

Hero Commemoration and State Legitimation in Post-Communist Vietnam —A case study of martyr Võ Thị Sáu (1933-1952)—

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

This essay examined the public veneration of the heroic figure Võ Thị Sáu (1933–1952) and its relations to state legitimation in post-communist Vietnam. Through the case study of Sáu, the essay illuminated some characteristics of contemporary hero commemoration and the socio-political conditions that gave rise to these transformations. The goal was to demonstrate how communist fighters were reimagined into the embodiment of the revolutionary past and the moral high ground of the communists. These heroes became a medium for conflating national identity with state attachment, and for smoothing out post-communist ideological ruptures in state identity, hence making them valuable assets for the state in overcoming challenges against its leadership in the post-communist era.

Hero Commemoration and State Legitimation in Post-Communist Vietnam —A case study of martyr Võ Thị Sáu (1933-1952)—

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RÉSUMÉ Cet article traite de la commémoration publique de la figure héroïque Võ Thị Sáu (1933–1952) et sa relation avec la légitimation de l'État dans le Vietnam post-communiste. À travers l'étude de cas de Sáu, cet article met en lumière certaines caractéristiques de la commémoration des héros contemporains et les conditions socio-politiques qui ont donné lieu à ces transformations. L'objectif est de démontrer comment les combattants communistes ont été réinventés, en représentant l'incarnation du passé révolutionnaire et la supériorité morale des communistes. Ces héros sont devenus un moyen de fusionner l'identité nationale avec l'attachement à l'État, et d'aplanir les ruptures idéologiques post-communiste dans l'identité nationale, ce qui en fait des atouts précieux pour l'État afin de surmonter les défis contre ses dirigeants dans l'ère post-communiste.

ABSTRACT This essay examined the public veneration of the heroic figure Võ Thị Sáu (1933–1952) and its relations to state legitimation in post-communist Vietnam. Through the case study of Sáu, the essay illuminated some characteristics of contemporary hero commemoration and the socio-political conditions that gave

rise to these transformations. The goal was to demonstrate how communist fighters were reimagined into the embodiment of the revolutionary past and the moral high ground of the communists. These heroes became a medium for conflating national identity with state attachment, and for smoothing out post-communist ideological ruptures in state identity, hence making them valuable assets for the state in overcoming challenges against its leadership in the post-communist era.

Heroes and their public celebrations are a frequent subject for studies concerning national identity and state-building. Anthony D. Smith, an historical sociologist most known for his works on nationalism, has stressed the importance of heroes' existences as a binding factor between individuals and the community that the heroes are supposed to represent¹. In recent years, psychology and social science studies that focus on the functions of heroes have emphasized the emotional values of heroes to the individuals, and further highlighted the interlink between the creation of heroes and the construction of collective identity and political community². Given their symbolic power and potential for political mobilization, political entities around the world have regularly attempted to stake their claim on popular heroes and the meanings attributed to them³.

Not unlike political powers elsewhere, the Communist Party of Vietnam—the current sole ruling power in Vietnam, has recognized the symbolic power of the heroic figure since the

1. Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

2. Scott T. Allison, George R. Goethels and Roderick M. Kramer, eds., *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Veronica Kitchen and Jennifer G. Mathers, eds., *Heroism and Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018).

3. One can mention, for example, the frequent invocation of Winston Churchill's name during Brexit debates by both sides of the referendum; or Muhammad Ali Jinnah—founder of Pakistan, of whom both the conservatives and the liberals claimed to be the true inheritor and executor of his vision of Pakistan.

early days of their leadership. The party has been engaging in the mobilization of heroes and heroines for promoting its legitimacy throughout its reign. While the commemoration of heroes has always been a propagandistic instrument under communist rule, the way commemorative activities are conducted and the purposes they serve differ depending on each historical period, as the party is met with new socio-political conditions. This essay examines the public commemoration of heroic figures and its relationship to state legitimation in the post-communist era in Vietnam. Post-communist era here refers to the current period that began with the late 1980s state's departure from the central planning system in which it held the right to monopolize both production and distribution⁴. The shift from the orthodox communist economic system to a more liberalized system that gave official approval to the private sector has helped the party remain in power. However, it has also brought challenges to the supremacy of socialist rhetoric, and thus endanger the legitimacy of the party's reign. Facing this new reality, the party continues to rely on hero commemoration, albeit with adjustments, in order to redefine and restrengthen its position in Vietnamese society and history.

The essay is not a comprehensive study of the phenomenon and instead focuses on one heroic figure: the teenaged martyr Võ Thị Sáu (1933–1952). By analyzing the changes in post-communist commemoration of Sáu compared to how it was conducted in the previous era, this essay hopes to shed light on some characteristics of contemporary commemorative activities, especially

4. On the political and economic system before the late 1980s reform, known as the Subsidy Era (*Thời Bao Cấp*), see: Đặng Phong, *Tư duy kinh tế Việt Nam: Chặng đường gian nan và ngoạn mục 1975–1989* (Vietnam's Economic Mindset: A Daunting and Spectacular Road, 1975–1989) (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Tri thức, 2008); Nigel Thrift and Dean Forbes, *The Price of War: Urbanization in Vietnam 1954–85* (London and Worcester: Allen and Unwin, 1986). On the late 1980s reform, see: Adam Fforde, *Vietnamese State Industry and the Political Economy of Commercial Renaissance: Dragon's Tooth or Curate's Egg?* (Stanton Harcourt, Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2007); David W. P. Elliott, *Changing Worlds: Vietnam's Transition from Cold War to Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

the religious color of commemoration and the historical narrative that the hero is supposed to uphold, and the socio-political conditions that gave rise to these transformations. Hero commemoration became a site of interaction and negotiation between two contemporaneous desires of the Vietnamese communist party: one of distancing itself from socialist rhetoric, and one of reaffirming its socialist past. The efforts in achieving a balance between these two seemingly contradicting goals have great implications for state legitimation and state identity in a post-communist Vietnamese society.

