Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam, 1948-1964

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INTRODUCTION

… when what we see with our very eyes leads to the wildest rumours, there was no telling what had happened in a place beyond eight layers of white clouds.

Ueda Akinari (1732–1809), Tales of Moonlight and Rain

On 2 May 1952, as La Văn Cẩu prepared to mount the podium in front of him, he thought about the words Võ Nguyên Giáp had just used to introduce him: “La Văn Cẩu is a symbol of the Emulation Movement, an emulation to defeat the enemy and accomplish great deeds.”

He knew that in a matter of seconds the President would name him the first new hero (anh hùng mới) in the history of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). He thought about his village, Lùng Định, in the far reaches of Cao Bằng province, and about the arm he had lost in the carnage of Đồng Khê in the fall of 1950. Once just a small ethnic Tày who could barely read and write, he was now a hero of the Vietnamese nation, and government cadres were comparing him to Ly Thường Kiệt (1019–1105), Trần Hưng Đạo (1228–1300), and Phan Đình Phùng (1847–1896).

In the hills of Tuyên Quang province in early May 1952, leaders of the DRV organised a grand celebration to honour the merits and dedication of dozens of emulation fighters (Chiến sỹ thi đua). Seven among them — La Văn Cẩu (1932), Nguyễn Quốc Tri (1921–1967), Nguyễn Thị Chiện (1930), Trần Đại Nghĩa (1913–1997), Ngô Gia Khâm (1912–1990), Hoàng Hạnh (1888–1963), and the martyr Cù Chính Lan — were awarded the title of either “military hero” or “labour hero”. From 1948, when the first emulation campaign was launched, to 1964, just before the outbreak of war

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1 Interview with La Văn Cẩu, Hero of the Armed Forces (1952), Hanoi.
2 Đại hội toàn quốc chiến sĩ thi đua và cán bộ gương mẫu (1–6.5.1952) (National Conference of Emulation Combatants and Outstanding Cadres, 1–6 May 1952), in AVN3 (National Archives of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Centre no. 3), BLD (Archives of the Ministry of Labour), file no. 432, 529 pp.
with the South, DRV leaders (based in the northern region of the Việt Bắc) redefined the notion of patriotic exemplarity. “Vanguard workers” (Lao động xuất sẮc), “emulation fighters”, and “new heroes” made up the ranks of a new “exemplary society” where political virtue served as a principle for mobilising the population. This book examines the productivist and political elite that sprang up, often in great numbers, in the towns and countryside of North Vietnam. Between 1950 and 1964, the DRV elected 148 “new heroes” and nearly 100,000 “emulation fighters”.

To understand the implications of this move, one must first forget the names and individual lives of these new social players, and focus instead on the different categories elaborated within the schema of social reconstruction. The Sinologist Susan L. Shirk identifies three types of governance: meritocracy, feudocracy, and virtuocracy, based on Max Weber’s three principles of authority. In a virtuocracy, the distribution of titles, certificates, and medals on the basis of virtue plays a key role in the strategisation of power. It is the source of the government’s ability to transform the social system and its hold on the people, to increase its legitimacy as well as its political strength. This type of political response is natural in both traditional societies and Confucian cultures. In fact, an “exemplary society” in the sinicised world has always been based on the three pillars of discipline, education, and morality. A revolutionary government that grants rewards and decorations to its model citizens in order to bring about a moral transformation of society can also be called a virtuocracy. The problem is determining whether it is a core phenomenon or a peripheral one within the government’s agenda, especially when that agenda encounters historical continuities it cannot break or change completely.

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was a virtuocratic regime. From its inception in September 1945, leaders based in the Việt Bắc region (north of Hanoi, and the government’s base of power until the end of the Franco-Vietminh war in 1954) strove to offer the formerly oppressed classes a place in the new system. It was not just a question of replacing the “old collaborationist regime” with new masters, but an overall rethink of the criteria for reconstructing a political era, or beyond that, a new

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social relationship. The egalitarianism of a virtuocracy is meant to negate or redress a past injustice. The model — or modelling — of the “new man” in sinicised societies naturally arose at the junction between the failed compromises of the past and the demand for a new ideal. The guarantors of virtue were entrusted with the responsibility to sculpt and guide the first steps of an exemplary man, and reform society from the inside. The rise to power of any revolutionary group, regardless of its nature and ideological stance, invariably entails an attempt to transform society through the honour and celebration of its outstanding citizens.

