CHAPTER 1

Heroism in Vietnam

But where was the new man? On the third day he suddenly asked his guide this question. ‘The new man?’ said the guide, somewhat taken aback. ‘The people you see all around you — in the café, in the street. They’re the new men!’ They were strolling along Tirana’s main boulevard. Krams felt he’d been had. ‘Excuse my frankness,’ he said, nodding towards the passers-by, ‘but the last thing I’d call these people is the new men! Look at the way they’re dressed! Look at the way the boys move, look at the girls’ eyes! I don’t know how to describe them.’ The guide laughed. ‘They’re just human movements, human looks. Why should they need any other description?’

Ismail Kadare

COMMUNIST HISTORIOGRAPHY IN VIETNAM MADE HỒ CHÍ MINH THE NATURAL SUCCESSOR OF THE NATION’S HEROIC ANCESTORS. The hero in Vietnamese tradition helped define his era and was integrated into a social order that ensured the harmony of the community, guaranteeing the time-honoured relationship between the citizen and the land of his ancestors. The cult of the tutelary spirit in Vietnam goes back to the thirteenth century and gradually incorporated animist rites and beliefs. The ritual practices that emerged from this spirituality and the relationship to the sacred were

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... inseparable from the social, economic, historical and political reality of the human community that created them. An examination of these practices thus involves an examination of their context and their relationship with both actual and imagined realities. The nature of these relationships determines the survival strategy of the rituals in one form or another, whether dressed up as myth or taken over by the state, which bedecks them with patriotic elements to transform them into events within the nation’s history.³

The Vietnamese village was defined by its geographic space, which lay in the hands of protective spirits to whom one owed respect and veneration. The arrival of a new actor on the communal stage had to be accompanied by a cultural framework that was easily understood by everyone. To the outside world, the hero symbolised a transformation of identity, but within the DRV he was to be part of a continuity. The new government sought a rupture between the old and the new for political ends: the taking and managing of power. DRV leaders had no real cultural substitute to offer. In the early 1950s, the new heroic figure gave government leaders a means of penetrating into the traditional core of communal independence. But this did not take into account the mistrust or disinterest of the rural population for foreign concepts.⁴

The Hero in Vietnamese Culture

One of the cultural elements that the Vietnamese took over from China is the belief that “men were born unequal in talent”.⁵ As a result, the idea of social difference, an individual’s place in society, was inherent in the

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⁴ A report written in 1956 by the people’s committee of Hồng Quang illustrates the problems encountered by cultural teams in spreading the example of these foreign figures: “Workers would much rather see Vietnamese propaganda films than foreign ones. Of the latter, they prefer Chinese or North Korean films since they feel a cultural similarity and a feeling that they don’t find with the Soviet ones”, in Báo cáo tình hình nghiên cứu về công tác văn hóa phục vụ công nhân tại Khu Hồng Quang (Report on the cultural activities aimed at workers in the zone of Hồng Quang), in AVN3, BVH, file no. 880, document no. 3/BC, 25 November 1956.

conception of social order. The three relationships that were essential to eternal socio-political harmony were: the loyalty of the bureaucrat to the emperor, the obedience of a son to his father, and the submission of a wife to her husband. Society was built upon a vertical organisation of social differences via the application of the Confucian hierarchical principles. This principle of submission could be extended to include the submission of the inferior to his superior, ensuring the cohesion of the social whole. Social relationships between community members were hierarchical, and one’s responsibilities depended on one’s position within the group.

The hierarchisation of the Vietnamese community did not result in inequality, however. All men were not born equal, but this meant that they had different duties as well. A leader’s greatest responsibility was to be a model of virtue for his people. It was his duty, for example, to practise the virtues of loyalty, piety, self-sacrifice, etc., in order to instil the values of the community in his inferiors. As one proverb goes, “If leaders are not exemplary before their inferiors, the latter will never have an orderly life.” For centuries in Vietnam, rulers paid homage to their exemplary subjects. The hero was a sort of barometer of patriotic virtue, and was connected to his nation by a filial link. The description of a heroic life was less concerned with biographical details then with situating the hero’s life at the border between the personal and the collective. The hero’s life story was usually generic and impersonal. He represented a certain social order but not the heart of the system. The ruling power came into the picture only when involved in national defence. The hero shared in this legitimacy by playing the role that society expected of him; he offered his body to the abstraction of a political body, and was defined by the fatherland in return. The hero was created by the fatherland and was the best possible servant to his nation, the inferior to a superior being. The public recognised this subjection of the “exemplary man” to the collective. In homage, they agreed to venerate the heroic figure in order to re-establish a parity within the symbolic exchange that underlies the harmony of a Confucian society.

In Vietnamese, the idea of “love for one’s country” (yêu nước or ái quốc in Sino-Vietnamese) blended with the expression of “loyalty” (trung), which referred more specifically to the loyalty of an individual to the king, the family, or a relative. The concept of a nation took hold relatively late in Vietnam and went beyond the mere physical space of a territory.6

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The land of the ancestors sought a perenniality in the supernatural, where “the miraculous spirit of rivers and mountains” determined the limits of national space. According to Vietnamese mythology, the spirits of the elements gave birth to invincible men and women. The souls of the generations of heroes who lived and died on the land made it a sacred place. For having harboured these heroes, Vietnamese soil was sacred, and its people had been heroic since the dawn of time. Protecting the soul of these mythical heroes linked the Vietnamese people to their land. Leaving home meant breaking the filial bond that tied one to one’s heroic ancestors. It was hard to distinguish the national from the individual, the familial, or the communal in the depths of this ancestral patrimony.

The hero was tightly bound by the time and space of this mythological past, and he alone defined the spirit of his age. His fusion with the elements made him the representation of national identity. Legend tells us that the ancestor of the Vietnamese people was the dragon Lạc Long Quân (Hán tự: 龍龍君; literally “Dragon Lord of Lạc”, sometimes spelled 蠟龍君 or 鵝龍君 and also called Hùng Hiền Vương). North Vietnamese communists preferred to invoke the continuity of the “national spirit” rather than the “Vietnamese soul”, but the myth of their “4,000-year-old history” made it necessary to incorporate this heroic heritage. The Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) presented itself as the direct descendant of the nation’s heroes. The heroic figure distilled the essence of the national character. There was no patriotism without heroes, nor heroes without patriotism. The cult of mythic heroes was a natural part of delimiting the physical boundaries of the nation. They had fought for centuries to defend these tracts of land, which thereby linked them forever to its perenniality. The belief in this fusion between the exemplary man and the physical

