



# **BUILDING A PEOPLE'S ART**

**SELECTED WORKS OF  
TRƯỜNG CHINH AND TỔ HỮU**

**INTRODUCED BY  
RUEHL MULLER**



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*Ruehl Muller*



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## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION Ruehl Muller	ix
ON CULTURE AND EDUCATION Trường Chinh, 1936	1
THE OUTLINE OF VIETNAMESE CULTURE Trường Chinh, 1943	5
IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES OF THE NEW CULTURE MOVEMENT IN VIETNAM TODAY Trường Chinh, 1944	9
RESISTANCE IN THE FIELD OF CULTURE Trường Chinh, 1947	14
EIGHTEEN PRINCIPLES FOR WRITING Trường Chinh, 1947	19
MARXISM AND VIETNAMESE CULTURE Trường Chinh, 1948	21
BUILDING A PEOPLE’S ART (OR A NEW-DEMOCRACY ART): FOR THE CREATION OF REVOLUTIONARY THINKING AND MASSIFIED ACTIVITY Tổ Hữu, 1949	65
LETTER TO OUR ARTIST BROTHERS AND SISTERS Trường Chinh, 1951	84
BUILDING A VIETNAMESE PEOPLE’S ART Tổ Hữu, 1951	88
STRIVE FOR REALISM: ADVANCE TOWARDS ART THAT EXPRESSES THE NEW LIFE, NEW PEOPLE, AND NEW HEROES OF THE NATION Tổ Hữu, 1955	118
STRIVE FOR A RICH NATIONAL CULTURE, UNDER THE BANNER OF PATRIOTISM AND SOCIALISM Trường Chinh, 1957	136
ART MUST CONTRIBUTE TO LIBERATING THE SOUTH, SAFEGUARDING THE SOCIALIST NORTH, BUILDING SOCIALISM, AND PROGRESSING TOWARDS REUNIFICATION Trường Chinh, 1968	173
<i>CODA: COMMEMORATING THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ADOPTION OF THE OUTLINE OF VIETNAMESE CULTURE</i> Trường Chinh, 1983	214

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*Của Máy.*

## PREPARER'S NOTE

A great challenge lies in situating this book. Is it a collation of texts to be carried and studied by organisers and artists? Or, is it a coffee table book for casual art admiration, interspersed with texts to better contextualise the art within?

My intention has always been the former: to present the timeless cultural theory of revolutionary Vietnam to a foreign audience, particularly organisers and artists. However, this raises the question of whether it was necessary (*viz.* cost-effective) to include the substantial collection of art you will find reproduced in this book.

I believe so. To quote John Berger, “it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain the world with words, but words can never undo the fact we are surrounded by it.”<sup>1</sup> And Vietnamese socialist realism remains tragically *unseen*.

This itself is an anomaly as, despite the arduous conditions in which Vietnamese socialist realism was born, a surprising number of earlier works have survived. Yet, when compared to their Chinese and Soviet counterparts from the same period, these works have had an inconsequential reach outside of the country and available reproductions remain scarce. I—with the full support of the team at Iskra—therefore felt it necessary to include the works of Vietnamese artists autoreferentially throughout the book, speaking for themselves in tandem with the texts (and thereby also saving them from being reduced to mere addenda, auxiliary images tacked on as visual aids).

What began was an immense and exciting process of collation and digitalisation, carried out by Adrian Jones and his team at Witness Collection who wound up photographing, scanning and retouching an enormous body of work. Thousands of works were narrowed down into hundreds. Eventually, *only* ninety-four works, from twenty-five artists, were selected—almost all of them being printed here for the first time. Representing the

apogee of Trường Chinh and Tố Hữu’s influence, these works range from 1948 to 1980, starting with Phan Kế An’s sketch of Hồ Chí Minh in situ (considered to be the oldest surviving original portrait of Hồ), and ending with Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm’s crayon pagoda-scape, showing a group of women in traditional dress, their colours as vibrant as their hard-earned freedom; their faces, however, non-existent—the final reminder that every struggle must embrace the void.

\*

However, if you are not an organiser or artist, but find yourself holding this book, do not be dissuaded by the laconic and repetitive—often *ad nauseam*—manner of expression in the following texts. While the idea to remove repeated elements was raised, it was ultimately decided against as doing so would have betrayed the authenticity of the texts wherein repetition served to reinforce the core tenets and socio-historical conditions of the rhetoric, embedding key messages in the minds of the audience who often lacked any substantial education.

To uphold the fidelity of the text, all original annotations by Trường Chinh are preserved as footnotes, marked by the initials “TC” at the beginning of each note; Tố Hữu made no annotations. Additionally, all other footnotes are references or translator’s notes meant to assist the reader in contextualising and understanding particular elements of the text.

While the names of Vietnamese publications and organisations mentioned in text have been translated or anglicised to preserve reading integrity, the Vietnamese names, with diacritical marks, are provided in the footnotes to assist with any potential sourcing or further readings. Equally for this reason, Vietnamese and non-English materials cited in this book have been left in their original languages. The materials cited by Trường Chinh and Tố Hữu have been updated for English readers where possible. To avoid confusion, the names of Vietnamese persons have been written using their original diacritical marks.

<sup>1</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin: 1972), 7.



Phan Kế An (1948)

## INTRODUCTION

Ruehl Muller

This brief introduction does not seek to serve as an extensive biography for Trường Chinh or Tố Hữu, Vietnam's leading cultural theorists. Any attempt to fully contextualise these men, who played fundamental roles in shaping the politics and aesthetics of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (and in creating the socialist structure of the modern Socialist Republic), would far exceed the scope of this book.<sup>1</sup> However, with that said, in the same way one “reads” an artist through their art (or at least attempts to), perhaps so too can we attempt to read Trường Chinh and Tố Hữu—as creatives—through their writings, creative works not only penned on paper but etched in practice upon the social fabric of the Vietnamese nation.

Trường Chinh, the eldest son among five children, was born Đặng Xuân Khu<sup>2</sup> in Hanh Thien village, near the Red River delta. Although not wealthy, the Đặng family was respected in the village owing to their education: his grandfather, Đặng Xuân Bổng, had been a Confucian intellectual who had worked for the Nguyễn court under Emperor Tự Đức, publishing many texts on history and Confucian literature and ideology. Likewise, his father, Đặng Xuân Viện, was a renowned Confucian scholar—though, notably, an early rebel in his own right, joining the Tonkin Free School movement, and later being imprisoned for his political beliefs.

Although Trường Chinh learnt Classical Chinese from his father, he was sent to the French-run Thanh Chung secondary school, the first secondary school for Vietnamese children. During this time, he boarded with a poor family who worked at a local industrial factory. This experience, compounded by his newly acquired

knowledge of French revolutionaries like Rousseau, pushed him to join the growing anti-colonial student movement. His political activities led to his expulsion from the school in 1926, resulting in him having to relocate to Hanoi in order to complete his education at the Hanoi College of Commerce. Following his graduation from the College in 1929, he worked as a journalist and copy editor at the Le Van Tan publishing house, becoming a member of the Central Propaganda Committee the following year. Towards the end of the same year, he was arrested by the French Secret Service while attempting to rendezvous with a member of the French Communist Party. Although tortured, he did not disclose any useful information and was transferred to the infamous Hoa Lo Prison. After a brief relocation to the Son La prison, he was released in 1936. While in prison, he acted as leader of the prison-based communist movement and wrote prolifically; publishing poems, polemics, and texts on Marxism–Leninism. Trường Chinh's inner Party popularity rose sharply during the Second World War when, amidst conducting clandestine operations, he briefly administered the role of General Secretary during a crisis wherein most standing Party leaders were eliminated by the French colonial regime. In 1941, he was officially elected as the Secretary General and Head of the Department of Propaganda and Training.

It was during this tumultuous period, amid the concluding stages of the Second World War, that the relationship between Vietnam's dual occupiers at the time, France and Japan, began to break down. A war of culture erupted between the two powers as both attempted to control Vietnam's cultural identity in their personal pursuits for regional dominance. Recognising the imperative for a cultural revolution, Hồ Chí Minh convened a secret meeting of the Party Central Committee from 25 to 28 February 1943. It was here, in the backwaters of Hanoi, that the Party established the groundwork for what would become the National Salvation Cultural Association, the Viet Minh cultural front that sought to assemble Vietnam's intellectuals and

<sup>1</sup> For extensive (Vietnamese) biographies, I recommend *Trường Chinh tiểu sử* (Hanoi: Sự thật, 2007) and *Tố Hữu tiểu sử* (Hanoi: Sự thật, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> As was the case with many revolutionaries operating at the time, Trường Chinh—or rather, Khu—was forced to take on many pseudonyms: Qua Ninh, Sóng Hồng [Red Wave], Anh Năm [Brother Number Five], etc., eventually settling on Trường Chinh [Long March], an homage to the nine-thousand-

kilometre military retreat of the Red Army led by Mao Zedong.

artists under Party leadership. It was also here that Trường Chinh penned *The Outline of Vietnamese Culture*, the thesis that was to serve as their philosophical foundation.

While the laconic text—written mostly in the form of bullet points—had minimal reach due to the repressive colonial policies of the time, it was on 16 July 1948, during the Second National Cultural Assembly, that Trường Chinh, in the presence of political leaders, guerrillas, writers, poets, painters, and sculptors from across the country, delivered *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*, a greatly refined and theoretically systematised development of *The Outline*. Whereas the original simply called for socialist realism to prevail, *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*, drawing on the socio-historical conditions of the time, methodically argued for it to serve as the cultural foundation of Vietnam’s “new-democracy.”<sup>3</sup>

Trường Chinh’s decree, however, sent ripples of dissatisfaction and doubt across the creative community. To ease the discontent and confusions, on 25 September 1949, the Party held the *Debate on Art and Literature*, a four-day conference in Viet Bac with the aim of clarifying the role and obligations of an artist through discussion and criticism. It was at the *Debate* that Tố Hữu, known as “the great socialist realist poet,” delivered *Building a People’s Art*, cementing his leadership role within the arts.

Born Nguyễn Kim Thành in 1920, Tố Hữu began writing poetry at around the age of sixteen. At nineteen he joined the Party, and was arrested, tortured, and imprisoned by French authorities only a few months later. After escaping in March 1942, he returned to the Party where, following the August Revolution, he assumed the position of Chairman of the Thua Thien–Hue Insurrection Committee and, later, Secretary of the Thanh Hoa Party Committee. Like Trường Chinh, Tố Hữu served as the guiding force for the Department of Propaganda and Training as well as the Art and Literature Department, overseeing the artistic activities in Viet Bac. In 1948, he became Deputy Secretary General of the Vietnam Arts and Culture Association.

Despite its humble beginning, *The Outline* (expounded by *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* and supported by *Building a People’s Art*) would serve as the Party’s official cultural policy for over forty years, shaping Vietnamese aesthetics and leaving traces still felt post-Đổi Mới. Today, although waning, Vietnam remains one of the last countries where socialist realism and its works do not exist outside the circuit of cultural incorporation, alongside Laos and North Korea. However, it would seem that one of the most seducing traps for Vietnamese and foreign scholars (and artists alike) is the attempt to recognise Vietnamese socialist realism on its own terms by underplaying or denying its Maoist roots. In fact, Deputy Minister of Culture and Information Hà Xuân Trường once stated that while Mao’s various writings on culture had indeed made their way into Vietnam, their impact was shallow and short-lived.<sup>4</sup>

One cannot blame Deputy Minister Trường for this strategic error. In many ways, Vietnam has always felt imposed upon by Chinese cultural influences—after all, throughout Vietnamese history, Chinese influence had always run deeper among the intellectual and ruling minority than the peasant majority. This, compounded by a turbulent history hallmarked by centuries of conquest and invasion at the hands of imperial China, had long fostered an undercurrent of mistrust in the Vietnamese relationship with modern China. While North Vietnam had always managed to precariously balance itself between its Soviet and Chinese counterparts—Trường Chinh led the Maoist faction, working in tandem with Hồ Chí Minh who led the Soviet faction, as it was often claimed—the Sino–Soviet split essentially forced Hanoi to choose between an allegiance with Beijing or Moscow. Despite a history of Stalin and Khrushchev keeping the Viet Minh at an arm’s length—during the time when many of the texts in this book were written, when China was in fact North Vietnam’s closest ally—under Kosygin, Moscow became North Vietnam’s largest benefactor. Ultimately, Hanoi chose Moscow, souring relations with Mao. During this period of

<sup>3</sup> A Maoist conception of a Marxist centralism that sought to oppose Western representative-parliamentary democracy which it viewed as an instrument for the fostering of bourgeois dictatorship through the manufacturing of consent. Contrary to Marx’s prediction that capitalism would follow independence from a colonial power, Mao proposed that it was possible to enter directly into socialism through the establishment of an unfortunate but necessary coalition of classes (namely the proletariat, peasantry, petty bourgeoisie, and national

bourgeoisie). Under the leadership of the working class, this coalition would oppose the ruling order. In this regard, every colonial or semi-colonial country would follow its own unique path to democracy, depending on that particular country’s material and social conditions.

