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# A World Transformed

*The Politics of Culture in  
Revolutionary Vietnam,  
1945–1965*



**Kim N. B. Ninh**

Ann Arbor

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*To my parents,  
Ninh Ngọc Hải and Nguyễn Kim Dung*



As in other spheres, the task of construction in the cultural arena has to begin with destruction: for a new culture to develop, it needs a cleared piece of land that contains no vestiges of feudalism or colonialism. The first task, therefore, is to completely eradicate the poisonous venom of the feudalists and colonialists.

On one front, the government will resolutely suppress the disloyal culturalists and confiscate and nationalize the cultural organs belonging to the imperialists and the Vietnamese traitors.

On another front, the government will generate a great propaganda effort to disclose the terrible consequences of the degenerate feudalist and cruel imperialist cultural policies and also to support the new cultural policy of the independent Vietnamese government.

On yet another front, to the best of its ability, the government will immediately abolish the customs and habits that directly hinder the critical work of the construction of the nation-state.

Those decisive acts of destruction will naturally displease some people, especially those who are slaves to the old regime. They will raise their voices to criticize [us]: "There, those revolutionaries, those who destroy." But what we do will refute those slanders brilliantly because construction on the cultural revolution front will be much more important than destruction, as on other fronts of the revolution. No! Revolution is not only destruction. Revolution is also building, revolutionary primarily in the act of building, and building the grand plans that cannot materialize under antiprogress regimes.

Nguyễn Hữu Đang and Nguyễn Đình Thi  
*Một nền văn hóa mới* (A new culture)  
Hanoi, 25 November 1945





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## Preface

The seed for this book was sown with my first visit to Vietnam in 1989. I did not have a concrete research topic in mind and in fact was not even sure that research was possible in Vietnam at that time. Fortunately I was spending a year at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, which was interested in establishing a research component on Indochina and was making contacts with Vietnamese scholars and institutions. It was via this connection that I obtained the necessary invitation for a brief visit under the auspices of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Hanoi.

It was a defining experience to be in the midst of a Hanoi that outwardly seemed to have stood still, singularly captured by its own quiet rhythm. The initial reservation of the people I met gave way, however, to passionate conversations in offices and homes about history, life, missed opportunities, and transformative experiences. I was overwhelmed by the sense that stories needed to be told, the frankness of the discussion, and the intensity of the intellectual exchange. There was so much going on underneath the surface that I could not comprehend and was not informed enough to even begin asking questions, although the sense of excitement was infectious. Young writers whose names I was hearing for the first time were making waves. Books and articles were read and discussed in detail. Scholars were keen to establish contacts with their peers regionally and internationally. It was the beginning of a period in which the intellectual community became very active in discussing a wide range of political, economic, and social issues as Vietnam turned toward a more open policy.

History, though, cast a long shadow, and I set out to return to Vietnam for an extended period to better understand the context in which these issues were first defined and how that, in turn, has affected the shape of the current intellectual discourse. The exciting intellectual

environment that I discovered in 1989 was in full flower while I lived in Hanoi between 1991 and 1993. This book is the result of my interactions with many people in formal interviews and informal conversations, of the voracious consumption of a large number of Vietnamese-language books that became available during this period, and of archival research. I had the data, but I can honestly say that it took some time before they coalesced into some measure of coherence.

This book could not have been realized without the assistance of many individuals and institutions. In particular, James Scott has offered much needed intellectual and spiritual support over the years. New Haven was more bearable whenever he was around, though Kay Mansfield's warm presence provided the center toward which many of us gravitated. Chalmers Johnson, who first suggested that I focus on Vietnam, has been a steady source of encouragement since my Berkeley days. The list of those who have read all or parts of various drafts of this book is long, and they have contributed substantially to sharpening its content. I would like to thank James Scott, Chalmers Johnson, Ben Kiernan, Yitzhak Brudny, Ben Kerkvliet, David Marr, Terry Rambo, and Muthiah Alagappa. I am also grateful for the careful reading of and helpful comments on the manuscript by David P. Chandler, Rita Smith Kipp, and an anonymous reader for the University of Michigan Press.

Crucial financial support came from a number of sources. A preliminary field research grant was provided by the Yale Council on Southeast Asian Studies. Funding for the actual field research came from the Social Science Research Council, the Institute for the Study of World Politics, and the Yale Center for International and Area Studies. The writing phase was funded by a Yale University Dissertation Fellowship and a Pre-doctoral Fellowship from the East-West Center. Finally, I am grateful to have received a Luce Post-doctoral Fellowship at the Australian National University, which made possible the necessary revisions. Exposure to the wide-ranging research projects of many has certainly added depth to my own work. In particular, Ben Kerkvliet and David Marr have fostered a truly supportive intellectual environment, which was augmented immeasurably by the generous hospitality of Ben and Melinda Kerkvliet. A leave of absence graciously provided by the Asia Foundation is also happily acknowledged.

In Vietnam, the Center for Cooperative Research (Trung Tâm Hợp Tác Nghiên Cứu) of the University of Hanoi, under the capable leadership of Professor Phan Huy Lê, facilitated all the necessary logistics and paperwork while Nguyễn Văn Khánh efficiently arranged interviews

for me. Members of the professional staff at the National Archives also went out of their way to help me find relevant documents. This book could never have been written, however, without the insights gained during the exhilarating hours spent in the company of those who generously shared with me their experiences and thoughts. With immense gratitude and affection, I thank especially *chú* Hoàng Cầm, *chú* Trần Độ, *anh* Lại Nguyễn Ân, *anh* Ngô Thảo and family, and *cô chú* Văn Tâm among many others. It is likely that they will not recognize in this book what they shared with me, and I take sole responsibility for its content.

Doing fieldwork in an environment in which one has relatives was both a curse and a blessing. They never quite understood my sorry excuse of being too busy with work to visit the most distant of relations or attend countless family gatherings. On the other hand, my relatives have added much to my understanding of life in Vietnam. I treasure the time spent not only with my uncle Lê Văn Chung and his family but the uproarious and yet gentle company of the regular clients of their small neighborhood café in Hanoi. A medal of valor goes to Nguyễn Kim Vân in Hồ Chí Minh City, who somehow miraculously manages to be both a doting aunt and a close friend.

The good friendship of many helped to sustain me throughout the life of this project, particularly that of Frederick Warner, Tai Ming Cheung, Lily Wu, Suriani Suratman, and Nguyễn-võ Thu Hương. Nguyễn Quý Đức, who graciously spent many hours on the cover for this book, deserves special mention. For giving me the space necessary to finish this book, I am grateful to my husband, Thắng Đỗ, for his love, faith, and understanding. Finally, blessed as I am with siblings and an ever enlarging circle of nieces and nephews who stand ready to remind me of the more concrete joys in life, I want to pay special tribute to my parents whose courage and sacrifice made possible a new horizon for their children. This book is dedicated to them and is in remembrance of my father, who sadly passed away when this book was in its final stage of production.





## Abbreviations

BGD	Bộ Giáo Dục
BTCN	Bổ Túc Công Nông
BTVH	Bổ Túc Văn Hóa
BTVHCN	Bổ Túc Văn Hóa Công Nông
BVH	Bộ Văn Hóa
NVGP	Nhân Văn–Giai Phẩm
NXB	Nhà Xuất Bản
THCN	Trung Học Chuyên Nghiệp
VNQĐĐ	Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng
WPCE	Worker-Peasant Complementary Education



## Introduction

This book is about the politics of culture in socialist Vietnam between 1945 and 1965. In the broadest outline, I want to capture the complexities of ideas and motives of a particular time in which the Vietnamese communists managed to capture the nationalist discourse and took the leading role in the anticolonial struggle. The definition of history and culture embedded in the Vietnamese communists' formulation of cultural policies in those early years established a particular vision of the postrevolutionary nation-state. The content of cultural policies, the effort to construct new institutions designed to make concrete the communists' vision of state and society, and the multidimensional societal reactions to the institutionalization of such a vision, chiefly among the intellectual community, comprise the heart of the book. In short, it is about the evolution of the politics of culture under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party as an integral component of the unfolding of the Vietnamese revolution.

The outcome of that revolution is well known and much discussed: it brought an end to French colonialism, succeeded in defeating the United States, reunited the two halves of the country, and established a socialist state in Vietnam. Bracketed by a brief moment of euphoria when Hồ Chí Minh and his followers declared Vietnamese independence from France on 2 September 1945 and by the communist takeover of Saigon on 30 April 1975, it took thirty years for the Vietnamese revolution to run its course. In between, a country called the Republic of Vietnam came into existence and disappeared, but its confrontation with the seemingly implacable trajectory of the revolution continues to reverberate both within and outside the country. The historic development of overseas Vietnamese communities in many parts of the world, for instance, is one consequence to which the current government still struggles to formulate appropriate responses. Domestically,

after some twenty-five years of reunification, there is still much to be done in coming to terms with the legacy of the south and its incorporation into the larger national discourse.

As a process of radical transformation, therefore, a revolution cannot be so neatly bounded as its dates would suggest, offering us the comfort of order by providing a beginning and end to a series of events. In rare instances, when a revolution actually succeeds in making its political vision concrete, as in the case of Vietnam, it is crucial to examine the dynamics leading to the revolution to understand the shape it finally took as well as the enactment of the revolution itself to comprehend the structure of the new state, which continues to be redefined and contested. Indeed, that the Vietnamese revolution came to adopt a socialist character was not a narrative foretold. A number of works have shown that in the decades immediately preceding the revolution, Marxism was but one intellectual trend among many being discussed within various intellectual circles, with all participants earnestly searching for new ways to conceptualize the people and the nation under colonialism and in the modern world.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the ultimate triumph of Marxism-Leninism in Vietnam and the Vietnamese Communist Party's ability to secure for itself the leading role in the nationalist struggle beg the question of how such a situation came about and, by extension, why a noncommunist nationalist discourse did not, or could not, prevail.

Many writers of early works on Vietnam therefore set out to understand the nature of the Vietnamese revolution and the rise of the Vietnamese Communist Party. In considerable measure, however, they were influenced by a particular time and political environment: many of the foreign scholars on Vietnam either had direct experience with the Vietnam War or had been involved in the antiwar movement.<sup>2</sup> Other views about the war existed, but a number of influential academic works were authored by those who came to believe that the U.S. involvement in Vietnam could not succeed because it took into account so little of the political, historical, and social impulses driving the Vietnamese. Their works therefore were also meant to address the lack of knowledge of Vietnam evident in the development of American policies.

Indeed, besides the colonial era scholarship and journalists' reports of the war in the 1950s and 1960s much research remained to be done. David Marr prefaced his 1971 work on Vietnamese anticolonialism from 1885 to 1925 with the comment that he was at "the barren starting point" of such an enterprise.<sup>3</sup> In his thought-provoking 1976 work

on the Vietnamese revolution, Alexander Woodside stated rather mournfully that “Despite the two harrowing Indochina wars of the past three decades, and despite the fact that in population, resources, and cultural achievements it is the equal of many important European countries, Vietnam has never received much serious attention at universities in the Western world.”<sup>4</sup> In different ways, this first generation of Vietnam scholars in the United States sought to restore history to Vietnam in order to counter distorted and patronizing assumptions embedded in the American approach to the war: Alexander Woodside reminded us that the country has more than twenty centuries of recorded history and that “Vietnam is and always has been one of the most intensely literary civilizations on the face of the planet”; Keith Taylor’s work established the fact that Vietnamese society was sophisticatedly organized and had a cohesive sense of itself as early as the tenth century; and monographs by Truong Buu Lam and John Whitmore demonstrated that Vietnamese nationalism had been forged over a long period of time out of conflicts with its neighbors before the arrival of either the French or the Americans.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, American scholars’ assertion that Vietnam is an independent subject worthy of inquiry was also meant to address the common view among Chinese historians and French sinologists that the country’s history is simply a lesser version of Chinese history.

In the midst of the cold war, therefore, a different image of Vietnamese communists began to coalesce, not as orthodox adherents to Marxism-Leninism far removed from the general population but as rightful inheritors of the anticolonial tradition. In one of the few works to systematically compare the Vietnamese and Chinese revolutions, David Elliott argues that

China’s revolution was, in essence, a search for a political formula that could integrate its wide diversity while simultaneously pursuing a policy of social transformation that would increase its “wealth and power” and restore a position of international respect and prestige. Vietnam’s goals were more modest, and its revolution aimed at re-integrating a society that had been disrupted by colonial occupation, and re-affirming the traditional ideals of the scholar-patriots who fought to maintain Vietnam’s independence.<sup>6</sup>

By 1981, however, the evolution of the field was such that David Marr felt it necessary to comment on the pervasiveness of what he has

called the continuity thesis or, in his words, “the tendency to argue that Vietnamese success in defeating first the French and then the Americans was due primarily to traditional strengths, for example, relative ethnic and linguistic homogeneity, ancient civilization, and a proud record of struggle against northern invaders.”<sup>7</sup> These factors are important in the analysis of the Vietnamese revolution and the rise to power of the Vietnamese Communist Party, and these earlier works contributed enormously to the foundation of our understanding of Vietnam’s recent history. Nevertheless, as Marr has suggested, “the cumulative effect of all these studies (in Vietnamese, English, and French) stressing the power of tradition has been to downgrade the historical significance of major transformations occurring during the colonial period in Vietnam (1859–1945).”<sup>8</sup>

Ironically, Marr himself contributed to the general acceptance of the continuity thesis. Through the Indochina Resource Center, which he and his colleagues founded in 1971 with the expressed intention of providing the public with access to alternative voices and interpretations of the war, Marr introduced the work of the Vietnamese Marxist Dr. Nguyễn Khắc Viện, whose views were already known in France, to an English-speaking audience. A well-respected Vietnamese communist intellectual who was trained in France, Dr. Viện maintained that the similarities between Confucianism and Marxism (e.g., a secular frame of reference and high moral standards) made it easy for the latter to be accepted by the Vietnamese revolutionaries, who were themselves, in Dr. Viện’s words, “petty intellectuals.”<sup>9</sup> It is certainly difficult to imagine a Chinese Communist Party theorist who would further argue that “it could even be said that Confucianism has left its mark on some aspects of Marxist thought” and offered by way of an example that “Revolutionary morality in Confucian countries often is more influential than notions of the law of historical development.”<sup>10</sup> Dr. Viện’s views were often quoted as exemplifying the uniqueness of Vietnamese Marxism’s seemingly comfortable connection with the country’s past.

For a number of different reasons, therefore, the themes of continuity and unity have pervaded Western works on Vietnam and coincided with Vietnamese communists’ efforts to construct a natural teleology of Vietnamese anticolonialism and nationalism in which communism was the logical end.<sup>11</sup> One consequence of this development is a Confucian interpretation of the Vietnamese revolution. An early proponent of this was the colonial scholar Paul Mus, who emphasized the notion of a cosmology of Marxism and the “mandate of heaven” concept to

explain Vietnamese peasants' acceptance of the communists.<sup>12</sup> Mus's views in turn heavily influenced Frances FitzGerald's popular and award-winning book *Fire in the Lake*.<sup>13</sup> One of the few works written on the Vietnam War at the time that paid much attention to the Vietnamese view of the conflict and sought to provide a rational explanation of Vietnamese nationalism in the context of the country's own history and political thought, FitzGerald's overarching use of the concept of the mandate of heaven essentially embalmed modern Vietnamese nationalism, leading one scholar to criticize her work for "denying the Vietnamese any social basis for their revolution."<sup>14</sup> When the Vietnamese communists managed to reunify the country in 1975, however, socialism must have seemed even more inevitable. In the words of historian John K. Whitmore:

The [Vietnamese communists'] resolution of their dilemma took the form of successfully integrating traditional concerns and socialist dynamics. History and the past have a positive and unequivocal (though certainly not uncritical) meaning for the Vietnamese. There is no ambivalence in interpretation of cultural continuity, nor do the Vietnamese face any dilemma of historical discontinuity, as do the Chinese. The result has been formation of the SRV [Socialist Republic of Vietnam] over a united country after more than thirty years of struggle. The Vietnamese concerns have been less universal than local, their emphasis has been more voluntaristic than deterministic, and social harmony has a greater role than class contradiction. They accept the tenets of Marxist thought without feeling it necessary to insure that their past is completely in step with the universal flow. They are confident of their nation's place in the world.<sup>15</sup>

This is a peculiarly static view of Vietnamese nationalism, and the revolution itself is presented as largely devoid of drama. The logic of this view takes Vietnam out of the context of the international development of socialism, ascribing to the Vietnamese communists a unique ability to somehow overcome the tension between nationalism and international socialism that ran through the course of the Vietnamese Communist Party, particularly in its early years. In addition to downgrading the significance of major transformations during the colonial period, the continuity thesis also distorts our understanding of the construction of the socialist state in the north and blinds us to other political and intellectual discourses not sanctioned by the state. In this

regard, intentionally or not, the emphasis on the inevitability of the socialist character of the Vietnamese revolution and the state can lead to neglect of the southern perspective. I am not interested here in the argument about the viability of South Vietnam as an independent nation; rather, I wish to emphasize that alternative views in Vietnam about nationalism and the state were in a sense kept alive during the existence of the Republic of Vietnam in the south and continue in Vietnam today. It is important, therefore, to understand those views—how they intersect with the official positions of the state and to what extent they resonate with other political and social currents in the country—for they may well constitute the boundaries of the effort to reconceptualize state and society in the foreseeable future.

The contemporary period, however, is beyond the scope of this book. My concern is that the pervasiveness of the continuity thesis has unwittingly engendered a static view of revolutionary politics in Vietnam, ignoring its radical and modern dimensions. Pioneering works have elucidated the chaotic but stimulating political and intellectual environment of the colonial period, and the ability to do fieldwork in Vietnam in recent years has broadened our knowledge of that era significantly.<sup>16</sup> The most significant gap in the scholarship, however, remains the period between 1945 and 1975.<sup>17</sup>

My intention is to go beyond 1945 to examine the dynamics of revolutionary politics *after* the Vietnamese communists had managed to capture the nationalist discourse and at the beginning of the process of constructing the socialist state. In his provocative work on nationalist thought and colonialism, Partha Chatterjee posits a three-stage development process of nationalist thought: (1) the “moment of departure,” when nationalist consciousness first encounters the framework of post-Enlightenment rationalist thought; (2) the “moment of manoeuvre,” a period of consolidation of a particular direction of nationalist thought that is fraught with many contradictory possibilities; and (3) the “moment of arrival,” the beginning of the state-building process with its discourse of order and rational organization of power.<sup>18</sup> What I want to capture in this book is some measure of that very dramatic and complex movement from the moment of maneuver to the moment of arrival that defines revolutionary politics in the Vietnamese context. I take 1965 as the cutoff point, partly because the escalation of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War constitutes a new period in the life of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam but also because by then the features of a socialist state have largely been institutionalized.

By revolutionary politics I mean both the ideology and the struc-



ture whose interaction gives shape to the postrevolutionary state or what Lynn Hunt has referred to as “the underlying patterns in political culture that made possible the emergence of distinctive policies and the appearance of new kinds of politicians, conflicts, and organizations.”<sup>19</sup> First and foremost, far from the confident Vietnamese communists that the continuity thesis portrays, I aim to delineate the profound ambivalence, and at times the extreme hostility toward history and past intellectual achievements, at the heart of their views of politics and society, as these are evident in their definition of *culture* and the subsequent formulation of cultural policies. In this, communist theorists were participating in the larger intellectual milieu of the 1920s and 1930s, suffused as it was with painful attempts to formulate a distinct Vietnamese self from the heavy burden of the Chinese past and the recent experience of French colonialism. By the 1940s, however, their faith in Marxism-Leninism as both the guiding principle in interpreting Vietnam’s historical conditions and the mode of organization that would bring about Vietnamese independence and the establishment of a new state armed Party theorists with what they perceived to be the scientific (and therefore incontrovertible) truth.

The modern faith in scientific progress and the radical impulse to create a whole new world upon the ashes of the old were what motivated the Vietnamese revolution under the communists and proved to be enormously appealing to many Vietnamese of diverse backgrounds and political persuasions. We would miss much of the extraordinary power of the revolution if we failed to recognize the impact of this radical dimension on the general population as well as on the politics of the new state in its earliest years of formation. One consequence of this radical view is the emphasis on organization as the concrete tool with which to realize the vision of new social, political, and economic relations that would define the new independent nation-state. The communists were the most organized of all anti-colonial forces in Vietnam, and supreme organizational capability was key to the communist victory in the south. Alexander Woodside sees it, in the larger context of nationalist thought, as the search in the twentieth century for better collective organizations or communities in order to overcome both the fragmentation of the colonial period and the structural weaknesses of traditional Vietnamese society.<sup>20</sup> David Elliott has attributed the focus on organization to historical necessity and also as reflecting the rationalist attempt on the part of the communist leaders to impose order through complex organization and scientific management. In his view, over time this “predilection

for organizational solutions" itself has become a development strategy for socialist Vietnam, one in which "institutional development provide both framework and stimulus for economic and social development."<sup>21</sup> In the context of this book, given the radicalism of the view that nothing much was worth saving from the hodgepodge of achievements that constituted Vietnamese history and culture, organization of both ideology and structure became key, for organization served the dual purpose of clearly establishing the path that society must follow and containing any inclination to stray from such a defined course.

Within the larger framework of the politics of culture in revolutionary Vietnam, therefore, the preoccupation with organization presents a theme that runs through this book, outlining a top-down transformative vision of state and society. The second theme probes instead the complex societal reactions against that vision in their different manifestations, from those of the intellectuals to those of the cadres in state institutions like the Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Education and among the general population. That there were signs of resistance early on testifies to the inherent gap between the theory and practice of revolutionary politics. Yet we would do well to remind ourselves of the faith many Vietnamese had in the Party and the revolution even as they struggled with the heavy weight of state structure. It is the painfully searching efforts to reconcile the self first with the needs of the revolution and then with the emerging shape of state and society that provide us with some understanding of the intensity of the revolutionary moment, unifying many in that heroic collective endeavor to preserve what was viewed as an extremely fragile nation and to forge the creation of a modern state in which to house it. In the end, the radical tendency was tempered because the escalation of the American presence in the south forced the Party to return to a more inclusive nationalist mode in order to mobilize popular support for the war effort but also because of the powerful legacy of the anti-colonial struggle, which carried with it a different interpretation of what the postrevolutionary state should be.

In fleshing out the societal reactions to state policies in these early years, this book also addresses the role of intellectuals, the nature of dissent, and the definition of *civil society* in a socialist system. Intellectuals figure heavily because they were the target of the Party's earliest cultural pronouncements and they were cast firmly in the intermediate role of transmitting the Party's agenda to the larger public. As

Katherine Verdery has asserted in her work on socialist Romania, “For a political regime such as this, where discourse has a disproportionately productive role, and especially for one whose self proclaimed task is to change society, the producers of discourse *must* be incorporated within the regime.”<sup>22</sup>

Much has been written and debated about what the term *intellectual* means. Here I offer only an operational definition in the context of my research on Vietnam. By intellectual I mean simply a person who participates in some significant way in literary, educational, and cultural activities. These creative intellectuals were the poets, novelists, critics, playwrights, and essayists, many of whom were prominent in the intellectual scenes of the 1930s and 1940s and played key roles in disseminating the Party’s message during the revolution and helped to establish the foundation for the new art and literature, educational system, and culture in the socialist state. This study focuses on these creative intellectuals because they have been the most outspoken in promoting the Party’s agenda as well as questioning it. This is partly because the country’s low level of economic development did not provide the small number of scientific intellectuals much of a role but mostly because in Vietnam intellectual debates have always been the premise of creative intellectuals.

In this regard, literature is well within the political realm. The fact that Vietnamese intellectuals often view their world through the prism of literature or regard it as a solution to social issues testifies to the overwhelming importance of language and its perceived capabilities.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunate developments after 1954, in which research and teaching became polarized in institutes and universities, respectively, additionally undermined the power of social and political commentary that had previously existed in the educational system. Thus, post-1954 intellectual issues became even more concentrated within the creative intellectual circle. This study will also focus primarily on northern intellectuals since they were more influential in the intellectual discourse on nation and society in the years leading to the August Revolution and because they played such an important role in helping to create the Vietnamese socialist state.

Although intellectuals are variously defined as court jesters, myth-makers, and ideologists, the dominance of the totalitarian approach in the study of socialist systems has generally maintained that they cannot play an important and independent role given the regime’s monopoly of power.<sup>24</sup> The pronouncements of the socialist states

themselves testify to this view: intellectuals are thought of as merely workers or cultural cadres whose task is to be a means of communication between the leadership and the people. In response, studies of intellectuals in socialist states tend to share an implicit assumption that there is no autonomous space in which intellectuals can shape their own roles.<sup>25</sup> The interest, more often than not, is on dissent, and underground publications are viewed as being more revealing of intellectual situation than what the official press may have to say. One of the results of this tendency has been an overriding emphasis on individuals rather than the intellectual community as a whole. On the other hand, even when intellectual debates arise in the public sphere, this is labeled “permitted dissent.”<sup>26</sup> The connotation is that the state is merely manipulating the situation for its own gains and holds the upper hand in the discussion from the outset. Intellectuals in socialist states are seen as being so wedded to the system that they have become “establishment intellectuals.”<sup>27</sup>

The view adopted in this study departs from most of the writings on intellectuals in socialist states. Strict official parameters in socialist states do not mean that intellectuals become either victims or passive participants. As in any system, there is an arena in which policies are fought for, opinions are voiced, and issues discussed—even if the arena is much smaller than or different from intellectual freedom as it is known in the West. Far from the view that socialist intellectuals are essentially powerless (a view espoused by socialist intellectuals themselves, though I think they will be appalled at how much intellectual work goes unnoticed in the West in comparison), I see them as quite influential precisely because of the extraordinary demands made upon them by the state. Beyond the intellectual class, however, what this study suggests is that a broader definition of civil society is needed in examining socialist regimes like that of Vietnam. For all the overwhelming concentration of power in the Party and the extensive bureaucratization of all sectors of society, societal forces do find myriad ways to express discontent and resistance. The differentiation between the public and private that grows out of the experience of democratic political systems may blind us not only to the possibilities of dissent but to its locations within the very structures of the Party and the state.<sup>28</sup> The question of to what extent professionalism can play a role in transmitting norms and ethics that can transcend the state’s imposed agenda is an interesting one to ponder.

In summary, this study covers the period from 1945 to 1965, from the Vietnamese communists’ initial ascent to power to the beginning

of the escalation of the American involvement in the country's conflict, by which time a full-fledged socialist state had been in place in North Vietnam for eleven years. There are two parts to the study. The first deals with the period from 1945 to 1954, when the nascent socialist state emerged during an anticolonialist struggle against the French. Chapter 1 examines the contemporary political and intellectual landscape in which Party theorists struggled to raise the banner of Marxism-Leninism. Examining in detail the Party's earliest cultural pronouncements, which continue to be regarded as the guiding principles of literary activities and cultural work in Vietnam today, I want to bring out that strand of radical modernism that shot through these attempts to define a new culture within the political platform that would bring the intellectuals to the side of the revolution. Chapter 2 explores the complex responses among intellectuals to the Party's cultural policies. Many were supportive of the Party's leadership role in the struggle for national independence but were already highly ambivalent about the inherent conflict between their desire to contribute to the heroic undertaking and what they perceived to be unnecessarily narrow and utilitarian definitions of the creative act. Chapter 3 describes the increasingly rigid orientation of the official intellectual policy as the Party began to emphasize its socialist agenda over the national front disposition. The opening of the northern border with China in 1950 reinforced orthodox tendencies in Vietnam, and the beginning of land reform coupled with the introduction of criticism and self-criticism heightened the issue of class. The chapter focuses also on the pivotal but little known 1949 Conference of Debates in Việt Bắc, which provides a fascinating glimpse of the Party's growing effort to capture the content and direction of the intellectual discourse. The shift from the intimate comradeship of the early days of the revolution to more hierarchical relations of authority is already discernible, underlined by the official emphasis on the need to organize the intellectuals as well as other sectors within society.

The second part of the book addresses the period from 1954 to 1965 and pays greater attention to the establishment of the structure that would institutionalize the ideological debate of the previous years. Chapter 4 examines the most significant instance of intellectual dissent in socialist Vietnam, which has come to be known as the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm (NVGP) period, named after the two main publications airing the alternative views. Although NVGP dominated the discussion of intellectual activities during this period, what I want to show is that the dilemma inherent in state-intellectual relations affected the

whole of the intellectual community and not just those who participated in NVGP. As such, the way in which intellectuals came to be organized was partly the state's effort to erect control mechanisms in response to the widespread discontent exposed by NVGP. Moving beyond the intellectual circle, chapter 5 examines the work of the Ministry of Culture, founded in September 1955 as the agency to promote and safeguard the Party's cultural agenda from the cities down to the villages. Here I explore the conflict within the ministry in the early years as it struggled between competing goals, pitting professional standards against political demands. Finally, chapter 6 analyzes the educational system as the mechanism through which new generations of socialist men and women were to emerge. The intense effort to generate a new intellectual stratum composed of those from politically pure class backgrounds attested to the commitment to the vision of a socialist state. We see also here glimpses of the difficulties educators had in reconciling the needs of the educational system with the political concerns of the time. In both the cultural and educational work, what is remarkable is the extent to which state responses to NVGP also affected these arenas in these early years. As such, NVGP's position as a watershed moment of dissent in the history of socialist Vietnam became firmly established, above and beyond what any of its initial participants, faithful sons and daughters of the revolution, could ever have imagined.

Material for this study comes from four sources. The first is the large body of Vietnamese-language publications, literature in particular. Second, there are archival data, which have not been available until recently. All of my archival research was done at the National Archives in Hanoi in 1992 and 1993.<sup>29</sup> Third, I have conducted a number of interviews, through both formal channels and private contacts, with officials and intellectuals. Fourth, the opportunity to simply observe the intellectual community, mostly in Hanoi, over a period of a year and a half has provided a background understanding of daily activities, constraints, and beliefs in a way that no amount of reading could provide. Finally, unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.