8 “Whether mythical or historical, these heroes took on a spiritual power and joined the ranks of the cult figures who used to fill the Vietnamese countryside, and thus helped to define it.” J.K. Whitmore, “The Vietnamese Sense of the Past”, Viêt Nam Forum: 8.
9 Vũ Hồng. “Sự ra đời của Đảng và bước ngoặt lịch sử của chủ nghĩa anh hùng” (Birth of the Party and the important stages in heroism), Học tập, Hanoi, no. 4, 1967: 75–81.
10 “When men and women die for the country, the mountains and rivers transform the goodness of their existence into spirit. And the sun and the moon will shine in all their brightness.” This is a couplet from one of the “parallel sentences” dedicated to Trương Công Định (1820–1864), a South Vietnamese patriot who rose up against the French. Cited in Phạm Cao Dương, Viêt Nam Forum: 13.
space of the nation is a key element of Vietnamese culture. The heroism of their ancestors allowed them to successfully resist being completely sinicised, so the modern citizen had to prove himself worthy of such a heritage. The myth of the heroic origins of the Vietnamese nation appears obsessively in the political rhetoric of the communist regime. In the days following the victory of Điện Biên Phủ, the DRV reinterpreted the stories of its historic figures in order to infuse this national spirit into the bodies of its new men.

In pre-communist Vietnam, the national hero alone represented the land of the ancestors in the villagers’ daily lives, so the new government had to establish a genealogical dynastic continuity in order to gain legitimacy. They did this by invoking the nation’s glorious ancestors, but they had to know what they were doing. The people and the State looked to the heroic, mythic, and historic ancestor for the form and development of a historic continuity to ground their identity.

Vietnamese leaders had relied on this principle for centuries to produce a official historiography celebrating a lineage rich with heroic figures. Many historical works recount the glorious days of the royal dynasties, but there are also books praising the heroic lives of its “loyal subjects, devoted to and benefactors to the fatherland”. The most famous of these was written by Lý Tế Xuyên in 1329, called The Powerful Spirits of the Realm of Viet (Việt diễm u linh tập). It was basically a series of biographies of “exemplary spirits” from antiquity to the beginning of the fourteenth century, who had helped to spread the Vietnamese spirit and traditions. The State encouraged its citizens to venerate the model, and each new emperor adapted the nation’s historic ancestors to his liking. In the fifteenth century, the eight biographical volumes of Extraordinary Stories from Linh Nam (Linh Nam chích quái) listed “the people who

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helped found and defend the nation, and protected the people”. In 1623, Phạm Phi Kiên published *Presentation of the Loyalty and the Just Cause of the Southern Nations* (*Nam thiên trung nghĩa bảo lạc*), dedicated to the great men of the fatherland under the Đinh, Lý, Trần, and Lê dynasties. In 1771, the scholar Hồng Cẩm Hoàng published a vast collection of poems entitled *Anthology of Illustrious Personalities* (*Danh Tích Thi Tập*), dedicated mainly to the “combatants for the just cause” and “extraordinary men” from the “land of the ancestors”.

National heroes were not just an example or a model for the State, but a “constantly active source of its life, its power, its success, of the continuation of the dynasty for the good of the people”. The function of the hero in Vietnamese civilisation should thus be analysed within the context of his link to those in power. In his study on the historiography of the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945), the historian Philippe Langlet describes the use of the cult of heroic ancestors in the affirmation of dynastic majesty. The hero in Vietnam was first and foremost an “outstanding citizen” to whom the dynasty in power rendered homage. The biographies of the “Illustrious Loyal Officers” enumerate the “exemplary men”, listing the merits that earned them the title. Dynastic leaders had to maintain loyalty and encourage the ardour of those serving them so as to strengthen the stability of their institutions, hence the creation of an official cult to that effect under the Ministry of Rites. In 1790, Nguyễn Phước Ánh (Gia Long) drew up a list of “outstanding citizens”, living or dead, for real or hono-

13 The first four volumes were written by Vủ Quỳnh between 1478 and 1492. The scholars Trần Thế Pháp and Kiều Phú then took over the project. See Trần Nghia and F. Gros, *Catalogue of the books of Han Nom*, vol. II, pp. 206–7.
Dynastic rule was that of a family patriarch, but also of important government leaders; they had to be honoured and the souls of the departed appeased by a State cult. This cult, presided over by the emperor, was also a show of respect for the fundamental principles against tyranny.\(^\text{17}\)

A cult of outstanding citizens was organised by categories of merit, after an examination of each candidate’s history. In 1810, a temple was built near Huế to venerate the accomplishments of the outstanding citizens of the Restoration. The ruling dynasty showed great prudence with respect to these “heroic spirits”. By showing respect and veneration, it hoped to influence the present and guarantee the goodwill of the elements. Each new sovereign invoked the protection of illustrious spirits from the nation’s past. Devotion to the heroic dead was carried out via the spread and continuation of official rites. After the death of Gia Long (1819), Minh Mạng (1791–1840) in turn reinterpreted the deeds of past heroic figures in order to draw up a list of the greatest heroes and associate them with the cult of his father. Under the Nguyễn emperors, three types of exemplary men were honoured: Illustrious Loyalties (hiền trung), Outstanding Citizens of the Restoration (trung hung), and the Loyal and Faithful (trung tiệt). They were showered with imperial favour and were meant to express the solidarity of the dynasty in power.

Hero worship was thus a key political act. Popular custom held that acts of piety performed for these heroic figures could bring about benevolent intercession. The wrath of unsatisfied souls was feared and the sovereign’s virtue depended upon “his current behaviour, but also upon his filial, or rather familial piety, which situated him within a historical continuity. Glorifying the benevolence of his ancestors not only proved his legitimacy, but was part of the cult of universal harmony, a condition of good government”.\(^\text{18}\) The legitimate hero was one whose actions benefited those in power. When we examine the origin of the “new man” in the DRV, we must remember this ancient link between the outstanding citizen and the state. Vietnamese culture would never recognise an illegitimate heroic figure nor one dedicated to an unjust cause.\(^\text{19}\) Ontologically, the hero served a just cause and was defined by his filial link to the secular power. While the veneration of the hero as outstanding citizen reinforced the legitimacy

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\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 69.

\(^{19}\) văn Thảo. *Chủ nghĩa anh hùng cách mạng Việt Nam* (Vietnamese revolutionary heroism). Hanoi: nxb Khoa học xã hội, 1972, pp. 7–34.
of the political authority, the relationship with heroic ancestors played a key role in the construction of national identity.