<sup>4</sup> Hà Xuân Trường, in Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ, *Cách mạng, kháng chiến và đời sống văn học: 1945–1954* (Hanoi: Khoa học xã hội, 1995), 213.



Nguyễn Văn Ty (1949)

deteriorating relations (culminating in the 1979 Chinese invasion), many once heralded Party texts were revisited and “corrected”; essentially scrubbed of any overtly pro-Chinese sentiment they possibly held or sidelined in the hope they would disappear into obscurity.

Owing to its momentous and enduring impact in the cultural sphere, *The Outline* (along with its explications) could not simply be swept aside. Furthermore, there was no reason to scrub the text directly as, compared to other notable writings, it contained a distinct lack of Chinese praise nor any direct reference to Mao. Rather, it was left to the pedagogues to do the scrubbing who, when imparting the content of the writings, eschewed the Maoist nuances and presented the works as unique formulations. While this brief introduction will attempt to pay Mao his dues, it will equally highlight the distinct rupture of Vietnamese socialist realism with its Soviet and Chinese predecessors.

As laid out in his seminal manifesto-essay *On New Democracy*, Mao propounded that China’s new-democracy was to encompass a new politics, a new economy, and—most importantly—a new, “national, scientific, and mass” culture. It was from these three principles that Trường Chinh and Tố Hữu drew their set of non-mutually exclusive factors to guide Vietnamese socialist realism, the cultural aesthetic of Vietnamese new-democracy: vietnamisation (*dân tộc hóa*), scientification (*khóa học hóa*), and massification (*đại chúng hóa*). For Tố Hữu, Vietnamese new-democracy art (or a people’s art, as he preferred to call it) was vietnamised in form and new-democracy in content.<sup>5</sup> This is, by way of Mao’s call for a culture that is “national in form and new-democracy in content,”<sup>6</sup> essentially a Stalinist aesthetic formula. Mao was simply following the famous Stalinist recipe of “national in form, socialist in content,” whereby socialist meaning was to be inscribed within established forms (dialects, customs, dress, etc.). The reasoning behind this watchword was that utilising established forms would not only maintain legibility of the message but avoid any local discontents. “A minority is discontented not

because there is no national union but because it does not enjoy the right to use its native language. Permit it to use its native language and the discontent will pass of itself,” as Stalin put it.<sup>7</sup>

## VIETNAMISATION

The revolutionary difference between Vietnamese socialist realism and its Soviet and Chinese counterparts comes in Trường Chinh’s early (re)interpretation of nationalism: *dân tộc hóa*. For most scholars, Vietnamese and foreign, “*dân tộc hóa*” is inattentively presented as the Vietnamese translation of “nationalism,” or occasionally “patriotism,” or simply brushed aside as a simple matter of semantics. However, this fails to grasp the complexities of the term “*dân tộc*,” used synonymously for “race,” “nation,” and “ethnicity,” but also—as Trường Chinh uses it—a composite: “race–nation–ethnicity.” In this sense, the term transcends racial, national, ethnic, and even geographic concerns. It is, for lack of a better term, a primordial peoplehood; the very “-ness” of Vietnamese-ness—the state or condition (or essence) of that which whatever we call “being Vietnamese” is.

The problem arises, however, in attempting to translate it. As our *social past* (how we recognise the *real past*—that which is irreversible—and read our own identity through it) is inconstant, there is little point in defining pastness in terms of genetically continuous groups (race), historical sociopolitical groups (nation), or cultural groups (ethnicity)—they are, as Immanuel Wallerstein rightfully states, peoplehood constructs: mere inventions of pastness and contemporary political phenomena.<sup>8</sup> So, why do three different modal terms exist when only one is needed? For Wallerstein, each of the three modal terms hinges on one of the basic structural features of the capitalist world economy: “race” stems from the axial division of labour wherein capital accumulates by creating unequal differentiations of human value; “nation” stems from the political

<sup>5</sup> Tố Hữu, *Building a People’s Art (or a New-Democracy Art): For the Creation of Revolutionary Thinking and Massified Activity*.

<sup>6</sup> Mao Zedong, *On New Democracy* (1940), adapted from Marxists Internet Archive, [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2\\_26.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_26.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2021), 65.

<sup>8</sup> Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991), 78.

superstructure of this historical system, wherein capital accumulates by creating unequal differentiations of sovereignty; “ethnicity” stems from the creation of household structures wherein capital accumulates through the maintenance of large components of non-waged labour.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, any attempt to translate *dân tộc*, or even unpack it, inevitably embeds it within the capitalist world-economy, thus stealing its kernel of unbridled peoplehoodedness.

Here, the popular mischaracterisation of Hồ Chí Minh as a “nationalist first and communist second” begins to make sense. Those who attempt to justify Hồ as primarily nationalist do so only by examining the aesthetic *parole*, ignoring the very unbridled peoplehoodedness of the *langue*, a primordial—dare we say “natural”—communism. In this sense, Hồ, for all his nationalist (and therefore structurally reformist) tendencies, was *not* primarily a Marxist—but precisely in the sense that Marx himself, in criticising Guesde and Lafargue for their opting of revolutionary phrase-mongering over tangible achievements for workers through reformist tactics, famously proclaimed “I am not a Marxist!”<sup>10</sup> This reading of Hồ being driven primarily by nationalism, endorsed almost entirely by the contemporary left, is understandable as the alternative comes at a high price for the average revolutionary phrase-mongering (particularly Western) Marxist reader: perhaps Marxism(–Leninism–*et al.*) is not some sort of systematic saviour—an external framework to be implemented and free the Vietnamese from all their earthly problems—but rather a relatively successful way of articulating an internalised, pre-existing, shared matrix (among many other articulatory forms; the Buddhist sangha being another regional example<sup>11</sup>). Or, as artist and now-retired director of Laos’ National Institute of Fine Arts Maising Chanbouthdy once told me: “In the Laosphere, there is no separation between ‘socialism’ and ‘nationalism.’ In this sense, our tradition is inherently socialist. The Laotian identity is a socialist one, just as much as it’s a Buddhist one ... Our

culture, all the way back to ancient times, has always had these elements—long before their structured codifying and Western definitions came about.”<sup>12</sup>

Dân tộc hóa should therefore be read as an inner plea. This plea for an active investigation into the essence of that which is Vietnamese—or as writer Thạch Lam put it, “why we are like we are today”<sup>13</sup>—might seem contradictory as, at the time, the Viet Minh were actively purging much of what constituted autochthonous heritage. However, this was the very crux. This was not a *return* to a primordial Vietnam (a Vietnam prior to cultural contamination by the French; or the Japanese; or the Chinese; or however far back one wishes to take such a fatuous exercise), but a *turn* to a better articulation of a primordial peoplehood. Theorists Nguyễn Hữu Đang and Nguyễn Đình Thi argued that the state ought to immediately eradicate, to the greatest extent possible, traditional customs and practices that did not assist in nation-building efforts—“construction [within the cultural sphere] must begin with destruction.”<sup>14</sup> In this sense, “Vietnamese” as a denotation was replaced with “Vietnamese” as a designator, affirmed as a distinct entity only in relation to its negating of that which it wasn’t.

Again, the Maoist thread is not hard to see. Mao saw the emergence of an uncritical reading of Hegel’s dialectics taking place among communists, owing to a mechanical attempt to separate it from Hegel’s idealism, and therefore the presenting of anti-scientific content scientifically (to use Trường Chinh phraseology); that is, the sneaking of metaphysics (teleology, a spirit, etc.) into Marx’s method. The irony, of course, is that Marx and Engels famously attacked the subjectivist views of the Young Hegelians in *The Holy Family*, arguing that there was no *a priori* schema into which the history of man could be neatly fitted, nor could history stand separate as a metaphysical subject, a “person” apart, using man as a means to achieve its own aims.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, to say that all former centuries, each with their own distinct means of production and needs, worked

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Engels, “Engels to Bernstein: 2–3 November 1882,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 46, translated by Betty Ross (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010), 356.

<sup>11</sup> Does John Clark’s reading of Nagarjuna not illustrate precisely this: “the ego is not only a psychological and epistemological construct, but also a historical one. Its roots are to be found in the development of large-scale agrarian society and regimented labour, the

rise of the state and ancient despotism, the emergence of economic class and acquisitive values, the triumph of patriarchy and warrior mentality—in short, in the evolution of the ancient system of social domination and the domination of nature. To put it in Buddhist terms, our true karmic burden, both personally and collectively, is our profound historicity and our deep materiality.” See John Clark, “On Being None with Nature: Nagarjuna and the Ecology of Emptiness,” in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, vol. 19 (2008), 28.

<sup>12</sup> Ruehl Muller, “On Laotian Socialist Realism in the Statuescape of Vientiane: A Conversation with Maising Chanbouthdy” (2022), Critical Asian Studies Commentary Board, <https://doi.org/10.52698/MCSF2052>.

<sup>13</sup> Thạch Lam (1930), as quoted in David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial: 1920–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 257.

<sup>14</sup> Nguyễn Hữu Đang and Nguyễn Đình Thi, *Một nền văn hoá mới* (Hanoi: Hội văn hóa cứu quốc, 1945).



Trương Hiếu (1969)

providentially for the realisation of where we find ourselves now (or will find ourselves later) is to fail to grasp the historical movement by which the successive generations transformed the results they acquired from the generations that preceded them.<sup>16</sup> In response to this anti-scientific content in scientific form, Mao sought to reinsert the unity of struggle of opposites back into the core of communist philosophy (as it had been for Lenin, but began wavering under Stalin). To do this, he drew from Laozi and idealist Daoism, rejecting the framework of the negation of the negation and instead positing that inequality is constitutive of all developments: the essence of everything contains a mutual struggle of negation and affirmation. In the process of one thing supplanting another, the supplanter emerges as both an affirmation of itself and a negation of the supplanted—it affirms itself as a distinct entity only in relation to negating that which it isn't. Thus, no reconciliatory "synthesis" is reached, just further ruptures: contradictions (the negation-affirmation struggle) within contradictions within contradictions...

While Mao was correct to attack the diluted triplicity of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, wherein the synthesis is some sort of reconciliatory lovechild of the thesis and antithesis, Mao's "mistake" in all of this was purely semantic and not, as is often claimed, dialectical: he was not *removing* the negation of the negation from the prevailing Marxist philosophy at the time but, in a weird way, *reinstating* it. For Hegel, the dialectic was never the now-famous triplicity but rather a quadruplicity:

In this turning point of the method, the course of cognition returns at the same time back into itself. This negativity is as self-sublating contradiction the *restoration* of the *first immediacy*, of simple universality; for the other of the other, the negative of the negative, is immediately the *positive*, the *identical*, the *universal*. In the whole course, if one at all cares to count, this *second* immediate is *third* to the first immediate and the mediated. But it is also *third* to the first or formal negative and to the absolute

negativity or second negative; now in so far as that first negative is already the second term, the term counted as *third* can also be counted as *fourth*, and instead of a *triplicity*, the abstract form may also be taken to be a *quadruplicity*; in this way the negative or the *difference* is counted as a *duality*.<sup>17</sup>

The result of this formulation was, for Mao, a philosophy rooted in the idea of "one divides into *two*"—in direct contrast to the compromise he saw the Marxist-Hegelian synthesis as: "two merges into *one*." This was the main question of revolutionary desire: that of division and war (the desire for the *two*) or that of unity and peace (the desire for the *one*). If our desire is for the *one*, it is ultimately premature as we have not yet fully explored the *two* to its completion—and thus have no way of comprehending what a victorious total war is. Therefore, under the guise of synthesis, our desire is actually for a restoration of the *old one*. Was this not most tangible in the modernist pursuit of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total artwork where the spectator is no longer outside looking in but completely immersed within? For all its utopianism, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* project seemed to consistently capitulate to fascist nationalism with works routinely drawing upon a cultural and racial purity (the Arts and Craft movement's fixation on traditional English crafts, Richard Wagner's operatic caricatures of Jews, etc.)—why? The utopia pursued through the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was, in essence, a revival of an earlier age, a spectacle of surface change—perhaps even the creation of a new set of social norms—while the relations of production remain the same on a fundamental level. Simply, for Mao, Trường Chinh and Tố Hữu, in order to not be reactionary, and be truly revolutionary in the present, one should desire division: revolution which, in its course, revolutionises its own starting presuppositions.

