Động stated, journalists are spokespeople of the Party, who tell the truth to the Vietnamese people on behalf of the regime. The responsibility of citizens does not allow them to look at only the positive side of society. Discontent and complaints, disappointment and anxiety, preoccupation and apprehension can be found directly or indirectly in people’s writing. “In a socialist society, under the rule of a communist party, the government can put people in jail. But if people lodge a complaint with the government, who would judge the case?” The question was raised by an old man who had served in the national army for years and now lived off of his small garden. He accused his old comrade, now a journalist for a state–owned newspaper, of not reporting the negative side of life in the daily news to bolster people’s belief in the Party.

Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Phương was more direct when expressing her opinions of the social situation in her review article “Lời Cảnh tỉnh nghiêm khắc” (A Serious Warning). According to Phương, the bad habit of distorting facts and evading truth in literature and journalism eliminated trust in the CPV and blinded the authorities to the truth and the people’s hardship.

Also regarding people’s views of the political regime, Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn provided a different view of people who had served the Republic of Vietnam in the Vietnam War, and afterwards stayed in Hồ Chí Minh City (formerly their capital

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122 Anh Động, “Tiếng Bước Chân” (“The Sound of Steps”), in Qua rồi thời bao cấp (The Subsidy Period is Over), 160.
123 Ibid.
The historical event in 30 April 1975 had a strong impact on all aspects of life in the south of Vietnam, particularly on people’s views of the nation. Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn’s overseas published novel Những Người Đàn Bà Còn Ô Lài (The Women Left Behind) is one among very few publications which is less politically prejudiced in reflecting alternative opinions in the south of Vietnam after the war. According to Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn, there was supposedly a part of the southern population against communism, which was quietly known in the southern community. Phúc, in his conversation with one main character in the novel states,

The most important argument at the present is anti-Communism. But is it anti-Vietnamese-communism or anti-communist-theory, regardless of the different parties? Why did our old government fight against communism, yet communists won? (...) Actually, Hồ or Lê or Phạm is the same. The significance is their regime. What if after the war they cleverly led the nation in the direction of national interests as previously promised? The people would not hate them like they do today, and we could not do anything harm to them.

In this conversation, Phúc also has no hesitation in expressing his awareness of the contemporary political regime, “this regime is not communist. It is a monster with the name ‘communism.’ Assuming it decides to transfer to capitalism but with the same

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125 Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn was born in 1946 in Sơn Tây, northern Vietnam, and went to Saigon in 1954. He graduated from the University of Saigon, before being drafted into the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. After April 1975, he was imprisoned by the Communists for three years, then sent to a "New Economic Zone." In 1979, he and his family escaped Vietnam by boat, but he alone reached Malaysia and eventually settled in Toronto. While still in a Malaysian refugee camp, he wrote his first novel, Những Người Đàn Bà Còn Ô Lài (The Women Left Behind), but it wasn't published until eight years later. He has since published 25 novels and collections of short stories in Vietnamese, and is by far the most popular author in the overseas Vietnamese community. For further information see Linh Đinh’s entry http://www.vietnamlit.org/wiki/index.php?title=Nguyen_Ngoc_Ngan (accessed May 10, 2010).

126 In this context, Hồ refers to Hồ Chí Minh, Lê to Lê Duẩn, Phạm to Phạm Văn Đồng.

situation, we also have to fight against it, no matter how it is labeled.”\textsuperscript{128} This figure understands the diversity of the different Vietnamese mentalities and opinions in different parts of the country, which, in his opinion, should be effectively used in pursuit of political goals. “The northern people migrating to the south are eternally sworn foes of communism without any knowledge of its theory. People in the central part are absolutely nationalist, either capitalism or communism, they oppose everything with foreign origins. The southerners are more fair-minded and politically flexible as long as they have a comfortable life. Those advantages and disadvantages are reasons for people’s attitude.”\textsuperscript{129}

Political content aside, this opinion partly explains the complicated diversity of Vietnamese views of their era. During 1979-1986, Vietnamese people living in different social environments formed alternative opinions of the nation and government. These positions reflected not only the personal experiences they gained or witnessed in their life but also their family or clan traditions also contributed to their views. As writer Lê Lựu once put it, “go to any northern village and see what kind of Party is our CPV. It would be a Party of the clan, not a Communist Party.”\textsuperscript{130}

Particularly regarding political issues like the government, the CPV, diplomatic relations, and the nation’s future, writers could not freely express their opinions if they wanted to publish their works in Vietnam. This partly explains why publications in this period are not able to reveal all of the diverse opinions of the general public.

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 316.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 312.
CHAPTER 3: VIETNAMESE OPINION ON SOCIETY

After the Vietnam War, leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam ruled Vietnam as a reunified nation for the first time. Leaders’ limited experience and understanding of the people’s living conditions and opinion resulted in various weaknesses in economic and social management in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. Not until several years later were they actually aware of the complicated situation of life during peacetime. The process of renovating the leaders’ mind was hard, and such a process for the general public was also not simple. To many Vietnamese people, since they had already defeated the US, one of the most powerful nations in the world, they simply believed that socialism would certainly prevail over capitalism.

In the general literature during the 1979-1986 period, there was rarely any evidence provided of the hardships in life, malnourished people, government censorship, or lack of political freedoms that the average Vietnamese experienced. But even under heavy censorship, public views about the community and individual, relationships in the family, neighborhood, and society and traditional and modern values in contemporary times partly emerged from literature. The views of authors varied from issue to issue, due to their social positions, as well as their bravery to speak out the truth. It was not until 1987-1988 that we see examples about the real-life situations of 1979-1986 disclosed in literature. Even when writers felt freer to report the reality under the light of renovation, they were faced with different kinds of troubles after their works were released.\textsuperscript{131}

\textsuperscript{131} See Phạm Thị Xuân Khải, Phùng Gia Lộc, etc.
Viewing Vietnam internally, Vietnamese authors seemed to be more critical regarding social and cultural issues than national politics, which was, for many reasons, understandable. Through such a heavy censorship system, the political regime controlled all political discussions, and attempted to eliminate all opinions which appeared to be critical or which emphasized negative aspects of life in Vietnam. Moreover, as analyzed above, many people were hesitant to criticize the Party, believing that it had already done a service to the Vietnamese people by resisting French and American encroachment. However, authors felt much more comfortable addressing cultural or social issues. Faced with the complications of everyday life, Vietnamese authors found it easier to describe their own experiences and provide observations on the experiences of others. They were also well aware that criticizing social life was less sensitive or dangerous than criticizing political policies. Local culture may have played a role in the imbalance in expression of criticism about social and political issues. It was never a habit of the general Vietnamese public to critically review their rulers. Ordinary people in everyday life were more concerned with earning a living than criticizing their leaders. Inspired from real life, people’s narratives of the society were full of colors and emotions.

**Two Views of Society**

In the 1979-1986 period, it was true that except for some privileged types of people (such as high commanders, leaders of the state, and the CPV), all other people suffered from serious deprivation. However, according to many present-day Vietnamese people who experienced these dark ten years after the reunification of the country, while
they faced a really poor everyday life, they were confident in a generally better life in the near future. Living in Vietnam during 1979-1986, a small number of people went abroad and developed ideas about a more modern life; however, these people, mainly intellectuals, understood the vast difficulties that a post-war nation faced. A larger number of the general public who never left their country, even their village, to some extent, did not have a clear understanding of what a wealthy or “modern” life was. Therefore, they were enjoying their independence and peace, which was a life they had been looking forward to for decades.

Furthermore, Vietnamese people understood that they could not reach a happy and comfortable life in just a few days. During wartime, northerners stated that it might take them five years, ten years, twenty years or even longer to gain independence, and the Vietnamese people were all determined to gain it. Now they were ready for another five years, ten years, twenty years or longer to construct a socialist, independent, free, and happy nation. Moreover, in their view, people throughout the country were going through the same experiences. They did not think it was appropriate to demand more than what the state was offering them, since they were at the same stage as their nation. They followed the simple life of the nation’s father, Hồ Chí Minh. As Trọng Đức stated, “Honestly, Uncle Hồ taught me not to feel shy about putting on rough clothes and, more importantly, to feel ashamed to eat delicious food or wear beautiful clothes, while our

132 Anh Động. “Tiếng Bước Chân” (“The Sound of Steps”), in Anh Động, Qua rỗi thời bao cấp (The Subsidy Period is Over), 15.
common people lived in poverty.” Hồ Chí Minh set a bright example of living simply and sacrificing for others in the community.

Vietnamese people also believed, even though it would be a long and hard process, that they would eventually succeed in establishing a just, free, and happy life in their independent nation. In the leaders’ view, spiritual encouragement was necessary to support the national efforts to fight, work, and study to maintain independence and develop the nation. Therefore, official newspapers and general publications depicted great improvements and positive changes in both material life and people’s attitude.

Reading Nhân Dân (People’s Daily News) in 1985, for example, readers rarely found any sign of difficulty or discontent in Vietnamese peoples’ lives. All aspects of life, from agriculture to industry, from economic relations to diplomatic relations within and outside the socialist community, were improving. Thủy Dương district in the suburban area of Huế provided an example. Journalist Anh Trang reported the impressive development of this area in her article “Thủy Dương của Huế” (Thủy Dương of Huế). According to Anh Trang, living conditions of the local people were considerably advanced. Thanks to the great efforts of the Party branch and local people, household income rose, rice production increased, the monthly average per capita rice supply increased from less than 10kg after 1975 to 32kg in 1985, 85% of the population in the region built solid new houses for their family. With this scenario, the reporter had no reason to criticize, but complimented Thủy Dương on its accomplishments and potential development.