HERO COMMEMORATION AND ITS INSTRUMENTALIZATION IN THE HISTORY OF VIETNAM

Before examining commemorative activities under the communist party, there is a need to understand the larger cultural and historical context out of which the party's approach emerged. In Vietnam, the history of hero commemoration is deeply intertwined with struggles for power of different political entities. One can mention, for example, the tutelary spirit cult (*tín ngưỡng thờ Thành Hoàng*), the folk religious practice of deifying a deceased heroic individual into the guardian spirit and symbol of a village⁵. Tutelary spirit worship is often seen as a symbol of Vietnamese village's distinctiveness and autonomy from central power⁶; yet it had also been used by the court of various dynasties to infiltrate, regulate, and proclaim authority over village life⁷. Literature

5. See Lê Minh Ngọc, "Tín ngưỡng Thành Hoàng và ý thức tâm lý cộng đồng làng xã" (Tutelary spirit cult and village psychology) in *Nông thôn Việt Nam trong lịch sử I* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1977).
6. John T. McAlister, *Vietnam: The Origins of Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1971); Paul Mus, *Việt-Nam. Sociologie d'une guerre* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1952). This view is also informed by popular proverbs that are still in use today, such as "Each village strikes its own drum and worships its own deities" (*Trống làng nào làng ấy đánh, thánh làng nào làng ấy thờ*), or "The customs of the village have precedence over the laws of the king" (*Phép vua thua lệ làng*).
7. Nguyễn Thế Anh, "Village versus State: The Evolution of State-Local Relations in Vietnam until 1945", *Southeast Asian Studies* 41, 1 (June 2003): 101-123; Olga Dror, *Cult, Culture, and Authority: Princess Liễu Hạnh in Vietnamese History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007); Philippe Langlet, *L'ancienne historiographie d'Etat au Vietnam, tome 1: Raisons d'être, conditions d'élaboration*

dedicated to praising heroic individuals throughout pre-communist history is another area where one can observe the mobilization of heroes. These works, often produced or reproduced by court historians and scholars who supported the court, typically painted the heroes as loyal subjects, and their heroic deeds in terms of sacrifices for the ruler⁸. Entering the French colonial period, nationalists reinterpreted past historical figures into national heroes, attempting to create heroic narratives upon which a sense of national identity, perceived as crucial to the achievement of Vietnamese autonomy and independence, could be built⁹.

The communist party's mobilization of heroic figures from the twentieth century onwards was therefore more or less a product of the already existing and accumulated culture of politicizing the hero. Nevertheless, the party has played a significant role in reinforcing and readjusting hero commemoration, simultaneously making the practice a continuity and a distinct novelty in regard to previous eras. During the period of two Vietnams (1955–1975), the party¹⁰, as the leader of North Vietnam, had two political goals in mind: full attainment of socialism in the North, and the unification of the country. This informed the reinterpretation of “old heroes”¹¹; together with the creation of

et caractères au siècle des Nguyễn (Paris: PESEO, 1990).

8. For example: Lý Tế Xuyên, *Việt điện u linh tập* (Collection of Stories on the Shady and Spiritual World of the Viet Realm) (1329); Vũ Quỳnh, *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* (Selection of Strange Tales in Lĩnh Nam) (1478–1492); Phạm Phi Kiến, *Nam thiên trung nghĩa bảo lục* (Collection of the Loyalty and the Just Cause of the Southern Nations) (1730, 1731, 1741); and Hồng Cẩm Hoàng, *Danh Tích Thi Tập* (Anthology of Illustrious Personalities) (1771).

It should be noted that myth and history were frequently conjoined in pre 20th century Vietnam. For further discussion, see: Olga Dror, *Cult, Culture, and Authority*.

9. David G. Marr, “Perception of the Past” in *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

10. From this period onwards, the two terms “the party” and “the state” will be used interchangeably.

11. See: Patricia M. Pelley, “National Essence and the Family-State” in *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002).

Pelley sheds light on Northern historians' appropriation of historical figures for the sake of establishing a national heroic narrative and a unified national identity that are in accordance with their Marxist Stage Theory of History.

a new group of heroes, namely the “new hero/new man”, which consisted of the “labor hero” and the “military hero”¹². In both cases, the heroic figure served as a medium through which the party legitimized their goals, and preached appropriate thoughts and behaviors perceived vital to their realization.

The vision of who deserved to be celebrated and remembered as a hero, and the appropriate forms of veneration, did not stay static throughout the party’s reign. Changes in the state’s approach to hero commemoration, particularly the relaxation of intolerance policy towards religious commemoration of heroic spirits, are often attributed to the 1980s economic reforms known as *Đổi Mới* (Renovation). *Đổi Mới* policies of economic liberalization and integration within the capitalist world were devised to improve the inefficient economy and concomitant social problems that had threatened state legitimacy since as early as immediately after the American war ended, and became even more unmanageable after Soviet aids came to a halt due to the USSR’s disintegration¹³. *Đổi Mới* proved to be a successful project that had revitalized the economy and saved the Vietnamese communist party from suffering the same fate as its Eastern European comrades did. Since *Đổi Mới*, and especially after the 1994 lifting of the 19-year-old US trade embargo, Vietnamese society has experienced an influx of imported commodities and international tourism, accompanied by a gradual adoption of a consumerist lifestyle, increasing opportunities for approaching new ideas and establishing exchange with the international community¹⁴. These profound transformations that *Đổi Mới* brought about were perceived by the state not entirely in terms of opportunities, but

12. See: Benoît de Tréglodé, *Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam* (Arts Link: National University of Singapore Press, 2012).

De Tréglodé, through his meticulous examination of the shifting in the “new hero” image each time the Northern regime redefined their priorities, demonstrates clearly the interdependence of state needs and state-supported heroism.

13. Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet and Doug J. Porter, eds., *Vietnam’s rural transformation* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press; Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1995).

14. These transformations of course did not occur evenly throughout the country, but mostly concentrated in big cities.

also in terms of potential dangers that could erode the foundation of state legitimacy at any moment. It is within this context that the commemoration of heroes continued to be employed, as well as modified so as to fit in the new reality and serve new purposes.

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF VIETNAM'S POST-COMMUNIST HERO COMMEMORATION

There have been a number of studies, often done by anthropologists, that explore hero commemoration in post-communist Vietnam. These studies have shed light on how post-communist hero commemoration differed significantly from that of the communist era: the religious aspects of commemorative activities were tolerated by the state and in many cases actively endorsed¹⁵. As such, and perhaps also due to the broader context of international debates about religiosity in post-communist Eastern Europe¹⁶, hero commemoration was more often than not treated as a sub-topic within a larger question concerning Vietnam's religious "renaissance". Specifically, ethnographic works on post-communist Vietnamese society tended to frame hero commemorations as an extension of the ancestral cults. These studies therefore mainly paid attention to the revival of ancient and medieval heroic tutelary spirit worship and its significance in a Durkheimian sense¹⁷; or focused on regional ancestral worship

15. See, for example: Phillip Taylor, "The Goddess, the Ethnologist, the Folklorist and the Cadre: Situating Exegesis of Vietnam's Folk Religion in Time and Place", *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 14, 3 (2003).

16. The debates on post-communist Eastern Europe's religiosity are often situated in differing perspective about whether a religious revival or secularization was taking place. These debates frequently involved broad generalization with both sides dismissing cases that didn't fit their picture as exceptions to the rule. For the former argument, see for example the body of works by the priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley; for the latter, see Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: religion and politics worldwide* (Leiden: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

17. See: Phillip Taylor, "Empowerment and Innovation among Saint Trần's Female Mediums" in *Modernity and Re-enchantment: Religion in Post-revolutionary Vietnam*, Phillip Taylor, ed. (Singapore: ISEAS, 2007).

of the war dead, often with an emphasis on the gap between the state's vision and local memories and practices¹⁸.