That said, a Vietnamese *Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* ultimately never materialised. Firstly, when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, Vietnam was preoccupied with the American War; when Mao suggested Hồ Chí Minh carry out a cultural revolution

<sup>15</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Holy Family* (Moscow: Ripol Classics, 1975), 107.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, "The Poverty of Philosophy," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 6 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), 173.

<sup>17</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, translated by George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 746.

in Vietnam, Hồ hesitantly replied that “Vietnam cannot carry out any great cultural revolution in the immediate future as we are still focused on carrying out a great military revolution.”<sup>18</sup> But secondly, and most importantly, despite a key similarity between Mao and the Vietnamese, there was indeed a fundamental difference.

Let us start with the key similarity. The Chinese and Vietnamese shared desire for the eradication of all that could potentially re-establish capitalism or hinder socialist developments should indeed be seen as a desire for the end of society as we know it. However, in observing this formal desire for nothing, one should be careful not to miss the inner essential desire for *Nothing* itself. Consider the level of secrecy and censorship undertaken by the Party in promulgating the myth of Hồ Chí Minh’s saint-like celibacy. A cursory reading of this behaviour generally leads to two consensuses. A: the Party seeks to push the narrative of Hồ simply having no time for personal shenanigans and being wholly committed to the revolution, in mind and body. In this sense, the revolution was Hồ’s ultimate desire. This, notably, intersects with B: the Party attempts to Buddhify Hồ in order to reinforce his cult of personality on *brahmacharya*-esque grounds. It should therefore come as no surprise that such earned Hồ the moniker “the saint of communism” from Khrushchev who likened him to a holy “apostle of the revolution.”<sup>19</sup> The truth, however, does indeed lie closer to the second consensus. The supposed absence of sex or romance in Hồ’s life was not an absence per se, but a gestured desire for no desire—how Lacan, following Nietzsche, emphasised that the anorexic subject does not simply “eat nothing,” but actively wants to eat the Nothing that is itself the ultimate object-cause of desire.<sup>20</sup>

We are of course talking about what Freud termed the “death drive” albeit in a roundabout way. Born from his witnessing of the First World War human wave offensive infantry tactic—a strategy which would later become ameliorated by and synonymous with Chinese and Vietnamese forces—Freud sought to rationalise how soldiers were able to abandon any sense of self-

preservation and knowingly charge out of the trenches to their violent deaths. The death drive, for Freud, was thus the opposite of the creative drive, often emerging when trauma is unresolved and resulting in the reliving of distressing experiences, risk-taking behaviour, and violence.

However, to avoid overlooking the communal nature of the death drive, we should bear in mind the radical microsociology of Randall Collins: *interaction rituals*. For Collins, an interaction ritual is a practice involving two or more people assembled in the same place within boundaries so as to give participants a sense of who is taking part and who is excluded (be it physical location, within a nation’s borders, within the Party, etc.), focusing their attention upon a spectacle, mutually aware of each other’s shared focus of attention, and sharing a common emotional experience. Where a ritual takes place, participants feel a sense of solidarity wherein the coupling of behaviour within the ritual synchronises their nervous systems to the point of generating emotional entrainment, a collective effervescence which Collins terms “emotional energy.” This is, of course, a brief but addictive taste of the death drive. We are intrinsically emotional energy seekers wherein the majority of our interactions can be characterised as an unconscious gravitation toward available ritual situations from which we expect the greatest emotional energy reward. Simply, human behaviour seems to appear a lot like some form of death drive tropism.

The Lacanian realm of symbolic signification should not be missed here. Nor should we be limited by Freud and Collins’ biologism. Rather than the death drive being merely a biological opposition to the instinctual need to physically live, it is a notion indicating that the human psychic apparatus is subordinated to the blind automatism of repetition beyond pleasure-seeking and self-preservation; an automatism generated within the functioning of a *symbolic* system. For Lacan, the death drive’s operation is meta-physical: residing in a materiality “outside” our own, within a “margin beyond life.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Trần Quân Ngọc, *Bác Hồ với bạn bè quốc tế* (Ho Chi Minh City: Tổng hợp, 2008), 204.

<sup>19</sup> Nikita Khrushchev (1969), as quoted in Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 144.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Lacan, “La Direction de la Cure et les Principes de son Pouvoir,” in *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), 119.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, translated by Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), 290.



Thái Hà (1965)



Central Art Academy Block Print Combat Collective (1966)  
*Scatter the old world, build a new world*

In such a sense, the death drive is the fidelity to Nothing itself; a fidelity to the gap between the subject and the object of desire. Here, death is not the destruction of biological life but rather the destruction of its symbolic texture. Thạch Lam, for example, wanted to continue to believe in reincarnation but realised that such a belief would lead the “poor to bow their heads before the rich, the weak before the strong,” and therefore it had to be eradicated<sup>22</sup>—to end not just the life of the oppressor but the very afterlife.

So, what of the *difference*? To start, one should understand that the key outcome of an interaction ritual is the sacrosanctification of symbols. A symbol of power holds a high level of emotional energy charge, however, this charge is determined and maintained by the success and frequency of the interaction rituals in which the symbol is the spectacle; without further interaction rituals, emotional energy is likely to decay. In this sense, the symbol functions as a memory of the death drive experience, fading when not regularly evoked. Consider a national flag, the Nazi swastika, or the Christian cross—or even the heyday images of Stalin, Mao or Hồ Chí Minh—as significantly charged symbols. These symbols become more charged and therefore more powerful to those who regularly participate within their respective rituals (such as attending rallies, Party meetings, or celebrations where they are prominently displayed) until they achieve a level in which secondary rituals begin to manifest, such as the personal wearing of the symbols, or creating certain handling and displaying procedures around the symbols. In turn, there is a strengthening of the notion that those violating the sacredness of the symbols should be denounced or punished. These symbols are not simply the lenses through which we see, as Collins believes,<sup>23</sup> but the Symbolic Order through which we *are*.

Mao’s Cultural Revolution manifested as the ritualistic destruction of these sanctified symbols—just recall the infamous 1966 block print *Scatter the old world, build a new world*—but rather than truly filling

<sup>22</sup> Thạch Lam, in Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 258.

<sup>23</sup> Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 374.

the space of death within the symbolic with Nothing, the Red Guards merely symbolised and then accepted death. Or, to put it another way, instead of realising that Nothing lies in the margin beyond life, they simply embraced the Margin. Thus, all assertions of scattering the old world were imposture since there could be no “new world” untainted by the psychological residue of that which was destroyed—the Red Guards simply filled the gap between the subject and the object of desire with the *ghosts* of the past, unable to fully obliterate them in the symbolic.<sup>24</sup>

The Vietnamese, on the other hand, recognised the unfillableness of the gap. One need only recall Trương Hiếu’s 1973 composition of a PAVN radioman wherein the radioman, the central focal point and object of the audience’s projection, lacks almost any defining features compared to his jungle surroundings, represented as if a vacant hole cut from the original sketch.<sup>25</sup> And indeed, it seems Trương Chinh was channelling his inner Lacanian twenty-five years prior when, in his polemic against the misuse of the Vietnamese language by the local intelligentsia, he rebuked:

Some people have bastardised [our terminology]. Instead of saying: “Our movement still has many weaknesses, and I hope you can offer suggestions to fix them,” they now say: “Our movement still has many gaps, and I hope you can offer suggestions to fill them”—how utterly ridiculous!<sup>26</sup>

Nonetheless, Trường Chinh did not go far enough. Despite being the instigator, he failed to recognise how Vietnamese socialist realist artists (like Trương Hiếu, or Thái Hà, or Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm, etc.) were confronting the symbolic in their deliberate failure to fully acknowledge it; that is, through the unfinishedness of their works. By leaving visual elements unresolved, the artists challenged the traditional idea of a finished and complete artwork, emphasising the impossibility of achieving a unified and total representation. In his error, Trường Chinh would complain that,

Although full of promise, [the art of the emerging worker–peasant artists] remains mostly in the form of rough drafts and sketches rather than fully-developed artworks. The role of artists in general, and our resistance art soldiers in particular, is to elevate the standard of art to meet the demands of the era and the aspirations of the people, serving them in their endeavours, be it work, fighting, or education; to actively contribute to the national struggle for freedom and independence.<sup>27</sup>

Here, Trường Chinh betrays himself, overlooking how any struggle involves a continuous encounter with the void (the impossibility of complete satisfaction) and that the death drive and the gap between the subject and the object of desire are thus intersectional (as any pursuit of desire involves acknowledging the impossibilities of fulfilment). Beyond the semantics, there is a structural homology with Hegel here:

*Being and Nothing are therefore the same.* The truth is neither Being nor Nothing, but rather that Being has passed over into Nothing and Nothing into Being—“has passed over,” not passes over. But the truth is just as much that they are not without distinction; it is rather that *they are not the same*, that they are absolutely distinct yet equally unseparated and inseparable, and that *each* immediately *vanishes in its opposite*.<sup>28</sup>

Simply, the two original opposites (Being and Nothing) go through the process of sublation that results in the coevolution of two original Being and Nothing opposites into a *new* pair of opposites. This is, ironically, the Maoist dialectic—or perhaps we can tentatively and humorously call it the Maoist–Hegelian dialectic, much to the dismay of both Maoists and Hegelians. Regardless, what this dialectical view offers us is a very different reading of the work of art, especially when opposed to the prevailing Marxist–Hegelian dialectical view of today’s Marxist art scholars and practitioners. In this (contemporary Marxist–Hegelian) view, the work of art is seen as the fulfilment of the dialectic: the creation is the

<sup>24</sup> Perhaps we could even go so far as to say this difference was the core failure of theseemingly Maoist-influenced Khmer Rouge experiment to create a so-called “Year Zero,” a complete reset of Cambodian society wherein all previous culture and traditions would be eliminated and all vestiges of the past destroyed. So, why did such an extreme pursuit of liberation descend so quickly into reactionary, paranoid genocide? In order to accomplish such a grand project, the Khmer Rouge consolidated local support and stoked revolutionary fervour by piggybacking

off pre-existing ethnic tensions, namely those with the Vietnamese—who the CPK called the “hereditary enemy.” We can already see the irony here. The erasure of the traditional stabilising ideologies and social practices only rendered Cambodians all the more open to the unmitigated and destabilising fantasies of “hereditary” personalised individual agents as the source of their troubles. This deteriorated into further irrational superstition as the enemy became less and less defined, culminating in the killings of *kbal yuon kbluon khmaer*

[Vietnamese minds in Khmer bodies], anybody who was believed to think the same thoughts as a Vietnamese. See Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930–1975* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 534.

<sup>25</sup> It should come as no surprise that Trương Hiếu was one of the few Vietnamese artists to depict a war casualty.

<sup>26</sup> Trường Chinh, “Hãy gây một phong trào làm trong sáng lời và văn của chúng ta,” in *Sự thật*, no. 104, 19 December 1948.



Trương Hiếu (1973)

reconciliatory synthesis of the form and the content—the old conscious social formulations and the new individual experience made conscious, as Christopher Caudwell once put it.<sup>29</sup> However, the Maoist–Hegelian dialectic provides a different framing: one of irreconcilable total war between form and content.

## SCIENTIFICATION

In his classic 1939 essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, Clement Greenberg rationalised this antagonism as being between the avant-garde and kitsch. The avant-garde—modernist art, particularly abstract—takes the side of the form: it seeks to combat the dumbing-down of taste, perpetuated by the mass-production of consumer society, by removing the “what” of the artwork (the content) to reveal its “how.” In contradiction, kitsch—ersatz culture—takes the side of the content: it operates as a simulacrum of high culture, appropriating its established techniques (the form) in order to produce a specific effect on the uncritical observer (thus, Greenberg saw socialist realism as a form of kitsch—mere visual propaganda that appealed to the uncultured masses).