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A few articles in official newspapers discussed the difficult situation of people’s lives and expressed their hopes for reformation. For instance, Trần Đình Bá ended his reportage with a call for more serious implementation of all policies, regulations, and contracts between the government and people who planted jute trees, so that people’s interests were secured.134

In the urban areas, Tô Hoài analyzed the change in the capital, Hanoi, in his reportage “Thành phố, Gương mặt, Con người” (“The City, Faces, and People”). As he put it, “I do not think that the current situation of Hanoi’s life is worse than before.”135 As a Hanoian, Tô Hoài loves all corners and historical stories of his hometown. To him, “every action of yesterday motivated us to take more meaningful actions today.”136

Similarly, Trọng Đức realized changes in city life through the colors of clothing by beginning his reportage with an old saying about the harmony between costume and social environment. He then cited a judgment by a representative from the south visiting the north in 1976 on the occasion of the National Day after reunification that “Hanoi women are white shirt women. In streets, in meetings or receptions, all women wear white shirts and black trousers.”137 Trọng Đức argued that after the liberation day, there was a big change in people’s costume. White shirts and black trousers already belonged

136 Ibid., 78.
137 Trọng Đức, Trước Ngôi nhà sàn bác Hồ: Nghĩ về lối sống Việt Nam (In Front of Uncle Hồ’s House: Thinking of Vietnamese Lifestyle), 78.
to the past and were replaced by colorful clothes as various flowers blossom in an optimistic and happy life.\textsuperscript{138}

Regarding the countryside, Nguyễn Khải reported potential development in the northern rural area. Revisiting Đồng Tiến village after 24 years, Nguyễn Khải could not recognize any familiar scenery since the local life had considerably improved. One of the villagers, his friend Phúc, told him, “the standard of living for people is much higher than before, particularly in my family, the living conditions are ten times higher than before.”\textsuperscript{139}

From the south, Trần Bạch Đằng generalized changes in the Mekong Delta in his 1985 book, \textit{Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long: 40 năm} (\textit{The Mekong Delta: 40 Years}). He confidently stated, “considering the last four to five years of development, changes in the Me Kong Delta are considerable.”\textsuperscript{140} His statement was illustrated in his 1982 reportage on Mộc Hóa, Long An province. In this area, the rate of development was increasing day by day. Both roads and waterways were expanded significantly. Developing transportation systems in turn encouraged the widespread use of modern technology and enriched the local cultural life. Trần Bạch Đằng excitedly reported his observation of TV antennas in some “middle of nowhere” places in the remote Đồng Tháp Mười area.\textsuperscript{141}

Tô Hoài also shared the same positive feelings when he visited Mai Châu, Sơn La province in the northwestern mountainous area in 1982. For the past few years, the Dao

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{140} Trần Bạch Đằng, \textit{Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long: 40 năm} (\textit{The Mekong Delta: 40 Years}), 134.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 83.
ethnic minority group enjoyed peace and a better life. The houses were more spacious and better-equipped, transportation was more modern, and the people happily did agriculture and forestry.\textsuperscript{142}

\textit{Nhạc sĩ Sáng tác Việt Nam} (Vietnamese composers, two volumes, 1986) gathered the majority of contemporary artists composing songs and music for instruments, folklore theatre, and films. A great number of their works of art stressed the main theme of a beautiful country in its process of development. Various songs were titled with the images of a country with a fertile and wealthy nature and hard working and enthusiastic people in a spring full of sunlight. For example, “Tình ca Mùa xuân” (“A Spring Love Song” by Trần Hoàn, 1979), “Đi lên trong ánh Binh minh” (“Go Forward at the Bright Dawn” by Vũ Thanh, 1982), “Tuổi trẻ với Mùa xuân” (“The Youth and the Spring” by Phạm Đình Sáu, 1983), “Khát vọng Mùa xuân” (“Spring Aspiration” by Huy Du, 1984), “Phả Lại sớm xuân nay” (“This Spring Morning in Phả Lại” by Trần Chung, 1985), and “Mùa xuân bên tháp Chàm” (“The Spring in Cham Tower” by Tố Hải, 1986).\textsuperscript{143}

Listening to the music of the time, audiences could partly understand the social atmosphere and those beautiful lyrics and bright melodies could hardly be products of human minds in a dark time.


\textsuperscript{142} Tô Hoài, \textit{Bút Kí (Reflection Essays)}, 306–325.
\textsuperscript{143} Phạm Đức Lộc, \textit{Nhạc sĩ sáng tác Việt Nam (Vietnamese Composers)} (Hanoi: Culture Publishing House, 1986).
excited environment, in which the majority respected collective interests and were persistent in their defense of communal prosperity. In the novel *Đứng Trước Biển* (*Facing the Ocean*), Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn depicts a company director continuously trying to expand his fishing enterprise, but at the same time questioning whether he did enough for Vietnamese society. In the story “Sự Trắc Trở đã qua” (“The Impediment is Over”), Trần Huy Quang describes a director who is very concerned with being helpful to his workers and more broadly, to the community. In the short story “Người Đến” (“The Newcomer”), Tùng Diên portrays a young communist with a PhD who is an assistant director of a company who always concerned himself with improving work productivity and raised the sole voice to criticize imperfection straightly and directly. The popular presence of people with traits of the so-called “new socialist people” in literature, suggests that the government may have encouraged this portrayal. On the other hand, the commonalities within these depictions suggest that they may partially reflect reality. The writers may be describing people they came across in their own lives.

Great determination to rebuild and develop the country, strong hopes for improvement, absolute faith in the wise leadership of the CPV, and so forth are colorfully portrayed in a number of works of literature. There are *Cù lao Tràm* (*Mangrove Islands*) and *Đứng Trước Biển* (*Facing the Ocean*) by Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn, *Mưa Mùa Hạ* (*Summer Rains*) by Ma Văn Kháng, *Thời xa vắng* (*A Time Far Past*) by Lê Lựu, to name a few novels. These views present the fact that Vietnamese people realized the real

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144 Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn, *Đứng Trước Biển* (*Facing the Ocean*).
145 Trần Huy Quang. “Sự Trắc Trở đã qua” (*Impediment is over*) (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1986).
situation, while always looking forward to positive solutions and a better life in the future.

In spite of the awareness of difficult realities, many authors described people’s confidence and persistence to fight against bad and negative influences. The 1984 short story “Cây Mỡ Trắng” (“The White Magnolia”) by Tùng Điền depicts an ideological struggle within the self of the main figure Minh. Minh’s mistakes restricted the progress of the whole enterprise. After a certain time working in a different position, Minh finally understood himself and his social position. His friends played an important role in supporting and encouraging him to overcome his own problems and return to his normal life. Vân Anh, who had actually learned the job under Minh’s guidance, shared with him her own experiences. Vân Anh said, “There are moments when I feel bored and desperate, but life and the people within it are always cheerful and effervescent, which strengthens my confidence and my desire to live a useful and productive life.”

Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, a major critic of the period, also provided a positive portrayal of Vietnamese life, even when he discussed such a critical writer like Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. Reading a short story about contemporary society “Không có vua” (“Without a King”) that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp wrote based on the 1979-1986 context, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến stated, “reading this story, everyone is upset by the untidiness and dirt of Kiên’s family. However, at the end, listening to Sinh’s feelings on the family’s situation, we immediately believe that is is possible for this life to be improved; this dilemma, even

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worse than now, is able to be solved.” \(^{148}\) Although Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s literature in the 1980s focused primarily on the negative, he often portrayed good overcoming evil.

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In fact, different from the bright picture described in mainstream literature, Vietnamese people experienced extreme poverty and suffering during this period. Witnessing the life around them in their village and the whole country, many people questioned the reasons for the difficulties of the post-independence era. Questioning Vietnamese society surfaced in different ways. At the provincial level, the question appeared direct and simple. As a peasant put it, “our land is rich, our labor force is strong, so why do we suffer from poverty and indigence?” This became the most significant topic for discussion in a meeting about the next five-year plan of the Vĩnh Trung cooperative. \(^{149}\)

One of the popular novelists, Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn, let his character, Út Cẩn, express his opinion. In Út Cẩn’s fishing enterprise, the majority of officials, workers, or sailors had no houses and their salaries never caught up to price inflation. In an important meeting with the committee board of directors, this figure states, “There is no reason for the poorer life while from generation to generation, tens of thousands of our friends, relatives, comrades died for the national liberation. We keep saying that workers are


\(^{149}\) Đinh Quyền “Tiếng kêu Con vịt dực” (“The Sounds of Drakes”) in Năm tháng còn dài (Years to Go), 21-22.
masters. What kind of masters are they with less money to support their family than when they were servants?\textsuperscript{150}

National leaders viewed the contemporary issues from a different perspective. Võ Chí Công, Deputy Prime Minister of Agriculture, Industry, Fishery wondered, “The northern youth sacrificed and overcame severe hardship in a very enthusiastic and positive way while fighting in the south in wartime. Why do the same people work so negatively in our cooperatives?”\textsuperscript{151} Vietnamese people, from the top leaders to the general public certainly understood what was occurring around them. They were not enjoying victory and dreaming of a brighter future as many people depicted. They were looking for solutions in different directions.

Facing the reality of the nation, a great number of articles, reportages, stories, and reflections portrayed the hardship, poverty, and poor living conditions of the general people, including the authors. And as true socialist people, they felt their responsibility to reflect and warn people of a myriad negative influences on the community. In all areas of material and spiritual life, authors viewed the complexity of the contemporary situation through different lenses and found different means to raise their voices. As the 1979-1986 period saw a system of heavy censorship, only a few people were brave enough to directly describe the living conditions of the ordinary Vietnamese as it challenged the wisdom of Vietnamese leaders.

