CHAPTER 7

Mass Culture and
the Patriotic Pantheon

It is not very important to know what few things myths can tell us about the future; they are not astrological almanacs…. Myths must be seen as a way of acting on the present…. The myth [is] an organisation of images that can instinctively evoke all of the feelings related to the various manifestations of the war against modern society.

Georges Sorel1

The new hero had indeed become a reality, but his true nature lay in his political role. The new man in a Marxist-Leninist society was primarily an object of political propaganda. He was more appearance than essence. He gained influence within society only as an object of representation, and as a link between the government and the people, he had to accept a certain immateriality. The hero was at the centre of an imagined community in which politics was defined by ethics and collective morality. The assent of the people depended on how well he established the course of a new virtuous path. Government leaders thus sought obedience through moral and spiritual values, not only through force.2 The new heroic figure was the personification of a general idea. He was not only an example and a model for DRV leaders, but a “constantly active source in [their] lives, for [their] power, success, and the continuation of the dynasty for the good of the people”.3 The hero’s role in society cannot be understood outside

3 Ibid.: 157.
of this relationship with the government. By recognising the new man, the DRV continued its mission to provide a moral education to its people without, however, trespassing against a popular consciousness that was not easily moved.

The official new morality sanctified a cultural relationship with virtuous ancestors — only the frame of reference had changed. Government leaders mastered the art of double-talk and adapted themselves to a foreign institutional framework without renouncing the characteristics of their own cultural environment. The new hero began as a propagandistic tool, as the final aim of patriotic emulation, and gradually took on a cultural role within the community, ushering in a sense of political permanence. Without this transformation, the new regime would never have gained political prominence. A dynastic change depended on it. The emergence of a new historical pantheon provided the cultural ballast necessary for the communists
to retain power over their “merely Nationalist” opponents. The genesis of the new man sprang from the national emulation movement as it spread throughout the country, but his acceptance within the popular mentality depended on the success of the mass culture campaign.

Mass Culture and the New Hero

A few months before the thirtieth anniversary of the Party (3 February 1960), Hồ Chí Minh gave a lengthy speech on national radio on 15 December 1959. A few days prior to the event he had criticised the weaknesses of several cadres in an informal talk, and he now returned to the question of the virtue of the new man: “The heroes of the Party and the people are collective heroes who are deeply imbued with the revolutionary virtues of the Party. Only such revolutionary virtue will allow us to lead the working class, organise and unify the masses, and make the revolution a success.” He declared that the heroes and heroines of the present day were the leaders of the emulation movement in North Vietnam and the sworn enemies of the “U.S.-Diệm regime” in the South. The new hero was part of the government’s reorganisation efforts. The country was torn apart by the end of the war in 1954, so new and dedicated cadres were desperately needed to rebuild the country.

The government was determined to increase its ideological visibility throughout the country. The challenge now was to develop a real mass culture. They had seven main objectives: to disseminate Marxist-Leninist theory and the policies of the Party and the government, spread the scientific advancements necessary for the development of society, continue to enrich people’s minds, produce quality literary and artistic works, organise cultural events, implement a new morality to build the new man, and eradicate old habits to build a new life. The DRV placed the new man at the heart of its educational efforts and put forth this model of revolutionary virtue as the only way to acquire the “New Spirit”. The “policy of mass culture” was to “help workers understand advances in politics, science, and mass culture in order to fully carry out the plan”.

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6 Đề án công tác Văn hóa đội với công nhân (Project for cultural activities aimed at workers), in AVN3, Coll. BVH, file no. 880, document 234 HC/VH, 1956.
To implement this policy, the government relied on the new exemplary men selected during the patriotic, and later socialist, emulation campaigns. Artists and intellectuals were mobilised and put to work. The patriotic crusade for the liberation of South Vietnam was stepped up. Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng gave talks on how art must serve the people, drawing upon the principles of Lenin and Mao. All types of artistic expression were harnessed for patriotic propaganda, from film to theatre, literature, music, poetry, and painting. The hero was displayed everywhere — he was sung about, painted, sculpted, told in stories, performed, danced, portrayed in verse, prose, images, or illuminations, and was a key part of the government’s mobilisation policy. In the autumn of 1964, the Ministry of Culture started making more movies about the lives of new heroes.


9 AVN3, Coll. BVH, file no. 278, unnumbered document, January 1965.


11 The original screenplay for the movie changed over time. In 1965, a new version based on the hero’s life, called *Sống như Anh* (To live like you), was distributed by the Propaganda Department of the Party’s Central Committee and Cultural Department: “Between 4 July 1965 and 25 February 1966, the screenplay was enriched by the ideas of Tố Hữu, Comrade Quản Truong, and people from the Department of Reunification”. See Cộng tác của Xưởng phim Hà Nội (Activities of the Hanoi movie studios), in AVN3, Coll. BVH, file no. 275, document no. 56/BVH, 23 February 1966.
Đắc Kha (Học Sinh Ngô Đắc Kha, 1962), and the labour hero Nguyễn Văn Thuyên (Anh hùng Nguyễn Văn Thuyên, 1962). Cultural cadres were asked to think about how to improve the “look” of the new hero. In 1962, cultural publishing houses put out a translation of the essay by the Chinese Culture Minister Trần Hoàng Môi on the new hero in the visual media.