In the eleventh century, Confucian reforms within the government imposed a new regulation of society. According to ancient tradition, the Vietnamese village had an identity and a political unity unto itself. One proverb states that “[T]he law of the prince must give way to the customs of the village (Phép vua thua lệ làng)”. At the heart of communal culture, the tutelary spirit was the most important factor in identity formation. The anthropologist Lê Minh Ngọc states that this spirit “represented the shared destiny of a society living in the same territory”. The spirit thus defined the territorial unity of the village community. A cult was dedicated to the spirit to protect the work and daily life of the village. In Vietnam, the ruling dynasty conceived of the nation through the community of its official ancestors. The political autonomy of the commune did not diminish its existence as a part of the nation. Thus, since the Lí Dynasty (1010–1225), imperial powers have tried to increase their hold on the tutelary spirits of the commune. The cult of local spirits had to be approved by certificates or royal edicts issued by the Ministry of Rites. Under the later Lê dynasty (1428–1788), each village had to declare every aspect of its local spirit cult (history, legend, rites, dates of celebration, festivals, etc.). The central government managed to penetrate into the communal level through this control over village rites. Secular authorities could then denounce any “inconvenient cults” that did not conform to state ideology.

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20 The tutelary spirit was the protector of the village inhabitants. The term Thành Hoàng is a Chinese word composed of two elements: thành (fortifications, ramparts) and hoàng (a dry moat dug around the ramparts). It originally referred to the space inside the fortifications and the surrounding moats, but later referred to the god who protects the fortifications.


By controlling the tutelary spirits, the ruling power imposed its dominance over the nation’s communes. In other words, by granting titles to local spirits, the government linked the fate of the village to that of the State.

Tutelary spirits were a mix of mythological figures, celestial spirits (thiên thần), historical figures, and human spirits (nhân thần). They were venerated because they had rendered great service to their country, emperor, or village during their lifetime. The ruling dynasty encouraged the establishment of these cults in communes around the nation. We know, for example, that more than 60 per cent of the spirits worshipped in Vĩnh Phú, Hà Tây, and Hà Bắc province were patriots who had fought to defend their country. The Minister of Rites held a key position within the State apparatus as he contributed to the homogenisation of the national imaginary. The hero, who was a national figure but also a provincial, or more specifically, communal one, helped establish the myth of the “great Vietnamese family”, which added a sense of familial hierarchy to the relationship between the members of the national community:

The feudal dynasties from the Lý to the Nguyễn usually tried to make popular culture serve their political interests. They made an effort to collect the legends of heroic figures from all provinces in order to touch them up, give them their stamp of approval, and then send them out into the countryside where temples and altars would be built for their veneration. From then on, every village had to organise an annual festival in honour of these benevolent spirits. This policy established and reinforced national pride and a spirit of independence, and encouraged a veneration of the heroes who helped build the nation.

The historical hero offered Vietnamese dynasties a way to politically unify their territorial space. Eventually, nearly every village had a cult for Hai Bà Trưng (?–43), Bà Triệu (226–248), Lý Thường Kiệt (1019–1105), Trần Hùng Đạo (1228–1300) (born Trần Quốc Tuấn), Nguyễn Trãi (1380–1442), Lê Lợi (1384–1433), and others, who had defended the nation’s independence over the centuries. Vietnamese rulers managed to establish a homology between the present and the past. The veneration of benevolent

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24 Ibid., p. 64.
spirits was an extension of the cult of ancestor worship, and fulfilled an important political function in the construction of national identity. The ritual of venerating the nation’s ancestral spirits had the possibility and privilege of bringing together the “great” and the “small” family. The cult of the hero symbolised a first attempt at unifying the country and aimed to circumvent the traditional policy of local autonomy.

The Mutation of the Hero

In the early twentieth century, the scholar-patriot Phan Bội Châu (1867–1940) proposed an abrupt reinterpretation of the heroic figure, sparking his transformation from traditional “historical hero” to the progressivist “collective hero”. One recurring theme in Vietnamese culture is the assimilation or rejection of exogenous ideas. The adoption of Marxist-Leninist ideology in Vietnam was due in large part to the peregrinations of Nguyễn Ái Quốc (Nguyễn the Patriot) — better known as Hồ Chí Minh (born Nguyễn Sinh Cung) — who left Vietnam for Europe in 1911. The imported hero could not have been simply the fruit of the internationalist rapprochement of the 1950s.

Phan Bội Châu wrote numerous books, tracts, pamphlets, moral treatises, and interviews, which fall into three distinct phases concerning the heroic figure in Vietnam. In his earliest writings on the subject, A Tribute to Shining Lives (Sùng bái giai nhân, 1907) and Outline History of Vietnam (Việt Nam quốcsử khảo, 1908), Châu advocated the traditional approach to the historical hero espoused by scholars and official historiography. Only a scholar could rally the Vietnamese people to a just cause;


26 The figure of the hero is a constant presence in: Lưu Cầu Huyết Lệ Tần Thúc (1903), Việt Nam vong quốc súc (1905), Hải ngoài huyết thúc (1906), Sùng bái giai nhân (1907), Hoàng Phạm Thơi truyền (1907), Việt Nam quốc sách khảo (1908), Trần Động Phong truyền, Hà thành liệt sĩ truyền, Trùng quang tâm súc (1913), Ngư Hải ông liệt sĩ truyền, Hà thành liệt sĩ truyền, Trưng Nứ Vương (1911), Truyện Phảm Hồng Thải (1925), etc.

only he could conjure the spirit of a movement and make it a reality. Châu referred to Nguyễn Trãi and Lê Lợi as models of the national hero who, with his acute sense of political ideals blended with strong feelings of hatred toward the aggressor, was a colourful figure and shone with exceptional character. These three elements defined the hero for centuries and made it impossible for peasants and the “lower classes” to become national heroes. Intellectual training was the only way to learn the sort of behaviour worthy of the heroism of great men.

Ideologues from the DRV criticised Châu’s early writing for excluding workers and peasants. But in 1907, a short work entitled Project for Awakening the National Spirit (Đề tinh quốc dân hồn) revealed the evolution of his thought and the first mention of the “normalisation of the hero”. He argued that if the essence of the historic struggle had always been the defence of one’s country, the people should now be able to share that privilege. He advocated a re-evaluation of the role of the masses in the origin of patriotic uprisings, but kept within a traditional framework. His “normalisation of the hero” thus heralded the arrival of patriotic heroes from a segment of the population that had always been excluded from official historiography.

Phan Bội Châu published two works in the 1910s: The Painful History of a Usurped Dynasty (Trùng quang tâm sử, 1913) and Portrait of a General (Chân tướng quân, 1917), which revealed his new conception of the heroic figure. He had been heavily influenced by the fate of Đề Thám (aka Hoàng Hoa Thám, 1883–1913), instigator of the Yên Thế peasant revolt in Bắc Giang province. From this perspective, The Painful History

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28 “He was the first to propose a new criterion for judging the historical figure. Both the nation and the people could thenceforth grant historical merit to exemplary figures”, in Nguyễn Đông Chi, “Bàn thêm về quan niệm chủ nghĩa anh hùng của Phan Bội Châu” (New elements on heroism according to Phan Bội Châu), Nghiên cứu Lịch sử (Historical research), Hanoi, no. 111, June 1968.