As witnesses and reporters of the era, many authors critically portrayed the social problems of the newly united socialist society. They seriously criticized the CPV and the

\textsuperscript{150} Nguyên Mạnh Tuấn, \textit{Đứng Trước Biển (Facing the Ocean)}, 14.
government for their faults in economic and social management for years. They also accused the leaders and members of the CPV for their inability to prevent severe hardship and poor living conditions. Not until 1987–1988, when censorship was loosened, were these literary works published, and then, not surprisingly, banned. These authors also paid a price for their actions, as many were punished in their private lives and careers.\footnote{Such as cases of Dương Thu Hương, Trần Mạnh Hảo, Trần Văn Thủy, etc.}

Either through direct or indirect reflection, these voices implied that a great number of people in the society did not sleep in victory or totally trust the propaganda documents of the communist party. They were aware of reality with all of its complicated aspects they had to face in everyday life. To these people, life in post-independence era was harder than it was during wartime. A worsening situation encouraged them to speak out regarding the difficulties and injustices that they and their community were suffering. A number of literary works reflected these voices, such as “Người Đàn bà Quỳ” (“The Kneeling Woman”), “Đơn xin xóa án cho cha” (“A Petition to Absolve my Father”), “Cái Đêm hôm ấy … Đêm gì?” (“The Night of That Night…What a Night?”), “Công lý, Đừng quên quen ai” (“Justice, Do Not Forget Anyone”), “Bông lúa nổi giận” (“Rice Plant Get Angry”), “Chuyện của ông lão thường dân” (“Story of an Ordinary Citizen”).\footnote{Phùng Gia Lộc et al. \textit{Người Đàn bà Quỳ (The Kneeling Woman)} (Hanoi: Agriculture Publishing House, 1988).}

While exploring the everyday lives of ordinary people in contemporary Hanoi, the film \textit{Chuyện Tử Tế (How to Behave)} implied a Vietnamese conception of “the people.” “The people” (Nhân dân) were considered sacred words. By clarifying its meaning, which included “sacrifice, devotion and generosity,” the film highlighted the wide gap
between words and deeds.\textsuperscript{154} From the film producers’ perspective, while the people were struggling with difficult lives, powerful political officials, whose lives were marked by material ease, seemed to be indifferent. Also, artists and film producers had never produced a “kind” film about those people living in misery before. The film begins and ends with a quotation by the venerated Karl Marx “only animals can turn from the suffering of men and busy themselves preening their furs and feathers,” which raised an anguished question about the lack of human kindness in this period. With this idea in mind, Trần Văn Thủy produced a “kind” film, and named it \textit{Chuyện tử tế (The Story of Kindness, or How to Behave)}.

The short story “Tiếng Bước Chân” (“The Sound of Steps”) written by Anh Động is another example. Anh Động describes the everyday life of a journalist’s family in the south of Vietnam in the early 1980s. The five-person family lived in a room that was only 9 square meters on the second floor of the public library.\textsuperscript{155} The daily meal of the family for months contained only some fried crabs and fresh cucumber. The conversation at lunch reveals general weaknesses of the economy. Cucumber costs only two Vietnam Đồng per kilogram in the field, and twenty Vietnam Đồng in a town market only 100km away. This means farmers received only 10\% of the total price, and the remaining 90\% of the profits went to traders, road taxes, sales taxes, and various intermediate services of both the state and private systems from a cucumber field to a city market.\textsuperscript{156} The

\textsuperscript{154} Mark Philip Bradley. “Contests of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting War in the Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema,” in \textit{The country of memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam}, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 218.
\textsuperscript{155} 9 square meters is equal to 96.88 square feet.
\textsuperscript{156} Anh Động, “Tiếng Bước Chân” (“The Sound of Steps”), in \textit{Qua rì bõi bao cấp (The Subsidy Period is Over)}, 157.
difference between the benefits of laborers, particularly peasants, was also Trần Bạch Đằng’s observation in the whole Me Kong Delta. In his view, the prosperity produced by southern farmers for society was much more valuable than the benefits they received from the community.

It is a strong impression in various literary works that in 1979-1986 Vietnam harassment, bureaucracy, bribing of superiors, taking collective advantages for personal benefits were common. It implied the increasing role of material values over the importance of human relations, which was one new issue emerging in the post-reunification period. It was one of the unexpected complexities to many Vietnamese, after they had just overcome all of the loss and hardship from war; they looked forward to an ideal socialist society where everyone worked to build a prosperous and happy society.

Anh Đỗng’s story is about a 79-year-old man from a village visiting his old friend in the town to ask for advice about his last wish, a wooden casket for his death. With an introduction letter from one of his old comrades, the old man day by day knocks on the doors of all levels of the administration only to be transferred to the next office. He eventually reaches the lumber enterprise, which is supposed to be able to directly provide him with some wood. Unfortunately, this enterprise had been closed for a while as they had no wood to distribute. The director of the enterprise told the old man that the next time they were supplied with wood, he would save enough wood for his casket. The story sadly ends with the reader wondering if the old man would live long enough for the next distribution of wood. The heavy bureaucracy and irresponsible attitude of officials leaves the impression of a corrupt society and a supposedly discontented people.
The fact that a great number of authors expressed their reactions to different social issues implies the widespread and serious nature of the problems in 1979-1986. They portrayed a dark side of the society in their short stories, reportages, dramas, films, and TV programs during this period, and a series of reportages and social reflection essays in 1987-1988. Expression of these social phenomena varies in the context of administrative systems at the local level, industrial enterprises, agriculture cooperatives, everyday life. Through different types of characteristics, their actions and statements, the authors described a society filled with discontent and expressed their opinions. In all publications, the community contained both irresponsible and heartily enthusiastic individuals, who worked for personal or collective interests (for example, Mr. Tú and Loằng in the drama “Kín đáo” [“Secret”]; Lâm, Phượng and Hạnh in the drama “Trách Nhiệm” [“Responsibility”]; or the main character “I” and his assistant

157 Trần Khắc, “Người Dân bà Quỳ” (“The Kneeling Woman”), in Người Dân bà Quỳ (The Kneeling Woman), Phùng Gia Lộc et al. (Hanoi: Agriculture Publishing House, 1988), 16-32; Ngô Ngọc Bội, “Chuyện của ông lão thương dân” (“Story of an Ordinary Citizen”), in Người Dân bà Quỳ (The Kneeling Woman), 50-70; Anh Đông, “Qua rồi thời bao cấp” (“The Subsidy Period is Over”), in Qua rồi thời bao cấp (The Subsidy Period is Over), 130-44.
director in the short story “Những cái vòng” (“The Gears”). The heavy costs the bad people have to pay, the happiness the good people eventually enjoy, as well as guilty feelings of irresponsible individuals and tolerant forgiveness of community present authors’ confidence in future improvements.

These different views regarding various social issues revealed some of the complexities of the first decade after reunification. As in other societies, Vietnam during the 1979-1986 period consisted of both positive and negative characteristics. While Vietnam did experience discontent and corruption during this period, this is not the whole story. Authors of censored publications of the time and more recent works presented different analyses of the 1979-1986 society. While Vương Trí Nhàn argued that extreme privation created more negative effects in society, including new lifestyles, new habits, new human relationships, and new methods of security, a Hanoian writer, Tô Hoài, stated about his surrounding community:

In the process of overcoming disorders and litter, there appear kind and talented people with ideal ambitions, enthusiastic work ethic, and responsibility to improve their professional knowledge. The fact is that kind people, kind actions, and a positive life are more advantageous and popular. From young pupils to old seniors, everyone is contributing to build the new life in the city and fight for the good and kindness.

The Shadow of War in the Time of Independence

The 1979-1986 period became more difficult for many soldiers coming back from prolonged wars. In the aftermath of the war, soldiers returned to their homeland and

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162 Tô Hoài, Bút Kí (Reflective Essays), 94.
enjoyed the peaceful existence of normal people. Their philosophy was simple and pure: after defeating the invaders, they came back to the village, to the fields and as soon as good conditions returned, they studied further in pursuit of an advanced education degree. In the meantime, they participated in agriculture and industry; improving the living conditions of the community; and served as reliable and strong support for the young generation.163 The life appears very simple, fighting for the nation in wartime and contributing to nation building in independence. As a poem by Thế Hanh portrays:

Now the war ends  
I go to school  
I study agriculture  
To contribute to the building of our nation164

In the “kind” film Chuyện tử tế (How to Behave), Trần Văn Thủy and his colleagues portrayed the life of an ordinary person in the 1979-1986 period. After devoting his whole life to national independence, Trần Thanh Hoài was forced to support his family by driving a pedicab. His situation was not unique, as many people faced similar circumstances. From the producer of the film’s perspective, earning a living by one’s own labor was a pure value.165

Phan Thị Kim Phúc, the little girl in the famous picture “Napalm Vietnam” in 1972, was still suffering from the napalm wounds until the 1980s.166 Above all unforgettable memories of the war, Kim Phúc’s greatest wish was that people all over the

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164 Thế Hanh. “Còn đi đánh giặc” (“Keep Fighting against the Enemy”) in Sức sống mùa xuân (Spring Vitality) , 22–5.
165 Trần Văn Thủy, Chuyện Tử Tế (How to Behave) (video recording).
166 Kim Phúc was the girl at about age nine seen running naked on the street after being severely burned on her back by a South Vietnamese napalm attack. The Pulitzer Prize winning photograph taken in Trang Bang during the Vietnam War on June 8, 1972, by AP photographer Nick Ut became an iconic photo of the war.
world live in peace. She expressed her desire to become a nurse, which was “the most pragmatic job I could do for my nation at the moment.” She wanted to bring medical help to people like her facing health problems.167

As a result of the war, a huge amount of the Vietnamese population was comfortable living as soldiers. They maintained the lifestyle of soldiers and characteristics of “Uncle Hồ Soldiers” even after peace came. Having the spirit of a soldier was considered a prestigious value in the community. In the 1984 short story by Ngô Đạt, entitled “Tiếng chim buồn sớm” (“The Early Morning Bird Song”), a married couple, Lưu and Trâm, were wounded in the war, but neither of them asked for any kind of social aid. They never even allowed themselves to view their situation in a negative way. They agreed with each other that they should never forget their roles as soldiers.168 Writer Dương Thu Hương also joined Ngô Đạt to explain the spirit of the soldier in the peaceful life. “Ban Mai Yên Á” (“A Peaceful Morning,” 1984) is a short story about an ex-soldier working at a cultural institute after the war. Despite facing numerous difficulties, he never ignored the people and their lives. The reason was simple: he was a soldier, and as a soldier, he had a responsibility to the people.169 Popular images of soldiers presented a manifestation of Vietnamese society in the first independent era: the war still existed in the human consciousness.