Depicting the revolutionary hero in a human and realistic way is crucial to audiovisual creation — in the past as in the present, and is in fact the responsibility of all who create. We have to continuously and resolutely create the image of the new revolutionary hero based on the principle that we are at the service of workers, peasants, and soldiers, so as to serve the political aims of the working class and work seriously for the construction of socialism.

Literature and the arts were dedicated to defining the new man. The transmutation of the “spirit” was carried out using the full arsenal of Leninist propaganda. Government leaders wanted to offer the Vietnamese people a “good morality”. They began their socialisation of North Vietnamese society and presented a virtuous model to follow. Technical advancements had only modernised an ancient principle except now the DRV had more propaganda tools at its disposal, making it easier to transmit information throughout the country. Without this complex system of disseminating knowledge, the government would not have been able to establish the new national heroic figure within the popular imagination.

Talking about the Hero in the Commune

In the fall of 1956, the Ministry of Culture sent a group of cadres to the small mining town of Cẩm Phả (in the zone of Hồng Quang) to study the initial results of its mass culture efforts. On the ground, the three local

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13 In 1962, Trần Hoàng Môi was the head of the Cinema Department at the PRC’s Ministry of Culture.
14 Trần Hoàng Môi. “Sáng tạo nhân vật mới xuất đáp với thời đại” (Create avant-garde figures in accordance with the times), in Trần Hoàng Môi, Lâm Sam, Sáng tạo con người mới trong điện ảnh (Creating the new man in cinema). Hanoi: nxb Văn hoá Nghệ thuật, 1962, p. 3.
organisational entities (Party, government, and mass organisations) were responsible for disseminating ministerial directives. One cadre was assigned to the Party cell to oversee propaganda matters. A new department of cultural affairs was created within the village People’s Committee to serve as relay with mass organisations. It consisted of a small team of three cadres: the department head, an official in charge of artistic propaganda (movies/performing arts), and another in charge of literacy. Finally, the trade union of Càm Phả had two specialised cadres, one in charge of propaganda and one for cultural affairs.

Càm Phả was classified as a high-priority industrial development zone (mining). In 1956, the small town had 15,000 inhabitants: 2,000 were of Chinese origin (out of whom 40 per cent were miners) and another 2,000 were from various ethnic backgrounds (out of whom only 7 per cent worked in the mine). The rest of the population consisted mainly of Kinh, most of whom were either miners or local government officials. In 1955–56, only 5 per cent of the 4,000 workers in Càm Phả could read and write properly. This figure soon changed, however, as 980 people and 1,535 workers signed up for literacy classes, an educational coup that lowered the illiteracy rate to below 32 per cent, according to official statistics. Note that a great many of the ethnic Chinese (Hoa Kiều) in the town spoke no, or very little, Vietnamese.

The Ministry of Culture’s goal was to establish “a dense infrastructure of cultural activities to improve work in the mine and in the daily lives of workers and their families in the neighbourhood”. Propaganda facilities were set up on the neighbourhood, business, and communal levels to make use of the government’s new propaganda tools (books, films, photographs, cartoons, plays, etc.) in an effort to mobilise a population with little cultural education. Within the mine itself, the inspection team reported that “cultural activities remained quite underdeveloped because of difficult working conditions”. The union’s delegate for cultural affairs merely distributed daily newspapers (Nhân dân, Tiên Phong, etc.) and posted them on the wall for workers. Every day, a cadre read the news aloud for 10–15 minutes during the lunch break or sometimes before the start of the workday. News about production levels and exemplary workers from the factory,

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16 Đoàn nghiên cứu tình hình khu Hồng Quang. Báo cáo nghiên cứu tại thị xã Càm Phả (Study group on the situation in the zone of Hồng Quang. Report on the town of Càm Phả).
or about other industrial operations across the country was broadcasted.
Lastly, there was a small social club that in late 1956 had nearly 100
books, a few chess sets, and newspaper boards. The inspection team from
the Ministry of Culture noted, however, that very few workers actually
went there and that the activities offered were inadequate.

Outside of the mine, cultural activities took place in the communal
cultural centre and its neighbourhood branches, the cultural clubs.17
The government proclaimed nationwide that “cultural centres were the hope of
the people”. A directive from the Ministry of Culture exhorted its cadres
“to spread propaganda to the people through cultural centres and clubs,
which were the heart of cultural activities for workers”.18 Cultural centres