29 For the centenary of his birth (1967), numerous studies were published in the North Vietnamese press: Trần Huy Liệu, “Phan Bội Châu tiêu biểu cho những cuộc vẩy đồng yêu nước ở Việt Nam đầu thế kỷ XX” (The biography of Phan Bội Châu and patriotic activities in Vietnam in the early 20th century), Nghiên cứu Lịch sử, Hanoi, no. 105, December 1967; Nguyễn Đình Chù, “Tim hiểu quan niệm anh hùng của Phan Bội Châu” (Study on heroism according to Phan Bội Châu), Văn Học, Hanoi, December 1967; and Nguyễn Đông Chi, “Bàn thêm về quan niệm chủ nghĩa anh hùng của Phan Bội Châu”. 
of a Usurped Dynasty represents the pivotal work of his career. Châu questioned the long-standing distinction between the “anonymous hero” and the “famous hero”. The main axis for defining heroism had shifted from the individual to the collective. “The country needs thousands of anonymous heroes before it can have famous heroes”, Châu wrote. Recognising the subtle, everyday heroism of the lower classes led him to reconsider the role of the masses in general. By granting the “anonymous hero” honours previously reserved for the extraordinary “historic hero”, Châu had marked the first appearance of the “collective hero” in Vietnamese historiography, wrote the critic Nguyễn Đông Chí in the 1960s. Phan Bội Châu wrote about the acts of bravery of the “humble people”, allowing Mr. Xí, Old Chìm, Mr. Vô, or Madame Triệu to share the honour with their illustrious counterparts, whose heroic deeds preserved national independence. This new perspective led Châu to reconsider the position held by the mass of “anonymous heroes”, that is, by the people. In this way, venerating the various acts of these “exemplary men” from everyday life endowed the collective with a higher value than the individual action itself.

Ideologues from the DRV granted that Châu’s perspective led to an exceptional rupture in national historiography, but this did not turn him into a “revolutionary writer” outright. From then on, the peasant sat prominently alongside the mandarin-patriot in the hierarchy of esteemed men, but the old model had not been completely toppled; the heroism of the peasant blended in well, in fact, with traditional heroism. Phan Bội Châu was profoundly shaken by the Yên Thế peasant revolt against the French and wrote Portrait of a General (1917) about the event. He dedicated the book to Đề Thám, the movement’s leader, and enthusiastically compared him to the “bourgeois” heroes who defeated the Chinese at Động Đa (1788). The traditional conception of heroism no longer fit his theoretical framework, so Châu decided to redraw its contours. Trần Hùng Đạo and Đề Thám found themselves on the same footing, both having shown incomparable courage and perseverance in their fight against the hostile enemies of the state. Together, Đạo and Thám represented the best of Vietnamese

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30 Phan Bội Châu. Trùng quang tâm sử. 1913, p. 34.
heroism. Action, Phan Bội Châu concluded, was the only tangible component of heroism.\(^{33}\)

The conception of the heroic figure continued to evolve in Châu’s works throughout the 1920s and 30s. The third stage of his evolution is illustrated in his pamphlet on the young patriot Phạm Hồng Thái (Truyện Phạm Hồng Thái, 1924), who was killed during an assassination attempt on Governor Merlin in Canton in 1924. I will return later to this figure from Nghệ An province, to whom the North Vietnamese regime awarded a key position within the imaginary of their movement. Through the figure of Phạm Hồng Thái, Phan Bội Châu completed the transformation suggested in his previous works. The young man’s life brought together two eras of the patriotic struggle. Phạm Hồng Thái (1893–1924) was born Phạm Thành Tích, the grandson and son of the scholar-patriots Phạm Trọng Tuyến and Phạm Thành Mỹ, both of whom died under colonial repression.\(^{34}\) This family tragedy only strengthened his patriotism. In 1922, Thái left his native province to join patriotic organisations based in China, accompanied by the revolutionaries Lê Hồng Phong and Lê Thiệt Hùng. The young Thái, according to Châu, exemplified the shift in heroism from the hands of an enlightened elite to the omnipresent masses.\(^{35}\) His acts of bravery concretised the need for the “right of the lower classes” to participate in nation-building. From then on, the fatherland extended the privilege of the legitimate struggle to the people. The honour of lineage could not compete with the grandeur of the just cause.

The ambiguity of Phan Bội Châu’s approach, however, kept him from being considered a precursor of Vietnamese communism. He never ventured into paradigms,\(^{36}\) refusing notably to accord primacy in heroism to “the consciousness of the working class”. Though Châu conferred upon the “lower classes” the means to participate fully in a patriotic movement, he maintained that the “enlightened figure” of the intellectual was still more suited to guide “the great disorder of the popular masses”.

\(^{33}\) For more on this, see the various historic portraits proposed by Phan Bội Châu in Việt Nam nghĩa líệt sĩ (The martyrs of Vietnam). Hanoi: nxb Văn Học, re-issued in 1984.


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DRV ideologues criticised what they called “the limits of Phan Bội Châu thought”, but put it down to the nineteenth-century spirit of his era. Whether he was the first Vietnamese socialist or a scholar from the previous century, Phan Bội Châu still revolutionised the conception of the heroic figure in Vietnam. His writings were the first to impose a distinction between two types of relationships to patriotic excellence within a community. He was the first to grant the people the right to take part in the just cause of the fatherland and to don the robes of the national hero.

For Phan Bội Châu, the hero was made in the way he surmounted difficulties to defend the just cause. But the grandeur of the heroic figure took on real meaning in his relationship with death. A hero did not fear death. “Death is useful; one should not die an insipid death, but in the struggle, not in the arms of one’s wife,” Châu remarks. The hero thereby affirmed the depth of his commitment. Phan Bội Châu was in fact falling back on a patriotic tradition that imbued martyrs, such as Trần Bình Trọng (thirteenth century), Bái Thị Xuân (eighteenth century), Trương Đình (nineteenth century), and Thù Khoa Huân (nineteenth century), with an aura of indisputable purity. According to Châu, a hero was solely defined by his absolute self-sacrifice, be he “famous” or “anonymous”. When he wrote biographies, Châu invariably recounted the last hours of the hero with emphasis and emotion. In the 1950s, government ideologues condemned Phan Bội Châu’s literary style, which was stamped with the “petit-bourgeois” lyricism of the late nineteenth century. They agreed, however, on his vision of the heroic figure. The death of a hero guaranteed the continuation of an ideal and appeased the torment of the nation’s spirits. Phan Bội Châu always concluded with the declaration that the hero should have

a certain charisma in order to fulfil the social role demanded of him by his community. This idea evolved in his work, and in the deeds of Phạm Hồng Thái, Châu found a true grandeur. The hero’s charismatic nature destined him for a mission within the community. Whether mandarin, peasant, or worker, the heroic figure had to serve as a model of the morality and action of his time.