The presence of national war after the reunification also had an impact on memory in people’s lives. In Ung Ngọc Tri’s 1986 short story “Cống Cố Đảng” (“A

168 Ngô Đạt, “Tiếng chim buồn sớm” (“The Early Morning Bird Song”), in Mạch sống (Living Pulse), 51.
169 Dương Thu Hương, Ban Mai Yên Á (A Peaceful Morning), 107.
Bitter Blade of Weed”), the happy family of Mai would be separated if Mai did not soon realize the close relation between her husband and his memory of wartime. Mai’s husband respected every single memory of the war as a part of his life, and found it difficult to live together with a partner who degraded his own experience.\footnote{Ung Ngọc Trí et al. Cộng cối đắng: Tạp truyện ngắn đc giải quán của Hội nhà văn thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1985-1986. (A Bitter Blade of Grass: An Anthology of Prize-Winning Short Stories of the Writers of the Association of Writers in Hồ Chí Minh City, 1985-1986) (Hồ Chí Minh City: Literature and Arts Press, 1987), 22.}

Vietnam’s younger generation expressed respectful attitudes toward the recent past of the nation. Tân and Loan in the 1980 short story “Cửa sổ màu xanh” (“The Green Window”) acknowledged a more profound understanding of their own lives when they recognized that they were preserving an important memory of the past. Writer Lê Văn Thảo depicted the green window in Loan’s room as having witnessed numerous attacks in the war. As a result, many soldiers once passing by Loan’s house stopped to look at the window. One of those soldiers wrote Loan a letter to tell her his story and the important role the window played in his military experiences. The window served as a symbol of past sacrifices meant to remind people to live a more just life in the future.\footnote{Lê Văn Thảo. Cửa sổ màu xanh (The Green Window). Hanoi: New Publication Press, 1981, 53.}

To some people, national resistance against foreign intervention even became more significant in the post-independence period than ever before. As a popular poet stated, “Reflecting the war is not only our responsibility but our absorption as well. The war is a starting point and a prolonged challenge for all of us. Integrating oneself into the common fight, wholeheartedly living in sacrifice and loss are the first signs of a true writer. Therefore, poetry is secured by blood.”\footnote{Hữu Thỉnh, “Sự Chuẩn bị của Người viết trẻ” (“The Preparation of Young Writers”), Literature and Art Journal 50 (12 December 1981).}
The prolonged and violent war left behind not only unforgettable memories but also numerous legacies from which Vietnamese people suffered for decades. The effects of Agent Orange, buried-unexploded bombs, wounded people, and family separation were commonly reported in popular literature. From the north to the south, the struggles of the Vietnamese people in dealing with these legacies were discussed.

A number of scholars conducted research on the legacies of war for the conference organized by the Center for Women Studies in Hanoi in November 1985. For example, according to a group of scholars, the high rate of abortion, congenital defects, and death of new-born children (up to 30% of total births) reflect the severe impacts of chemical poisons on women and people in the region. The legacies of war certainly changed the views of this particular academic group of Vietnamese about the country. Through their various reports, a different picture of Vietnam with the severe consequences of the war revealed itself. This view recognized and challenged the notion that all Vietnamese people should expect a happy and comfortable life in the first decade of reunification.

In the 1984 short story “Tiếng Lục Lạc” (“Sound of the Tintinnabula”), Nguyễn Quang Lập movingly described the impact of Agent Orange and chemical poisons on Vietnamese people in the aftermath of war. The story concerns the family of colonel Chi and his wife Lành in the post war period. For twenty-one long war years, Lành had

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173 The paper was presented at the conference by Nguyễn Đình Khoa, Trịnh Hữu Vách, and Nguyễn Hoài Khanh from the National University in Hanoi, cited in Giám đốc nghiên cứu về phân bố, sử dụng, đào tạo và điều kiện lao động nữ - Hội nghị khoa học tháng 11, 1985 (Some Research Problems of Managing, Using, and Training Female Laborers - Record of Conference in November 1985) (Hanoi: Center for Women Studies), 1986, 217-220. This report was the result of their fieldtrip to Thanh Binh, Tân Biên, Trà Răng, Tây Ninh province in November and December 1984.

waited for her husband and fortunately he returned. The old couple now planned to have children. Their dream eventually came true when Lành became pregnant. However, at the end of the story, their newborn son was described as having a disability as a result of Agent Orange and chemical poisons his parents were exposed to. The sound of the tintinnabula reverberated in readers’ mind with some of the lasting effects of the war on the Vietnamese populace. Even the ability of a loving couple to have a healthy child was effected.

Similarly, the song “Vì đâu em chết?” (“Why did you die?”) by Thanh Trúc tells a story about victims of the Agent Orange in the early 1980s. The song was composed after the author’s field trip in 1985 from the Central Highlands to Central Vietnam. A member of the group, film director Lâm Quang Tèo, brother of Thanh Trúc, recalled, “From Đà Nẵng, Quảng Trị, to Bến Tre, Kiên Giang, Cà Mau, everywhere we met and heard anguished stories about soldiers’ families suffering from Agent Orange. My brother wrote a song in this period.”

The Agent Orange had killed my mother
In a bombing raid
Left me an orphan
(…) And now the legacy of the war
The Agent Orange is ravaging my brother’s body
Mother! I will never see my brother again.

The case Nguyễn Quang Lập described in his story and Thanh Trúc’s song reminds readers of various miserable fates that Vietnamese faced in the post-war period. The legacies of the war lasted with Vietnamese people for generations.

In addition to those chemical poisons, buried-unexploded bombs caused significant casualties to many families. “O Tớ” (“My Aunt,” 1980) a short story by Lê Tri Ki portrays a woman, who devoted her youth to national independence, then sacrificed the rest of her life for her family. After the war, her life appeared poor and miserable. Nevertheless, she always felt comfortable in her life and optimistic about the future. Unfortunately, she died when working in the field because of an unexploded underground bomb left behind from the war. The four-page story suddenly ends with the unexpected death of the aunt bringing to readers images of the struggles faced by many Vietnamese who were suffering from the war even when it had already ended.

From an alternative perspective, Anh Đức portrayed a different case of victims of war in his short story “Miền Sóng Vỗ” (“Land of Waves,” 1982). Hai Chi was nearly blinded during his military service. After returning home, it was his desire to cancel his marriage plans in order to free his fiancée. However, his fiancée, Sáu Hạnh, as a communist, was willing to take care of Hai Chi for the rest of her life. The story not only describes disabled people’s lives in the post-war era, but social attitudes towards soldiers returning home. Living in peacetime, soldiers, particularly the wounded, confronted more difficulties in everyday life than normal people. Moreover, family members, relatives, comrades, and friends who died in war lived on in the memories of the survivors. A number of poems, including some of those written by Nguyễn Việt Chiến, Nguyễn Quang Thiều, Ngô Thế Anh, Vương Trọng, Đoàn Minh Tuấn, Nguyễn Đức Mậu, and Văn Lê, depicted this reality. People’s opinions of the victims of war like Chi and Lành,
Lê Tri Ki’s aunt, Hai Chi, and many others were described with authors’ respectful appreciation to people who devoted their life to the nation.

**Human Relations in the Period of Reunification**

Social changes in the 1979-1986 period not only occurred in economic and material life, but human ideology and attitudes also reacted to the new environment after the war. In various literary works, it became clear that human relations in the post-independence era changed radically as well. In 1979-1986, the population was confronted with numerous difficulties and many did not live up to their morals as faithfully as they had lived as soldiers before. New positions, new ambitions, new relations in urban areas, new productions and material concerns in the rural areas were perhaps placed higher than friendship and comradeship. While some people were still friendly and warmly welcomed old friends, some people in higher positions of society did not communicate with old friends and comrades as frequently as before in order to avoid dependence and asking for help. There appeared in the society a new type of people whose worldview was affected by the political and economic powers of the new environment. People’s reactions to this phenomenon included sadness and even sympathy, but, more significantly, determination to fight against negative expression and confidence in positive changes.

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176 Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn, *Đứng Trước Biển* (*Facing the Ocean*), Anh Động, “Tiếng Bước Chân” (*The Sound of Steps*), in Anh Động, *Qua rồi thời bao cấp* (*The Subsidy Period is Over*).