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17 In 1956, the Ministry of Culture announced that “communal clubs” would thenceforth
be called “communal cultural centres”. The difference lay in the size of the institution.
At the neighborhood level, they could still be called clubs. A cultural centre provided
a variety of services (theatre, sports facilities, library, etc.) while a club was smaller.
In reality, however, communes made decisions on a case-by-case basis and did not
always respect the central government’s distinctions, such that both clubs and centres
could be found throughout the communes. See Thông tri bổ sung về công tác xây dựng
Nhà văn hóa (Directives for strengthening the programme to build Cultural Centres), in
AVNV3. Coll. BVH, file no. 888, document 1369NH (UBKC Khu IV).
18 Đề án công tác văn hóa đối với công nhân (Project for cultural activities aimed at
workers), 16 April 1956.
and neighbourhood clubs developed their activities in tandem. An inspector from the Ministry of Culture suggested that they offer more picture books to the public. Biographies of heroes were the most commonly borrowed books, with Mạc Thị Bưởi (1955) and The Exemplary Struggle of Heroic Combatants (Gương chiến sĩ đấu của anh hùng chiến sĩ, 1955) at the top of the list. The book distribution department had a similar experience: the lives of heroes were selling well in the area of Hồng Gai and were frequently re-ordered by cultural centres. The town of Cẩm Phả not only had a cultural centre but also an entertainment hall (for theatre, song performances, etc.), a 400-seat movie theatre, a radio broadcasting facility, and a people’s bookstore. These new cultural facilities allowed mass organisations to organise local arts projects in their villages and neighbourhoods. With each new propaganda tool, the government got closer to imprinting the image of the new hero in the popular imagination.

The town of Cẩm Phả was a perfect example of this. It had been equipped early on with some of the best cultural facilities since it was considered a priority zone, and the government’s main goal was mobilising the working class. But Cẩm Phả was not the only city to be privileged. In 1956, other areas with a large working-class population were outfitted with similar facilities. In the district of Nguyên Bình (Cao Bằng), the tin-mining town of Tĩnh Túc was endowed with a library and a small cultural centre in 1955–56, while no such facilities were built in the district seat of Nguyên Bình until 1961. Industrial cities were priority propaganda targets for the State, followed by the administrative centres (provincial and district seats). Hà Giang province, for example, did not have an industrial

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19 In the city of Cẩm Phả, only two neighborhoods had a functioning club in 1956. The club in neighbourhood no. 9 had 120 books, 5 newspapers, and a few games, but only 30–40 people went there per day. On the communal level, the reading room at the cultural centre in Cẩm Phả was much better stocked (1,200 books), but it also attracted relatively few people (50–70 people per day). What kinds of books were people reading? We know, for example, that “most of the books were never checked out, especially the ones on politics and economics”.

20 Outside of Hồng Quang, the highest concentration of workers was in the cities of Hanoi and Hải Phòng, the provinces of Việt Tri, Thái Nguyên, and Nam Định, and the provincial capitals of Thanh Hóa (Thanh Hóa) and Nghệ An (Vinh). See Tổng kết công tác phát hành phim và chiếu bóng năm 1962 và phương hướng nhiệm vụ công tác năm 1963 (Summary of movie screenings and “magic lantern” shows in 1962 and plan for the following year), in AVN3, Coll. BVII, file no. 107, document no. 379/VH, 1 February 1963.
base in 1956, but the provincial committee already had a department of
cultural affairs that built a public library, a cultural centre, and neighbour-
hood clubs. An inspection team from the Ministry of Culture was not
impressed, however, and regretted that “the people still weren’t prepared
enough ideologically, despite all of the assistance provided by the central
government. Of the 32 artistic cells that had been created, only 11 of them
were up and running a few months later.” The situation was different in
the neighbouring province of Lào Cai. In addition to the cultural facilities
provided by the provincial committee, there were several factories and
industrial sites that were under direct ministerial supervision. Production
units gave rise to public libraries, clubs, and cultural centres that sprang
up and thrived in the far reaches of the province. Thus, the process of
ideologising the population varied between the rural and industrial pro-
vinces of the country.

Ideaologisation in Remote Areas

Ideaologisation was more sporadic in the remote towns and villages that
lacked an industrial infrastructure. The Ministry of Culture published a
handbook for cadres assigned to these regions to help them adapt the
“policies of mass culture to the environment of remote regions”. Ethnic
minorities still did not speak much Vietnamese and funds were sorely
lacking. The establishment of a cultural facility in these communes was
unthinkable given the estimated costs, so the government could only send
itinerant cultural groups. They were trained and organised by the depart-
ment of cultural affairs of each provincial People’s Committee. Some were
even sent directly from the district. Experts from the Ministry of Culture
suggested they put on more “magic lantern” shows, show more films (full-
length movies, documentaries, and shorts), organise theatre evenings and
recitals of patriotic songs, and hold exhibits of “colourful images exalting
the solidarity, production, and great heroes of national culture”. The iti-
nerant groups distributed books, organised talks, and trained rural cadres.