My interest in the virtuocratic aspect goes beyond the symbolic level, an aspect already prioritised in Confucian tradition. The importance of heroic exemplarity in the development of Vietnamese communism is also due to the particular social and political context in which this development took place, which was diametrically opposed to the urban and internationalist world envisaged by Marx and actually inhabited by Lenin. In fact, Communist Vietnam is unique in that it was born out of a prolonged civil war instead of social revolution, within an agrarian society that was barely urbanised and strongly Confucian in nature. The context was similar to that of China in the 1930s–1940s with some important differences — Vietnam was under colonial rule prior to the revolution, and the nation underwent a transition that was, in fact, highly structured around heroic symbols. These characteristics have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere, both in their structure and consequences, so I will not deal with them here. My aim, rather, is to show that the establishment of a national model of heroism by the new communist Vietnamese regime arose mainly from its need for legitimacy and identity. This need took two forms, one global and the other domestic. On the international scene, the movement led by Hồ Chí Minh needed internationalist recognition, which had become central to their strategy in the early 1950s. Becoming a part of the international communist world engendered a host of symbols, but this was also shot through with political tension. In no way was the process neutral, be it in the choice of symbols or the affiliation with either Russia or China. On top of this internationalist alignment was superimposed a process of self-identification, involving a legitimising strategy that relied on powerful symbols of Vietnamese nationalism and which had to be implemented within the social reality.

Many people have denied the importance of the new hero in the DRV’s identity formation. Since it was basically a foreign concept based on Russian and Chinese internationalism, these heroes were thought of
as simply tacked-on compared to the more substantial reality of national heroes from Vietnam’s long history. In the 1990s, the government encouraged the return of religious festivals and rituals in an effort to minimise the impact of these new heroes, but the new morality and politics that they represented could not help but enter into dialogue — or at least into contact — with traditional models. The new hero often polarised the debate between those insisting on a clear demarcation between nationalism and communism within DRV ideology, but I prefer to situate the analysis outside of this opposition from the outset. In fact, separating nationalism from communism in developing countries is quite irrelevant. Such a distinction, based on the opposition between culture and ideology, stems more from rhetoric — if not from ideology itself — than from reality. For those in the countryside, the appearance of the new hero in the hills of Tuyên Quang in May 1952 did not seem like a total rupture with their national history. And yet, there was no direct historic progression. As seen from Hanoi, the hero was not the same as the ones already present in the towns and villages around the nation. How can this duality be explained?

The origin of the exemplary man reveals an intentionalist underpinning. While official historiography claims that the new hero was the fruit of a heroic land, I believe, on the contrary, that the heroic figure was born of a political decision with a particular aim — as per Saint Thomas Aquinas, “intention refers to an act of will by which reason ordains something towards its end”.

Far from denying the historical existence of heroic figures in Vietnam, the intentionalist approach sees communism as a technical problem rather than a philosophical or ethical one. The creation of the new man in the DRV was first a matter of organisational necessity. The main focus was not so much on developing a concept of materialism to influence minds, but on finding ways to organise the material itself. The viability of communism was above all a technical matter. Emulating the new model citizen was not only seen as a communist invention, it also helped to perpetuate a tradition that had relied on heroic tales for centuries to educate the people.

My main focus here is how the social process brought about by the emergence of an elite virtuous class became a motor for social reform. In other words, the new hero and the emulation fighter in North Vietnam were the beginnings of a re-evaluation — if not a recasting — of social

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relationships, not of the group as a whole, as claimed by some in the communist ideological camp. As Andrew G. Walder wrote in the case of China, the establishment of communist regimes in the sinicised world led these countries to an exchange whereby “political loyalty is rewarded systematically with career opportunities, special distributions, and other favours that officials in communist societies are uniquely able to dispense”.  

What Walder called “neo-traditionalism” describes political regimes which set out to recast social relationships around values of loyalty and the political value of “exemplary men”.

I do not wish to overstate the role of cultural determinism in the DRV’s endogenisation of the new heroic figure, but I return frequently to the question of how the hero was adapted to fit the Vietnamese reality. The new model citizen is not an isolated object. His modernity lies not so much in the simple acceptance of an exogenous model than in the modifications he represents to a transmitted heritage. Accepting the continuity of the heroic figure in Vietnamese society does not necessarily mean opposing the rupture implied by an ideological approach. This sort of dualist vision of history arises when one ignores the facts. In Vietnam, the development of the new society sometimes seemed more like a conservative reaction to the growing influence of Western modernism, first introduced by the French and then by the Americans. While DRV leaders were certainly aware of the changes going on in the world around them, the political rupture of the late 1940s — which engendered a host of thoughts about the new man — sprang more from their desire to re-Asianise their political vision, which had been shaken by the spread of Western modernity since the late nineteenth century.

The question still remains of the new hero’s position within the timeline of Vietnamese history. Previously, according to the historian François Furet, “the notion of subaltern classes evoked mainly a sense of quantity and anonymity”. But a vast number of these minute lives found an ear, a writer of history, in the State. The real question was not whether the details of a particular hero’s life were true or false, nor how he was created by the institutional process. Rather, one should examine how the hero was culturally anchored within Vietnamese society and how official

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historiography described the daily lives of these new characters. That is, despite the superficial or stereotypical nature of the life stories of these exemplary men, their heroic feats spread out and resonated throughout the countryside, thus spreading the theatocratic ideal of the new North Vietnamese regime. In so doing, the DRV began to control the rules governing the daily life of the collective. The hero allowed the State to have a better command of the real through an imaginary canvas, one that came naturally from their ancestral past and guided their political reorganisation. Once again, the preponderance of cultural elements was necessary given the still vague notion and quite “modern” sense of the revolutionary phenomenon.

The political functionality of the new hero was an expression of the government’s desire for national reunification; by presenting such a seemingly “normal” figure, they maintained the illusion of a State “by and for the people”. Historians, however, should not see the sudden appearance of this new figure as simple political manipulation. North Vietnamese leaders wanted to control the real via the imaginary of the heroic myth. For them, the hero was not confined to his immortal existence in the archives, as he was in Maoist China. In communist societies, the heroic dead were usually subsumed as individuals behind the political significance of their lives (see the myth of Lei Feng in the PRC). In Vietnam, however, the exemplary man was put on display in all the normality of his daily life, confirming Montesquieu’s notion that “to accomplish great things, one must not be above other men, but with them”.

The new exemplary men of the DRV are representatives of the people, of common citizens in a society that revolves around the land and their labour. The institutionalisation of communism destroyed the anonymity of class. The new man in Vietnam had little to do with the reconstruction of lives based on the modern idealities of politics and the city; it was mainly a peasant issue. It was about real lives, with real names, dates, and places. Behind them were “men who lived and died, and suffering, meanness, jealousies and outcries”. The words of the exemplary man were written down and transcribed, and though they were sometimes vague or idealised,

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or borrowed or even suggested outright by those in power, their simplicity does not hide any falsity, lies, or injustice. They evoke an era in which the utopia of a socialism of resistance blended with memories of a vanished youth, and describe the intersection between the simple lives of selected families with the official granting of honours.

Thomas Carlyle wrote that “History is the essence of innumerable Biographies.” Indeed, ruptures, erasures, forgetting, and the intersecting discourses of the new hero led to a reconstruction of the past. At first glance, of course, these brief lives seem fabricated, constructed, or even manipulated, but the simple and sincere way in which they are told gives them a very real sense of truth. Hence, my study is twofold, and deals with the history of the DRV as well as individual biography. Studying the new hero and the emulation fighter is not a means for re-examining the political and social history of the Vietnam, but rather an independent standpoint that can shed some light on the latter from the inside.

As a general rule, the everyday life of the new man in North Vietnam was not a matter of interest except where his productivist and military action could serve as a lesson and example, and the new heroism took root in this dimension of immediacy. The physical anchoring of the new heroic figure is important. Although they were presented as national symbols, the new heroes were actually intended from the beginning (in 1952) to serve as a relay between the centre and the periphery, that is, to consolidate or even create a political space in the literal sense of the term. Once the logic behind the exemplary man took on a geographic dimension, a decentralised approach was needed to understand him. The new hero’s message speaks unequivocally of spreading, and thus anchoring, the State discourse within the local. In order to grasp this concept from the outside, we have to listen and observe at ground level, far from the centres of power, to the words and the actions of peasants, workers, low-level government employees, and local factotums, to whom the central government once awarded a certificate of merit, aware that they were shattering forever the ancient order of things.

The new hero thus has to be studied on the provincial level. It is often said that the Việt Minh revolution was a peasant revolution, but recruitment of the movement’s top cadres took place mainly in the cities.

The countryside, on the other hand, presented a challenge for the new regime to conquer hearts and minds, but rewarded it in return with a potent political legitimacy. This, however, led to a rupture that threatened the ancient notion of village autonomy for the sake of democratic centralism. One cannot see this as just a local phenomenon defined by local circumstances, nor situate the facts of the hero’s life within pure individuality. In this case, the local community no longer represented the isolated and autonomous community so sought after by historians and ethnologists for abstract experimentation. While the ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss saw a very restricted study of isolates (villages, neighbourhoods, ethnic groups, etc.) as a way to get back to the authenticity of the Other, understanding the reality of these new honourees required going beyond a monographic or micro-historical approach. The new hero was measured along two axes, in a constant back-and-forth between the local and the national. The new outstanding citizen was established in North Vietnam to help garner internationalist recognition. As a foreign concept, he had to fit into a specific cultural context to establish his legitimacy. He was to become the symbol of identity transformation to the outside world, and the expression of continuity within his own.

The first chapter examines the role of the Vietnamese heroic figure through time (Chapter 1: Heroism in Vietnam), studying how the hero was portrayed in classical Vietnamese historiography, then the rupture brought about by the writings of Phan Bội Châu, the early nineteenth-century free-thinker and patriot. These overlapping discourses and the resulting singularity of the new hero revealed just how the official historiography made this new object its own. The launching of the first patriotic emulation campaign in June 1948, and especially the reforms enacted in the first semester of 1950, provide a prism for understanding this phenomenon and the demands placed upon it by outside forces. The new hero was the product of emulation, which announced straightaway his connection to the institutional apparatus of communism (Chapter 2: Patriotic Emulation (1948–1952)). The following chapter takes a closer look at the official historiography itself and tracks the progression of the new figure in order to present a profile of the emulation fighter (Chapter 3: The Emulation Fighter (1950–1964)) and the new hero (Chapter 4: The New Hero (1952–1964)). I noticed that among the common people, discourse about the hero implied the adoption

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of a new civic virtue, which was often more concrete than the actual requirements for receiving the title. It is difficult, however, to understand the value of this mass mobilisation if we know nothing about the daily lives of these outstanding men and women. A large part of this study is thus devoted to their words and deeds, which I then systematically compare with the official government documents that supposedly represent them.

Finally, after examining the origins and the daily life of the new man, I broach another aspect of his integration into North Vietnamese society. Though the new internationalist hero was still a living and active member of his community, I also considered the lives of the heroic dead who, as national martyrs, were seen as cultural doubles of the new patriotic hero (Chapter 5: The Life of the Dead). Beyond the formalist concession to proletarian internationalism, the national martyr also adopted a traditional face to both protect and mobilise the national community. However, after the DRV victory at Diên Biên Phủ (1954), this mechanism took on a more global aspect. Government leaders gained more control over the lives of their honoured dead, which led them to rethink the role of past heroes as well as accord the newly fallen with a veneration more in line with ancestral principles (Chapter 6: The Cult of the New Hero). Chapter 7 then examines the way in which the new heroic figure — now as an object of representation — took part in the reconstruction of a national patriotic imaginary. It is an idealised version of his life that was carried down to the village as a tool of propaganda. Lastly, the new hero was also part of the national discourse, which leads to the question of Vietnam’s patriotic pantheon. The veneration of the new hero indirectly gave rise to a network of identity references, thus establishing the blueprint for a new collective memory.

This latter element is part of the complex system governing the right of access within Vietnamese society. The observer’s position (age, profession, ethnicity, life story, etc.) determines his access to a certain type of information. What would happen if we change the nature of the person speaking? It is important to keep in mind the space accorded to foreigners in Vietnamese society.

Since 1986, Vietnam has operated on two distinct and carefully controlled levels of openness, one economic and the other political. In keeping with long-standing regional tradition, and in the hopes of legitimising their return to the international scene, Vietnamese leaders have been rather reserved since the mid-1990s about the extent of their involvement in the establishment of global communism from the 1950s onwards. With the policy of openness known as Đổi Mới, the official historiography initiated
a return to the cultural origins of its political identity. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam liked to call attention to the religious renewal taking place, a timely topic as the regime was turning towards the West.12 This study thus seeks a balance between these two fundamental tendencies in national historiography. How do we account for a choice that seems to run counter to the most immediate interests of those in power? The new hero continues to tie Vietnam to a past that its present seeks to ignore. On the other hand, directing foreign attention to the return of the rites and customs of their ancient traditions reveals their intention to reassure the West about their political openness. Of course, this orientation still conforms to the tradition of government intervention and implies the use of control tactics. Contemporary foreign scholars in Vietnam must seek official approval, and their jurisdiction and access to the national reality are still carefully controlled. Yet to turn away from the reshaping of the patriotic imaginary in the DRV as a result of intimidation would be to ignore an important part of the remaking of national identity that has been going on for a half a century.