177 See for example Anh Động, “Tiếng Bước Chân” (*The Sound of Steps*), “Lá thư bàn về Hạnh Phúc” (*A Letter on Happiness*), in Anh Động, *Qua rồi thời bao cấp* (*The Subsidy Period is Over*).
Among many authors who reported this issue, Trần Huy Quang described typical changes faced by a farmer, named Hữu Lợi in the short story “Đò Ngang” (“A Ferry Boat”). From an ingenuous villager, Hữu Lợi became boastful and self-conscious since he was promoted to chairman of a local agricultural cooperative. Hữu Lợi’s behavior caused troubles for the community as his efforts to establish a good reputation threatened the potential development of the village. On the other hand, the story highlighted Hữu Lợi’s colleague, Hoạt, who persistently opposed Hữu Lợi’s plan. Hoạt was always confident that the community would support him to change Hữu Lợi’s attitude.\footnote{Trần Huy Quang, “Đò Ngang” (“A Ferry Boat”) in Sự Trắc Trở đã qua (Impediment is Over), 94 – 115.}

Another important issue for Vietnamese of the period was the inappropriate management of human forces for economic and social development. Tùng Điển’s short story “Mắt xích” (“The Chain”), for example, highlighted the main reason for the ineffectiveness of dominant hiring practices. To be more precise, when people were hired because they bribed their employers, or because they were family members of the owner, a number of consequences arose. For one, a person’s talent had no bearing on whether they were hired. As a result, productivity weakened, damaging the socialist economy.\footnote{Tùng Điển, “Mắt xích” (“The Chain”) in Bức Kí Họa (The Sketch), 3-15.}

Nguyễn Quốc portrayed a slightly different picture of people working in Hồ Chí Minh City, where the new political regime made it a difficult place to live for a large part of the population. In Nguyễn Quốc’s point of view, contemporary society placed family background higher than an individual’s ability, which restricted many talented people from contributing to the general development. In his 1985 short story “Tuổi Kỷ Mão” (“Age of the Cat”), his concern focused on the integration of people who once served the
government of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) during wartime into the new united nation. Bích Thoa, an excellent engineer who confronted various obstacles because of a so-called bad background, exemplified a number of people of the former South Vietnam. In the contemporary view, Bích Thoa belonged to the generation educated by the old school, as her knowledge was good but out of date, and her experience left her unqualified for technological work. Moreover, her husband had been a colonel in the Saigon regime before 1975, and he was at the time “studying” at a re-education camp. In the company, Bích Thoa had to deal with various obstacles by colleagues with a “good” background who were often powerful, but also selfish. Fortunately, her director sacrificed his political future to protect her and provide her with the conditions necessary to use her talents. Nguyễn Quốc’s portrayal of Bích Thoa reminded readers of the fates of people in society who had served or been identified with the previous regime, as well as a variety of social reactions to those disadvantaged people.

Similarly to the observation and attitudes provided by Nguyễn Quốc, Hữu Sơn in the short drama “Qua Đêm” (“Overnight”) highlighted the importance of being forgiving towards those who had served the Saigon regime in wartime. Hồng used to be a bar girl before 1975, who was ordered to attend Rehabilitation School and School of Youth to Build New Life, before moving to her enterprise. When a large number of goods in the storage of the enterprise was stolen, other colleagues in her office immediately accused her of the crime, simply because she served the former regime. Eventually Hồng was
cleared of the false charges, but the fact that she was charged highlights the difficult life many former RVN supporters faced in the post-reunification period.\textsuperscript{180}

During the first decade after the reunification between north and south Vietnam, there seemed to be a gap between people of the “old Saigon regime” and those of the new society in the south of Vietnam. People who had worked for the Americans or the Saigon government before 1975, plus a small number of overseas Chinese, were certainly not treated as equally as the rest of the populace. In their everyday life they faced economic hardship, political observation, and censorship by local authorities. Life under the new regime in the united era was apparently much more complicated for these groups. Additionally, for many historical reasons, southern people were familiar with a generous and open-minded lifestyle without any Marxist theory or observation. Their personality might lead them to different reactions to contemporary social issues.

It was a social phenomenon of the 1979-1986 period that a number of southerners left the country by risking death on boats to overseas lands.\textsuperscript{181} This issue has apparently been understood from the simple perspective that they could not live in harmony under the rule of a communist regime. However, from contemporary literary works, others would argue that the tendency of leaving the nation by southern people was perhaps not only a result of the Communist Party’s treatment. Such tolerant behaviors and supportive efforts of Bích Thoa’s director in “Tuổi Kỷ Mão” (“Age of the Cat”), Hồng’s friends in

\textsuperscript{180} Hữu Sơn, “Qua Đêm” (“Overnight”), in \textit{Qua Đêm (Overnight)}, 23-36.

\textsuperscript{181} Besides overseas authors, Vietnamese writers in the country also reported this issue and the remaining people who considered leaving the nation but did not. They are Nguyễn Khải’s drama “Khoảnh khắc dang sông” (“The Living Moment”), in \textit{Khoảnh khắc dang sông (The Living Moment)}, 75- 161; Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn’s novel \textit{Đứng Trước Biển (Facing the Ocean)}; Nguyễn Đình Minh’s short story “Hòa Bình cho mọi nhà” (“Peace for Every Family”) in \textit{Cọng cỏ đắng: Tập truyện ngắn được giải thưởng của Hội nhà văn thành phố Hồ Chí Minh}, 1985-1986. (A Bitter Blade of Grass: An Anthology of Prize-Winning Short Stories of the Writers of the Association of Writers in Hồ Chí Minh City, 1985- 1986), 119-37.
“Qua Đêm” (‘‘Overnight’’), Liễu’s colleagues in Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn’s 1982 novel Đứng Trước Biển (Facing the Ocean), and the authors themselves, presented the sympathy of the community to the people of the ‘‘old regime’’ in the south. The issue was certainly more complicated than commonly understood, such as family reunification, individual freedom seeking, and/or limited understanding of the contemporary political and social situation. The story of southern society after the war is still hidden by diverse complications, including political censorship.

Also emerging from the literature of the 1979-1986 period, various human relations werecolorfully described, including relations between family members and society, as well as individuals and the community. As a core value in Vietnamese culture, family lays the foundation for individual success and social stability. In contemporary literature, images of happy families took center stage. Even families of the villains were
given positive characteristics.182 The Vietnamese family appears with valuable aspects of human relations between husband and wife,183 parents and children,184 siblings,185 husband’s mother and daughter-in-law.186

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From these stories, an impression is given that the social role of women in society was improved in post-independence Vietnam. The traditional image of Vietnamese mother, wife, and daughter changed towards a more dynamic and sociable model. Women in literature, in addition to their household duties, were often deeply involved in social work and leadership.\(^\text{187}\) Moreover, there were not only changes in the women’s conceptions, but in reality, women were greatly supported by men to participate in social management. Sociological statistics in 1985 implied the more important roles and positions in making decision at the family level as well as social works in the community.\(^\text{188}\)

Beyond the family, building up good social relations was also a common concern of the public. A great number of literary works reflected different types of individual-community relations in search of harmonious and supportive connections. There was gratitude for earlier help,\(^\text{189}\) or misunderstandings between individuals and authority,\(^\text{190}\) or

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\(^{186}\) Ngô Đạt, “Tiếng chim buổi sớm” (“Early Morning Bird Song”), in *Mạch sống* (Living Pulse), 42-64.


\(^{189}\) Đắc Trung, “Con người bị lãng quên” (“The Forgotten Person”), in *Truyện ngắn mười năm: Tập chí văn nghệ Hà Nam Ninh* (Short Story in Ten Years in Hà Nam Ninh Literature Journal), 34-51.

\(^{190}\) Đinh Quyền, “Tiếng kêu Con vịt đực” (“The Sounds of Drakes”), in *Năm tháng còn dài* (Years to Go), 17-35.
contributions of individuals to co-operative production,191 or colleagues’ relations in the same institutions.192

In this period, some social relations attracted the special attention of writers, such as army forces working hard to construct canals and buildings,193 traffic controllers not receiving bribes to win people’s trust,194 and people in turn supporting security forces to perform their duties.195 Interestingly, Vân Long reported a deep affection by officials for criminals at the Education reform school Phú Sơn 4, Bắc Thái province. Nguyễn Bá To, Dean of the school, strongly believed that “human affection defeats lust,” and that his school produced useful citizens who would return to society.196 The positive reflection of human relationships in literature was certainly affected by censorship and the conception of literature’s function as a pedagogical tool. All stories imply the fact that even in times of difficulty, people always respected Vietnamese traditional values.

When many people participated in the process of developing society, the conservative members in the community altered their views after witnessing vast changes in villages. The figure that Đinh Quyền portrayed in his 1985 short story “Ông Cả” (“Mr. Cả”) is an example. As the head of a big clan in Chanh village, Ông Cả appeared very

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191 Anh Dông, Qua rồi thời bao cả (The Subsidy Period is Over): “Khai đập” (“Canal Dredging”), 5-18; “Khơi Mạch” (“River Dredging”), 19-39; “Qua cơn bệnh” (“Disease Treatment”), 69-82.
192 Nguyễn Khải, “Khoảnh khắc đang sống” (“The Living Moment”), in Khoảnh khắc đang sống (The Living Moment), 75-161; Tùng Điển, “Mắt xích” (“The Chain”), in Bức Kí Họa (The Sketch), 3-15; Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn’s Đứng Trước Biển (Facing the Ocean); Ma Văn Kháng, Mưa Mùa Hạ (Summer Rains).
194 Tuấn Vinh, “Án tướng không dễ quên” (“Unforgettable Impression”), in Án tướng không dễ quên (Unforgettable Impression), 113-24.
195 Trần Thanh Giao, “Đêm Bình Yên” (“A Peaceful Night”), in Án tướng không dễ quên (Unforgettable Impression), 65-86.
196 Vân Long, “Ở Trại Cải Tạo Phú Sơn 4” (“At the Education Reform School Phú Sơn 4”), in Án tướng không dễ quên (Unforgettable Impression), 104.
patriarchal and conservative. Facing the day-by-day alteration of his own village, he initially ignored and denied all new agricultural techniques, new dams, new schools, new houses, and new ideologies. In his view, anything he did not support was useless and meaningless. His opinions turned positive and supportive by the end of the story. Now he felt like a fish out of water if he insisted on his old thinking. To the motherland, which he considered his flesh and blood, for which he had fought and voluntarily sacrificed his life, and for which he lived his entire life with his family and clan, he felt guilty for his previous conservative thinking. He now thought his village should have developed much more than it did.  