The neatness of this antithesis, for Greenberg, corresponds to and defines the huge “interval” that separates from each other two such simultaneous cultural phenomena.<sup>30</sup> This interval corresponds to a *social interval*, “whose termini converge and diverge in fixed relation to the increasing or decreasing stability of the given society.”<sup>31</sup> Essentially, this interval is rooted in class distinction: the uncultivated masses contra the cultivated bourgeois ruling class (namely, those who have the power to command the level of stable income and leisure required for cultivation). Thus, while the avant-garde believed itself to be cut off from the bourgeoisie (and often advertised itself as such), its financial and social existence relied entirely upon the bourgeoisie who historically supported traditional art.

In this regard, the situation in revolutionary late-

forties Vietnam was not much different to that in the West. At that particular time, as Trường Chinh asserts, such an “interval” existed even within the so-called new-democracy culture: on one side, a culture of the working class; on the other, a culture of the national bourgeoisie. Trường Chinh inherits this observation from Lenin who stated that the elements of democratic and socialist culture are present, if only in rudimentary form, in every national culture as there is always an exploited class whose conditions of life inevitably foster democratic and socialist ideology. However, by that same metric, every nation equally possesses a bourgeois culture in the form of the *dominant* culture—not merely “elements.” Therefore, the general national culture is that of the bourgeoisie.<sup>32</sup>

So, what does this patronage—this connection to the bourgeoisie via an “umbilical cord of gold,” as Greenberg put it—mean for the artist? For Trường Chinh,

they are not allowed to do as they please. On the contrary, they are more or less expected to follow the proclivities of the customer. And who are the largest consumers? The exploiters and parasites of society. Therefore, in order for their works to be popular, writers must satisfy the most reactionary and most bizarre wills of these parasites. They cannot practise their “art for art’s sake,” but instead have to kneel before their “golden cow.”<sup>33</sup>

In this sense, the artist must regard their work as a finished commodity and the process of creation as a relation between themselves and their work—which then disappears into the market. The artist is thus forced into seeing their work as hypostatized and their relation to it as that of a producer for the market. As the artist is forced to earn their living from the sale of their work as a property right, they must estimate their work by the market which produces a high total return for these property rights. Inevitably, we are left with the commercialisation of art.

However, one should not forget that, according to Greenberg, modernism emerged precisely as a means to combat this very commercialisation—and indeed, many

<sup>27</sup> Trường Chinh, *Letter to Our Artist Brothers and Sisters*.

<sup>28</sup> Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 59–60.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Caudwell, *Culture as Politics: Selected Writings of Christopher Caudwell*, edited by David Margolies (New York City: NYU Press, 2018), 6.

<sup>30</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 15.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> Vladimir Lenin, *Critical Remarks on the National Question: The Right of Nations to Self-determination* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 78.

<sup>33</sup> Trường Chinh, *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*.

avant-garde artists did rebel against the bourgeoisie, with many even attempting to appeal to the uncultivated masses (the Bolshevik constructivists, for example). So where did it go wrong? To put it in Marxist terms, as Boris Groys does, the modernists operated on the level of the base, rather than the superstructure; their work did not seek to propagate a message but attempted to change the environment in which its spectators lived and worked.<sup>34</sup> As constructivist Vladimir Mayakovsky famously proclaimed: “the streets are our brushes, the squares are our palettes.” One need only to recall how those practitioners of Bauhaus and de Stijl, inspired by the constructivists, sought to imbue the spectator with logic and egalitarianism not on a conscious level through content (that is, subject matter) but on an unconscious level through form (reduction, simplification, and geometrisation). Thus, modernists saw their artworks not as representations but as autonomous *things*—essentially entrenching the property relation that gave rise to the very commercialisation they opposed.<sup>35</sup>

It is precisely this “counter-revolutionary” culture that Trường Chinh attacks in his explication of the Marxist cultural stance. Here, he notes that, other than the illusion of freedom (that the artist creates for himself rather than the market), the most remarkable feature of this counter-revolutionary culture is that “anti-scientific content is presented scientifically—poor content is concealed in rich, glossy, delicate, sophisticated forms.”<sup>36</sup> Trường Chinh is basically asserting what Mikhail Lifshitz would put forward two decades later in his polemic on modernism *The Crisis of Ugliness*:

The renunciation of realistic pictures, which Picasso sees as an empty illusion, that is, deception, and the affirmation of a wilful fiction, designed to spark enthusiasm, that is, the conscious deception of mythmaking ... Let’s just say that the main inner goal of such art lies in suppressing the consciousness of the conscious mind. A flight into superstition is the very minimum.<sup>37</sup>

Around the turn of the twentieth-century, Freud penned

*The Interpretation of Dreams*, his first breakthrough attempt to propound his theory of a continuously operating dynamic unconscious, wherein he gives a wonderful case study of a patient’s dream:

A young man has a very distinct dream which recalls to him fantasies from his infancy which have remained conscious to him: he was in a summer hotel one evening, he mistook the number of his room, and entered a room in which an elderly lady and her two daughters were undressing to go to bed. He continues: “Then there are some gaps in the dream; then something is missing; and at the end there was a man in the room who wished to throw me out with whom I had to wrestle.” He endeavoured in vain to recall the content and purpose of the boyish fancy to which the dream apparently alludes. But we finally become aware that the required content had already been given in his utterances concerning the indistinct part of the dream. The “gaps” were the openings in the genitals of the women who were retiring: “Here something [the phallus] is missing” described the chief character of the female genitals.<sup>38</sup>

Is the constructivists’ betrayal, their flight into superstition, not such a parapraxis? If the mystical content which they sought to negate through their devotion to an objective “machine art” form is indeed negated, this very negation is itself negated by its *own* return in the form! Gabo and Pevsner’s *Realistic Manifesto*—at the time seen as a rupture from constructivism, though with the benefit of hindsight may now be seen as an inevitability—sought to imbed a spiritual nucleus (the teleological procession of life) in Soviet art’s new scientific tendency;<sup>39</sup> Kandinsky famously adopted what *appeared* to be scientific methods in determining the nature of the fundamental elements of art (through surveys, for example), but the manner in which these seemingly objective investigations were conducted indicated that his approach was predetermined by his own subjective aesthetic theories (such as the mystical “inner necessity” of artists).

Herein lies the tragedy of modernist art. Modernists

<sup>34</sup> Boris Groys, “The Cold War between the Medium and the Message: Western Modernism vs. Socialist Realism,” in *e-flux Journal*, no. 104 (2019), 6.

<sup>35</sup> So, what of the avant-garde artists who saw art not as a property relation but as a relation between the creator and spectator with the work being a vehicle which both parties must grasp as part of the process? The irony, as Christopher Caudwell notes, is that, within the confines of bourgeois culture, if the artist attempts to disregard

the market in favour of concentrating on their own relation to their work, it inevitably becomes hypostatized as an end-in-itself and the process becomes an extremely formless, individualistic, and personal relation.

<sup>36</sup> Trường Chinh, *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*.

<sup>37</sup> Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Crisis of Ugliness: From Cubism to Pop-art*, translated by David Riff (Leiden: BRILL, 2018), 142.

<sup>38</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated by Abraham Brill (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2015), 278.

<sup>39</sup> At the time, cosmism remained a shadow philosophy among many Soviet elites and intellectuals owing to its undercurrent of physicalist spirituality: beliefs that desires traditionally associated with religion, like heavenly paradise, eternal life, resurrection, total enlightenment, etc., could be achieved through science and technology.



Phạm Thanh Tâm (1954)

eschewed content owing to the belief that it lacked the “language” needed to communicate what they knew to be real. The result, however, was the opposite: *they communicated that which they didn’t know they knew to be real*. There is, of course, an unmistakable fantasy element here—the repressed (spiritual, mystical, call it what you will) content that re-emerged in the modernist’s form was not *real*. And one would not be wrong for seeing the fascist parallels here. It was this revolutionary, unconscious influence on the masses that paved the way for the Nazis’ solidifying of power,<sup>40</sup> rooted in the re-emergence of repressed fantasy through form—most infamously, the mystical Jew, an easy explanation to all confusions and problems. Such was not ideological surrender but a means of precipitating social formation—or rather, the Jew (in its imaginary form) served as *doxa*. Thus, where communists had once readily accepted those revolutionary avant-garde artists who held anti-bourgeoisie stances as fellow travellers, they now viewed them as a dangerous precursor to irrational fascist revolution.

As contemporary cognitive science has come to teach us, our brain holds only a few salient details about reality as, rather than storing elaborate pictures in our short-term memory and unnecessarily consuming valuable computing power, we only log changes and assume that the rest has remained the same. This haphazard system therefore results in missing details, creating gaps in our reality. Daniel Dennett famously suggested that there is no single central place where conscious experience occurs, a Cartesian Theatre where a sensual show is played out for the Ego or Central Executive.<sup>41</sup> Rather, the brain consists of multiple semi-independent agencies producing a fragmented stream where we construct an experience supported by fantasy—that is, virtual content—filling the gaps. However, this is not a sequential process—there is no direct experience of the gap prior to filling it. Rather, it is retroactively constituted by the very process itself. When the fantasy makes a difference in our cognitive life, its effects propagate, building a narrativisation wherein

the central character is our own “self.” For Freud, artists, like neurotics, are oppressed by excessively powerful instinctual needs and, just as the neurotic uses fantasy to satisfy his otherwise forbidden urges, so too does the artist in seeking to satisfy his artistic urges (which cannot be satisfied directly).<sup>42</sup>

We should also not forget Freud’s characterisation of neurosis as a response to the concrete suffering of trauma.<sup>43</sup> Nor should we forget Lacan’s premise that we are all neurotics, with our identities outlined by our traumas, as it is within these traumas that the symbolic neutralises the Real, resulting in the experience which we call “reality”: an existence which is ciphered by language and equally deciphered (though never fully) through communication. Simply, symbolisation is the process through which reality, for us, attempts to become real but always falls short. Or, as Sean Homer puts it,

Trauma is *real* insofar as it remains unsymbolisable and is a permanent dislocation at the very heart of the subject. The experience of trauma also reveals how the real can never be completely absorbed into the symbolic, into social reality. No matter how often we try to put our pain and suffering into language, to symbolise it, there is always something left over. In other words, there is always a residue that cannot be transformed through language. This excess, this ‘X’ as Lacan will call it, is the real. As we will see, the real thus becomes associated with the death drive ...<sup>44</sup>

The difference between the neurotic artist and the average neurotic, however, is that the artist possesses the ability to fashion his fantasies in such a way that they are not only effective for himself, but for others too. The fantasy in art is not simply the personal imaginings of the specific artist but one that appeals to the masses in general. The core of that appeal being that fantasy is an absolute requirement, owing to the limitlessness of human existence (which, of course, emerges as the death drive). One cannot exist with just drive alone—such drive must be domesticated through fantasy, and it is only within art that we are able to experience fantasy *as fantasy*. Therefore, it is precisely

<sup>40</sup> Despite its popularity amongst Russian communists prior to the Revolution, one should also not forget what bedfellows futurism and the National Fascist Party came to be.

<sup>41</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 227.

<sup>42</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Creative Writers and Daydreaming,” in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis: Standard Edition*, translated by James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1966), 375.

<sup>43</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 16 (London: Hogarth Press, 1963), 275.