While these works were built around the hypothesis of the multiple teleologies presented in religious rituals, hence their focus on the lived experience of those who engaged in religious activities in their everyday life, they have also provided a number of explanations for the state's greater embrace of religious practices. Within the context of *Đổi Mới*, state tolerance has been interpreted in several ways: as an act of commodification for promoting tourism and other for-profit purposes¹⁹; as an attempt by the communist party to redefine its identity and relocate its legitimacy in the "pure Vietnamese" distant past²⁰; or as an official desire to promote a "return" to traditional morality in an era of perceived anomie and hyper-westernization²¹. While persuasive and particularly useful for understanding the post-communist revivification of folk religions in general, these analyses, however, tend to overemphasize the state's desire to downplay its recent history so as to relocate its roots of identity in the less ideologically problematic distant past. Such an assumption about

18. See: Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

There are exceptions, such as those that deal with the history and symbolic power of the personality cult of Ho Chi Minh, founder of the Vietnamese communist party. See Olga Dror, "Establishing Hồ Chí Minh's Cult: Vietnamese Traditions and Their Transformations", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 75, 2 (2016). Dror has also written extensively on the perpetuation of Ho Chi Minh cult in North Vietnam's education system.

In addition, around the drafting and enactment of the 2016 new law on religion, there was a reinvigoration of discussion, mostly among the overseas Vietnamese diaspora, that further called into questions the history of state policies concerning religious activities, and the state's motivations for adopting specific approach during specific times. Particularly, many of those with religious background who left South Vietnam after the fall of Saigon have been vocal in expressing their anxiety over the course of the communist party's increasing involvement in religious activities. Some see the endorsement of the party on folk religious practices and Buddhism, referred to as "*quốc doanh*" (state-owned enterprises), and the oppression of particular religions as two sides of the same coin.

19. Lê Hồng Lý, "Praying for Profit: The Cult of the Lady of the Treasury (Bà Chúa Kho)", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38, 3 (2007): 493-513.

20. Taylor, "The Goddess, the Ethnologist".

21. Kirsten W. Endres, *Ritual, Fest und Politik in Nordvietnam: zwischen Ideologie und Tradition* (Hamburg: LIT Verlag, 2000).

the irrelevance of the revolutionary past implicitly suggests the suspension of commemorative activities for a figure that is closely associated with this “irrelevant” past: the communist hero.

As scholars who have written extensively on North Vietnam such as Benoît de Tréglodé and Olga Dror have rightly pointed out, during the communist era, the state had introduced a number of new names into the pantheon of heroes, and poured a considerable amount of energy into making these heroes household names²². This begs the question: what happened to these heroes, whose identities have been largely perceived by the public only in terms of their affiliation with the communist party, and whose position in the national collective memory are far less secured compared to that of ancient and medieval heroes? The lack of attention to these figures is perhaps due to the assumption that communist heroes do not have “the potential to guide the nation intact through its daunting process of integration with the capitalist world”²³, and therefore are doomed to oblivion. But is it true that communist heroes no longer hold any authority in the mind of the people? Has the state really abandoned its pantheon of communist heroes? To further understand these issues, I examine the case of Võ Thị Sáu (1933–1952), a teenaged member of the Vietnam Independence League (Viet Minh)²⁴ during the French resistance period (1945–1954).

22. De Tréglodé, *Heroes and Revolution*; Dror, *Making Two Vietnams: War and Youth Identities 1965–1975* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

23. Taylor, “The Goddess, the Ethnologist”: 389.

24. Viet Minh was an anti-Japanese and anti-French resistance alliance formed in 1941 by Ho Chi Minh, chairman and first secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party (then the Workers’ Party of Vietnam). While Viet Minh’s membership was open to all persons regardless of political persuasions, the organization’s leadership consisted of mainly communist party member, most of whom were later absorbed into the National Liberal Front (often referred to in popular culture as Viet Cong) after the establishment of the seventeenth parallel DMZ in 1954.

VÕ THỊ SÁU (1933-1952)—CONSTRUCTING THE TEENAGED
MARTYR OF THE FRENCH RESISTANCE ERA

Võ Thị Sáu was the fifth child of a working-class family in Dat Do district, Ba Ria-Vung Tau province, situated in the southern part of Vietnam²⁵. In 1947, at the age of fourteen, following her brother's footsteps, Sáu joined the Vanguard Police Squad of Dat Do District—a local resistance group that fought against the French occupation. After having received basic ideological and military training, she began working as a spy and provided information on French soldiers and their collaborators' movements to the Viet Minh. In 1950, Sáu was tasked with lobbing a grenade at a group of French soldiers in the crowded market area of Dat Do. She was immediately arrested and given the death penalty. The sentence was delayed for two years since Sáu was still a minor at the time of the trial. In 1952, at the age of nineteen, Sáu was shot to death on Con Dao—an archipelago where the French authority imprisoned, reeducated, and executed political dissidents. Before being executed, Sáu is said to have rejected the last rites given by a Catholic priest, stating that she had no sin to be forgiven, and the only regret she had was her unfinished goal to annihilate all colonialists and collaborationists²⁶. She refused to be blindfolded, constantly sang songs that were popular among the Viet Minh during the shooting, and her last words were "Opposition against the French colonialists! Hail independent Vietnam! Hail President Ho!"²⁷.

25. Information on the life of Võ Thị Sáu differs from sources to sources in terms of dates and even the events that took place. The information here is extracted from the 1993 posthumous biography written by Nguyễn Đình Thống. See: Nguyễn Đình Thống, *Võ Thị Sáu—Con người và huyền thoại* (Võ Thị Sáu—The person and the legend) (TP.HCM: Nhà Xuất Bản Tổng Hợp Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2012).

26. *Ibid.*, 67. The conversation between Sáu and the priest is also featured in her 2006 biography written by Lê Quang Vịnh. The details of the conversation differ, but the most essential, which is her refusal to acknowledge that her action was a sin, remains the same. See, Lê Quang Vịnh, *Chị Sáu ở Côn Đảo* (Sister Sáu on Con Dao) (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Kim Đồng, 2016).