Contemporary literature also provides opinions from younger generations. When revisiting Đồng Tiến village, Nguyễn Khải unintentionally conducted an interview with a 24-year-old man. The character Định in Nguyễn Khải’s reportage advocated for part of the Vietnamese youth. In his mind, “the man of today” should be able to live comfortably anywhere in the country. He said, “today life is more modern than that of yesterday. We do the same business, but life is ten times better.” His sole goal was to do business and earn an honest living by his own labor. He had only a simple wish that he would become a normal person who was a responsible citizen fulfilling his social duty. Nguyễn Khải depicted this opinion as certainly different from that of those in wartime, when every young person wanted to serve in the battlefield and fight for national independence. The views of young people now apparently focused more on individuals and their families.

197 Đinh Quyền, “Ông Cả” (“Mr. Cả”), in Năm tháng còn dài (Years to Go), 16.
199 Ibid., 40-1.
The desire of a young citizen in the independent era was the signal of the potential changes of the nation.

Similarly, changes among the intelligentsia, particularly artists, were also remarkable. In the north, the majority of intellectuals were confident in the development of the country and made every effort to fulfill the duty assigned to them by the CPV. A number of northern intellectuals moved southwards to strengthen the intellectual forces in the southern provinces of the newly united country. Their first trip to the south after reunification should have left certain impressions on their worldviews and their later writing. Unfortunately, no material sources referencing their potentially changing opinions have been explored.

As for the southern intellectuals, perplexed and puzzled feelings supposedly filled their minds. Some of them expected to collaborate with their new government. According to Đặng Phong, economic experts and officials particularly, had realized the weaknesses of the Saigon regime, and desired to devote their talent, knowledge and experiences to the new government in peacetime. However, the communists’ treatment of the southern intellectuals was largely covered up. Their reactions to the government, or the communist regime therefore were different (as a consequence, some of them left and some collaborated with the newly united nation). While Đặng Phong depicted a picture of harmonious collaboration between the communist leaders and the southern experts, some of the “free-minded” southerners would not have stood the reactions and bureaucratic

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working style of the conservative and political oriented northerners. The situation was probably complex, but little is known regarding these interactions.

The 1979 drama by Nguyễn Khải “Khoảnh khắc đang sống” (“The Living Moment”) is set in the context of a small community in a quiet quarter of Hồ Chí Minh City. While Huấn represented communist intellectuals, Nam was considered a non-communist member in the newly established socialist society in the south. Different from many of his peers, Nam stayed in the city after 30 April 1975 without any consideration of leaving, although he could have fled to the US much more easily than other evacuees. In staying, his greatest concern was to earn people’s trust. From his perspective, if he stayed but would not be allowed to properly work or not reliably employed, he might have to leave, which was, in his words, “such a trip full of disgrace and shame because of broken faith and the loss of noble aspiration.”

He eventually decided to stay in the country. While literature of the period involving former RVN supporters had been heavily censored, this story about people and their opinions in Hồ Chí Minh City, viewed through the sensitive lenses of a northern writer, provides certain information of an interesting part of Vietnamese society in the period of 1979-1986.

Other southerners, who might be considered “reactionary elements,” also changed their views in the post-war era. Phúc, an old friend of one main figure in Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn’s novel Những Người Dân Bà Còn Ở Lại (The Women Left Behind), expressed his feelings about the changes in his life and his personality, “[h]onestly, over the past twenty years, I never spent even a minute to think of the nation, as the survival of this land has

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201 Nguyễn Khải, “Khoảnh khắc đang sống” (“The Living Moment”), in Khoảnh khắc đang sống (The Living Moment), 92.
no connection to me. Maybe this is how I changed.” This statement ended his long
discussion on capitalism and socialism, national forces and communist forces, and
political issues in the south. Political and social changes in the 1970s and 1980s played an
important role in changing the worldviews of a part of the population in the southern part
of Vietnam.

The 1979-1986 period witnessed the first visit of northern scholars and writers to
the southern part of a united Vietnam in the post-independence period. In their view, the
south in this period, as a consequence of history, was still suffering from the cultural
products of neo-colonialism, which corroded spiritual life in a socialist era. They
criticized the cultural taste of southerners, whose minds were profoundly infused with
ideology propagated by the old mass media of the American–Saigon regime. In addition
to the purpose of showing their political loyalty to the socialist government, these writers
grew up in the socialist atmosphere of northern Vietnam. Therefore, these writers found it
difficult to understand – were even allergic to – non-socialist cultural products in the
south, such as books, newspapers, films, and pictures. The northerners did not seem to
have a very tolerant view of the southern people. Even the relatively fair writers, like
Nguyễn Khải, could not sympathize with the southerners. Although he put great effort

202 Nguyễn Ngọc Ngân, Những người dân bà còn ở lại: truyện dài xã hội chủ nghĩa Việt Nam từ 1978 đến
203 Trọng Đức, Trước Ngôi nhà sàn bác Hồ: Nghĩ về lối sống Việt Nam (In Front of Uncle Hồ’s House:
Thinking of Vietnamese Lifestyle), 46; Trần Trọng Đăng Đán, Về sân khấu, văn học, điện ảnh, ca nhạc... và
dạng văn hoá tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (About Theater, Literature, Movie, Music... and Cultural
Life in Hồ Chí Minh City) (Hồ Chí Minh City: Literature and Arts Press, 1989), 472; Nguyễn Đình Minh,
“Hòa Bình cho mọi nhà” (“Peace for Every Family”) in Cổng cổ đông: Tập truyện ngắn được giải thưởng
của Hội nhà văn thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1985-1986. (A bitter blade of grass: An Anthology of Prize-
into understanding and reflecting on different types of southerners in his literary work, the society in the southern part of Vietnam seemed to be much more complicated than what northerners grasped.

Moreover, censorship certainly played a crucial role in writing about the south of Vietnam. Consequently, the weaknesses of literature of the period were heightened by the narrow-mindedness of Vietnamese writers, who seemed to be limited by their own “imaginary reality.” As Nguyễn Văn Bổng pointed out, Trong con Bão (In the Storm) written by Đào Chí Hiếu (Hồ Chí Minh City Publishing House, 1978) serves as a representative of mainstream novels about the southern society after reunification. This was a trend that writing about Saigon and other earlier occupied areas, writers should not ignore girls marrying American soldiers. In Đào Chí Hiếu’s novel, Tú not only married an American GI, but also had a blue-eyed, blond-haired child with him as well. To portray the dark side of the Saigon regime, there was also a tendency that writers should not neglect youth turning to be heroin addicts (the character Cang). Likewise, writers should not disregard victims of neo-colonialist rule (sergeant Nghi), as well as revolutionary people fighting for the good and just (Trọng and Hữu).

The strong imprints of revolutionary and socialist ideology in literature, plus the system of heavy censorship and strict literature management, obstructed the creative and reflective ability of writers. When the majority of writers follow mainstream literature, it is hard to understand the diverse opinions of the time, particularly ones that contradict the

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204 Nguyễn Khải, “Khoảnh khắc đang sống” (“The Living Moment”), in Khoảnh khắc đang sống (The Living Moment), 75-161.
205 Nguyễn Văn Bổng, Bên lề những trang sách (On the Margins of Books), 121-122.
dominant view. Consequently, a true understanding of the reality and people’s views is difficult to reach.

Unfortunately, for similar reasons, voices of southern people about the northern control and northerners were largely unexamined, particularly alternative views of people who had worked for the Saigon regime before 1975. The people of the Republic of Vietnam from overseas, through some means, had advocated their views of 1979-1986 Vietnam (such as Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn in Những Người Đàn Bà Còn Ở Lài [The Women Left Behind]). However, just as Vietnamese within Vietnam expressed political biases about overseas Vietnamese, those who chose to leave the country also expressed biases of those who supported the political regime in 1979-1986 period.

**Artists’ Views and Desires regarding Renovation**

In the 1979-1986 period, the artists expressed their attitude toward social life and their responsibility to improve human life. Dương Thu Hương described an artist and directly expressed her opinion through the artist’s colleague in her 1984 short story “Ban Mai Yên Â” (“A Peaceful Morning”). In her view, an artist had to overcome his personal life and satisfaction; had to be able to imagine and sympathize with misery and the disadvantages of the surrounding people.206 Trần Văn Thủy stated about his own works “our job is mean and humble. It is mean because we think a lot but we do not dare to say what we think. It is humble because what we produce is unworthy and unimportant for the people.”207 The authors themselves felt guilty for not being helpful for their

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206 Dương Thu Hương, Ban Mai Yên Â (A Peaceful Morning), 106.
207 Trần Văn Thủy, Chuyện Từ Tế (How to Behave).
community. “For a long time we have been in the habit of pleasing our superiors. Producing a book, a play, or a film is neither to serve the community nor to satisfy desires of ragged people, but depends on the consideration of our superiors.”

Additionally, a myriad of real faces of the society in the 1980s can be indirectly recognized between the lines of literature. For example, the fact that a good citizen was discouraged to contribute to his community due to various obstacles originated from the political hierarchy reveals certain problems in contemporary society. Định in the story “Sự Trắc Trở đã qua” (“The Impediment is Over”) by Trần Huy Quang (1983) is a director of a glass factory. Youth, enthusiasm, dynamics, faithfulness could not help him overcome all economic limitations and difficulties from the economic management system. In spite of his factory’s productivity and potential, his attitudes in life showed his unsatisfactory feelings toward his society.