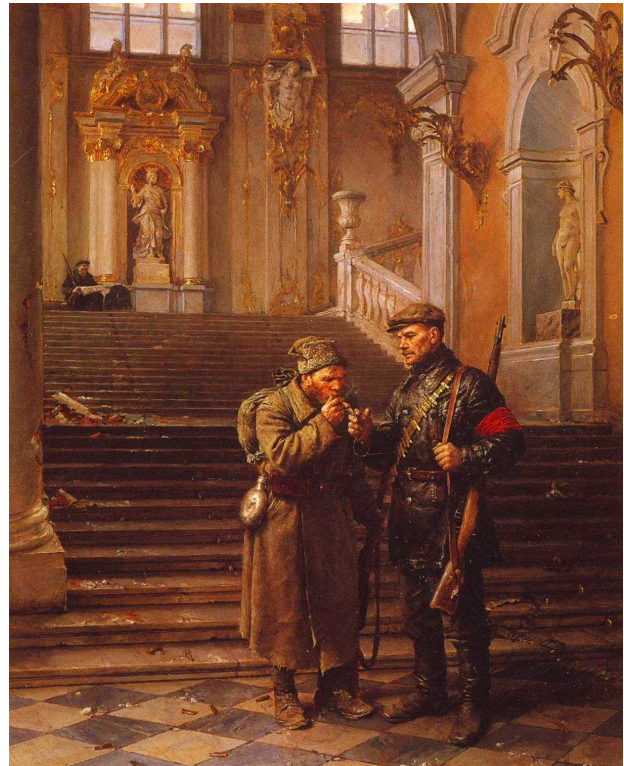
<sup>44</sup> Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge, 2005), 84.

through art that, via this double negation, we are able to experience the death drive. Was this not what Zhou Ziren, a former Red Guard, felt when he recalled Vladimir Serov's *The Winter Palace is Captured*, as recorded in a brief diary entry:

I was planning to participate in the criticising Duan Daming assembly in the afternoon. But I was late, and the meeting was already over. I entered the main hall alone. Being in Chongqing for five years, this was the first time I visited this place.

When I stepped into this grand palace-like hall, I was so emotional and couldn't help myself feeling my passions kindled and my blood boiling. I thought of one picture: two soldiers smoking in a peaceful assembly hall after the Winter Palace was captured in the October Revolution. Because of the battle that had just happened, the magnificent hall was full of traces of gunfire, and the entire place was in a shambles. At that moment, did I also not enter a historical picture? Looking at the traces of the *dazibao*<sup>45</sup> and slogans on the wall, I asked myself, were these not gun marks of fierce battles?

I was so elated. I followed the steps and ran up. With the east wind blowing into the city, I wanted so much to sing heroically: "We have devoted ourselves ... to the glamorous revolution, so much happiness, and so many honours."<sup>46</sup>



Vladimir Serov (1954)  
*The Winter Palace is Captured*

## MASSIFICATION

There was, of course, a larger irony. Once established, the Nazis also turned to realism, not only abandoning their modernist ancestors but outright rejecting them—a move cemented by Hitler's penchant for classical Greco-Roman art and Goebbels' 1937 pet project of the "degenerate art" freakshow (despite once having an extensive collection). Perhaps more systematically than its abstractive predecessors, fascist realism sought to actively render fantasy real, whereby art, considered superior to truth, was uniquely suited to the realisation

<sup>45</sup> Originating in China (and reaching an apogee during the Cultural Revolution), big-character posters, more commonly known as *dazibao* [*báo tường*—"wall newspapers"], are handwritten posters, usually using large type, prominently displayed on walls of public spaces. They had no fixed format or style and could appear in the form of letters, slogans, news reports, poems, caricatures, etc. They functioned not only as a means of generally anonymous protest and propaganda but popular communication.

<sup>46</sup> Zhou Ziren (1967), as quoted in Pang Laikwan, *The Art of Cloning: Creative Production During China's Cultural Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2017), 4.



Bùi Quang Ảnh (1971)

of such aims. To do this, the fascists adopted the project of rendering the medium of the body as their political message, siding not with any theoretical convictions or programmes, but with corporeal heroism—that is, the physical body of heroes.<sup>47</sup> What, for the fascist, distinguished a heroic body from an unheroic one? Hitler had the predictable answer: “When defending its existence, every race operates from the powers and values that are naturally given to it. Only someone who is suited to be heroic thinks and acts heroically.”<sup>48</sup> Simply, heroism was a mystical inner quality inherent only in certain races. And, as the purpose of art was to extract (and formalise) this stupid fantasy—to reveal the hero race through their heroic bodies—only those who were inherently gifted with heroism could achieve such an endeavour. As such, the process of artmaking was itself an act of heroism. Consequently, the true artwork became the viewer who, in order to appreciate such heroic art, had to have been part of the heroic race—and thus, the genuine fascist art of politics lay in the production of heroic bodies.

It is here, in the production of bodies through classical aesthetic models, that cursory observations begin to draw homologies between fascist realism and socialist realism (after all, in socialist realism, the viewer was also envisioned not just as a crucial component of the work, but the ultimate outcome in itself). Art critic Yakov Tugendhold illuminated the difference:

The distinction between proletarian and non-proletarian art happens to be found not in form but in the idea of use of this form. Trains and machines are the same here as in the West; this is our form. The difference between our industrialism and that of the West, however, is in the fact that here it is the proletariat that is the master of these trains and machines; this is our content.<sup>49</sup>

Tugendhold could have added: “In the (fascist) West, it is fantasy that is the master of their trains and machines; this is their repressed content returning in form.” In fact, had Tugendhold had the prescience, he could have evoked how the Nazis would come to extensively use their trains

for the futile deportation of Jews in 1944, rather than for the conveyance of much-needed military supplies.

So, while both art programmes were concerned with the creation of their audience, one was grounded in rational strategy, the other in fantasy-induced autotelic self-destruction. Perhaps it was Hitler himself who made this most clear when, during the 1935 Conference on the Cultural Politics of the NSDAP, he asked (and answered): “Can we allow ourselves to sacrifice for art at a time when there is so much poverty, want, misery, and despair everywhere around us? ... Yes, we can and should!”<sup>50</sup> Thus, despite the apparent surface change, the form–content antagonism remained steadfast. Fascist realism, like modernism before it, remained in the formalist camp, holding art to be a metaphysical object apart through which repressed fantasy could be formalised. Socialist realism, on the other hand, remained on the side of content, holding art to be a participatory, self-excited circuit wherein the artwork establishes the implicit ontology through which the masses understand themselves and their world.<sup>51</sup>

For the socialist realists however, a problem persisted: how was one to utilise art as a means for enthusiastic mobilisation, operating on an unconscious level, without giving rise to the “monstrosities of fantasy?”<sup>52</sup> Soviet socialist realism had indeed emerged amid a realignment of cultural politics, which came to be guided by the struggle against fascist (particularly Nazi) irrationality, but required the very same collective effervescence-inducing means—the taste of the death drive—to achieve its goal of developing mass socialist consciousness. As painter Konstantin Yuon summarised, socialist realist art was not simply to be seen as ideological education, but as a means of generating a “powerful attraction” from the spectator—it ought to affect the spectator with “a powerful magnetic force.”<sup>53</sup>

For Mao, this powerful attraction could only be achieved through the intimacy of embodying the masses within the self-excited circuit; a mandate he put forward in his 1942 *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and*

<sup>47</sup> Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 130.

<sup>48</sup> Adolf Hitler, as quoted in Groys, *Art Power*, 131.

<sup>49</sup> Yakov Tugendhold (1930), adapted from Groys, *Art Power*, 142.

<sup>50</sup> Adolf Hitler (1935), as quoted in Groys, *Art Power*, 133.

<sup>51</sup> Writer Trường Tầu theorised this self-excited circuit to be one of three principles of

human existence. The other two, based upon Marx's view of the human as a product of social relationship, being that spiritual life is a product of physiological and social life, and that the hereditary and psychological nature of humans change in accordance with social changes. See Nguyễn Bách Khoa (Trường Tầu), *Tâm lý và tư tưởng Nguyễn Công Trứ* (Hanoi: Hàn Thuyên, 1944), xxviii–xxx.

<sup>52</sup> Trường Chinh, *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*.

<sup>53</sup> Konstantin Yuon (1957), as quoted in Alla Efimova, “To Touch on the Raw: The Aesthetic Affections of Socialist Realism,” in *Art Journal*, Spring (1997), 72.

*Art.* There is little doubt that Mao's *Talks* left a profound impact on Trường Chinh and Tố Hữu who echoed the call for artists to embed themselves within the masses. Poet Xuân Diệu attempted to articulate this intimacy in his wartime poem *Nights on the March* (wherein one would not be wrong to recognise Collins' emotional entrainment):

Body and Soul, flesh and blood, I am with my people  
warm with the ardour of their heart, sweating their  
sweat  
sharing the life and the struggle  
of millions who suffer... the people I love.<sup>54</sup>

Despite their influence on Trường Chinh and Tố Hữu, and becoming the foundation for the CCP's policy on art after the Revolution, Mao's *Talks* were not so much intended as theoretical guidelines as they were a means to discipline communist artists and writers who, at the time, had become dispirited with the production of propaganda. Ultimately, the *Talks* were a directive to invert the role of artists and writers from active educators of the masses to passive students of the masses. In a distinct theoretical break from the Chinese, Vietnamese artists recognised and deciphered this intimacy through their adoption of Maoist "struggle sessions" where—rather than showy tests of political loyalty—these ritualised spectacles offered the masses the opportunity to engage in self-criticism through the vehicle of the artwork–artist. In this sense, to truly analyse art within the Vietnamese context, we must adopt an Adornoian approach: reflecting upon the manner in which art manages to create another world whilst remaining dependent upon and yet confrontational toward this one; its reflection being its embodiment of the social contradictions of the masses as inner contradictions within its own form.

While Adorno condemned socialist realism's willingness to subject itself to administrative domination—believing that such would only result in the loss of any critical leveraging it may hold and thereby impede its utopian potential—he likewise saw the Hegelian prioritising of systemic integration as

an equally impeding form of dogmatism. Instead of a dialectic hindered by the anticipation of a final synthesis, he, like Mao, sought for art to be read through a dialectic that radically opposes all forms of unification. Thus, form and content are neither separable nor moments in an organic whole but dimensions that exist as tensions on each level of the work. It is for this reason that both the act of interpreting existing works and producing new ones can be taken to release the conflicting forces "locked up" in canonised works and thereby rendering them as self-enclosed totalities.<sup>55</sup> For example, it is through celebrated socialist realists like Bùi Quang Ảnh and Huỳnh Văn Gấm (or their Soviet counterparts Yuri Pimenov and Aleksandr Deynek) that we are able to see that which was repressed by their easily-recognisable cubist and Bauhaus predecessors.

So, how was the Vietnamese socialist realist then to avoid the modernist parapraxis, of having their negation itself negated by its own return in the form? The answer, it seemed, was the extended reliance upon one of the key principles of early Soviet socialist realism: typicality (*tipichnost'*), inspired by Engels opine that, besides truth of detail, realism ought to reflect typical circumstances. This was not simply some superficial exercise for peasants to see representations of themselves,<sup>56</sup> but an endeavour to instil a love for *literalness*—or, to follow Kierkegaard's notion of the truth residing in the negative: *a hatred of ambiguity*. Left untreated, extensive ambiguity only ran the risk of creating "hidden meanings," which inevitably played into fascist hands.<sup>57</sup> Does this not become palpable when comparing the impressionist and post-impressionist works of Phạm Lực, Nguyễn Bằng Lâm, Nguyễn Thế Vinh or Nguyễn Thanh Châu against the abstract expressionism of Tạ Tỵ,<sup>58</sup> despite all being somewhat modernist in origin? Trường Chinh epitomises this in one of his later directives: "do not write any sentence that may be misunderstood or that might have two meanings."<sup>59</sup>

To put it in Groysian terms, Vietnamese socialist realism broke free from history as artists, although

<sup>54</sup> Xuân Diệu (1966), as quoted in Nguyễn Khắc Viện and Hữu Ngọc, *Vietnamese Literature* (Hanoi: Red River, 1972), 666.

<sup>55</sup> Sven-Olov Wallenstein, "Adorno's Realism," in *Baltic Worlds*, vol. 4 (2016), 28–34.

<sup>56</sup> After all, the spectator had always, to a degree, been able to recognise even in the modernist geometric shapes a representation of themselves. Sometimes this was direct and tangible, as in El Lissitzky's famed *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, where a red triangle, symbolising the

Bolsheviks, stabs into a white circle representing the White movement—"I am that red triangle." Other times, it occurred on an affectual level when witnessing the geometric combinations as a whole, as in Kazimir Malevich's suprematist works wherein the spectator didn't see themselves but felt themselves as a cog in the great machine—"I am a piece of a connected and integral Whole."