21 Thông kê số lượng công nhân các ngành năm 1955–59 của Sở Lao động (Statistics
from the Labour Department on the number of workers per sector in 1955–59), in AVN3,
22 Báo cáo về văn hóa đại chúng (Report on mass culture), in AVN3, Coll. BVH, file no.
888, document no. 194/VH (Ty văn hóa, UBHC tỉnh Hà Giang), 1956, p. 3.
23 Kế hoạch báo cáo của Bộ Văn hóa ở các khu tự trị (Provisional report by the Ministry
of Culture aimed at autonomous zones), in AVN3, Coll. BVH, file no. 888, unnumbered
document, p. 5.
In the 1950s and 60s, most of the ideologisation of North Vietnam took place through the occasional visits by itinerant cultural cadres. Official statistics do not show clearly just how many communes were actually affected by or excluded from these tours. For example, the table below shows reports by cadres from Cao Bằng to the Ministry of Culture on the activities of its mobile units in charge of “magic lantern” shows for 1956 (when the first two groups were created) to the end of 1963.\(^\text{24}\) It unfortunately does not provide any clear indication of the number of communes actually visited, but if we look at the data for 1962, we see that there were only two groups running the 816 projections for the year, or 408 showings per group, which seems rather unrealistic. Given the distances and the conditions of the roads and paths between the villages, which were often steep, it would seem that several projections were held in a small number of communes.\(^\text{25}\) It plumps up the statistics but in reality, numerous communities across the province, such as the village of Vũ Nông (Nguyễn Bình district, Cao Bằng), were never visited by an itinerant cultural group between 1956 and 1965. In 1962, barely one-fifth of the 48,000 inhabitants of Nguyễn Bình district saw these shows in 1962.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of showings</th>
<th>Number of groups</th>
<th>Number of spectators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8,278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13,710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>568</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45,115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>699</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50,861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>842</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>60,968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>816</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40,809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Activities of itinerant teams of “magic lantern” shows, Cao Bằng province (1956–1963)

\(^{24}\) Báo cáo thống kê tình hình phát triển sự nghiệp văn hóa thông tin Cao Bằng (Statistical report on the development of cultural and information enterprises in Cao Bằng province), in AVN3, Coll. BVH, file no. 302, document no. 12/ CB, 12 December 1964.  
\(^{25}\) In 1956, the province of Yên Bái sent an itinerant cultural group into the mountainous areas. In the course of the year, 120 (out of 215) screenings were shown in 16 communes. The team states in their activity report that eight screenings were shown in each commune. See Tóm tắt thành tích của đội chiếu bóng lưu động số 9 Chi nhánh 4 năm 1956 (Review of performance of itinerant projection groups, no. 9, session no. 4, 1956), in AVN3, Coll. BVH, file no. 61, document no. 40/VH, January 1957.
The lack of statistical evidence makes any estimate at the national level impossible. Even at the height of the movement (1959–1961), it seems difficult, if not unthinkable, that such a limited number of cultural teams could cover such a large area, reaching communes that were far apart and often quite isolated.

These campaigns had a dual objective: to aid in the construction of socialism and reinforce the struggle for national reunification. In 1963, a cadre from the Ministry of Culture explained that:

Movies had a great impact on the villagers, many of whom had never seen such technology before. Itinerant cadres showed them the example of Lý Tự Trọng, Kim Đồng, Võ Thị Sáu and other heroes and emulation fighters. Through the lives of the nation’s exemplary martyrs, the villagers understood how to adopt such heroic behaviour in their daily lives and improve their lives.26

The Ministry strongly advised its cadres to respect the manners and customs of ethnic minorities. A beautiful account of the propaganda group’s work among minority peoples was written by Nguyễn Tuân.27 The Ministry advised provincial departments of cultural affairs to create their own shows and documentaries, or write patriotic songs directly inspired by local revolutionary heritage (Lăng Sơn anh dũng, Sơn La anh dũng, etc.).

The ideologisation of the communes from the Red River delta and remote towns in the plains or coastal villages proved equally uneven. From 1959–1960, the ideologisation of the peasant masses was left to production groups and cooperatives28 in charge of setting up the basic structures of mass culture,29 notably the first people’s bookstores. A cultural centre was

29 In the springtime of 1962, the Việt Bác zone organised a cultural conference for the area. Many cooperatives were criticised for their lack of cultural activities. In conclusion, one cadre admitted that “the movement had developed very slowly” in the zone. See Báo cáo tổng kết công tác Văn hóa quân chủng 1961 và tháng đầu năm 1962 ở miền núi (Account of mass culture activities in the mountainous regions from 1961 to early 1962), in AVN3, Coll. BVH, file no. 1104, single document, 4 June 1962.
created in Thái Bình in 1956, and shortly after, the People’s Committee started 87 such institutions among its 301 communes. On average, these bookstores had 25–50 books and a selection of newspapers (Nhân dân, Tiếng Phong, Nông nghiệp và Khoa Thương Thức, Thời sự Phó thông). In the village of Hữu Bằng (Son Tây), the president of the commune said: “We still haven’t held any discussions because none of our cadres feel competent to do so. We haven’t established a cultural cell either, nor a newspaper reading group; in short, we haven’t really done anything yet but we do have the building.”

In 1961 in Quỳnh Lưu (Nghệ An), most communal cooperatives and production groups had a small people’s bookstore. The Ministry was of course disappointed that many of them were under-staffed and under-utilised by the people. There were some good tricks, however, for beefing up the weak numbers. The provincial government of Vinh (Nghệ An), carried away by the game of statistics, awarded a certificate of exemplariness to the commune of Nghĩa Đàn for its “record number of books”: they had 8,446 books in all, which makes 25 books per family, or 6–7 books per person. In actual fact, a small group of exemplary families had 150–200 books each, a disparity that would have tempered the optimism of the official in question.

The neighbourhood library (or people’s bookstore in the larger towns) thus played a key role in the ideologisation of the North Vietnamese village. In theory, every new book published was to be discussed among the villagers, but documents show that in 1964–65 very few communes actually did so. In Quang Trạch (Quang Binh), the head of the village library was decorated for having organised 34 lectures in 1965, including 9 dedicated solely to the hero Nguyễn Văn Trỗi (Sống Như Anh [Living like you]). Elsewhere, however, many communes did not have a cultural director, so had no way to acquire books. From time to time a cultural cadre from the district would come to the village, but usually people would have to go to the district bookstore. Despite these various problems, the people’s library/bookstore was instrumental in popularising the new hero and emulation fighter in the countryside.

The local museum, or communal museum space, was another important part of the ideologisation of society. Although they did not become widespread until the war with the South (1965–1975), the Ministry of

30 Báo cáo tình hình kiểm tra một số xã ở Sơn Tây về nhà văn hóa, thư sáeh (Inspection report on some communes from Sơn Tây regarding cultural centres and bookstores), in AVN3, Coll. BVH, file no. 888, document no. 12/vh (UBHC liên khu III, Phòng Văn hóa), 18 August 1956.
Culture had suggested since 1961 that provinces build “Houses of Remembrance in honour of every hero, important person, and great leader from their area”.

The new museum situated the local revolutionary heritage within a global perspective. In 1963, there were only four museums in the whole of North Vietnam: at Hồng Quang, Hưng Yên, Hải Phòng, and Điện Biên Phủ. The one in Điện Biên Phủ opened its doors in December 1961 to mark the anniversary of the founding of the PAVN. In Hanoi, the three national museums (of the Revolution, of History, and of the Army) designed and sent exhibitions to the provinces. Elsewhere, provincial departments of cultural affairs encouraged communal authorities to open “small museum spaces” (cơ sở bảo tàng) to aggrandise local figures and key events in the visual arts. We do not know how many of these museums were actually built since there are no reliable statistics on the matter.

During the interwar period, these clubs, cultural centres, libraries, itinerant cultural groups, people’s libraries/bookstores, and basic village museums made up the DRV’s ideological network. The nation’s new heroes relied on these channels to begin their gradual penetration into the communal level.

A New Historical Pantheon

DRV leaders cleverly situated themselves within a virtuous genealogical heritage. The new identitary references were not gods and demigods, but they wove together various periods of the nation’s revolutionary struggle. The State was anchored in the past and asserted itself through the heroism of its exemplary men. Individuals were often presented as a generic type (the Catholic peasant, the minority worker, etc.), symbols of the progressivist legitimacy of the new government. No spiritual references (gods, demigods, spirits, etc.) were allowed, of course, given its internationalist framework, and I use the term “patriotic pantheon” as a way to examine how the political imaginary was recreated to suit the times. This new referential world is a system of relations, and each figure exists only

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33 In 1965, the history museum sent an exhibition to the provinces of Hải Dương, Hải Phòng, Kiến An, and Hồng Quang. The Museum of the Revolution and that of the Army prepared a show to be sent to the provinces of Tuyên Quang, Thái Nguyên, and Hà Giang. AVN3, Coll. BVH, file no. 107, document no. x/bt, 17 January 1963, p. 5.
through the network binding them together, defined by his relationship to the others. This relationship both dominates and explains him. It creates the overall plan wherein the hero is but one part and his role is understood only in light of the final aim. The classification of gods was a political issue in the sinicised world. The agnostic and modernist position of the new government in Vietnam did not imply a rupture with the past; on the contrary, the legitimacy of its short history depended on it.

The system of relationships linking the figures of the new patriotic pantheon incorporated four frames of reference: historical, geographical, ethnic, and functional. The government was basically honouring the model citizens of the new regime by venerating the glorious spirits of a new dynasty. While the nationalists merely appropriated the political imaginary stained with the blood of the collaborationist Nguyễn dynasty, Hồ Chí Minh and his followers rearranged the realm of their ancestors. They offered the people a patriotic pantheon made up of “pure beings” who reflected the legitimacy of their rule. The moral excellence of the revolutionary hero was the main source of political legitimacy. Of course, a nineteenth-century patriot had a harder time fitting into the new revolutionary morality given his links with the old system.  

The Patriotic Pantheon of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam

1st row (18 figures)

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Region</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai</td>
<td>1930–1952</td>
<td>Quảng Ninh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cù Chính Lan</td>
<td>1930–1952</td>
<td>Nghệ An</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoàng Hanh</td>
<td>1888–1963</td>
<td>Nghệ An</td>
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<td>1906–1944</td>
<td>Lạng Sơn</td>
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<td>1932–</td>
<td>Cao Bằng</td>
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<td>Nghệ An</td>
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<td>Ngô Gia Khâm</td>
<td>1912–1990</td>
<td>Hà Bạc</td>
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35 The figures were listed alphabetically within each rank.
The new patriotic pantheon decided the course of the nation’s history as determined by those in power, who needed to establish a monopoly on memory with the help of a few key figures. The boundaries of legitimacy were drawn by Hồ Chí Minh and, by extension, the various organisations in power (Thanh Niên, the ICP, the VWP).

**A History in Four Acts**

The official new timeline was divided into four main periods: the “Golden Age” of the early resistance against colonial rule (1924–1945), the Franco-Vietminh War (1946–1954), the struggle for socialist production (1955–1964), and the war against the South (1965–1975). It followed the outlines presented by the heroic figures of the new patriotic pantheon.
Phạm Hồng Thái (1893–1924) inaugurated the “Golden Age” of the first legitimate resistance against colonial rule (1924–1945) with his attempt to assassinate Governor Merlin in Canton in June 1924, thus becoming the first martyr of the “new history”. He predated the creation of the Thanh Niên but was already in good company when he visited China in 1922 with Lê Hồng Phong and Lê Thanh Nghị to join the Resistance. He was a great influence on the movement. The 1920s–30s were formative years for the Vietnamese Resistance. The ICP (and later the VWP) first created the myth of the indomitable cadre-militant at the height of the colonialist repression of 1930–33. The Sûreté came down hard on the first militants, all of whom met exemplary deaths during the two major waves of repression (1931–33 and 1939–1941). Trần Phú (1904–1931), elected first General Secretary of the ICP November 1930, was arrested in Saigon in April 1931; he was tortured and died in September. Ngô Gia Tự (1908–1935), one of the founders of the ICP and its first cell in Hanoi on Hàm Long Street, was arrested in 1930 and sent to Poulo Condor, where he drowned while trying to escape. Nguyễn Văn Cử (1912–1941), founding member of the ICP and Party General Secretary at the age of 26 in 1938, died in Poulo Condor in 1941. Lastly, the couple Lê Hồng Phong (1902–1942) and Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai (1910–1941) both died at Poulo Condor, lending a tragic and romantic air to the self-sacrifice of the first generation of revolutionaries.

41 Sophie Quinn-Judge partially questions this myth in an article that was passed around secretly. She implied that Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai and Nguyễn Ái Quốc were married, a hypothesis that casts further doubt on the nature of her relationship with Lê Hồng Phong. See S. Quinn-Judge, “Hồ Chí Minh: New Perspectives from the Comintern Files”, in Việt Nam Forum, New Haven, no. 14, 1993: 61–81.
In 1941, with Hồ Chí Minh’s return to Pác Bó (Hà Quảng, Cao Bằng), the Party’s propaganda department wanted to scale back the heroisation of early patriots in favour of the still little-known figure of Hồ Chí Minh. During the Franco-Japanese occupation (1941–45), only the ethnic Tày Hoàng Văn Thư (1906–1944) assumed a prominent place in official history, though less than those mentioned above.\(^{42}\) Head of military propaganda for the Viêt Bắc region, Thư was arrested during a mission in 1943 and executed a year later. The hero of Lạng Sơn heralded a shift in the make-up of the Viêt Minh’s patriotic pantheon. The trend was now toward figures from outside of the Party apparatus who had died while performing courageous acts. The tragic fate of two heroic adolescents, Lý Tự Trọng (1914–1931) and Kim Đồng (1928–1943), illustrates perfectly the DRV’s approach towards this early period of the ICP and the Viêt Minh.\(^{43}\) Both symbolised the voluntary and patriotic engagement of youth within the Resistance. On the eve of the August insurrection of 1945, the new regime had a series of figures-reference points within its collective memory for every moment of its brief revolutionary past.

The war against France (1946–1954) also generated its share of heroic figures who symbolised the struggle of an entire nation. Early Party leaders gave way to new heroes and a whole string of teenaged martyrs. From 1950 onwards, more and more soldiers were honoured: Trần Cử (1920–1950) and La Văn Câu (1932), who distinguished themselves at the front at Đồng Khê in the fall of 1950,\(^{44}\) the former losing his life and the latter his arm; Nguyễn Quốc Trị (1921–1967), who led his company to victory during the taking of Gò Hạc in May 1951;\(^{45}\) Cù Chính Lan (1930–1951) who died a martyr’s death at the front in Hòa Bình in 1951;\(^{46}\) and Phan Đình Giót (1920–1954) and Bế Văn Đàn (1931–1954), who died during the battle of Điện Biên Phủ in the spring of 1954.\(^{47}\) Of course, these were all

\(^{42}\) Trần Đức Cường. “Hoàng Văn Thư, một chiến sĩ cách mạng kiên trung” (Hoàng Văn Thư, a resolute and loyal combattant for the revolution), in Nghiên cứu Lịch sử. Hanoi, 1984, pp. 52–5.

\(^{43}\) Gươm liết sỉ., pp. 52–5.

\(^{44}\) Anh hùng lực lượng vũ trang nhân dân (Heroes of the people’s armed forces), pp. 28–30 (on Trần Cử) and pp. 12–4 (on La Văn Câu).


victories by the Việt Minh over French Expeditionary Forces. A number of villagers were also feted: Mạ Thị Buổi (1927–1951), Nguyễn Thị Chiến (1930), Nguyễn Thị Suốt (1902–1966), and the Bahnar leader Núp (1919–1999) from the Central Highlands, who were chosen to illustrate the courage and perseverance of communal guerrilla organisations.\(^{48}\) The vigour of the nation was also expressed through the bravery of its many teenaged martyrs, four of whom received special honours by the propaganda department. In the South, Lê Văn Tám (14-years-old) doused himself with gasoline and then threw himself, aflame, into an enemy munitions depot in 1945. Also in Saigon, during the anti-American demonstrations of 1950, the student Trần Văn On (1932–1950) courageously resisted Southern police forces and was eventually shot at point-blank range. In Cochinchna, Võ Thị Sáu (1935–1953) was sent to Poulo Condor prison at the age of 15 for having participated in several resistance operations; she died 3 years later from ill-treatment. Finally, in the northwestern mountains near Lào Cai, the teenager Vũ A Đinh lost his life one night after leading some resisters to the start of their mission.\(^{49}\)

The DRV threw all of its propagandistic might behind these soldiers, communal militia members, patriotic children, and their war of resistance. After the victory of 1954, however, ideologues from the VWP shifted their attention from exemplary resistance fighters to the struggle for socialist production (1955–1964). While the average peasant could understand the concept of the “hero-martyr” who fell in battle, he had a harder time understanding the honour bestowed upon an exemplary worker. Of the many people elected labour hero from 1952 to 1964, few managed to successfully take root within the popular imagination. Propaganda authorities noted this weakness and were content to focus their efforts on a few key individuals, knowing that they could never match the force of the nation’s distinguished warriors. This basic wariness explains why few figures from the labour or peasant movement are included in the national pantheon. Only three labour heroes entered into popular consciousness: Cao Lực (1929–1974), outstanding leader of the cooperative at Ba Tô in Nghệ An; Cao Viết Bảo (1932), exemplary worker in the weapons industry; and


\(^{49}\) *Những ngày kỷ niệm lớn trong nước* (The nation’s important dates of remembrance). Hanoi: nxb Quân đội Nhân dân, 1972, p. 172.
Lê Minh Đức (1923), a railway worker. Together, they represented the entry of North Vietnam into the socialist era.

Finally, the last reference period was the resumption of hostilities with South Vietnam. In 1964–65, the propaganda department of the VWP focused its efforts on the extraordinary lives of two young martyrs: Nguyễn Văn Trỗi (1940–1964), who was sentenced to death in 1964 after attempting to assassinate U.S. Secretary of State McNamara, and Nguyễn Việt Xuân (1934–1964), a young soldier who died in battle during the first American bombings. At each new stage of its struggle for independence, the DRV sought to respond with new heroic and loyal myths adapted to the times and to the ideal of invincibility put forth by official history.

Territory and Control

The widespread establishment of new heroes gave rise to a new geography of power which even today defines political culture in Vietnam. In a study of the demigods of Soviet mythology, the historians Nikolai Kopossov and Dina Khapaeva showed how the redistribution of patriotic titles in the Soviet Union benefitted the local level. In rural societies, localism has always been a critical tool for getting the people to accept the material reality of the central government. The emergence of the DRV as a national political force was built on the pretense of a village politics developed and adapted to the rules of democratic centralism. In helping to rewrite the history of the new regime, the hero suddenly redefined the contours of the geography of power. The construction of the DRV’s political identity was adapted to the three parts of its cultural roots (the myth of the reunification of the three Kỳ [regions], the north, centre and south).

From 1964–66, the advent of many heroic figures from the South answered this quest for geographical balance. There was no question in Hanoi, however, of the North and South being completely equal: the

revolution was still in Northern hands. The reality of the newly drawn geography of power was that nearly 70 per cent of the new heroes in the pantheon were from the North. The revolution, in its incarnation as a relationship of power, was first and foremost a Northern creation. More precisely, the actual heart of political power was in the region of Nghệ An/Hà Tĩnh, which produced 10 of the 22 figures in the North Vietnamese pantheon. This was also the birthplace of Nguyễn Ái Quốc (Nguyễn Saviour of the Nation), aka Hồ Chí Minh (He Who Enlightens). He was born in the village of Kim Liên, 14 kilometres west of the city of Vinh, on 19 May 1890. Some might say that this was just a coincidence, for why would the government want to privilege one region over another? Is the myth of the new hero not supposed to reinforce the traditional and originary link to one’s own native village? Obviously the government had its reasons for doing what they did.  

The political decision-making process in Vietnam today is still marked by this principle, and the grouping of interests based on geographical solidarity is ever-present in its political culture. This issue merits further study, but I will merely add here that the new hero, as a sort of cultural relay between the central government and the provincial level, had since the 1960s become a highly effective tool for the reintegration of the local within the history of the nation. His empowerment at the provincial level was part of the affirmation of political centralism within a geographical space that had long been vulnerable to rupture. The rebalancing of the centre/periphery testified to the emergence of a new geopolitics of decision-making power that has continued ever since. The political imaginary of the DRV reflected the diversity of the nation, and political power was always conceived of with reference to the organisation of the family unit. The myth of the “great Vietnamese family” conferred upon government representatives a patriarchal role in society. Confucianism in Vietnam, according to the linguist Phan Ngọc, was different from its Chinese counterpart in its more ardent sense of the nation:

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52 In some areas the advantages were quite obvious: “Many villagers occupy high positions within the central government. Five people from Quỳnh Đội were members of the central committee, six others were elected deputy at the National Assembly, and three more were members of the steering committees for mass organisations — and we’ve lost track of how many people from the commune hold key positions in the government, at all levels, from ministries to district people’s committees. We sent quite a lot of people [to Hanoi] in the 1950s–60s”, from an interview (Quỳnh Đội commune, Quỳnh Lưu district).
All Confucian concepts have to be seen through a first prism: the Vietnamese Fatherland. A single concept in Chinese philosophy splits to give rise to two concepts. With filial piety, for example, we find the lesser filial piety relating to the duties of a child to his parents (i.e., Confucian piety) and then the greater filial piety towards one’s country. This duality runs through Vietnamese Confucianism. The interpersonal is on a lower level, while anything which serves the nation or the people is higher. This differentiation has never been stated by any Chinese writer. It is a Vietnamese idea. And Nguyễn Trãi did not hesitate when he had to choose. He chose the higher piety, higher wisdom, and higher humanism. It is the choice of any Vietnamese in any era. Contemporary history in Vietnam is all the proof you need.  

The DRV’s new patriotic pantheon reflected the heterogeneity of the great Vietnamese family, a rallying point for different generations, genders, and ethnicities. Like a mirror of the national reality, its structure was that of a large family carrying on under the watchful eye of their pater familias, Uncle Ho. Teenagers or young adults sat side-by-side with their older siblings or parents. Lê Văn Tám was 14 when he sacrificed his life for his country, Võ Thị Sáu was 15, Cù Chính Lan was 22, etc. In 1952, when Hoàng Hạnh accepted his title of hero, it was an “old man” of 64 who mounted the podium at the conference of Tuyên Quang. For the people to identify with their heroic figures, a mix of genders and ethnicities was also required. Women held an important position even within ethnic communities. A woman’s act of bravery was more meaningful in the people’s eyes — her choice to devote herself to the nation rather than to her traditional duties (children, housework, etc.) reinforced the extraordinary nature of her chosen path. The re-evaluation of a woman’s place in society was certainly common to all countries in the communist bloc, but in Vietnam it grew out of an ancient principle that for centuries gave a prominent place to the glorious deeds of the nation’s heroines (Hai Bà Trưng, Bà Triệu, Bùi Thị Xuân, etc.). The great Vietnamese family fulfilled the myth of the national ethnic melting pot. Government leaders pointed out that ethnic minorities — rallying around the Kinh of course — participated

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54 There were only five women, however, out of the thirty-two heroic figures: Võ Thị Sáu (1935–1952), Mạc Thị Bưởi (1927–1951), Nguyễn Thị Чиên (1930), Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai (1910–1941), and Nguyễn Thị Suốt (1906–1968).
fully in the modernisation of the country. The bureaucracy of heroism made sure to integrate a whole series of new heroes from various ethnicities. The biography of the hero Núp, a Bahnar combatant from Gia Lai province, was published in 1956 by the writer Nguyễn Ngọc and was tremendously popular.\(^{55}\) Within the patriotic pantheon, a great many figures were from ethnic minorities: three Tày (La Văn Cầu, Bế Văn Dân, Hoàng Văn Thư), one Banhar (Núp), one Nùng (Kim Đòng), and one Mèo (Vừ A Đình). National cohesion depended on a show of solidarity in the community.\(^{56}\)

The new political pantheon of the DRV created a sense of belonging: — men, women, young and old, Kinh and minority — they were all facets of the great Vietnamese family as imagined and reconstructed by ideologues of the propaganda department of the VWP. The new hero of Vietnam formally followed the lead of the Sino-Soviet Stakhanovist model, but the internationalist dimension does not paint the whole picture. Ideologues and intellectuals from the DRV were clever in that they were able to back him up with a genealogy. With the emergence of a revolutionary lineage, the government acquired a historical foundation, and by reinventing its illustrious ancestors, the State took charge of a collective memory that had been stricken with selective amnesia.


\(^{56}\) The collective work edited in 1995 by Bế Việt Đăng includes a list of minority figures who were awarded the title of “military hero” from 1952 to 1985. Among the 117 figures, the ethnic division is as follows: Tày: 25 (21 per cent); Nùng: 14 (12 per cent); Thai: 14 (12 per cent); Muong: 10 (8.5 per cent); Hrê: 10 (8.5 per cent); Gia rai: 7 (6 per cent); Ta ôi: 5 (4 per cent); Hmông: 6 (5 per cent); Khmer: 4 (3.4 per cent); Raglai: 5 (5 per cent); Banhar: 3 (2.5 per cent); Giê Triêng: 2 (1.7 per cent); Cao Lan–San Chi: 2 (1.7 per cent); Cham: 2 (1.7 per cent); Xo dang: 1 (0.8 per cent); Co tu: 1 (0.8 per cent); Xtièng: 1 (0.8 per cent); Co: 1 (0.8 per cent); Cho ro: 1 (0.8 per cent); Dao: 1 (0.8 per cent); Kho mo: 1 (0.8 per cent); Bru-Van Kiều: 1 (0.8 per cent). See Bế Việt Đăng, ed., *50 năm các dân tộc thiểu số ở Việt Nam*, pp. 271–6.