Another significant way of criticizing the contemporary context of human hardship was to take advantage of metaphorical symbols. Lưu Quang Vũ’s 1983 drama, “Hồn Trường Ba, Da Hàng Thịt” (“Trương Ba’s Soul, Butcher’s Body”), contains various details of the inharmonious relations between a kind, elegant soul and a rude, rough body. In many cases in the drama, the body wins over the soul, or external cover forces internal thinking to follow its commands. In a broader view, it is beyond human ability to change their surrounding environment; likewise it is also beyond Vietnamese people’s control to change the contemporary social hierarchy.

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208 Ibid.
In this context, people released their ambition through the figures they created in their works of art. As Nguyễn Huy Thiệp described the desirable atmosphere for the kite to freely fly, “the kite flies at its absolute height, where no risky and mean whirlwind exists, but kind, generous, peaceful and gentle breeze.” Similarly, Nguyễn Quang Sáng expressed his thinking through the feeling of a bird, “Perhaps the bird was confined in the cage for too long, thus its wings were uncertain, and its chest felt dizzy in reaction to the immense sky and earth. Perhaps it suddenly feels lonely, suddenly feels too small in the sky.”

In Lưu Quang Vũ’s drama “Hồn Trương Ba, Da Hàng Thịt” (“Trương Ba’s Soul, Butcher’s Body”), Trương Ba’s statement “the surface is not important, only love and sublime intelligence of humans is significant” was engraved in his daughter-in-law’s, as well as the reader’s heart. With that feeling in mind, Lưu Quang Vũ and many other writers expressed their wishes and desires to live as a true human, to write as a true writer.

Phùng Quán spoke for the desire of his class – the artists – to write on lined paper in order to be able to keep handwriting neat and straight.

As a writer
I wrote for thirty years
As a soldier
I was the best gunner of the regiment
I can write as fast as I shoot
On unlined paper.
But I still wrote on lined paper
Because to me,


Nothing is better than
To write neatly and straightly
From the first to the last line.\footnote{Phùng Quán, “Viết trên Giấy có Kế Dòng” (“Writing on Lined Paper”), Sông Hương Journal, No 28, (November and December 1987).}

Reiterating Phùng Quán’s aspiration of neat and straight writing, Thanh Thảo even expressed a more “revolutionary” spirit in her poem “Những Cây thông kêu” (“The Shouting Pine Trees”). She wished to follow the manner of pine trees, and challenge the political system.

\begin{quote}
We want to live
The life of a pine
Straight up
Spreading thousand of needles
Naturally
[...] The pine trees rush to the provincial committee
Please don’t fell us\footnote{Thanh Thảo, “Những Cây Thông Kêu” (The Shouting Pine Trees), Langbian Journal 1 (October 1987).}
\end{quote}

These desires represented the diversity of people’s opinions on social issues of the time. The statement in Sài Gòn Giải Phóng (Saigon Liberation News) on 11 June 1986 that “the people know what is happening but they do not dare to speak it, to write it down” seems not totally correct. Writers found different ways to advocate for their people. And these views of some of the Vietnamese intelligentsia should have had certain impacts on the opinions of the people, as well as the situation of the period.
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

The period of 1979-1986 was significant in modern Vietnam as a ‘night before the renovation period’, a transforming period from the war to reunification and the aftermath of military activities, economic, social, and cultural changes. After protracted war, the Vietnamese people looked forward to a peaceful and happy life of independence. To reach the eventual goal of an independent – free – happy society, Vietnamese people experienced various changes that they had not expected before.

To both foreigners and Vietnamese, historians and ordinary people alike, post-war Vietnam has not been adequately studied, compared with research on the Vietnam War and the post- Đổi Mới period. In pursuit of an objective interpretation of Vietnam, outsiders’ analyses are necessary to examine the whole community as one unit with various events. However, in order to understand the local community, it is crucial to study the variety of internal voices of indigenous people. Studying Vietnamese opinion, despite the scarcity of sources, would provide a sense of the mood of the Vietnamese public to fill in the historical gap.

Moreover, viewing this period from a social approach reveals positive aspects in social changes in modern Vietnam. Similar to the fact that people cannot deny some positive contributions of colonialism to the modernization of Vietnam, the 1979-1986 period highlights people’s efforts to renovate the country and develop a totally new face for Vietnam. Studying this period also brings to light the social atmosphere before the
Renovation period, partly explaining the reasons for the success of the Đổi Mới policy in Vietnam in the late 1980s.

Through Vietnamese literature of the 1980s, readers are able to understand different aspects of contemporary Vietnamese society. In such a newly united, independent, and peaceful country in the first decade after protracted wars, human life was more complicated and challenging than people expected. Political issues, including Vietnamese relations with the global community, border conflicts, the state, and the CPV attracted less critical opinions and expressions were often indirect. On the other hand, the Vietnamese people tended to criticize Vietnamese society, especially changes in human relations and negative aspects of life. Wars still remained in the people’s minds and had various impacts on people’s lives throughout the country. The worsening economic, social, and cultural situation the Vietnamese people witnessed for years encouraged them to support the vital importance of renovation in material and spiritual life. Immediately after the birth of the renovation policy, changes in human life are colorfully reflected in various publications.

A main theme of 1979-1986 literary works is a Vietnamese society emerging with two sides. On one hand, it is common knowledge that not many people in any society, when opportunities come, are willing to deny themselves a better life and continue to live as poorly as the majority of the people around them. There were certainly a number of people who sought personal interest in contemporary collective society. On the other hand, according to Vietnamese literature of the period, many Vietnamese devoted their life towards human goodness, beauty, and truth despite living in poverty. In other words,
people made every effort in reality to be a “pure” socialist person, an “all-good-human.” This devotion was not simply a reflection of the CPV propaganda, but an example of what some people sought to become. In doing so, many people experienced internal struggles in their mind to search for the true values of human beings. Some of them, both northerners and southerners, either directly or indirectly described the discussion and arguments in their works of art. Vietnamese opinion, therefore, was also divided into two categories, positive and optimistic views on one hand and critical and dissident attitudes on the other.

Vietnamese people in 1979-1986 dealt with not only a variety of difficulties in material life but a myriad of limitations on their spiritual lives as well. Living in an independent country, people’s ideology, however, depended on the political line of the government. To a certain extent, people did not feel totally free to express their true opinion, particularly if it included complaints or criticisms of the policies of the state and the CPV. Before 1986, describing negative aspects of life in Vietnam (which was, in many cases, the real situation) was viewed as an attack on the leadership of the government and the CPV. In other words, it was considered “taboo,” or even dangerous for writers to criticize life in Vietnam, therefore they avoided being critical. In this context, literature served as the most common forum for people to express their opinions. Regardless of the government’s efforts to censor, literature highlighted the darker aspects

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214 See Anh Động, “Lá thư bàn về Hạnh phúc” (“A Letter about Happiness”), in Qua rồi thời bao cấp (The Subsidy Period is Over), 49-69; Tùng Điển, “Cây Mỡ Trắng” (“The White Magnolia”), in Bức Kí Họa, 101-29; Trần Huy Quang, Sự Trắc Trở đã qua (Impediment is Over); Nguyễn Ngọc Ngân, Những người dân bà còn ở lại (The Women Left Behind).
of the contemporary situation, which challenged the ideal communist society that the government claimed existed.

On the other hand, there is a strong impression from contemporary literature that people yearned for a brighter future. Even under heavy censorship and strong influence from the political mainstream, documents reveal the people’s extraordinary strength and fortitude, which contributed to overcome all the privation in this hard time and renovate the country afterwards. People could not live through all difficulties without strong faith and confidence for future improvement.

It is necessary to emphasize the influence of politics in this literature trend. During the period of 1979-1986 a great number of publications were infused with the political line of the CPV. The majority of the literature aimed at praising nationalist spirit and encouraging the new life the socialist regime brought to the people. Therefore this type of literature was positive and supportive of the politics. The political influence was more easily recognized in stories about the other side. Appearing parallel to the “old Saigon regime,” people were always tolerant of communist cadres giving advice and theory or defending the new regime. The system of heavy censorship certainly affected the sentiments of authors and obstructed the search for the true opinion of the people.

Reading literature of the 1979-1986 period, people have a feeling that the “reality” described in publications was not the actual history of the time, but instead an “imaginary” reality that people were hoping and dreaming of. Some writers critical of the time realized the situation; however, for many reasons, they could not directly describe it

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215 See Nguyễn Khải’s drama “Khoảnh khắc đang sống” (“The Living Moment”), in Khoảnh khắc đang sống (The Living Moment), 75-161.
as it was. As a consequence, the general literature revealed only a one-sided and limited understanding and judgment of Vietnamese society during the 1979-1986 period.

However, the depiction provided by authors should not be simply seen as being a result of heavy censorship of the CPV. To some extent, literary works by intellectuals originated from real life and real people. They used materials of life to produce works of art or conduct research. As Nguyễn Văn Bồng pointed out, no one told a wife to write a letter to her husband on the front line with only her happiness and disregarding all sadness and sorrow or her anxieties about sick mother or hungry children. Neither did anyone tell the husband from the battlefield to reply to his wife with only accounts of heroic fights and brave actions, ignoring violence and death.\(^{216}\) It was their voluntary sacrifice for the nation, the people and their personal family. In other words, Vietnamese called it revolutionary heroism. This heroism was infused into people’s minds and their literary works.