<sup>57</sup> See Andreas Musolf, *Metaphor, Nation and the Holocaust: The Concept of the Body Politic*

(New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>58</sup> Tạ Tỵ was among the first painters to join the Viet Minh in 1946 but, only three years later, left the resistance citing inconsistencies between their beliefs and actions. He relocated to Saigon, allying himself with the South government and attaining the rank of Lieutenant Colonel within the General Department of Political Warfare, the military front for propaganda and psychological warfare. Following the end of the American War, Tạ Tỵ was interned in a



Tà Ty (1949)



El Lissitzky (1919)  
*Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*

operating within the sphere of established aesthetic models (classical, impressionist, post-impressionist—even the so-called “rough drafts” found themselves situated in the landscape of academic art), read these models as attitudinal lenses through which progressive or reactionary perspectives could be recognised. Perhaps a subtle move on Mao’s part to prevent creatives from conceiving of socialist realism as a mere technical style rather than a frame of reference, he notably did not use the term “socialist realism” during the *Talks at Yan’an* despite it being an already established and popular term amongst Chinese artists and intellectuals at the time. Instead, he seemingly deliberately opted for the terms “proletarian realism”<sup>60</sup> and “revolutionary art.” In a strangely Adornoian way, the editor of the Soviet periodical *Literaturnyi Kritik*—likely the esteemed Georg Lukács—went so far as to allude to this attitudinal reading as perhaps being that which constituted formal technical skill itself.<sup>61</sup>

We categorically reject the formula: “talented, but politically incorrect.” For a work to be of true talent, reality must be reflected with maximum objectivity, where the objective reflection of reality cannot be hostile to the working class or its cause. In Soviet conditions, a work that is incorrect in its ideas cannot be considered to be genuinely talented.<sup>62</sup>

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Today, we find ourselves trapped in the self-destructive trance of Plato’s *music* more than ever before: that unbreakable grip of the death drive which impels us towards our desire for the void—to reach the ideal, that perfect reality of existence that exists outside of time and space—but leaves us subordinated to the blind automatism of repetition beyond pleasure-seeking and self-preservation, reproducing its own circular movement by way of *mimesis*, missing its object and limiting us to inferior copies. In our current hyperreality,

reeducation camp until 1981. Once released, he left the country as a boatperson, resettling in the United States. He returned to Vietnam shortly before his death in 2004.

<sup>59</sup> Trường Chinh, *Eighteen Principles for Writing*.

<sup>60</sup> From 1953 onwards, in keeping with the trajectory set by Zhou Yang, reprints of the text replaced “proletarian realism” with “socialist realism.”

<sup>61</sup> It would seem that Tố Hữu had this in mind

when he stressed the priority of rapid production over that of any technical mastery. Drifting somewhat from Trường Chinh’s insistence on a visual finishedness, Tố Hữu would come to regard complex techniques as being unnecessary, simply slowing production and distribution, and believing they could thus be eschewed in favour of quicker, more naïve forms.

<sup>62</sup> In *Literaturnyi Kritik*, vol. 8 (1936), 113.

where we hurtle towards an existence in which we can no longer differentiate the original from the inferior copy, our fates are increasingly becoming decided upon by the indifferent solipsism of capitalism. The preservation of social reality is itself a hindrance to the guiding pursuit of profitability.

Adorno was correct in his praise for the potential of modernist abstraction to debase the world rather than merely attempt to mimic its beauty as it is only through such debasement that we are willed to change. For Adorno, our debasement is formalised not through any attempt to fill that sublime space with a copy but rather with *the ugly*. Here, the ugliness operates as critique through its regression, illustrating the human alienation indicative of capitalist society. Such depiction of ugliness removes liberal dispassionate distance—that which John Rawls famously referred to as a veil of ignorance—and directly implicates us, with any attempt to conceal this ugliness inevitably a fascistic *desire for the one*. As Adorno notes, Hitler’s empire not only illustrated this but, in doing so, exposed bourgeois society as a whole: “the more torture went on in the basement, the more insistently they made sure that the roof rested on columns.”<sup>63</sup> By rejecting formal beauty, modern art essentially renders itself unusable to commercial and political ends—in theory, it forces us to face Hitler’s basement rather than be distracted by his pretty columns—and thus breaks free from any notion of “functional art” and its economy of utility.

However, the formal ugliness of abstraction is now in danger of reaching its limitations. Abstraction is no longer some obscuring agent to be employed but, under developed capitalism, that which constructs the very material social processes. The communist project seems more unattainable now than ever before; our very dreams are appropriated by the capitalist order. It would appear that the post-socialist capitulation to capitalism—at least in the cases of Vietnam, China, Laos, and Cuba—comes not from pre-revolution residues (which so haunted the Red Guards), but precisely from the aftermath of

the revolutions themselves. After all, how are we meant to revolutionise a system whose very premise is one of continual self-revolutionising? Therefore, for those of us outside the so-called “imperial core,” the task at hand is to *reappropriate* our desires. If we follow Adorno in only seeking to achieve our desires within the framework of our existing reality, without changing these desires themselves, we are doomed to capitalist reemergence and the perpetual constraint of our bodies and minds. Marx’s last thesis on Feuerbach is consequently reversed: now is the time to *reinterpret* the world; to imagine, outside the throes of abstraction, a reality that is more real than ordinary reality. Commandeering Marx’s “product–money–product” schema, Evgeny Dobrenko provides the formula: “reality–socialist realism–reality.”<sup>64</sup> As socialist realism remains our vehicle to a higher plane of reality, art remains our vehicle to a higher plane of desires. Today, such a task will inevitably require ruthless critique so as to re-recognise our primordial peoplehoodness against the guiding illusions of developed capitalism. However, do we not already have the mechanisms for achieving this in the very kernel of those three rigid but radical precepts: vietnamisation, scientification, and massification? Poet Lê Đạt famously criticised Vietnamese socialist realism as akin to “putting a police station in the centre of a person’s heart,”<sup>65</sup> but perhaps this is the very price of freedom.

<sup>63</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 49.

<sup>64</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>65</sup> Lê Đạt, “Nhân câu chuyện mấy người tự tử,” in *Nhân văn*, 20 September 1956.



Thái Hà (1966)

## ON CULTURE AND EDUCATION

*Trường Chinh, 1936*<sup>1</sup>

The customs of our country are those of feudalism in its swansong. Just as the lifestyle and habits of the people have been affected and transformed by capitalism, so too has the basic foundation of the feudal economy been shaken. The “fine traditions” of yore have gradually become hypocritical and are no longer appropriate for the current era. Much of what was once considered fine tradition has become increasingly insincere and outdated.

How many hundreds of times have we found ourselves upset to see women use their relatives’ deaths as an excuse to criticise and mock each other? In the countryside—which remains full of the vestiges of feudalism—a young adult with radical thinking will easily be shocked at the abundant rural customs. What could be more irrational than the custom of forcing children to avoid mentioning the names of their grandparents and uncles? So often when the old Confucian scholars speak a sentence with too many substitutions for taboo words it sounds as if they have speech defects. If someone inadvertently uses the name of an ancestor in your family for his child, then you take the name of one of his ancestors for one of your children to get even. How petty and callous!

I once heard of a truly frustrating but hilarious instance: There was a woman whose father had recently passed away, forcing her elderly mother to move in with her brother (the son of the old widow). Realising that her brother’s wife was not properly caring for the mother, the woman devised a plan to frighten her. She went to her brother’s house and jumped around madly in front of the altar, pretending that she had been possessed by her father’s soul. Then, this “father” shouted abuses and curses at the daughter-in-law, scolding her for

abandoning her mother-in-law. Not stopping at this point, the “father” embraced the old mother, sobbing about how much he loved and missed her. While the superstitious daughter-in-law was terrified, the smart but indifferent guests had a side-splitting laugh.

The custom of “meat and sticky rice”<sup>2</sup> is perhaps one of the most destructive but can be seen everywhere in the hamlets and villages, be it among families, colleagues, and friends. It is as if every death anniversary is a chance to give offerings to flies,<sup>3</sup> drink, and quarrel. So many families are financially ruined by these ceremonies. The eldest son can be expected to spend several Piastres per celebration, and have as many as twenty celebrations per year, leading to financial ruin.

Whenever a member of the community reaches the status of an elder, he is expected to provide meat and sticky rice for his juniors. Villages have yearly offerings for a multitude of purposes: to get rid of worms, to ask for cooler weather, to pray for rain, to ask for happiness, fortune and success, etc. Additionally, there are the Spring and Autumn festivals, seen as a chance to slaughter a pig for the spirits—and our stomachs as well! When it comes to dividing up the portions of meat at these festivals, everyone eyes each other like they eye the meatballs. If the “higher officials” do not receive a big enough portion, the “lower officials” will be in trouble—even the pig tails and the chicken rumps do not escape the village chiefs. At every village meeting, it seems as if those of importance need to drink copious amounts in order to come up with new ideas. These “new ideas” soon degenerate into arguments, bloody fights, and property damage.

Death ceremonies seem to be another excuse to feast and drink in the countryside. Even if the deceased died of cholera or some infectious disease, a feast must be arranged for the community. And if anyone happens to catch the disease from the feast and dies, well, they will just blame it on fate.

Perhaps Dinh Bang village (Tu Son, Bac Ninh) eats more meat and sticky rice than anywhere else. In one year

<sup>1</sup> *On Culture and Education* is an extract from Trường Chinh and Võ Nguyên Giáp’s seminal study *The Peasant Question*, the first detailed analysis of peasant conditions in Vietnam by Party leaders. Here, the pair argued that while land reform was crucial for addressing the peasant problem, it was equally essential to recognise that peasants endure various other manifestations of oppression, such as those within the cultural sphere. Trường Chinh’s criticisms of the harmful nature of some Vietnamese traditions would subsequently catalyse his desire to bring about a

Vietnamese cultural revolution.

<sup>2</sup> “Meat and sticky rice” [*xôi thịt*] is a rural custom wherein one is socially obligated to host elaborate community parties for personal life events, such as marriage, anniversaries, falling pregnant, or even purchasing a car.

<sup>3</sup> Trường Chinh uses a double entendre, emphasising how food is often wasted as hosts overcater for the ceremonies, but also implying that the offerings given to the dead are received only by the flies.

alone this village had nearly eighty days of eating and drinking, including weddings and other festivals.

Just as inviting others for meat and sticky rice is a way of repaying those who have invited one in the past, the act of marriage itself has become more like a business transaction in which the daughter is a commodity to be exchanged. It is no wonder that potential brides who live with their husbands' families are often abused by their mothers-in-law. If a daughter-in-law is from a poor family and the husband's family is wealthy, it is almost certain that she will be snubbed, or sometimes even cursed and beaten by the husband's mother. Our women do not yet have any rights. They have no freedom to love whomever they wish—with some, in the countryside, promised in marriage while still in the womb. The fate of a girl who gets married is a gamble. As the folk expression goes: "A woman is like a drop of rain: some might fall into a beautiful palace, others on the rice fields."

Child-marriage and concubinage are even more deplorable customs. Those from privileged classes usually take a concubine—some take two or three. Often, the first wife (or other wives) will grow jealous and fighting will ensue. Those concubines who find themselves in wealthy families are usually nothing more than unpaid servants. In fact, there is often no love involved, just brutal worker exploitation.

In the countryside, wealthy families with few sons will often get wives for them while they are still very young—especially if they need an extra servant. As a result, there are eighteen- to twenty year old women that are married to nine or ten year old boys. Consequently, these wives despise their husbands, forced to either leave them or live a life of sorrow. On the other hand, when the husbands grow up, they also despise their wives, leaving them or taking a concubine. These customs demonstrate the lack of dignity afforded to women in this society. It is not a coincidence that so many of the masterpieces

of Vietnamese literature are laments about the fate of women: *The Tale of Kiều*, *Lament of the Soldier's Wife*, *Lament of a Royal Concubine*, or the recent works *Tổ Tâm* and *The Life of Miss Lưu*.<sup>4</sup> What are these works if not expressions of the resentment felt by Vietnamese women towards the feudal system?

Regarding education in Indochina and Vietnam in particular, the government has implemented a systematic policy of keeping the people ignorant and uneducated. They do not want the average person to be literate for fear of them gaining consciousness and rising up against the injustices. The rate of illiteracy in Indochina is a shocking statistic: well over ninety-five percent.