27. Nguyễn Đình Thống, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 70.

Episodes of Võ Thị Sáu's extraordinary resilience and resistance during her imprisonment and execution are well-known among the public today, which is largely the result of years of efforts made by the state's propaganda apparatus. The state's commitment to constructing and popularizing the image of Sáu as a heroic teenaged martyr can be traced back as far as the early 1960s. In 1961, Nguyễn Lam, the First Secretary of the Youth League Central Committee—the largest youth organization under the leadership of the communist party—wrote an article titled “Teaching communism to our youth”, in which he emphasized the need to establish Võ Thị Sáu and several other teenaged martyrs into role models for Vietnamese youth²⁸. This entailed various educational programs and propaganda campaigns promoting these teenagers organized by party's cadres at the local level²⁹. Regarding cultural products, in 1961, music composer Nguyễn Đức Toàn created the iconic song “Gratitude to sister Võ Thị Sáu” (*Biết ơn chị Võ Thị Sáu*), which interpreted Sáu's death as the ultimate sacrifice for achieving an independent unified Vietnam, and which criticized the separation of North and South as an act of betrayal, which went against the martyr's will³⁰. Similarly, in

28. Nguyễn Lam, “Giáo dục chủ nghĩa Cộng Sản cho thanh niên” (Teaching communism to our youth), *Học tập* 5 (1961): 38.

29. Some documents which mentioned Sáu in the context of propaganda campaign include: *Sổ tay Đội viên thiếu niên tiên phong Việt Nam* (Manual for Pioneers) (Hanoi: KĐ, 1964, 1968): 203; *Báo cáo công tác đèn chiếu năm 1962 và phương hướng nhiệm vụ công tác năm 1963* (Report on projection activities for 1962 and plan for 1963), January 1963, quoted in de Tréglodé, *Heroes and Revolution*: 201.

30. It should be noted that prior to *Đổi Mới*, artists were closely monitored by the communist party. There are several accounts of writers and artists whose works were deemed as straying from the party's cultural policies, and as a result were forced to undergo “public self-criticism”. Once criticized by the party, the career and reputation of these artists would suffer permanent damage. However, if their works turned out to be compatible with later changes in the party's cultural policies, they might receive a reassessment and recognition from the party. See for example: Peter Zinoman, “Reading Revolutionary Prison Memoirs” in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, Hue-Tam Ho Tai, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Taylor Nora Annesley, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

For an extensive discussion of cultural policies from the early days of the party as the leader of independent Vietnam until the beginning of the American War, see: Kim N.B. Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002).

1976, poet Phan Thị Thanh Nhàn wrote the poem “The Legend of Con Dao” which romanticized Sáu’s death, highlighting her calm and even playful attitude when facing death as proof of the righteousness of her action. The first stanza of the poem was reproduced in the 1985 national school reader for first graders and again in the 1997 national school reader for second graders. These efforts contributed to the preservation of Sáu’s existence in the consciousness of generations of those who were born long after her death and who had no personal connection to her or places associated with her.

What were the reasons behind the popularization of Võ Thị Sáu? As explains Benoît de Tréglodé in his extensive study on the construction of heroism in Vietnam between 1948 and 1964, Võ Thị Sáu, along with other young soldiers and martyrs of the French colonial era, was imagined as a symbol of the nationwide patriotic and voluntary engagement of Vietnamese youth in the resistance. This must be understood as a popular movement of and by the communist party³¹. These heroic figures thus served as pedagogical tools for defining and disseminating the party’s definition of heroic and patriotic behaviors among the masses³². Furthermore, as representations of the righteous beginning of the communist party, which itself was interpreted as a continuation of the “four-thousand-year-old tradition of resistance against foreign aggressors”, the heroic figures became, in Weber’s term, a source of “traditional authority” that conferred legitimacy to the party’s leadership and their various projects,

31. De Tréglodé. *Heroes and Revolution*: 207–208.

32. In 1948, the party launched the first emulation campaign (*phong trào thi đua yêu nước*) which established the standards for what was to be considered patriotic exemplarity. Winners of the campaign were awarded the title of either “Military Hero” (Anh hùng Quân đội) or “Labor Hero” (Anh hùng Lao động). This practice is continued to this day. For details, see: de Tréglodé. *Heroes and Revolution*. Together with Võ Thị Sáu, some of the more well-known heroes include: Tô Vĩnh Diện (died by placing his own body under the wheel of a cannon to prevent it from slipping downslope during the Battle of Dien Bien Phu), Bế Văn Đàn (used his body as a gun stand for his teammate during the winter-spring campaign 1953–1954).

including the war against the US-backed Saigon government, and the construction of a socialist Vietnam³³.

Moreover, it is worth remembering that Võ Thị Sáu was a southerner. The commemoration of her and many other southern martyrs could be seen as an attempt by the communist party in constructing a history of southern support for the party. If during the war against the Saigon government, such an image had served as a source of legitimacy and motivation for the war efforts; in the postwar era, it became a means for erasing the memory of southerners' supports for the Saigon government. The desire to subvert this local memory was perhaps one of the main motivations for the name change to Võ Thị Sáu or other southern martyrs' names of many streets and schools in the South after the fall of Saigon³⁴.

33. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 215.

34. Some immediate name changes include: Trương Tấn Bửu High School, founded in 1957 in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh city), was changed to Võ Thị Sáu High School in 1975; Hiến Vương Street in Saigon was changed to Võ Thị Sáu Street after 1975; Nguyễn Thị Giang Street in Hue city, then part of the DMZ area, was changed to Võ Thị Sáu Street in 1977.

According to Lê Xuân Hoàng, former secretary of District One's Party Committee in Ho Chi Minh City, after 1975, the streets and schools in District One (the busiest and richest district in the city) were renamed after the few patriotic kings of the Nguyen dynasty (the last Vietnamese dynasty whose rise to power took place in the South. The Nguyen Dynasty is conventionally perceived in Vietnam's popular culture as a treacherous (*phản quốc*) dynasty for its history of interaction with foreign powers, especially with the French), "true patriots" from different parties prior to the rise of the communist party, and heroic southerners who fought and died for the country "under the glorious guidance of the communist party". Hoàng emphasized that it was the southern population that demanded this name change. Some personal accounts of locals, however, referred to the name change as an involuntary act. Regardless of the veracity of Hoàng's claim, one can be certain that this representation of a history of southern patriotic resistance against foreign invaders and ultimately southern support for the party, is what the party wants to display to the general public.

See the conversation with Lê Xuân Hoàng in: Hoàng Phương, "Lễ tưởng niệm anh hùng liệt sĩ Lê Văn Tám" (The commemoration of the heroic martyr Lê Văn Tám), *Văn Nghệ* (2018) <http://tuanbaovannghehphcm.vn/le-tuong-niem-anh-hung-liet-si-le-van-tam-so-508/> (accessed 10 Dec. 2020).

See a mention about the involuntary nature of the post-1975 name change in: Vũ Linh Châu and Nguyễn Văn Luân, "Người đặt tên cho các đường phố Sài Gòn trước 1975" (Who named the streets in pre-1975 Saigon), *Trithucvn* (2020) <https://trithucvn.org/van-hoa/nguoi-dat-ten-cho-cac-duong-pho-sai-gon-truoc-1975-va-y-nghia-cua-chung.html> (accessed 12 Dec. 2020).