Why did historians and men of letters of the 1950s so frantically scrutinise Phan Bội Châu’s legacy? What did they hope to find in the scholar-patriot’s reflections about the notion of the hero? The reinterpreting of Phan Bội Châu’s works was part of the North Vietnamese regime’s repositioning vis-à-vis its national imaginary. Ever since Trương Chinh’s speech extolling a Maoist rupture between the old and the new in May 1952, the official historiography was reoriented toward the demand for continuity in national history. Ideologues sought national origins for this imported new figure. The critic Nguyễn Đình Chủ affirmed that the theoretical basis for the “new man” was already found in Châu’s *Painful History of a Usurped Dynasty*. He explained how, in shifting the source of heroism to the people, Phan Bội Châu was the first to affirm the existence and the primacy of the collective hero over the individual. This was clearly an effort to reinforce the Vietnamisation of a foreign concept. The same thing happened in the early 1960s when the State and the Party encouraged local governments to build memorials to new heroic figures. The desire for genealogical continuity is an old custom in Vietnamese culture. By situating the birth of the collective hero within the work of a national patriotic thinker, the DRV reappropriated the exogeneity of an internationalist myth. Our interest is less in whether Phan Bội Châu really was the first to create the collective hero in Vietnam, than in seeing how the communist Vietnamese regime sought, in the period between the two wars (1954–1964), to nationalise an imported figure in order to strengthen its hold in the countryside.

**The Importing of an Internationalist Model**

In just a few years’ time, the DRV reappropriated the spirit of the traditional heroic figure. The birth of the new hero took place at the conference of

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Tuyên Quang in May 1952. The new exemplary man was at the head of a restructured hierarchy of political virtue and was accompanied in official historiography by a reflection on his place within the new society. Unlike their counterparts in China, North Vietnamese leaders saw the new hero as much more than an infinite biographical source. On the contrary, he needed an air of normalcy in order to be easily understood by the average peasant, who was often far removed from the contingencies and abstractions of political discourse. The new man could now be a cadre, a soldier, or an outstanding peasant. Emulating a hero was not seen simply as a communist invention since Confucian tradition had used heroic tales for centuries to educate the people. Communism just increased the ways in which this could be accomplished: strict ideological control of the hero’s character, massive and global propaganda techniques, and an authoritarian policy of mobilising the members of the collective under the exemplary banner of new virtuous figures. The new man quickly became a high-priority stake for a government trying to root its political legitimacy within a new, active force. Far from all abstraction, the new bureaucracy of heroism generated a contingent of men and women who strengthened the government’s power structures (administration, mass organisations, the army, etc.). These transformations directly reveal changes within the regime.

Vietnamese revolutionaries had heard about Stakhanovism even before the war through the French communist publications that were widely distributed throughout the country with the establishment of the Popular Front in 1936. The new Soviet hero extolled the superiority of the “communist man” over his “capitalist and imperialist” antithesis. Soviet society had two types of heroic figures: the “Hero of Socialist Labour” (Geroi Socialisticheskogo Truda) and the “Hero of the Soviet Union” (Geroi Sovetskogo Soyuza). The honorific title of “labour hero” had been established by a decree (ukase) of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet on 27 July 1927. In December 1938, Soviet leaders replaced this with “Hero of Socialist Labour”, but the aim was still to promote “people who have accomplished exceptional innovations in industry, agriculture, transport, science and technology that improve the economy, culture or science in the country, or who increased the influence and the glory of the Soviet

Union”. The title of “Hero of the Soviet Union” dated from a decree issued by the Central Committee of the USSR on 16 April 1934. It was only granted to “people who have rendered an important service to the State through great heroic deeds”. In the 1930s, these two honorific titles determined the outlines of a new internationalist ideal ready for export to the socialist world. Within the Soviet Union, the movement for the construction of the new man gathered momentum on 30 August 1935, when a miner from Donbass, Alexei Stakhanov, single-handedly extracted 102 tons of iron ore. Beyond the mere details of the story, the productivist movement took on the name of its hero and allowed the Stalinist regime to “reaffirm its authority over the working-class through intimidation and the creation of a loyal caste of privileged workers”. In the Russia of the 1930s, the movement thus served more to consolidate the government’s foothold than to increase their production.

The internationalist “new man” arrived on Asian shores in late 1943. In November–December of that year, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) organ, Jiefang Ribao (Liberation Daily), illustrated its front pages daily with colour portraits of “labour heroes” or distinguished soldiers from communist-held areas in the North. On 19 December 1943, Mao Zedong’s movement organised a conference to officially elect new internationalist figures from the Chinese revolutionary movement. The CCP’s propaganda organ called upon “Labour Heroes” and “Military Heroes” again during the Chinese civil war to mobilise the population in Communist-held areas.

The first Vietnamese emulation tried to espouse a more flexible approach and outlook than that of the Yunnan campaign (1942–44). The new man in true Sino-Soviet form would not become a reality in Vietnam before 1950–51. The spread of “new heroism” is linked to the “conversations between leaders of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union]...

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40 From December 1938 to 1 September 1971, the title of “Hero of Socialist Labour” was awarded to 16,245 people. See articles on “labour hero” and “hero of socialist labour” in Great Soviet Encyclopedia, vol. 6. New York: MacMillan, 1975, p. 594 (Moscow, 1970).

41 From April 1934 to 1 September 1971, the title of “Hero of the Soviet Union” was awarded to 12,447 people. See articles on “Heroes of the Soviet Union” in Great Soviet Encyclopedia, p. 594.

and their counterparts in the CCP” which took place in Beijing in April 1950. Focusing on organisational issues within the Party and propaganda bodies in socialist countries, emissaries from the CPSU trained new Chinese advisors bound for the provinces of North Vietnam. In Vietnam in the early 1950s, the profile of the socialist new man as developed by heads of the National Emulation Committee resembled the internationalist hero that Soviet ideologues had created in the 1930s. In the Soviet Union in the 1920s, the historian Mikhail Pokrovsky (1868–1932) proposed a reform of the historic discourse which systematically did away with great men, events, and dates. But this determinist, linear, and irreversible model, governed by strict Marxist laws, was criticised by the Bolshevik intellectuals Anatoli Lunacharski (1875–1933) and Nikolai Bukharin (1888–1938). Both men died in the purges of the 1930s, however, and Stalin rediscovered the advantages of nationalism, which reinstated the prominence of the personalised heroic figure before the renewed outbreak of war. The debate also shook up leaders in Hanoi in the 1950s, though it never reached such an abstract level. While Khruschev’s de-Stalinisation speech split the communist world, intellectuals and theorists from the Workers’ Party (Đảng Lao Động, or VWP) in Hanoi carried out heated discussions of the individual heroic figure, the cult of personality, and the new heroism in the journal Văn sử Địa (Culture, History, and Geography).