To a certain extent, it is possible to understand the social atmosphere of the era, and generally the main concerns of people through a great amount of publications reflecting similar issues of the society. Prolonged expectations and pensive thinking expressed in literature of the 1987–1988 period could be seen as a reflection of the oppressive atmosphere of the previous time. The presence of a variety of constructive criticisms by numerous well-known intellectuals at the time, plus the reaction of the state afterwards, revealed that fact. The 1987–1988 literature, to some extent, truthfully reflected the era and opinions of a part of the population.

\(^{216}\) Nguyễn Văn Bồng. Bên lề những trang sách (On the Margins of Books), 161.
As Nguyễn Minh Châu stated, literature always provides questions for today. The authors communicated with the contemporary people about the emerging problems of society. Similar to historians who reported history hundreds of years ago, or artists who depicted the saints a long time ago, they only aimed at expressing their ideology to their society.²¹⁷ Therefore, according to 1979-1986 literature, Vietnamese society was reportedly similar to other peaceful and independent countries in the world, particularly any post-war transforming and developing society, which included both good and bad, both brightness and darkness, both achievements and mistakes, both wholesomeness and corruption. The importance is that Vietnamese people at the time did not think that they were wrong, hasty, dogmatic, or that their country was going backwards. Instead, they were confident and passionately believed that they were doing their best to reach a better life. Whatever opinion the public had, those views and attitudes were productions of a historical period, therefore helpful in gaining a better understanding of Vietnam during the reunification 1979-1986 era.

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Regarding Vietnamese opinion in the 1979-1986 period, given the limited sources, there are several questions that remain unanswered.

Although what emerged in literature published in Vietnam during these years confirmed a strong belief and great hope for prosperity and happiness, a dark picture of material life existed parallel to this ideal. The effectiveness of people’s opinion on the contemporary government to change the situation towards a positive development is difficult to examine. Even though people’s opinions played a certain role in awakening

²¹⁷ Nguyễn Minh Châu, Trang giấy trước đèn (A Paper under Light), 78.
the CPV leaders and pushing them to renovate the country, its actual impact on transforming society remains unknown.

In the southern part of Vietnam, people had suffered the most from military activities while living in the main battlefield of the war, and now they suffered from the political and economic changes after the war. The social and cultural alterations in the south were also remarkable for the local people. Moreover, as the main forces of mainstream literature, publications by northern “socialist” writers made up the majority of literary works in the 1979-1986 period. The few authors with southern backgrounds that published literature, was similarly influenced by official ideology and revised by the censor editors. As a result, almost no real southern voices were heard. Neither were southern opinions of the north reflected. Likewise, there is certainly no evidence that all kinds of people in Hanoi or in the north of Vietnam supported the contemporary government. Northerners’ alternative views of different social problems were hardly found in contemporary publications.

Also regarding southern society, the Sino-Vietnamese community became significant in the first decade after the war. In some specific areas, such as the eleventh or fifth district in the suburb of Hồ Chí Minh City in 1979-1986, more than 50% of the local population were ethnically Chinese.218 The Spring 1979 Incident marked an important point in the history of the Chinese community in Vietnam, when they questioned the idea of “citizen” and national identity. The Sino-Vietnamese people supposedly changed their views after 1979, and received different reactions from other Vietnamese surrounding

them. As witnesses and, to some extent, victims of the 1979 conflict between Vietnam and China, those people’s understanding of the two countries supposedly altered at different levels. Likewise, the worldview of the Khmer-Vietnamese living in the south certainly experienced similar changes.

Besides the majority Kinh people, the remaining 53 ethnic groups living in the mountainous areas where living conditions were extremely poor should have changed their views in this time. However, their economy, based on self-production and consumption, was perhaps not affected much by the state management. Regarding their general opinions of the national issues, people did apparently not pay enough attention to ethnic groups’ understanding of the broader nation in relation to their own community. Particularly to the ethnic people living in the border areas with China and Cambodia, military activities and their evacuation during the conflict period certainly impacted their worldviews.

Another category of people whose voices were unheard was the Vietnamese people returning from abroad during this time. They probably would have expressed different opinions on national issues, as well as received different attitudes from the surrounding community. People going abroad, either for study, work, or conferences, not only became the family and clan’s pride at the time, but in many cases, these people were also expected to support the family with modern equipment and goods which could not be purchased inside the country.\(^{219}\) Also, these people included different types of individuals, who might return home with only a few pieces of clothing or who benefited a

great deal from the trip. Experiences outside of Vietnam likely would have given people returning from overseas a different perspective on life in Vietnam. It would also be interesting to see the reactions of Vietnamese towards these people.

From a different perspective, one critical group of people that played a certain role in Vietnamese culture at the time were religious individuals. People practicing Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and other local religions like Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo, Bửu Sơn Kì Hương, etc. supposedly had different views of the nation in the period after reunification. Particularly religious groups in the south of Vietnam who were unfamiliar with Marxist ideology and practice. For example, southern spiritual needs were attended to by three thousand priests in 870 parishes throughout the southern provinces. Few within the church hierarchy or among the faithful were sympathetic to the revolution. To survive, the church would have to learn to swim with the tide and learn that “Vietnamese first, Catholics second.”\footnote{See William Duiker. *Vietnam since the Fall of Saigon*, 33.}

Opinions of people within these religious groups remain unknown.

Another group whose opinions need to be examined are people working at the New Economic Zones in the country. Either forced or voluntarily moving to the new areas, these people had different reasons for deciding to leave their ancestors’ village. The new lives in the post-independence period were supposedly not easy for these people, which certainly influenced their views of the nation and the community. Except for a few mainstream publications of the time complimenting the great achievement of the New Economic Zones, true opinions of the people in those New Economic Zones are in need of more research.
Similar to the people in the New Economic Zones, little attention has also been paid to the opinions of people who were “studying” in re-education camps in various places throughout Vietnam. Apart from publications by overseas Vietnamese escaping from those camps in the later period, no information of the re-education camps has been revealed in Vietnam until recently. Years at the camps might change their views of the nation, the government, and society toward either a more positive or negative direction.

Since all publications of the period went through a complicated and serious system of censorship, it would be interesting to explore the views of the art council at the local level and censorship boards of Propaganda and Training Section of the CPV. Careful research on opinions of this group of decision makers would reveal interesting facts on what kinds of publications were censored, and their awareness of “sensitive,” “problematic,” or dangerous topics.

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The subsidy period before Đổi Mới has become significant in the present life of Vietnamese people. Vietnamese recall the past, perhaps not simply because those were years of conflict with China and Cambodia, of hardship and privation in material life, or of preparation for the Đổi Mới process. These years left various unforgettable memories among the majority of people in Vietnam. Many people remember this time as a period of incredible efforts, steadfast determinations to adjust to hardship after the war, and new understanding of the society and the world. They also viewed numerous details of the period as unavoidable consequences of the hard times in war, as roots of many present cultural phenomena, social behaviors, as well as historical experiences for future social management. Present people appear to be tolerant and sympathetic when looking back to
this period for many reasons. Although it took the Vietnamese people years to feel more comfortable talking about this period, they do not now find it very difficult to discuss the hardships of this time since Vietnam already overcame it.

The Vietnamese people at present think that the young generations born during this time and afterwards will never be able to understand how hard their parents’ lives were. Vietnam today has been developing faster than anyone living during the 1979-1986 period could ever have imagined. To an extent, people today view Vietnam as a place with great potential for economic growth and advancement. Looking back twenty years earlier, they had positive and tolerant opinions of the time, other than blaming internally or externally limited conditions for the extreme hardships they had suffered from.

The popularity and positive feedback of audiences toward the exhibit “Life in Hanoi under the Subsidy Economy (1975-1986)” at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in 2006 provides clear evidence of the concern of Vietnamese people today about this period. The exhibit was initially planed to open for only 6 months, but was extended several times from June 2006 to October 2007. It attracted more than 350,000 visitors, in which 57.6% is Vietnamese and 42.4% is foreigners, 2000 comments on visitor’s books for only this exhibit, over 100 articles on newspapers and journals inside and outside Vietnam. During the time of exhibition, no other exhibition on such a small scale has had such a major social impact on Vietnamese society.221

Although ignored by both scholars and ordinary people for twenty years, the “subsidy period” has recently been discussed at different levels through various means.

The exhibit reminded people who experienced the years 1979-1986 of a period in their lives. It also strengthened the national pride of younger generations who gained a greater appreciation for the struggles their parents generation experienced. In all interviews, films, quotations, they made various comments regarding the contemporary economy, society, human relations, everyday life, but not concerning the government or state. Non-Vietnamese scholars appeared to be more concerned with the political aspect of this exhibit. For example, they questioned CPV involvement in the project, whether the CPV opposed the exhibiting of a dark period under its leadership, or how different Vietnamese people conceptualized socialism before 1986 and after 2006. Some foreign scholars argue that the CPV was simply trying to demonstrate to its population that things had improved since the “subsidy period.” These scholars claimed that the CPV took the position of “Look how bad it was and how good it is now” and “remember how far we have come.” One again, indigenous opinions of the issue are different.

However, the period of 1979-1986 is still viewed as a sensitive topic for popular discussions. The political influence on public statements is still so strong that people do not speak out about their full understanding of the issues, if they see “problems” behind that. Generally people state only what they think is safe for themselves and their family. Therefore, direct complaints and criticism of the leadership and management of the government are hardly found in present publications. Even though today the political atmosphere is more comfortable and literary standards are certainly higher than in the 1979-1986 period, generally Vietnamese people prefer silence and peace over criticism.

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Of course, as in every other community, there are a few individuals in Vietnamese society who speak about their opinions at different levels. Nevertheless, the effects of these actions on social changes are not very clear. From this perspective, the period of 1979-1986 contains various similarities to the present-day Vietnam. In other words, studying the past certainly helps to understand present-day Vietnam.
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