FROM VÕ THỊ SÁU TO CÔ SÁU (LADY SÁU)—FLIRTING WITH THE POWERFUL SPIRIT

On March 2, 1993, Võ Thị Sáu was awarded posthumously the title Hero of the People's armed forces by President Le Duc Anh under Decree No. 149-XT/CTN³⁵. This event marked the beginning of an increase in cultural products featuring Sáu. It also featured a gradual change in the state's approach to her commemoration. Within the same year, Nguyễn Đình Thống—then head of the communist party's history committee within the propaganda department of Ba Ria—Vung Tau province³⁶—published a biography titled *Võ Thị Sáu—The person and the legend*. The book differed from all previous popular representations of Sáu with its mythical depiction of Sáu and its documentation of the cult of *Cô Sáu* on Con Dao. According to this book, after Sáu's death, rumors about her ghost appearing near her grave, punishing those who disrespected her with terminal illness or death, and rewarding those who venerated her with career promotions or good health, started to circulate throughout Con Dao³⁷. The locals, especially families of officers and staffs who worked at the Con Dao Prison where Sáu was briefly imprisoned before execution, began to worship her in private as *Cô Sáu* (Lady Sáu). Religious rituals were conducted in a similar fashion to the ancestral cults, such as the keeping of a small shrine or altar dedicated to Sáu in one's home and paying respect to her grave on a regular basis. The biography has been reprinted multiple times since, and its latest version was published in 2020. In a similar

35. Nguyễn Đình Thống, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 94.

36. Huỳnh Tới, "Tác giả Nguyễn Đình Thống và nhiều công trình nghiên cứu lịch sử về Bà Rịa—Vũng Tàu" (Author Nguyễn Đình Thống and his research on the history of Ba Ria—Vung Tau), *Thư viện thành phố Vũng Tàu* (2019) <http://thuvienvungtau.vn/News/NewDetail/tac-gia-nguyen-dinh-thong-va-nhieu-cong-trinh-nghien-cuu-lich-su-ve-ba-ria-vung-tau> (accessed 3 Dec. 2020).

Nguyễn Đình Thống is currently a member of the History Department in the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City (former name: Saigon). He specializes in the history of the Vietnamese Communist Party. The fact that he is now in the position of teaching university students what to think about the party attests that his religious portrayal of Sáu was not deemed problematic by the party.

37. Nguyễn Đình Thống, *Võ Thị Sáu*, 73–94.

vein, in 2014, The People's Public Security of Vietnam Publishing House—a publisher with the mission of “printing and distributing widely books on topics of national security, social order and public security that adhere to the [communist] Party's principles [...]”³⁸, published the book *The Love of Dat Do*, described as a compilation of stories about Sáu's life and afterlife that were retrieved from witnesses of Sáu's execution and followers of the *Cô Sáu* cult³⁹.

In addition to biographies, in 1995, Ho Chi Minh City Television Film Studio—a state-owned studio under the direction of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism—released the biopic *Like a Legend*, written by the prolific author, script-writer and party member Nguyễn Quang Sáng⁴⁰. He was famous for his creative writings on anti-French and anti-American resistances in the South. The majority of the movie revolved around the myths surrounding Sáu's ghost and the establishment of her cult.

Another area where one can observe the state's acceptance of Sáu's religious representation is online platforms such as social media, internet forums, and personal blogs. The rapid growth of the internet opened up new avenues for information dissemination and thus prompted state institutions to go online. The *Cô Sáu* cult, now a major cult with followers throughout Vietnam, is not only broadly featured on online news channels without fear of censorship; information about the cult, along with the myths of Sáu's ghost, are now proudly displayed on the homepage of the party's provincial branches, city councils, or of government mouthpieces, and most notably on the homepage of the People's Public Security Press⁴¹.

38. “Introduction”, *The People's Public Security of Vietnam Publishing House Home Page* <http://www.nxbcsand.vn/default.asp?tab=2&zone=2&menuid=2> (accessed 5 Dec. 2020).

39. Lê Văn Thiện, *Tình Đất Đỏ* (*The Love of Dat Do*) (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Công an Nhân dân, 2014).

40. *Như một Huyền Thoại* (*Like a legend*), directed by Phan Vũ (Hãng phim truyền hình Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1995).

41. See for example the article featured in the section “Officer in the People's Heart” on the homepage of the People's Public Security Press: Ngô Minh, “Huyền

From the examples above, it is clear that the public representation of Võ Thị Sáu has expanded significantly from the strictly secular portrayal in the era before the 1990s. Given the conventional understanding of communist doctrines as anti-religious, one would be perplexed at the communist party's attitude towards the integration of a religious cult into the image of its supposedly communist hero. Indeed, the current acceptance towards Cô Sáu cult stands out even more when compared to the destructions of religious sites, illegalization, and stigmatization of various forms of local religious practice led by communist cadres in previous decades⁴². Why were state institutions and high-ranking party members involved in the promotion of *Cô Sáu* cult? Should we see this shift in representation as an effort to remove the revolutionary past from Sáu? If so, what is Sáu supposed to represent now from the state's perspective and what does the state hope to achieve in popularizing the mythical, religious image of her?

I would suggest that the state's embrace of *Cô Sáu* cult does not indicate a desire to separate Sáu from the revolutionary past. The official narrative of Võ Thị Sáu's life, what she symbolized—i.e., the virtuous communist fighter figure (*chiến sỹ cộng sản*)—and the patriotic history of southerners' support for the communist party and their participation in the two revolutionary wars, has never been repudiated by the state. Particularly in cultural products and activities aimed at schoolchildren, Sáu's portrayal remains strictly secular and almost identical to the pre-1990s representations, if not for the deemphasis on the grenade lobbing incident. This was done in response to the critique about exposing children to violence rather than about the legitimacy

thoại về cô Sáu linh thiêng" (Legends of the sacred Lady Sáu), *Công an nhân dân online* (2016) <http://cand.com.vn/Cong-an/Huyen-thoai-ve-co-Sau-linh-thieng-389032/> (accessed 5 Dec. 2020).

42. See: Barley Norton, "Vietnamese Mediumship Rituals: The Musical Construction of the Spirits", *The World of Music* 42, 2 (2000): 75-97; Hy V. Luong, "The restructuring of Vietnamese nationalism, 1954-2006.", *Pacific Affairs* 80, 3 (2007): 439-453; Shaun Kingsley Malarney, *Cultural, Ritual, and Revolution in Vietnam* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

of Sáu's action⁴³. The communist party has shown no intention of letting go of the past. On the contrary, it has demonstrated intense efforts in preserving the revolutionary memory. In the case of Võ Thị Sáu, the establishment (1982) and continuous rejuvenation (1985, 1986, 1995, 2001, 2011) of the commemorative area (*khu tưởng niệm*) dedicated to Sáu in her hometown Dat Do highlight it⁴⁴. The heart of the commemorative area—the memorial house, functions both as a temple and a museum⁴⁵. Sáu's and her family members' altars are placed in the center room of the house, whereas the rooms upstairs are for exhibiting pictures and other materials demonstrating Sáu's activities as a Viet Minh member.