Communism and Official Heroism in Vietnam

During his speech at the Tuyên Quang conference of 5 May 1952, Trương Chinh laid out the definition of the new hero in North Vietnam:

The hero is oriented towards the party, dedicated to serving the people. He does not oppress the people and takes part in the liberation of the masses. Most heroes are workers and peasants. For the good of the masses, the hero is a dedicated volunteer, exemplary in production and labour. The hero follows the political line of the Vanguard Party and the government. The hero has a close relationship with the masses; he

43 Conversation between leaders of the central committee of the CPSU and leaders of the CCP, in Archives of the Central Committee of the CCP. Moscow, files no. 1200 and 1201, April–December 1950.
45 The Khrushchev “de-Stalinisation” speech was made on 24 February 1956, before the 1,436 delegates of the twentieth congress of the CPSU.
must belong to the masses. The hero is neither proud nor conceited; he tries to learn; he practices criticism and self-criticism in order to make constant progress. The hero has a revolutionary spirit, initiatives, knowledge, and a new discipline that stems from a rich experience derived from contact with the masses. The hero has a strong sense of class. He can distinguish between good and bad, friend and enemy. He is selfless, and has a responsible attitude towards leaders and the masses. His participation in the struggle and in production is not driven by individual interest but by a collective one.46

DRV leaders wanted to impose a new model of society, so they had to renew the link between the government and the governed. The people had to understand that only by acting in line with the legitimate government would they approach a promised era of “economic prosperity and social equality”.47 Peasants, workers, and small shopkeepers had to be realigned in their responsibilities towards the community. The new man satisfied a juxtaposition of three criteria: political (total Party loyalty), technical (exceptional combative or productivist qualities), and social (being from and remaining in close contact with the masses). Heroism officials singled out the most virtuous of these subjects. They honoured the discipline and dedication of these exemplary men and women in an effort to keep their hold on the social space.

The criteria for civic exemplarity had to be understood by all cadres in leadership positions, starting at the communal level. The new man was the fruit of a new socio-economic environment which would be the basis for the reorganisation of society. The State promoted the man of the people and a new community solidarity, and rejected outright a model of society that had championed individualism since the beginning of French colonisation.48 Paradoxically, the road towards the new man offered leaders the hope of a restoration, a return toward the holistic values which placed the members of the community in a relationship of dependence with the nation. Hồ Chí Minh stated that “socialist morality is not the same everywhere.

In our country, it is synonymous with diligence and frugality. Everyone who practices emulation studies with the spirit of socialism, works within a socialist framework, and has a socialist morality.” By joining mass organisations and the Party, the Vietnamese new man was “liberated from the yoke of individual self-interest and took possession of himself”.

To better understand the role of the new man, we must look at Hồ Chí Minh’s place in the Vietnamese community. His intellectual training in the 1920s was mainly in Marxist-Leninist thought though he later advocated a more moderate ideological approach to the movement. Upon his return to Vietnam in 1941, Hồ managed to make himself the sole model of

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49 Hồ Chí Minh. “Nói chuyện với sinh viên và cán bộ Việt Nam đang học và công tác” (October 1961) (Discussion with Vietnamese students and cadres in training), in Toản tập, p. 115.

50 Nguyễn Khánh Toàn. “Việc xây dựng con người mới và trách nhiệm của khoa học xã hội” (On the construction of the new man and the responsibility of the social sciences), Học Tập, Hanoi, no. 8, 1968: 51.
legitimate virtue. He chose Marxism-Leninism, it was repeated throughout the countryside, because it was the best choice for the country. The veracity of such a choice left no room for debate. Only one who could distinguish good from bad could legitimately hold the reins of power, and his position as head of state conferred upon him this gift. The new society was a sort of dynastic rupture, but Hồ Chí Minh and his Party would see to the formation of the people’s spirit. The new man was the product of a new society built on the principle of the right political leader. The regime made him the most ardent defender of State values, of revolution, of socialism, and of the struggle for national unification. Hồ’s life symbolised the very essence of the nation’s advance towards socialism. He had such “love for his fellow man”, explained government propaganda, that from a young age he naturally turned towards the truly oppressed of his era — the workers and peasants. His humanity, continued Party hagiography, made injustice unacceptable. For the head of state, injustice stigmatised the “imperialists and the oppressing classes”. Hồ’s love of justice led him to become the defender of the “poor and oppressed”. Hà Huy Giáp saw Uncle Hồ’s humanism as the path that would lead the government to Marxism-Leninism; it was reason and the love of one’s neighbour — he continues — that eventually brought Vietnam into the fold of socialism. Liberating the country meant releasing the people from the yoke of oppression. Independence would usher in the systemic arrival of a new man, born of the humanism that the father of the country had for his legitimate children. Every member of the community was indebted to him for his kindness. In return for this love for his fellow men, Hồ deserved the utmost respect from his citizens. The balance of society depended on it. Since the father of the country had sacrificed himself, the good citizen was called upon to do the same. For the people, the new man was simply the result of the affirmation of this traditional duality.

The new man was thus based on two types of veneration, one linking him to the people and one to the ideology of his leaders. In the end, both


52 Hà Huy Giáp was quick to give Hồ’s humanism a Biblical tone. “Jesus Christ said: a man who has committed a mistake and begs heaven’s forgiveness is better than ninety believers.” Hà Huy Giáp, “Một vài suy nghĩ về đạo lý làm người của Hồ Chủ tịch” (Some reflections on Hồ Chí Minh thought), Học tập, Hanoi, no. 5, 1969: 29.
exploited the same key element: his discipline. He was a man of results. His actions alone determined the strength and also the limits of his importance within society. The transformation of men seemed to be the fruit of his good management. He was not asked to think but to work and join in. In the Stalinist and Maoist world, the production of thought was allocated to intellectuals. The Party encouraged initiatives on the part of the new man, but only in the area of production, not ideas. He had a disciplined respect for his creator, and action brought him into a Promethean face-to-face encounter with his hostile environment.