There are only a few hundred students in university, almost all of which are the children of rich families or government officials. It is impossible for children from the working or peasant class to achieve higher education. There are barely any high schools and few children from the working class have the opportunity to attend them. There is no attempt to develop or expand the number of primary schools. Children from poor families generally do not attend school or only study until the second or third grade. Those children from the peasant class cannot even go to school for when they are as young as ten, they must serve as buffalo herders for wealthy families.

Not only are the peasants unable to read newspapers or books due to their illiteracy, but their arduous, year-round work is entirely dependent upon natural forces. Consequently, they are all the more prone to superstition.

In the countryside, one regularly hears upsetting stories. Often, a poor peasant with nothing to eat will be forced to borrow from a wealthy family. Owing to his illiteracy, he will need to hire somebody to write his debt contract. Sometimes he will be forced into lifelong servitude simply because one word was written incorrectly. Petitions sent by the peasants to officials or newspapers are usually signed with fingerprints instead

<sup>4</sup> *The Tale of Kiều* [Truyện Kiều], *Lament of the Soldier's Wife* [Chinh phụ ngâm] and *Lament of a Royal Concubine* [Cung oán ngâm khúc] are eighteenth-century Vietnamese epic poems written in a traditional verse form known as lục bát.

*The Tale of Kiều*, written by Nguyễn Du, recounts the life and struggles of Thúy Kiều, a beautiful and talented young woman who is forced to sell herself into marriage with a middle-aged man so as to save her father and younger brother from prison. Not knowing that the man is actually a pimp, she is forced into prostitution. Although suffering a series of tragic events, wherein she is routinely raped, abused, exploited and humiliated,

she is ultimately reunited with her first love and her family, thus ending her cycle of bad karma.

*Lament of the Soldier's Wife*, written by Đặng Trần Côn, presents itself as the internal monologue of a woman whose husband is sent to war, exploring her ensuing feelings of anxiety, grief, and loneliness as the image of her husband (and her sense of time itself) begins to slip away. Similarly dealing with feelings of isolation, *Lament of a Royal Concubine*, written by Nguyễn Gia Thiều, tells the story of a royal concubine who, while initially favoured by the king, is soon cast aside. She begins to deeply resent the king for treating her as a mere object

and pities her fate. She yearns to return to her peasant life but continues to be trapped within the palace, engulfed in profound sorrow.

*Tổ Tâm*, written in 1925 by Hoàng Ngọc Phách and considered by many to be the first Vietnamese novel, recounts the story of Lan, a young woman whose uncle finds a lost wallet belonging to writer Dạm Thủy, setting off a romantic but ultimately tragic chain of events. In the process of retrieving his wallet, Dạm Thủy meets Lan (who he nicknames Tổ Tâm). The two remain in contact, communicating through letters and poems and eventually falling in love. They arrange to meet again in the countryside where, despite creating

of signatures—some petitions are black with hundreds of fingerprints, as dark as the life of the peasantry. This situation calls for a long and persevering struggle against illiteracy, outdated customs, and superstition.

many beautiful memories together, they soon realise that any further relationship would be impossible as Dạm Thủy is already in an arranged marriage. Sadly, Lan herself is forced into marriage with a wealthy man following her mother's decline in health. Lan soon falls into a state of emotional turmoil and becomes seriously ill herself, dying soon after her wedding.

*The Life of Miss Lựu* [*Đời cô Lựu*], a theatrical blend of southern folk songs, classical music, and modern spoken drama—known as “cải lương” [reformed theatre]—composed in 1936 by Trần Hữu Trang, follows the misfortunes of Lựu, a housewife desired by landlord Thăng. Thăng

renders a pregnant Lựu destitute and forced into marrying him after he frames her tenant farmer husband Hai Thành, leading to his imprisonment. Following the birth of the child, Thăng abandons him at an orphanage, telling Lựu that he died. However, friends of Thành adopt the boy, naming him Minh Luân. Lựu soon bears Thăng's daughter, Kim Anh. Much later, Thành escapes from prison and discovers his son. Angry at Lựu's apparent betrayal, he demands money for Luân's education in a letter delivered by Luân to his mother. Kim Anh takes pity on her mother (who has no claim to any of Thăng's wealth despite the marriage)

and sells her jewellery to help. Minh Luân, aware of this gesture, refuses the money but Kim Anh's husband, believing her to be having an affair with Luân, confronts them, demanding to see the letter in Luân's pocket. When Luân refuses, Kim Anh's husband shoots him. Visiting Luân in the hospital, Lựu meets Thành and explains her situation. Thành forgives her but is nonetheless caught by Thăng and reported to the police. Enraged, Luân kills Thăng, severely traumatising Kim Anh. Taking the guilt upon herself, Lựu becomes a nun.



Trương Hiếu (1969)

# THE OUTLINE OF VIETNAMESE CULTURE

*Trường Chinh, 1943*

## POSING THE PROBLEM

1. The scope of the problem: Culture consists of ideology, academia, and the arts.
2. The relationship between culture, economy, and politics: The economic foundation of society, and the economic regime built upon that foundation, completely determines the culture of that society (the base determines the superstructure).
3. The attitude of the Indochinese Communist Party on the issue of culture:
  - a. The cultural front is one of three fronts (the economic front, political front, and cultural front) in which communists must actively operate.
  - b. One must not only bring about political revolution but cultural revolution as well.
  - c. The vanguard Party must lead a vanguard culture.
  - d. Only once the Party is able to lead on the cultural front, can it influence public opinion and propagandise effectively.

## THE HISTORY AND NATURE OF VIETNAMESE CULTURE

1. The historical stages of Vietnamese culture:
  - a. Prior to the Quang Trung era: Vietnamese culture was semi-feudal, semi-slave-based, and reliant upon Chinese culture.
  - b. The Quang Trung era until the invasion of the French empire: A feudal culture with petty bour-

geois tendencies.

- c. The period from the invasion of the French empire to the present: A culture that is semi-feudal, semi-capitalist, and entirely of a colonial nature (one ought to pay attention so as to distinguish between differing stages within this period).

2. The nature of Vietnamese culture today:

Vietnamese culture today is colonial in form and pre-capitalist in content.

The war and contemporary cultural trends: the influence of fascist culture is strengthening the feudal and subjugative nature within Vietnamese culture. However, it is simultaneously being impacted upon by an emerging democratic culture with a disposition to overcome all domestic hindrances and break through (such as in the form of banned art and literature).

## THE DANGER TO VIETNAMESE CULTURE UNDER THE YOKE OF JAPANESE–FRENCH FASCISM

1. Fascist ploys that suffocate and destroy Vietnamese culture:
  - a. The French cultural policy:
    - Suppress revolutionary, democratic, and anti-fascist cultural experts.
    - Produce materials and form cultural agencies and organisations for the purpose of indoctrination.
    - Severely censor cultural materials.
    - Bribe and intimidate cultural experts.
    - Form intimate relations with religious organisations so as to propagate mediaeval culture, eclectic culture, etc.
    - Propagandise defeatist attitudes and narrow minded patriotism (chauvinism).
    - Foster a facade of caring for the people's mental, physical, and moral wellbeing.

- b. The Japanese cultural policy:
  - Propagandise a Greater East Asia ideology.
  - Foster the view of the Japanese as saviours of the yellow-skinned races and that Japanese culture brightens the light of civilisation and progress for the Greater East Asia races, etc.
  - Seek ways to flaunt and disseminate Japanese culture (through exhibitions, lectures, the offering of tourist accommodation, cultural institutes, student exchanges, the inviting of Indochinese artists to visit Japan, using the press for propagandistic purposes, theatre, film screenings, etc.).
  - Suppress anti-Japanese writers and bribe talented writers.
2. Regarding the prospects for Vietnamese culture; two theories exist:
  1. If fascist culture (mediaeval and subjugative culture) prevails, then Vietnamese culture will become impoverished and inferior,
  2. or, Vietnamese culture will be liberated through a victorious democratic revolution and, freed from its shackles, will catch up with modern global democratic culture.

Two theories exist—which one shall be proven true? Based upon current economic, political, and social conditions, the Vietnamese national revolution shall categorically prove the second theory true.
- c. A cultural revolution can only be realised once the political revolution has succeeded (the cultural revolution must come after political revolution). The currently proposed paths for cultural revolution will assist in paving the way to a future total revolution.
2. The culture in which an Indochinese cultural revolution is realised must be a socialist one.
3. Vietnamese cultural revolution and the national liberation revolution:
  - a. The Vietnamese cultural revolution must be based upon a national liberation revolution so as to meet the conditions required for self-development.
  - b. The Vietnamese national liberation revolution can, only in the most fortunate of circumstances, lead Vietnamese culture towards a democratic standard and foster an entirely independent national character so as to build a new culture.
  - c. We must advance forward so as to conceptualise and bring about social revolution throughout Indochina.
4. Three principles of the new Vietnamese cultural campaign during this period:
  - a. Vietnamisation (oppose subjugative and colonial influences, foster the independent development of Vietnamese culture).
  - b. Massification (oppose positions and actions that regard culture as contrary to the broad masses or distant from the broad masses).
  - c. Scientification (oppose all things that render culture unscientific and anti-progressive).

If we want the three above principles to prevail, we must fiercely oppose tendencies towards cultural conservatism, eclecticism, eccentricity, pessimism, mysticism, idealism, etc. At the same time however, we must also combat the excessive cultural tendencies of the Trotskyites.

## THE MATTER OF A VIETNAMESE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

1. The communist conception of cultural revolution:
  - a. A cultural revolution must be brought to fruition before society can be transformed.
  - b. A truly complete cultural revolution must be guided by the Indochinese Communist Party.

5. The characteristics of new Vietnamese culture:

The new Vietnamese culture, advanced and guided by the Indochinese Communist Party, is not yet socialist in character nor akin to the culture of the Soviet Union.

The new Vietnamese culture is national in form and democratic in content. It is for this reason that, at the present stage, it is the most revolutionary and most advanced in Indochina.

**THE URGENT MISSION OF INDOCHINESE  
MARXIST CREATIVES,<sup>1</sup> PARTICULARLY  
VIETNAMESE MARXIST CREATIVES**

I. The objectives ahead:

- a. Oppose culture that is fascistic, feudal, degenerative, subjugative, eclectic, and publicly deceiving.
- b. Promote an Indochinese new-democracy culture.

II. The work we must do:

- a. Struggle within the realms of academia and ideology: Destroy incorrect European and Asian viewpoints that have had a more or less harmful influence on us, like those of Confucius, Mencius, Descartes, Bergson, Kant, Nietzsche, etc., so that the philosophies of dialectical materialism and historical materialism can prevail.
- b. Struggle within the realms of art and literature: Oppose classicism, romanticism, naturalism, abstraction, etc., so that socialist realism can prevail.
- c. Struggle within the realms of spoken language and writing:
  1. Unify and enrich the spoken language.
  2. Determine the characteristics of our literature.
  3. Reform the Vietnamese script, etc.

<sup>1</sup> I have opted to use the term “creatives” rather than the more direct translation of “culturalists” [*những nhà văn hóa*].

III. Methodology for cultural mobilisation:

- a. Exploit all public or semi-public avenues so as to:
  1. Propagandise and publish.
  2. Organise writers.
  3. Struggle to gain true agency for writers, journalists, artists, etc.
  4. Combat illiteracy, etc.
- b. Closely coordinate secret and public praxis so as to unify all progressive cultural activities under proletarian, Marxist leadership.