The juxtaposition of the powerful spirit and the communist fighter implies not a deemphasis on the latter but a mutually

43. Two biographies of Sáu published by Kim Dong publishing house—the largest publisher for children's books in Vietnam—censored Sáu's grenade lobbing incident. Both books began with the scene of Sáu on a convict ship to Con Dao and ended with her death. See: Hoài Lộc and Bùi Việt Thanh, *Võ Thị Sáu* (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Kim Đồng, 2019); Lê Quang Vinh, *Chị Sáu ở Côn Đảo* (Sister Sáu on Con Dao) (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Kim Đồng, 2019). For a discussion on teaching violent history in contemporary Vietnam, see, for example: Thanh Tuyền, "Có nên dạy sử cho trẻ bằng tranh thời chiến?" (Should we teach history to children using war paintings?), *Pháp luật* (2017) <https://plo.vn/xa-hoi/giao-duc-co-nen-day-su-cho-tre-bang-tranh-thoi-chien-696560.html> (accessed 7 Dec. 2020).

The author interviewed parents and asked for their opinions about the war paintings on the wall of their children's elementary school (one of which depicted Sáu's execution). Most parents were concerned about whether the possibility of unintentional encouragement of violent behavior in children might overshadow the educational purpose of these paintings. Except for one mother who expressed doubts about the focus on war in history education and its relevance to the current peace time, other parents were generally not critical of the idea of teaching war and revolutionary heroes per se.

44. "Công Viên tượng đài, nhà lưu Niệm anh hùng Võ Thị Sáu: Điểm du lịch văn hóa về nguồn tại huyện Đất Đỏ" (Võ Thị Sáu's memorial house and monument park: a "returning to the roots"-themed tourist attraction in Dat Do town), *Ba Ria—Vung Tau Investment, Trade and Tourism Promotion Agency* <http://www.bariavungtautourism.com.vn/w4606-cong-vien-tuong-dainha-luu-niem-anh-hung-vo-thi-saudiem-du-lich-van-hoa-ve-nguon-tai-huyen-dat-do.htm> (accessed 7 Dec. 2020).

45. For pictures of the commemorative area, see: "Viếng thăm Nhà lưu niệm và Tượng đài Anh hùng liệt sĩ Võ Thị Sáu" (Visiting Heroic martyr Võ Thị Sáu's memorial house and statue), *Tiểu học Lê Thị Riêng* (2017) <http://thlethirieng.hcm.edu.vn/tin-tuc-su-kien/vieng-tham-nha-luu-niem-va-tuong-dai-anh-hung-liet-si-vo-thi-sau-c22443-193584.aspx> (accessed 7 Dec. 2020).

reinforcing relationship between the two images. The acknowledgment of *Cô Sáu* cult and the incorporation of the mythical into Sáu's official profile strengthened her commemoration by situating it within the (recently revitalized) deeply-rooted culture of worshipping powerful spirits⁴⁶. In other words, Sáu's commemoration is given a new cultural "form" that appeals to the people's spiritual needs, and enables Sáu's existence to be further engraved and immortalized in the imagination of the people, and along with it what she symbolizes: the revolutionary past, and the exceptional quality of the Communist. The spiritual "form" of *Cô Sáu* cult—perceived as part of the long history of spirit worshipping in Vietnam—bestows the "content" of Sáu's state-approved symbolism with additional credibility and attractiveness. In return, Sáu's extraordinary life, and her significance to the state, offers to the *Cô Sáu* cult's followers a sense of approval, or even a sense of superiority over other cults whose subjects of worship do not belong in the pantheon of national heroes. Thus persuading these followers to further embrace the official narrative about the righteousness of the communist party embodied in the figure of Sáu.

46. *Cô Sáu* cult belongs to a broader culture of worshipping those who died young.

In Vietnam, there is a belief that the souls of those who died young tend to linger on earth since they died while still harboring unfulfilled aspirations and needs. Furthermore, young souls are believed to be purer and more powerful since the amount of sins committed in their short life is often fewer than that of those who died at an old age. As lingering young souls are closer and more receptive to the living people than the souls that have gone to the heaven, people believe that if they properly worship them, their wishes have a much higher chance of coming true. This is the principle behind the common practice of worshipping separately ancestors who died young in the family (*Thờ Bà Cô Ông Mãnh*). Moreover, Sáu is exceptionally suitable as a subject of worship since she not only died young, but also died by firearms - an unnatural and violent death that falls into the category of "bad death". It is believed that those who died from "bad death" need to be worshipped so as to prevent their soul from turning into malevolent spirits that harm living people.

For a discussion about the worship of "bad death" souls, see: Shaun Kingsley Malarney, "The Fatherland Remembers Your Sacrifice" in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*.

COMMEMORATING THE COMMUNIST FIGHTER TO SURVIVE A
POST-COMMUNIST WORLD

While the motivation for an acceptance of *Cô Sáu* cult could be explained in terms of cultural/religious authority and its potentiality for spreading and reinforcing the official narrative, there still remains some questions concerning the state's management of the commemoration of Võ Thị Sáu: Firstly, what motivated the state's commitment to the revivification of Võ Thị Sáu? If the commemoration of Sáu is simultaneously a commemoration of the revolutionary past and the exceptionalism of the communist man/woman, why does the communist party feel the need to uphold and reemphasize these narratives in the post-communist era, when the wars are long gone and the communist economic system has been replaced by the market-oriented model? What does the party hope to achieve? To answer these questions, there is a need to reexamine the consequences of the *Đổi Mới* reforms.

Although *Đổi Mới* had successfully saved the communist party from a regime change, it had also damaged the pre-1980s two pillars of legitimacy for the party's leadership. One of the two, which was almost entirely uprooted, was the superiority and righteousness of socialism. By adopting *Đổi Mới*, the communist party had set aside its project of building a socialist Vietnam to embark on capitalism, a reversion that appeared completely contradictory to the national efforts over the past forty years⁴⁷.

47. It should be noted that *Đổi Mới* was not a single event but was preceded by a series of unofficial capitalistic activities and policy adjustments that could be traced back as far as 1975. The state's tolerance of, if not support for, a considerable number of deviations from socialist orthodoxies was done for practical purposes of coping with postwar economic hardships and sustaining its governing authority. Nevertheless, this pragmatic approach also led to growing skepticism among both cadres and the wider public about the efficiency of a communist economic system and the legitimacy of the state ideology of socialism. See: Elliott, *Changing Worlds*; Đặng Phong, "Phá rào" trong kinh tế vào đêm trước đổi mới ("Fence Breaking" in the Economy on the Eve of Doi Moi), (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Tri thức, 2009).

In current day discussions about the pre-*Đổi Mới* era (the Subsidy Era), it is not uncommon for the economic system to be referred to as "backward" (lạc hậu), and the adoption of *Đổi Mới* a "return" to the old ways (quay lại). See, for example: Ngọc Quỳnh, "Kinh tế Việt Nam: Từ lạc hậu đến cạnh tranh quốc tế"

Đổi Mới therefore not only implicitly annulled the authority of socialism in Vietnam, which had already shown visible signs of erosion especially since news about the disintegration process of the Eastern bloc broke out. Concomitantly, *Đổi Mới* also posed the danger of undermining and turning the supposedly glorious history of the party's leadership into a mere costly, meaningless, even regressive pursuit of unattainable goals. The fall of the socialist pillar had created a domino effect that could potentially bring down altogether the remaining pillar: the historically based legitimacy of the party as the morally upright leader of two just wars, one against the French, the other against the American and the treacherous Saigon government. Indeed, with the emergence of voices that labeled *Đổi Mới* the "southernization"⁴⁸ of Vietnam, an admiration for the supposedly illegitimate state of South Vietnam also began to surface. The antithesis of the righteous communist government appeared, in the nostalgic recollections of embittered southerners and wishful projections of envious northerners, as one single cosmopolitan city of Saigon, as *la perle de l'Extrême-Orient*—divorced from war and corruptions, and abundant in consumer goods⁴⁹. The subject of condemnation

(Vietnamese Economy: From backward to internationally competitive), *Công Thương* (2020) <https://congthuong.vn/kinh-te-viet-nam-tu-lac-hau-den-canh-tranh-quoc-te-143050.html> (accessed 7 Nov. 2021); Nguyễn Quang Duyệt, "Chiến lược phát triển của Việt Nam Cộng Hòa 'vẫn còn nguyên giá trị'" (The RVN's developmental strategy "remains beneficial"), BBC News Tiếng Việt (2021), <https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/forum-56720743> (accessed 7 Nov. 2021).

Despite the disinterest/unpopularity toward socialism as an ideology in the wider public, the state, however, continues to put efforts into defending the legitimacy of Marxist/Leninist theories and rationalizing the conflicts between theories, state's monopoly of power, and free market economy model. See for example, an article published by the Communist Party's official journal: Nguyễn Đình Bắc, "Lật tẩy 'màn ảo thuật' cổ xúy thay đổi chế độ chính trị của những giọng điệu xuyên tạc mối quan hệ giữa đổi mới kinh tế với đổi mới chính trị ở Việt Nam" (Debunking the erroneous interpretation of the relationship between economic and political reform deliberately promoted by anti-state forces), *Tạp chí Cộng Sản* (2021) https://www.tapchicongsan.org.vn/web/guest/dau-tranh-phan-bac-cac-luan-dieu-sai-trai-thu-dich/chi-tiet/-/asset_publisher/YqSB2JpnYto9/content/lat-tay-man-ao-thuat-co-xuy-thay-doi-che-do-chinh-tri-cua-nhung-giong-dieu-xuyen-tac-moi-quan-he-giua-doi-moi-kinh-te-voi-doi-moi-chinh-tri-o-viet-nam (accessed 7 Nov. 2021).

48. Melanie Beresford, "Vietnam: Northernizing the South or Southernizing the North?", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 8, 4 (March 1, 1987): 261-275.

49. This phenomenon can be observed today in any picture collections of "old

in the communist era had then transformed into the goal for the hitherto materially impoverished nation in the post-communist era. If so, what was the point of the war against the Saigon government and its “exploitative capitalism”? Sacrificing so many lives and resources to strike it down only to mount a replica of it eleven years later?⁵⁰ By the late 1990s, the idealized perception of pre-1975 South Vietnam, along with a rising skepticism about the war and ultimately about the party’s leadership, were pervasive and alarming enough to be categorized by the party as a cultural malady in the 1998 *03-NQ/TW Central Resolution of the Eighth Congress on Building and Developing a Progressive Vietnamese Culture Rich in National Identity*⁵¹. Among the antidotes proposed by the party was, of course, mass patriotic education to instill in the people’s minds the values of the revolutionary past and its legacy⁵².

Within this context, the commemoration of communist fighters could be seen as a manifestation of the state’s anxiety towards the emerging competing narrative that had become increasingly popular and could seriously jeopardize the state’s monopoly on power. Communist fighters, and especially those of southern origin like Võ Thị Sáu serve as a reminder of the

Saigon” (*Sài Gòn xưa*) posted and shared online. So far, I have never come across a collection tagged with “old Saigon” or “pre-1975 Saigon” that includes pictures outside of the “beautiful and rich Saigon” narrative. It is also almost guaranteed that, if there are enough commentors, there will be in these collections’ comment section “discussions” about the war, which often ends with name-calling. See, for example: “Bộ Ảnh Đẹp Về Sài Gòn Xưa, Trước Năm 1975” (Collection of beautiful pictures of old Saigon prior to 1975), *Hình ảnh Việt Nam* <https://hinhanhvietnam.com/bo-anh-dep-ve-sai-gon-xua-truoc-nam-1975/> (accessed 11 Dec. 2020).

50. See this sentiment in: Michael J. Totten, “Hanoi’s Capitalist Revolution”, *City Journal* (2015) <https://www.city-journal.org/html/hanoi%E2%80%99s-capitalist-revolution-13743.html> (accessed 12 Dec. 2020).

51. The Central Committee, *03-NQ/TW Central Resolution of the Eighth Congress on Building and Developing a Progressive Vietnamese Culture Rich in National Identity* (Hanoi: The Communist Party of Vietnam, 1998), Part One, Section Two <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Van-hoa-Xa-hoi/Nghi-quyet-03-NQ-TW-nam-1998-ve-xay-dung-va-phat-trien-nen-van-hoa-Viet-Nam-tien-130939.aspx> (accessed 11 Dec. 2020).

52. *Ibid.*, Part Two, Section Two, Subsection Three and Four; Part Three, Section One and Section Four.

revolutionary past, of the righteousness of the party's leadership, of the high morals of communist men and women, and of the historicity of popular support in the South for the party. Their commemorations become sites where the state reinvigorates the party-affirmative narrative of the revolutionary past, as well as redefine the communist party's identity and communist morality more strongly in terms of patriotism and national defense. After all, it is difficult to reassert socialist doctrine while the state is pursuing capitalism to save itself from being irrelevant like its European counterparts. A concentration on maintaining the image of the morally upright leader of just wars and inheritor of Vietnamese patriotic tradition thus seems to be the more viable tactic for boosting public confidence in the party's leadership. This perhaps explains why one can observe in post-communist Vietnam a "commemoration fever" that centers on the military hero, and not on the "labor hero" who symbolizes the more orthodox socialist ideals and past process of building socialism in Vietnam.

