Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam, 1948-1964

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The vanquished always want to imitate the victor in his distinctive characteristics, his dress, his occupation, and all his other conditions and customs. The reason for this is that the soul always sees perfection in the person who is superior to it and to whom one is subservient. It considers him perfect, either because it is impressed by the respect we have for him, or because it erroneously assumes that its own subservience to him is not due to the nature of defeat but to the perfection of the victor. If that erroneous assumption fixes itself in the soul, it becomes a firm belief. The soul, then, adopts all the manners of the victor and assimilates itself to him. This, then, is imitation. This goes so far that a nation dominated by another, neighbouring nation will show a great deal of assimilation and imitation.

Ibn Khaldûn\(^1\)

A history of the new man in Vietnam requires an examination of the ruptures, inconsistencies, and misunderstandings contained within the source materials and words of those involved, both past and present. This brings us back to the premise of this study. Nothing *a priori* is more familiar to the new Vietnamese hero than his Chinese or Soviet counterpart of the 1950s–60s. Yet, as the historian Carlo Ginzburg writes, “in the cross-section of any present are also encrusted many pasts, of varying temporal thickness, which can refer us to a much larger spatial context”.\(^2\) During the course of this work, I wanted to show that the development of the exemplary man in Vietnam depended deeply on the new government’s need for legitimacy and identity. The question of heroism, through the lives of a few key figures, reveals the extent to which the DRV wanted to build a new nation, and in so doing sheds light on the many difficult choices that the government had to make in those uncertain times.

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At the close of the Second World War, Vietnam existed as a land of ancestors (Tổ Quốc) but not yet as a nation (Quốc gia or Quốc dân). Vietnamese nationalism had arisen fairly late, at the end of the nineteenth century with the movement of Vietnamese scholars called Càn Vương (Loyalists). The defeat of the Resistance, the division of the country, and its tutelage under the French led to a new understanding of the concept of a nation while weakening the relevance of Confucian ideas. “Words take on new meanings: like dân, which means child of the king, but became the word for citizen. Terms from modern Vietnamese enter the language: patriotism (Ái Quốc), nation (quốc dân), compatriot (đồng bào), national state (quốc gia), democratic republican revolution (dân chủ cộng hòa).”

Belatedly, the educated elite transferred their allegiance from the legitimacy of the king to that of the nation. But these concepts were still completely unknown to the majority of the people when the Việt Minh appeared on the scene. With the rise to power in 1945 of an elite group that was mostly educated abroad, the construction of a modern political identity became a priority for the DRV. The war, and the need to mobilise the population, forced the Resistance to seek the means for its own survival. It was no surprise that they would need heroes. The myth of the nation’s saviour had never looked like this before. Traditionally there had always been some who wanted to “humanise” the hero by portraying him more like an ordinary person than an extraordinary one, since “heroes were only men, to whom credulity granted aspects of the marvellous”.

The new hero helped to build a new nation, but he also forced the government into deciding on a suitable model. When communism was imported into the Third World as an exogenous ideology, it had to be adapted to suit different cultures. I have chosen not to examine here the clash between Confucianism and Marxism in sinicised countries. Vietnamese

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5 Veyne. Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes, p. 53.

Conclusion

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communism is pragmatic, so it was often resistant to the various outside influences that tried to shape it. Understanding the way in which a society copes with governmental decisions is a key part of political analysis. In Southeast Asia, Marxism-Leninism responded to the people’s desire for independence and sovereignty through a brand of nationalism that aimed to anchor the revolution to the necessary and inevitable changes within each country. DRV leaders were torn between their dream of Soviet-style modernisation and the continued struggle for national liberation. The war legitimised the VWP in the eyes of the people and is key to understanding the foundations of a political regime that seemed indestructible. It also explains the regime’s resistance to external change and influence. The rupture with traditional land-owning classes and the heroisation of the common man made this “popular” discourse much more appealing to the masses. The Maoism that took root in communist Vietnam began as a rural movement, and remained a tool that was introduced, represented, constructed, and defended by their longstanding and problematic neighbour to the north. As in China, communism in Vietnam stressed the modernity of the imported ideological model. The new Vietnamese elite was mostly fascinated by its success. They found its ideology to be “the very symbols of progress, as opposed to the traditional categories of Chinese thought, which privileged the countryside. Revolution and modernisation, as an indivisible whole, stand in opposition to counter-revolution and backwardness”.7 In the case of the DRV, the appearance of the new hero was initially a condition for obtaining legitimacy within the communist world. It is true, however, that the importation of homo sovieticus had to contend with the heroes of Tuyên Quang and were measured by their standard.

The question still remains as to how this imported model was put to use. In many ways, the new heroic figure fit into institutional categories common to the whole communist world. But the adoption of a foreign model in Vietnam suggests that it was not something fixed but would fluctuate, less due to changes within Vietnam than to the evolution of power relationships abroad. The new hero was an actor who was driven by certain necessities and followed a steady course. This is a key part of his adaptiveness, and it always seems to divide the field of historical research. Beyond the opposition Ideology/Culture, the image of the new man in Vietnam

required a new sort of reasoning to be fully understood. Being neither completely foreign to traditional concepts, nor automatically similar to the Sino-Soviet model, and even less a blend of the two, he appears rather as the complex product of their similarities and differences.

Vietnamese communism must be understood in light of this double confrontation between the Soviet and Chinese models. China’s strong influence on the creation of Vietnamese identity made it unlikely that they would simply transpose the Maoist model without question. And their reluctance to simply adopt a foreign concept reveals their constantly evolving state of analysis from one period to another. In Vietnam, political power had always progressed in relation to the position of its powerful neighbour. Understandably, Vietnamese leaders were eager to set themselves apart somehow. While Maoist China saw the adoption of an imported ideology as part of its historical confrontation with the West, Vietnam had to also take China into account. The entire governing structure of the DRV was developed with this dualism in mind. Hanoi had to honour this long-standing relationship while not showing too much allegiance.

This quest for impartiality undoubtedly destabilised the new North Vietnamese hero, but by limiting the hero’s indigenisation to better reflect the Soviet canon, the government gained the desired distance from China. The history of communism in Vietnam should be seen in light of this principle of governance. It is true that after 1950 the DRV modelled itself greatly on Maoist China — land reform, accelerated collectivisation, and a similar desire to keep a tight grip on the masses — but the role played by Chinese advisers in the new emulation campaign that spawned the heroes of 1950–1952 was different from what they carried out in China. The version that prevailed following the Tuyên Quang conference was more the acceptance of a distant concept than a mere echo of the Chinese approach. In 1956, when the government condemned the “slavish imitation of foreign countries”, it pointed first at China, whose methods on the new man had thus far been faithfully applied.

In purely political terms, the new man was a key factor in the establishment of the North Vietnamese power base. The new hero was not only a symbol; he was very real both socially and politically. With the establishment of communist regimes in the sinicised world, countries had

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8 Công tác thương binh liệt sĩ từ hòa bình lập lại đến ngày (Activities for disabled veterans and martyrs from peacetime to today), in AVN3, BNV, file no. 2255, single document, 1961.
to redefine political loyalty, and thereby begin remodelling the virtuous man. The new ruling dynasty was obliged by the social reality to promulgate rules in accordance with the times. The government did not create the new man in opposition to society, but was instead aware of the rules and limits to social change within the community.

In Vietnam today, in towns and villages, in the newspaper, or in the government’s words, one cannot but see this history in movement, a history in which the referents of yesterday intersect with those of today, one that is rich with allegories of a war of liberation that gave rise to the present. Despite the passing of time, the new hero is more than ever a reminder of the past, when the Vietnamese were victorious over a Western modernity ushered in by decades of French and then American presence on their soil. Exemplary workers, emulation fighters, and new heroes finally took hold with the express aim of forming an exemplary society, a stronger and more united community in which the belief in the future was deeply rooted in a nostalgia for the past.