Mencius defined righteousness (vi nghĩa, chính nghĩa, or nghĩa) as the only conceivable path. Political action in a Confucian society was judged according to this principle, and any ruler who failed to honour it could lose the Mandate of Heaven. The question was to determine the natural limits of what was right and wrong. In the twentieth century, Hồ Chí Minh summed up what was “right” in a maxim: “Vì Độc lập — Tự do của tổ quốc” (Independence and freedom for the fatherland). The just cause was that of the fatherland, so the just man could only be one who fought to defend it. Patriotism was the flesh and blood of politics in a nation repeatedly coveted from abroad. The just cause was that of the nation’s glorious ancestors, those who had fought to defend the country against the string of Chinese, French, and then American invaders. Governance by a foreign power made a mockery of the founders’ spirits. The insurrection of August 1945 — whereby Hồ Chí Minh declared the country’s independence from France after the Japanese surrender — pitted the just against those who illegitimately held power. Once the Japanese and the French were driven out, Hồ Chí Minh’s rule attained a primacy that no opposition force had managed to obtain. The victory of the Việt Minh helped realise the legitimacy of the new regime. It was then up to the government to secure its power to the virtue of illustrious ancestors, and to the loyalty of the new outstanding citizens. Hồ Chí Minh, the Party, and eventually the working class symbolised this defence of the just, and the new man owed them absolute loyalty. In the government’s quest for exemplary men, it always took into consideration a potential candidate’s loyalty or “political positioning”.

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53 Hướng dẫn về việc lựa chọn hàng tiêu biểu (Phòng thi đua ưu quốc Trung ương) (Recommendations on selecting heroes of national emulation [Central department of national emulation]), in AVN3, Coll. BLD, file no. 510, unnumbered document, December 1956, p. 2.
In Confucian thought, the just was something unique and indivisible, and under a Marxist-Leninist government it was beyond all dispute. Only loyalty to the just cause could attain the good positioning of Man in society. To define the new man, one needed only to follow the model of virtue (Đức) laid down by historic figures from the nation’s past; every period had figures whose lives could be personified into examples. Hồ Chí Minh himself symbolised this symbiosis in Vietnam. For Phạm Văn Đồng, “President Hồ not only asked the people for more solidarity, he put this solidarity into practice. What’s more, President Hồ was not only the symbol of solidarity, he alone was this solidarity.” Hồ Chí Minh was the personification par excellence of the new man. Revolutionary heroism represented the most modern and most developed version of the nation’s heroic tradition. Hà Huy Giáp even asserted that its leader’s exemplary journey illustrated the progressive gestation of the new man in North Vietnam, who existed only with respect to his model. The new man was the anthropomorphism of a “body-nation”, an idea to which I will return in the following chapters. In choosing the just cause, the exemplary man showed a natural “greatness of soul”. Society simply offered him respect and veneration in return.

**Morality, Heroes, and the Revolutionary Ideal**

Scholars and ideologues often debated whether the hero was the product of his environment, or vice versa. Much has been written about the primordial influence of the Vietnamese land on the greatness of its people. According to popular belief, climate changes, natural disasters, typhoons, and deadly floods only strengthened the vigour of the Vietnamese people and their attachment to their native land. Chinese geomancy admitted that there existed a “land that gave birth to heroes and that it had to be kept in order”. Vietnam was this land, its patriots claimed incessantly. The birth

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of the Communist Party in 1930 was but another stage in the heroic destiny of their nation. It was born of the actions of the men and women touched by the grace of a heroic ancestral land:

Born in a land of radiant beauty, but a narrow one, wedged between the mountains and the sea, our people had to live for centuries under the continual threat of foreign invaders and natural disasters. They needed an immense greatness of spirit to withstand hurricanes, floods, and droughts month after month, and not die of hunger or the cold.57

The new man, with his close filial link with the new political authority, showed the same “greatness of soul” as his ancestors. He was not merely the product of an imported internationalism, but primarily the product of the “culture, spirit and spiritual beauty of the Vietnamese nation”. The new man, as eponym for the outstanding citizen of the past, was defined by his close association with the ruling power. For his sacrifice to the just cause and his great filial piety to the nation, society — in the form of each member of the community — had the duty to help educate these “virtuous men”. The State, out of respect for an ancestral principle, had to forge the spirit of its citizens. In the beginning, each man was like a blank slate, and his socialisation was the duty of those in power. Every man could aim to become a new man. His “greatness of spirit” was already present in the blank slate of his life. Only a collaboration with “reactionary forces” (landlords, the colonial administration, etc.) could drive it away. But in that case it was already too late, the period of “harmful socialisation” had already taken place. The new man did not bear re-education since he had never supported the unjust cause.58

The new man’s “greatness of spirit” stemmed from his irremediable bond with the land of his ancestors, with his own virtue, and from his ability to follow the teachings of a worldly power bearing the “Mandate of Heaven”. A just society sought balance. To this end, political leaders

57 Vũ Hồng. “Sự ra đời của Đảng và bước ngã lịch sử của chủ nghĩa anh hùng” (Birth of the Party and the important stages of heroism), p. 75.
58 The myth of the “blank slate” was an essential part of Vietnamese culture. It was more important than an individual’s social origins. Indeed, it was better to be from a bourgeois family but decide early to fight for the “just cause” than the opposite, to be from the working classes but let oneself be led astray by the enemy. There were quite a few government leaders (Hồ Chí Minh, Võ Nguyên Giáp, etc.) and new heroes (Tôn Thất Tùng, Phạm Ngọc Thạch, etc.) who were not from the working class. None, however, skipped the important early stages in the socialisation process.
had to show unfailing respect to their most distinguished citizens. Their pride in the heroes of yesterday and today was matched only by their need to venerate them in return. As Krushchev’s de-Stalinisation policy spread throughout Asia in 1956, North Vietnamese ideologues quickly stepped forward to make the distinction between the cult of personality (sùng bái cá nhân) and the veneration that the State traditionally bestowed on those who served it well (tôn kính anh hùng).59 Paying respects to a heroic figure, the VWP repeated, was primarily an homage to the spirit of the nation. This principle led to a symbiosis between the hero and the nation’s history, which was completely different from the deification of an individual personality that was being condemned by the new leaders in Moscow.

The government’s homage to its heroes initially had an internationalist bent, but gradually shifted towards a cultural hierarchy in the 1960s. Confucius, who saw reality as something in perpetual transformation, declared, “I hate stubbornness”, since the judgment and the conduct of the “virtuous man” should not become ossified.60 Thus, the definition of the new man has more to do with morality than ideology, more with wisdom than philosophy. He was indeed considered a man of national virtue. Collective morality was at the very heart of orthodox Confucianism. The wise man was a good man, a man of the middle ground, and a moral one. He was, as Confucius propounded in his Analects, in harmony with nature (the earth, sky, etc.). Unfailingly, his way of being enabled him to adapt to changing reality. In 1946–48, when the DRV broached the question of the new life (đời sống mới), their policies required such adaptiveness. What looked like an internationalist-style rupture was more a question of immanence, as the government simply reacted to changing circumstances to suit their cultural needs. It was an ambitious goal, to “launch a transformation of popular consciousness”.61 This re-calibration of society along class lines implied de facto a re-centering of the middle ground.

Despite their occasional rejection of Confucian principles, ideologues never strayed from the idea of the just, the true, the middle ground, the wise, reasonable, or possible. Instead, they simply slightly altered the definitions. Within such a system, morality only served to legislate the relationship to the just (li); the legitimacy and perenniality of society were at stake.

61 Shaun Malarney, Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam.
In his essay on the responsibility of the social sciences in the creation of the new man, Nguyễn Khánh Toàn wrote that the new man could only be defined by his relationship to the collective. His ideology tied him to the present, and his ethics determined the stability of his role within the community. The new man strove to be the personification of the just. Hồ Chí Minh often said that “morality is the primary — if not the essential — quality of revolutionary fighters”.  

The morality of the new man lay in his self-sacrifice for the good of the nation. In one of Hồ’s key texts from 1958, he writes (under the pseudonym Trần Lực), “real self-interest is collective interest”, so “Trần Phú, Ngô Gia Tự, Lê Hồng Phong, Nguyễn Văn Cử, Hoàng Văn Thứ and Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai were the real precursors of the new revolutionary morality”.

One could, in fact, wonder what was really “new” about this perspective, and whether that term was warranted. For Hồ Chí Minh, revolutionary morality had to satisfy four essential elements. One had to: “make a life-long commitment to fight for the Party and the revolution; strive to work for the Party, obey its discipline, and correctly implement its policies; put the interests of the Party and the people first, before self-interest; devote oneself to studying Marxism-Leninism, and always apply oneself to practicing criticism and self-criticism to improve one’s mind.”

Revolutionary morality dictated the limits of the possible within the community. “The Path is not far from man,” we read in the Analects. As a tool for group cohesion, the revolutionary ethic in Vietnam sprang from within and did not tolerate excessive theorising. Hồ Chí Minh stressed that civic morality was meaningless unless put into practice:

The morality of a citizen leads him to respect certain principles: obey government laws; be disciplined in one’s work; conform to collective directives; pay your taxes in full to serve the collective interest; take part enthusiastically in collective works; protect the public good; protect the nation.

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Defending the integrity and stability of the “great Vietnamese family” thus became the driving force of the new man. “In armed battle as in production”, the Party tried to animate the spirit of victory within the Vietnamese people. It made heroism the basis of revolutionary morality.

Cultural scholar Vũ Khưu writes that the Party, by aligning itself with the new man, restored the immanence of a revolutionary morality inherent within its “four-thousand-year history”. The new man was a model of revolutionary moralism. However, the government expected neither speeches nor eloquent writings from him. All he had to do was conscientiously practise the four founding virtues in his work and in his daily life: Thrift, Diligence, Integrity, and Honesty (Cẩn, kiệm, liêm, chính). Vũ Khưu maintains that Hồ Chí Minh gave a totally new meaning to these key values of Confucian morality. He even added a fifth element to these four “golden rules”: “Everything for the collective and nothing for self-interest.” Still, it would be wrong to call this a revision. Hồ Chí Minh himself bore the stigmata of the new moral ideal. As proof of his dedication to the nation, Party chiefs pointed to his selfless decision to not have a family: “Hồ never once thought about himself. His family was a family in the larger sense, that of a global working class, of the Vietnamese people.” The myth of this self-sacrifice by the “father of the people” for the collective was firmly anchored, and was in itself an essential part of the revolutionary ethic they

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68 In 1993 Sophie Quinn-Judge published an article about the romantic life of the young Nguyễn Ái Quốc in the 1920s–30s proving that he had a relationship with the militant Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai. Vietnamese authorities were adamant that the article not circulate in the country. See Sophie Quinn-Judge, “Hồ Chí Minh: New Perspectives from the Comintern Files”, The Việt Nam Forum, Yale University, no. 14, 1993: 61–81. The writer Dương Thu Hương wrote her novel Au zenith (At the zenith), published in 2009, about this taboo subject: “In 1953, the president [the president is not named but it becomes obvious soon enough that the author is referring to Hồ Chí Minh] falls madly in love, at sixty-something years old, with a very young woman. He has a family with her and takes them to Hanoi after retaking the capital. But he is not an ordinary man, he is the father of the country. When he wants to make his union official, the ministers, whom he helped put in power, make him understand that this private affair would pull him down from his political pedestal. The president gives in, believing that he is making a legitimate choice for the State. From that day forward, his life would never be the same.” Paris: Sabine Wespieser, 2009.
wanted to pass on to the people. The well-being of the group depended on the affirmation of this patriotic duty. The actions and the daily life of the new man materialised the essence of the five virtues.\(^69\)

On the other hand, the weaknesses of the new man were also brought into play as the model spread through society. Pointing out the “wrong-doing” and “social evils” of the present time led back to the affirmation of the new man’s ethical role in society. The accusations ran from waste to theft, bureaucratism, sectarianism, narrow-mindedness, corruption, formalist indiscipline, pride, egotism, laziness, provincialism, individualism, or excessive self-interest. The spread of the criteria for the new man allowed Party cadres to catalogue the weaknesses to be eradicated. The enumeration of his sins presented a negative image of his virtues to a population now on the path to a “new life”. The creation of the new man concretised the State’s new civic morality.

The heroes of Tuyên Quang did not need facts to prove their existence; the Party had conjured biographies for them while avoiding detours into their private lives. The new man was a man of action. The State asked him to be loyal and efficient, and in return he received a shining tribute. His sudden appearance in collective memory (administrative archives, books, films, etc.) provided the historian with a new object of study.\(^70\) The new man became the incarnation of a society in transition. In the following chapters, I look at the movements of these peasants, artisans, and labourers whose everyday actions make up the “works and days” of the common people and whom we now look at with new eyes. It is a history of the trivial, like a history of daily life, of things that we do every day without really thinking about them. The new man is part of this amplified quotidian, a man of the people who has been struck by a surprising and unexpected historiographical collusion.

\(^69\) Hồ Chủ tịch dân chủ, kỹ luật và đạo đức cách mạng (The democratic President Hồ). Hanoi: nxb Sự thật, 1967, p. 35.