EPILOGUE

In 2017, a group of prominent artists in Vietnam⁵³ held a casual gathering at a cafe to discuss the figure of Võ Thị Sáu. Each artist shared their mind-boggling experiences interacting with local people in Sáu's hometown, Dat Do. According to these artists, the locals who personally knew Sáu, including her biological sister, shared the view that Sáu was a child with an intellectual disability (*chập, điên, khùng*). The grenade lobbing incident in

53. The group includes writer Nguyễn Ngọc and poet Nguyễn Duy, whose works are featured in the current national textbooks for students in the final year of study junior high and high school. There have been voices from the Ministry of Propaganda that demanded these authors' works to be removed from the national curriculum, and it is highly possible that their works will no longer appear in the new national curriculum, which is scheduled to begin in fall 2024. See: "Ban Tuyên giáo 'công kích' Văn đoàn Độc lập" (Ministry of Propaganda "attacked" the League of Independent Writers), *VOA Tiếng Việt* (2018) <https://www.voatieng-viet.com/a/ban-tuyen-giao-cong-kich-van-doan-doc-lap/4316480.html> (accessed 12 Dec. 2020).

these locals' memory appeared nothing like the official account's depiction either. Sáu, together with a group of local militants, was indeed tasked with assassinating a mixed-race non-commissioned officer (NCO) who ran errands for the local French soldiers. Unfortunately, on the day of the mission, the NCO did not show up as planned, yet Sáu still threw the grenade into the crowded market, killing and injuring several civilians, all were local Vietnamese. The official and popular account of Sáu was, the artists concluded, a fabrication of the communist party, and those who were involved in the making of cultural products featuring Sáu (i.e. the books and movies discussed previously) deliberately perpetuated the fabricated account despite being fully aware of the truth about Sáu.

A participant of the gathering filmed the discussion and later posted it on social media⁵⁴, immediately creating an uproar on the internet. Those with an initial anti-communist party agenda did not miss the chance to pounce on their much-hated enemy, proclaiming that *everything* the communist party preached were lies to indoctrinate people and to justify its history of terrorism and criminal acts⁵⁵. Pro-party individuals retaliated by posting blog posts and video clips filled with ad hominem insults against the artists. State-approved news channels, with their keen sense of money and prestige, together with state mouthpieces, readily jumped on the bandwagon to produce a series of interviews with other authors, artists, university professors, and state officers; as well as articles on “facts” about Sáu, which in essence parroted the official narrative and served to condemn those who disagreed as anti-patriots attempting to distort *History*⁵⁶.

54. The video is no longer available on the original account but has been reuploaded by others and can be found easily on the internet by searching together the two keywords “Nguyễn Duy” and “Võ Thị Sáu”. Debates about Võ Thị Sáu continues to this day and can be observed in the comment section of these video clips and on social media.

55. See, for example: Vietlive.TV, “Quả thật lại là một “huyền thoại” về Võ Thị Sáu” (Again another myth of Võ Thị Sáu), Youtube video, 20:56, 5 Mar. 2018 <https://youtu.be/lkwldJeVJPI> (accessed 14 Dec. 2020).

56. See, for example: Nguyễn Hằng, “Hé lộ những giây phút cuối đời của nữ anh hùng huyền thoại Võ Thị Sáu” (Revealing the last moment of the legendary hero-

The controversy surrounding the figure of Võ Thị Sáu is a fascinating event that reveals the symbolic power of communist heroes in current Vietnam's cultural and political life. The hero serves as a medium for conflating national identity with state attachment, for smoothing out ideological ruptures in the party's identity, and thus helps defending the party against challenges of its leadership in the post-communist era. The intensity of attacks on the authenticity of the heroic figure, as well as the immediacy and seriousness of the party's response to these attacks further vindicate the interconnection between the hero and the legitimacy of the current rule. While it is unsure when the controversy surrounding Sáu will reach a conclusion, there is no doubt that Sáu is unlikely to disappear from the people's consciousness in the near future, like in the case of many other controversial heroes with the same accusation such as Lê Văn Tám or Nguyễn Văn Bé⁵⁷. The enduring popularity despite controversies of this particular heroine and her heroic image cannot be explained without mentioning *Cô Sáu* cult, whose followers remain committed to paying tribute at her grave and commemorative area every year⁵⁸. Indeed, *Cô Sáu* cult with its cultural/religious authority has contributed to the maintenance of the official narrative as a number of personal accounts have expressed their reluctance to participate in the debate, or even outright condemned and threatened the critical population on the basis

ine Võ Thị Sáu), *Dân Trí* (2017) <https://dantri.com.vn/van-hoa/he-lo-nhung-giay-phut-cuoi-doi-cua-nu-anh-hung-huyen-thoai-vo-thi-sau-20170727072646845.htm> (accessed 14 Dec. 2020); Trung Sơn, "Bịa đặt về liệt nữ Võ Thị Sáu là sự trào trớ, vô ơn" (Spreading false news about the martyr Võ Thị Sáu is an apprehensive act of ingratitude), *Công an thành phố Hồ Chí Minh* (2017) http://congan.com.vn/tin-chinh/chinh-tri-thoi-su/bia-dat-ve-liet-nu-vo-thi-sau-la-su-trao-tro-vo-on_42808.html (accessed 14 Dec. 2020); Viết Phước, "Đó là hành động xúc phạm người anh hùng" (It is an act of insult against a hero), *Văn Nghệ* (2017) <http://tuanbaovannghetphcm.vn/do-la-hanh-dong-xuc-pham-nguoi-anh-hung/> (accessed 14 Dec. 2020).

57. On the fabrication of Lê Văn Tám and Nguyễn Văn Bé, see: Dror, *Making Two Vietnams*, 203–210.

58. According to one cult follower who has been participating in rituals conducted at Sáu's grave every year since 2015, the number of tourists coming to Con Dao to pay respect to Sáu has been increasing year by year and shows no sign of stopping. This is also thanks to the improvement in transportation means to Con Dao.

that “*Cô Sáu*’s spirit is extremely sacred”⁵⁹. The party’s support for the cult, in this incident, seems to have paid out in a quite direct manner. The case of Võ Thị Sáu serves as an example of how religious elements may complement and reinvigorate narratives of the revolutionary past and its legacy in an unrevolutionary post-communist era.

59. See, for example, this blog post and the responses in the comment section: *Mô Làng*, “Đặt điều xuyên tạc hình tượng anh hùng Võ Thị Sáu, Nguyễn Duy bị cộng đồng mạng chỉ chiết bằng chuyện tâm linh” (Online community mentioned the supernatural to threaten Nguyễn Duy for his distortion of the heroic image of Võ Thị Sáu), *Mô Làng* (2019) <http://www.molango205.com/2019/03/at-ieu-xuyen-tac-hinh-tuong-anh-hung-vo.html> (accessed 14 Dec. 2020).