Nguyễn Hiêm (1948)

## IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES OF THE NEW CULTURE MOVEMENT IN VIETNAM TODAY

*Trường Chinh, 1944*

Recently, books and newspapers have openly discussed the issue of Vietnamese culture. The Han Thuyen publishing house is fervently promoting the “New Culture” movement through its *New Culture* book series and *New Literature Discussion* magazine.<sup>1</sup> It is almost as if the term “New Culture” has become fashionable. That said, very few people pay attention to the actual principles of the New Culture movement and the cultural front remains chaotic, with our cultural soldiers continually missing their targets. Recognising the principles of the New Culture movement in contemporary Vietnam is essential—these are not distant, ethereal ideas but tangible principles rooted in the current situation of Vietnamese culture. By examining contemporary Vietnamese culture, we are able to recognise three distinct phenomena which encompass the three cancers in our national culture, namely:

1. Our country is a colony under the rule of the French empire. Many detrimental influences continue to afflict our culture, rendering it servile, divided, and unevenly developed—it lacks the spirit of independence, freedom, and national unity. In the past, our people blindly followed China just as they now blindly follow the West. Recently, some of those engaged in the cultural sector have been dotingly following Japan! Our people have not bothered to investigate, cultivate, or develop the immeasurable essence of the traditional culture of the country. Instead, they glorify

Europeanisation or Japanisation—or blindly follow ancient culture. How can a country whose economy is dependent upon others and which has lost its political sovereignty not avoid fostering a culture of servility and dependency? Our country is full of literature encouraging boot-licking, “crying-without-even-being-in-pain” cowardice, and worm-like kowtowing. The legal literature generally betrays the spirit of national independence. The literary and artistic forms either inflexibly adhere to Confucian styles, or vulgarly imitate French methods of studying ancient matters. Literature, painting, music, etc. tend to become Frenchified or Japanised to the point where they lose the aesthetic identity of the nation. A movement for such “hybridisation” is spreading in language, literature, and art—not to mention in customs and ideas. Alongside these traits of servility and “hybridisation,” we find our lack of unity as a major obstacle to the development of a national culture. Industry cannot develop; communications routes cannot be expanded. There are far too many differences in cultural levels and living conditions within the various regions of the country. Imperialism has divided the country into three sections, each with slightly different political organisations and educational programmes. These are harmful conditions which deprive Vietnamese culture of any national unity.

2. Further, ours is an agricultural producing country. Imperialism monopolises heavy industry whilst impeding any autochthonous industry. As a result, hardly any of our people pay attention to science as they cannot conceptualise a freedom to expand in any economic or technical sector. Whenever one invents something unique, they are either suppressed or assassinated by the French. The

<sup>1</sup> *New Culture* [Tân văn hóa]; *New Literature Discussion* [Văn mới nghị luận].

French schools teach only a handful of basic and untested scientific concepts, seeking to turn our intellectual youth into nothing more than a bunch of exploitable servants. Thus, the scientific thinking of our compatriots remains limited. Our fields of art and literature are not unaffected by this substandard grasp of science: the majority of the cultural remnants of our feudal era are characteristically idealistic, mystical, or anti-scientific. These superstitious and mystical elements are fed by the Institute of Japanese Culture's propaganda—its *New Asia* magazine and *Japanese Culture* book, for example<sup>2</sup>—and the indoctrination taking place in our schools under France's Ministry of Information and Propaganda. Most Western-oriented cultural works have only a veneer of scientific substance. Several examples prove this point: a house constructed in accordance with the modern architecture lacks the three qualities of beauty, facility, and durability—it is strange, inconvenient, and sometimes unsuited to the climate of the country; most sentences are littered with “parasitic” words, ungrammatical by Vietnamese standards, inexact, unclear, and unconcise.

3. In a country like ours, a colony marked by numerous vestiges of feudalism, the dominant economic and political authority is wielded by imperialists, while only a small minority of natives hold such power and the masses—particularly the workers and peasants—are despised. For us, illiteracy is no less serious than famine. Our people write, draw, play instruments, sing, dance, build, and sculpt solely for the enjoyment of a privileged few! And only this privileged few have enough money and education to enjoy the “noble” cultural artefacts of this regime. Moreover, many write, draw, play instruments, sing, dance,

build, and sculpt only to lull the masses; to make them bow to the privileged or believe in luck, Heaven, or Buddha. In contemporary Vietnamese society, the children of the working class rarely have the opportunity to rise to the position of talented artists, and those who *are* talented—those who advocate for the masses—are suppressed and rejected. For these very reasons, contemporary Vietnamese culture is deeply estranged from the masses. The trait of opposing the masses is extremely clear in the legal culture of our country. These trends of “art for art's sake,” “surrealism,” and “eccentricity,” or the “creative constipation” of the Spring–Autumn collective,<sup>3</sup> are the deformed offspring of the current art and literature that opposes the masses, and prospers under the rule of fascism. A contradiction is revealed: the masses have the material vitality of society because they include the producers who sustain life; the cultural workers have the spiritual vitality of society which should serve the masses—the breastmilk of the community—and be in intimate association with the masses, but here they oppose and are estranged from the masses. The culture is not rooted directly in the masses and is thus a wilting culture...

In summary, contemporary Vietnamese culture—more specifically, *legal* Vietnamese culture—has three weaknesses, or rather, three cancers: it is anti-national, anti-scientific, and anti-popular. Even the *illegal* Vietnamese culture has not completely escaped these shortcomings. Thus, the duty of all progressive Vietnamese cultural workers, irrespective of their class, is to rapidly establish a front to fight against these three cancers in contemporary Vietnamese culture. Presently, the New Culture movement in Vietnam must adhere to the following three principles:<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *New Asia* [Tân Á]; *Japanese Culture* [Nippon văn hóa].

<sup>3</sup> Spring–Autumn collective [Xuân thu nhã tập].

<sup>4</sup> Trường Chinh simultaneously refers to these principles as *khẩu hiệu*, short and emotive propaganda slogans.



Phạm Thanh Tâm (c. 1950s)

—VIETNAMISATION  
—SCIENTIFICATION  
—MASSIFICATION

Anything that goes against the spirit of national independence and unity must be smashed.

Anything unscientific or reactionary must be resolutely eliminated.

Anything that is contra the people or distant from the masses must be condemned.

These three principles are the three links of a chain; they are non-mutually exclusive. It is impossible to complete the task of promoting a new Vietnamese culture if we are to omit any of these principles. It is likewise impossible to follow one principle if opposing any of the others. If this is not clearly recognised, we will not be able to fulfil our duty of building a New Culture for the nation and instead may fall into the trap of fostering imperialist culture or becoming victims of imperialist exploitation. The *Tri Tan* writers' group (feudal intellectuals) emphasised the principle of vietnamisation but, being traditionalists, they ignored the principles of scientification and massification and were thus attacked as reactionaries and conservatives. The *Thanh Nghi* writers' group (national bourgeoisie) did not fully practise the aforementioned principles because they did not fully recognise the cancers within Vietnamese culture. They are unable to play a leading role in the New Culture movement and their source of literature will surely dry up if they do not soon nourish themselves through cooperation with the proletarian culture in the fight against fascism. The (petty bourgeoisie) New Culturist Han Thuyen group claims to value science but exercises an anti-scientific stance in their opposition to historical and dialectical materialism. Were they not the ones replacing dialectical materialism with vulgar, mechanical materialism? Were they not the ones disguising themselves as historical materialists so as to distort Marx's historical materialism? They admit that they do not dare to defend the fundamental cultural rights of the masses. We want to say: they do not have the

qualifications or ability to oppose—whether directly or not—the propaganda tactics of the Institute of Japanese Culture or the Alexandre de Rhodes Publishing House. They disregard the principle of vietnamisation, daring to take us under the banner of “historical materialism” in order to process the history of the Vietnamese people and, in doing so, slander the true theory of historical materialism.<sup>5</sup> Instead of concentrating all forces of Vietnamese culture into a united cultural front to oppose the current cult of ignorance, the regressive and mediaeval culture of the fascists, and the dangerously invasive Japanese culture, they divided the cultural front of our people and, whether intentionally or not, benefitted the enemies. Indeed, why did they aim the fire of cultural struggle at the nationalist creatives (*Tri Tan* and *Thanh Nghi*) whilst knowing that a mutual alliance with these creatives—so as to focus the fire of cultural struggle at the Japanese and French fascists—is a matter of life and death for the people? Is it not suspicious that some Trotskyists can be found running rampant under Han Thuyen's supposed banner of New Culture?

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The three aforementioned principles of the New Culture movement must be written on the banner of the vanguard, loyal, steadfast, active, and skilful cultural workers. These cultural workers must find their strength among the masses, their spirit among the people, and use dialectical materialism as their guide. Their path must be the only correct and progressive path of socialist realism.<sup>6</sup> These writers must fight on all cultural fronts: be it art, language, customs, beliefs, etc. Their actions must encompass both legal and illegal forms of struggle and cannot be separated from the revolutionary campaign for the liberation of our people at the present time.

<sup>5</sup> TC: For example, see Nguyễn Tế Mỹ, *Hai bà Trưng khởi nghĩa* (Hanoi: Han Thuyen, 1941).

<sup>6</sup> Strangely, this sentence was removed from revised editions and reprints circa 1975.



NGƯỜI CHIẾN SĨ SẢN XUẤT NGÀY NAY IN BÓNG DÁNG NĂM XƯA

Tranh : Phạm Thanh Tâm .

Phạm Thanh Tâm (c. 1950s)

## RESISTANCE IN THE FIELD OF CULTURE

Trường Chinh, 1947<sup>1</sup>

Our total resistance requires more than just waging resistance within the fields of the military, politics, and economy—we must equally wage resistance in the field of culture. For our people, culture should likewise be a battlefield.

The tasks of the resistance in the field of culture are:

1. To eliminate the obscurantist culture introduced by the French colonists to strengthen their domination.
2. To build a new-democracy culture for Vietnam.

How are we to rid ourselves of the obscurantist culture of the French colonists? And, in answering, let us take note to not confuse this form of culture with the genuine and progressive culture of the French people.

Of course, our people's resistance is purging the evil influence of this reactionary culture; those subjugative, cowardly, and parasitic ways that were established during the time of French domination are being wiped out; the moral and intellectual chains of the French colonists are being broken. However, we must realise that the culture of the colonists remains prevalent in the thinking and habits of our cadres and people. For as long as they remain in our country, the French colonists will continue to deceive our people. Every day, the enemy sows so much of their poison among our people through their pamphlets, books, newspapers, magazines, speeches, and broadcasts that there are still some of us who are under the illusion that their intentions remain good. There are still people who have doubts as to our final victory, or

even believe that the enemy's "mission" is to fight us in order to re-establish peace and order, to bring the light of civilisation to our people, etc. These misconceptions, disguised as culture, are supported by policies of armed terror and economic corruption, and have been of some benefit to the enemy, particularly in the occupied zones.

The tendency toward such thinking is very dangerous, and must be fought resolutely.

All artists and writers, teachers and intellectuals, must now take part in the resistance, establishing a cultural front to attack those cultural strongholds of the enemy.

Currently, our engineers, in collaboration with the workers, are fiercely striving in the rear to establish workshops and production camps for the manufacturing of arms and that which is needed by the army and people. Doctors, nurses, and students are administering and overseeing the healthcare of the cadres and the masses. A number of architects are taking part in the construction of defence projects, schools, administration buildings, and refugee centres. These are the various ways in which people are participating in the resistance.

All our teachers are endeavouring to free the people from illiteracy and to train cadres to serve the long resistance and national reconstruction efforts. Our musicians are creating martial music and invigorating compositions. Our poets are penning lines which arouse love for the country and hatred for the enemy. Many artists and painters are actively participating in the creation of propaganda for the resistance. This is their way of taking part in the resistance.

All political figures, journalists, and writers are urging the army and people to unite in struggle, clearly defining the distinct advantages and disadvantages of various political lines, and proposing tactics and policies. Is this form of resistance any less important than that of armed struggle on the battlefield?

But all this is not enough. Further efforts must be made. There are still many shortcomings in our cultural activity. We are yet to have all the cultural forces at our disposal; the creative writers, scientists, and artists have

<sup>1</sup> *Resistance in the Field of Culture* is an extract from Trường Chinh's 1947 *The Resistance Will Win*. Written at the early onset of the war of resistance against the French, *The Resistance Will Win* sought to imbue the Vietnamese—for many of whom prospects of victory seemed impossible—with morale through a clearly defined path forward, made up of various fronts of resistance: the military, politics, the economy, and notably culture.

not yet been fully mobilised. There are a great number of creatives who want to work but are simply unsure of what to do; worse, there are still those who remain indifferent. And while there are those cultural workers who have boldly taken part in the resistance, and are currently serving the army and imbedding themselves with the masses, achieving much progress in this regard, we still feel that they lack clear guiding principles and planning.

For as long as the enemy is tramping all over our fatherland, and the whole nation is actively and heroically struggling, every cultural activity must be in line with the slogan: LOVE FOR THE COUNTRY, HATRED FOR THE ENEMY.

All cultural workers must celebrate and endeavour for the renewal of the collective heroism of our army and people, as well as instigating the greatest possible hatred for the enemy, so that our army and people will advance fervently in the fight against the enemy, preferring death to surrender. