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Youth Culture and Fading Memories of War in Hanoi, Vietnam

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I met Mai and her young college friends outside the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum on a warm, fall Sunday morning in Hanoi in 1999. For many Vietnamese, a visit to the mausoleum is a meaningful, emotion-laden experience, and visitors typically stand in long lines that wind around the massive granite tomb waiting to pay their respects to their nation's founding father, also affectionately referred to as "Uncle Ho." It was 8:00 AM. I emerged from the mausoleum and found a shaded park bench on the pedestrian walk across from the eleventh-century One-Pillar Pagoda that also occupies the grounds. Mai and her friends approached me without delay. "Do you speak English?" they asked. I replied that I spoke Vietnamese. They laughed. "Have you already visited the mausoleum?" I queried. They laughed again. Mai spoke up in hesitant English: "We do not come here to visit Uncle Ho, but to meet Western tourists and improve our English-language skills."

This chapter addresses what appears to be a growing tension in Vietnamese society: the increasing historical distance and disconnect of Vietnam's youth (who constitute the majority of the population) from their country's history of socialist revolution and war with France and the United States to achieve national independence. I use the words "appears to be" to identify the widespread sentiment among government officials and other older people who experienced and survived the war that Vietnamese youth growing up in a time of peace and prosperity no longer understand nor recognize the immense sacrifices made to liberate and reunite the country. To be sure, Vietnamese youth, most of whom were born after war with the United States ended in 1975, have grown up in an era quite different from that of their parents and grandparents who participated in the revolution and the wars of resistance between 1945 and 1975. Yet it would be mistaken to think that young people who grew up in peacetime are wholly disconnected from the violence of the past. On the contrary, while they may not have experienced war directly, youth in Vietnam have also suffered its severe and enduring aftermaths.

Substantial socioeconomic shifts took place in Vietnam in 1986 when the government instituted a series of economic reforms called *doi moi,* which opened the country to global market forces and foreign capitalist investment. As standards of living began to improve and poverty rates dropped, Vietnam was hailed as a "little Asian tiger," despite the alarming disparities in wealth that appeared. New global technologies and commodities flooded the markets, allowing younger generations to familiarize themselves with international brands and consumer products that remained largely unknown or inaccessible to their elders. Such are the social and economic conditions under which many Vietnamese youth have come of age. A rising, vibrant youth culture, thought to uncritically and irresponsibly embrace the global market and its commodities, as well as the association of young people in the press with "social problems" (drugs, promiscuity, night clubbing, motorbike racing, etc), have instilled moral panic in older generations who feel the youth have forgotten their nation's history, its moral values, and its cultural identity.[1] But the story is more complex than this. We can see youth as embodying the values and ideologies of betterment and development that were central to the revolution, although they use capitalism as their tool to achieve similar goals of national progress, sovereignty, and prosperity.

THE ROLE OF THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

All nations have a national memory enshrined in official history as "the past." Yet collective memory of a nation is always selective in that it involves the public remembrance of certain events and experiences, and the active forgetfulness of others. In 1882, Ernest Renan made an important observation about the nation as a type of spiritual family united not by a common language, religion, or race, but by "a rich legacy of memories" of past triumphs, regrets and sacrifices (1990 [1882]:19). Memories of mutual suffering, in particular, form the bedrock of a nation and its collective history that is communicated through textbooks, national holidays, war monuments, and museums. On account of its selectivity, national history is neither unchanging nor uncontested, as external forces refute and rework its dominant narratives and messages conveyed. These narratives not only transmit particular historical truths, but also important cultural and moral principles upon which the nation is founded. Knowing one's national history, such as singing the words to the national anthem, is thus a performative act of identification that signifies inclusion and participation in a national community.

National history is didactic; it draws upon stories of the past to teach the populace (especially youth) the normative ethics and values needed to become upstanding citizens—disciplined, loyal, and productive members of society. In Vietnam, the state regularly invokes national memories of past

wars to commemorate and keep the spirit of the revolution alive. With the aim of communicating the ideals of the revolution to postwar generations, the state has a vested interest in emphasizing triumphant achievements and acts of solidarity that helped to secure the nation's historical victories. Take, for example, museums, which are sites of pedagogical power in which the state produces moral and educated citizen-subjects through the management and discipline of history and memory (Bennett 1995). In an interview, the director of the Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution, in Hanoi, emphasized to me the critical role museums play in imparting revolutionary values such as sacrifice, valor, and gratitude: "It is important to know about history. This museum is about Vietnamese freedom, unification, and independence. If the young people do not learn about this past, they will not have a proper understanding of the present, and they will not be able to build and modernize our country for the future" (Schwenkel 2009:150). Knowledge of the past thus serves as an anchor in the present period of rapid socioeconomic change and a building block for future nation-building efforts.

Similarly, we can look at *postmemory*, knowledge and memory of past traumatic events that youth did not directly experience but are intimately and deeply connected to (Hirsch 1997). Family photographs, and the painful stories of loss that accompany them, have been central to the transmission of Holocaust memory to the children of survivors. As a tool of remembrance and self-representation, photography mediates between personal memory and public history; the stories told through images of everyday life that survived the Holocaust have contributed to (re)constituting both family histories and national memory (ibid). In Vietnam, postmemory among youth is similarly informed by photographs and oral histories of war. The young adults I interviewed in Hanoi—some of whom came from the capital city, others from poorer rural provinces to attend university, secure employment, or enroll in the military—grew up hearing songs and stories about the war and revolution from their parents and grandparents. Lien, a college student born in 1979 in the central province of Nghe An, recalled her strongest childhood memories:

> I remember playing ball games with friends during the day and listening to stories about the war at night from my grandparents. They always told me about the hardships they endured, and the difficult living conditions with little food. Both of my grandfathers fought against the French and my father is a veteran of the American War. My mother worked in a factory. When I was young she used to sing us love songs about waiting for a soldier to return from the battlefield. My grandmother worked to provide food for the soldiers. Even in the worst of times, she tried to remain optimistic. She told me many stories, but the one I remember most was about 1972, when the Americans dropped so many bombs on Vinh City that everything was destroyed. She went from one village to the next looking for safety and shelter, often hiding underground to escape the bombs.

The youth I interviewed did not grow up with collections of family photographs to illustrate life during the war years, as private ownership of cameras at that time was rare. Rather, as Lien's words show, the transfer of traumatic memory to postwar generations occurred primarily through personal recollection and oral testimony. Cameras were, however, present on the battlefield with photojournalists who in an official capacity produced a large repertoire of iconic images that today offer a detailed visual history. Like photography of the Vietnam War in the United States, these images have important postwar meaning and currency, and continue to circulate and shape national memory. In Vietnam, photographs from the war are considered an important means for reproducing and transmitting historical knowledge, and also for motivating and inspiring postwar youth. In an interview, a battlefield photographer who exhibited his work at the Military History Museum in Hanoi in 1999 emphasized to me the national and moral values conveyed through his images: "Photographs from the war carry meaning about the past . . . I want students who come to my exhibit to learn to hate war, but they should also learn about the brave deaths of those who sacrificed their lives. When they see these pictures, they will understand the need to continue the work to build and develop the country" (Schwenkel 2009:62). Photography is thus imagined to bridge the widening gaps between self-denying generations who experienced the trauma of revolution and war and pleasure-seeking generations born in the aftermath whose consumption activities seem to have displaced national values and history from contemporary society.

YOUTH CULTURE AND REAPPROPRIATION OF PUBLIC SPACES OF MEMORY

During my fieldwork, Vietnamese youth in Hanoi expressed little interest in visiting historical sites or institutions associated with the war, such as museums or the mausoleum discussed at the beginning of the chapter. All had visited such places at one time or another, mostly on group fieldtrips, and few were inspired to return. Many cited a lack of time, while others felt bored by what they saw as repetitive and noninteractive exhibits. Perhaps not surprisingly, respondents preferred to spend their limited free time with friends and family in parks, cafés, or newly built shopping malls. Phuc and Thang, two male students who came to Hanoi to study English at Hanoi University, explained:

> *Phuc:* We are very busy and don't have time to visit museums. When we do have free time, we usually go home and visit our families in the countryside. I went to the Ho Chi Minh Museum once and enjoyed it.

Thang (nodding): Nowadays we are more concerned with fashion than we are with the war.

Yet despite such generational distance from national history, the youth are not wholly detached from the war and its legacies. Phuc lamented: "If the United States had not invaded Vietnam, we would now be rich and strong like the rest of Asia." Thang agreed: "We wouldn't be so poor today." Signs of poverty, mass death, environmental devastation, and other enduring effects of the war are still visible on the landscape, from demining operations to national monuments and martyr cemeteries. In recent years, some of these sites have been transformed into international tourist attractions, reconfiguring postwar memoryscapes in new and decidedly capitalist ways. Young Vietnamese at times also journey to these public spaces, yet they do so to engage in leisure and recreational activities rather than to interact with and learn about history.

Anthropologists have shown how public spaces, such as parks and plazas, are socially produced, shaped, and experienced by diverse individuals and social groups. The aesthetic, historical, and cultural meanings of such sites are always dynamic, "changing continually in response to both personal action and broader sociopolitical forces" (Lowe 2000:33). In Vietnam, youth often engage in social activities and spatial practices that reflect new uses and meanings of public space. The stone monument on *Thanh Nien* [Youth] Street at Truc Bach Lake marks the site where militia forces shot down John McCain's A-4 Skyhawk in 1967 during a bombing mission over Hanoi. U.S. aerial bombardment commonly targeted the city, killing thousands of civilians and destroying a quarter of all living spaces (Thrift and Forbes 1985:294). For older Hanoians, the monument at Truc Bach Lake, though recalling a triumphant act, is also a painful reminder of catastrophic suffering and loss. Young couples, however, are drawn to the site because of its sweeping views of the lake. They sit closely together on park benches adjacent to the monument, not far from crowded restaurants, holding hands and sometimes embracing, demonstrating how postwar generations have reappropriated spaces of war and violence, and transformed them into romantic settings for social intimacy.

At the Cu Chi tunnels tourist park, an hour's drive from Ho Chi Minh City, a similar reappropriation of public space has taken place. Cu Chi, declared a national historic landmark by the state, attracts hundreds of international tourists each day who crawl through a maze of deep and narrow underground passageways built by guerrillas during the war. Vietnamese youth also travel to Cu Chi; however, the attraction for them lies not with the tunnels per se, but with the on-site recreational facilities that provide a respite from the bustle of urban life. Pool tables, food stands, and outdoor cafés are sites where youth gather to eat, drink, talk, relax, and make new

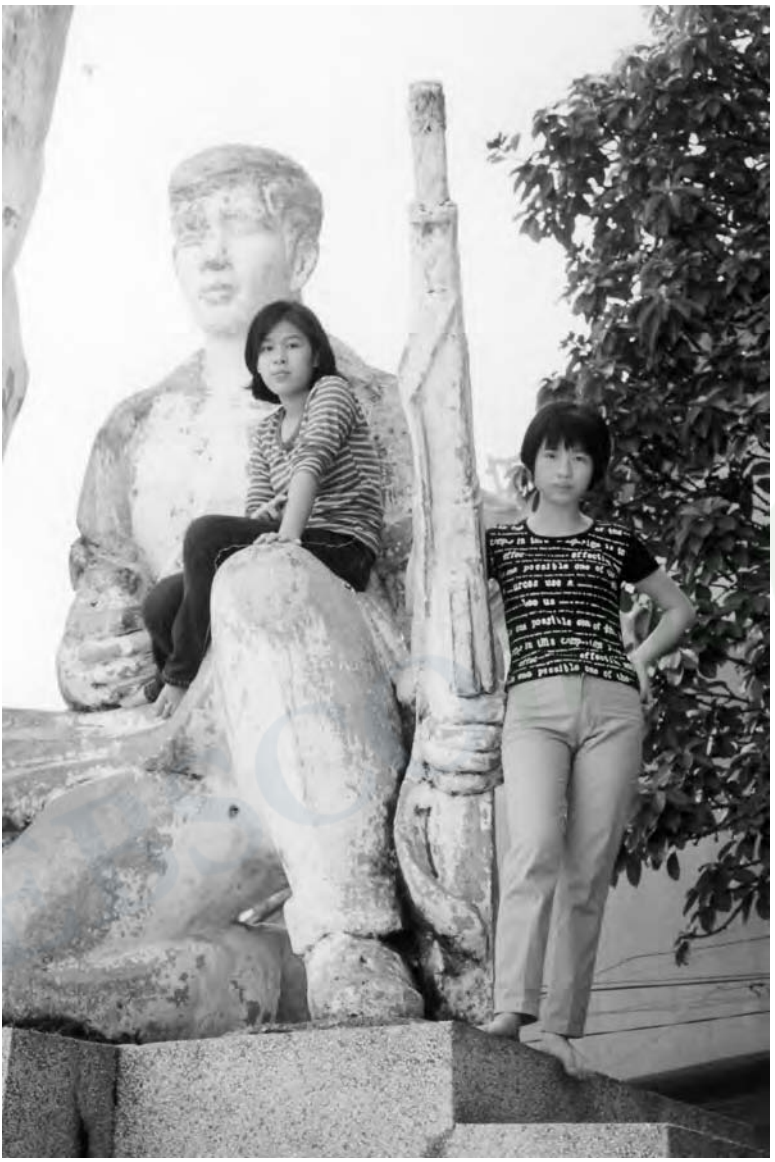

Figure 10.1. Hanoi youth posing on a war monument at Hoan Kiem Lake, 1999. Photograph by C. Schwenkel.

friends. Cu Chi is a site of entertainment as well as a site for love, especially on the weekends, when the area is converted into *café ôms,* or hug cafés, for young couples to spend time together privately. In a country with few places for lovers to be alone and where public affection is generally discouraged, hug cafés offer the privacy of an individual cubicle in the city, and in more peripheral areas such as Cu Chi, segregated nooks for lovers under the trees (Schwenkel 2006:18). Not unlike the lakeside setting of McCain's crash and capture in Hanoi, the battlegrounds of Cu Chi have also been recreated by youth in ways that appear to disregard state-intended meanings.

VIETNAMESE YOUTH: APATHETIC OR EXEMPLARY?

Anxieties about youth and their alienation from history, coupled with a perceived fixation on commodities (exemplified in Thang's comment about fashion being more important than the war) have been reinforced in the mass media through reports of gendered acts of conspicuous consumption (see also Leshkowich 2008). In the summer of 2007, for example, the Vietnamese press reported that women in Hanoi were frivolously spending an average of 500,000 Vietnamese *dong* (approximately $30) per month on brand name beauty products and services, while the average monthly salary of workers and civil servants hovered around 1,000,000 *dong* ($60). Moreover, youth have been increasingly identified in media and government discourse as presenting a moral and cultural problem for society; they have been associated with a growth in "foreign" capitalist practices thought to undermine "traditional" and revolutionary values, leading, for example, to an increase in drug use and premarital sex. Such claims of conspicuous consumption and hedonism, however, reveal more about growing disparities in wealth, privilege, and power under market reforms than point to a deliberate rejection of cultural norms. In fact, looking more closely, the reverse may also be true: youth are not necessarily more apathetic about national traditions and revolutionary history, but have embraced new global market opportunities to carry out their familial and national duties more effectively.

While young people may not be concerned with "boring old history," they are highly motivated to build and "modernize" the country, just as the museum director and war photographer had envisioned. In this way, youth are indeed following and embodying national ideals and principles as conveyed through stories of hardship and sacrifice in museums, photography, and family histories. When I asked a focus group of university students from the province of Viet Tri what they most desired for their futures, they expressed the hope of betterment for their families *and* for the nation: good jobs, enough to eat, and a reduction in the national poverty rate. The students also expressed a belief in education as key to social and economic progress, but not just any education would do in their view. One

must choose a field with skills that can be applied to the global economy (thus, one student gave up Russian to study English). Competition to gain acceptance into universities and departments of trade, economics, banking, and finance is high. Wealthier students increasingly take advantage of new opportunities to study overseas or to enroll in expensive international MBA programs in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. The role of the past seems almost inconsequential to these students' lives and their efforts to attain prosperity for their families and wider society.

THE STORY OF MAI

To provide a more detailed case study of the seemingly contradictory ways youth in Vietnam reject and yet reaffirm the traditions of national history, I return to Mai, who along with her friends at the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum visited this public space to connect not to a revolutionary past but to an anticipated global future. After I met Mai in fall 1999, we began to meet regularly and still maintain a friendship. I mention her story here because I have been witness to the dramatic changes in her life over the past decade and because she is a typical example of a young woman from Hanoi whose actions exemplify the messages and principles taught in history, though she rejects the form and style through which they are conveyed. For example, Mai refused to go to a museum with me. When I asked why, she laughed: "I don't like museums. It's always war history, war history. I'm fed up. I've heard enough. I'm more interested in the development of the economy, than in politics and war" (Schwenkel 2009:150).

Mai was born in 1980. When we met in 1999 she lived in a poor, three-generation household of five on the outskirts of Hanoi in a dark and dank two-room cement house with a detached cooking area and toilet. There was little income flowing into the family; her father was a retired factory worker, her mother unemployed, and her grandmother earned petty cash by selling candy and other snacks close to the main thoroughfare. When I asked Mai about her most vivid memories of childhood, she answered bluntly: "Hunger, illness, and a lack of money for medicine." Like most of her classmates, as a child Mai participated in Youth Pioneer activities, including collective charity and volunteer work for veterans and "heroic mothers" who had lost their families to the war. She went on to join the Communist Youth Union, a social organization (not political for her, she said) in which most of her friends took part. In interviews and conversations, Mai rarely discussed her family's poverty directly, though she consistently emphasized the need to study hard to improve their lives. As the eldest daughter, the burden fell upon Mai to secure a better future for her parents, younger brother, and grandmother. In this way, she exemplified "traditional" family values, such as filial piety exhibited through moral acts of obedience, love, respect,

and care for one's parents and ancestors (Rydstrøm 2003). Mai went on to study English and international finance at Hanoi National University, earning two bachelor's degrees by the time she was twenty-two. In her free time she studied Chinese and hung out with friends at Truc Bach Lake, not far from the McCain historical marker. She enjoyed Korean pop stars, Chinese soap operas, and Hollywood Vietnam War films—"more realistic than Vietnamese ones," she told me.

Four years later, Mai's life had changed significantly. At twenty-six, with two degrees and a working knowledge of Chinese, Mai had secured a full-time job at a domestic commercial bank, earning a monthly salary of three million Vietnamese *dong* (approximately $180). On Saturdays she regularly worked overtime to earn an extra one million *dong*, for a total monthly income of approximately $250, roughly $3,000 per year, only slightly more than the country's per capita GDP of $2,700 (2007 estimate). In late 2007, it was even harder to find time to meet with Mai. In addition to her fifty-hour work week, she had enrolled in evening courses at the university, studying international banking so she could obtain a higher position at her bank. "I'll get promoted through my hard work and education, not from doing favors and socializing with the managers," she told me confidently, revealing a strong belief in a capitalist work ethic. Sunday was also a work day—she taught Vietnamese to foreigners to further supplement her salary. "Do you think they would be interested in home stays?" she asked, passing me a classified ad she had taken out in an English-language newspaper.

Mai had a reason to be concerned about her earnings: she had recently built a spacious four-story house for her family. In September 2006, she took out a loan—seen by many as a new and risky financial practice—and hired construction workers to demolish her previous residence and build the new structure quickly before the lunar new year. The house was bright and airy, with indoor plumbing and a kitchen, along with a private room or area for each family member. At the time of my visit, Mai's bedroom was outfitted with a TV, a DVD player, and a karaoke machine. The modest yet comfortable home cost Mai $6,250, which she paid for with a low-interest loan of 1 percent for bank employees. Her monthly mortgage came to one million *dong*, leaving another three million for family necessities. Her aged grandmother, who was lounging in the kitchen when I arrived, no longer went out to sell candy.

Mai is now twenty-eight and not yet married, which makes her "old," according to popular belief in Vietnam. She continues to attend classes and take care of her family, while also providing financial support for her younger brother's studies, perhaps one day overseas, she confides. Mai is continually working to improve her English, brush up on her Chinese, and read new books about the international banking industry. She is an example of how industrious young people in Vietnam have taken advantage of new opportunities not simply to spend and consume frivolously, but also to sup-

port their families and contribute to "modernizing" their country. I share Mai's story not as a success narrative about Vietnam's global market integration. Compared to members of an emerging urban middle class, Mai is relatively poor, and her ability to consume is fairly limited. But as she shut the door to her bedroom and turned up the karaoke, she reminded me of how postwar generations, although seemingly indifferent to the state and its project of national history, still tend to emulate its moral values and traditions, and embrace its vision of an ideal and progressive modernity, even though Mai still will not accompany me to the museum.

NOTE

1. The term *moral panic* refers to a widespread social response, engendered and sustained by the media, to a perceived threat to the social order that also risks subverting deeply held cultural values (Critcher 2003). For a discussion of moral panic and youth through the lens of fashion in Ho Chi Minh City, see Leshkowich (2008).

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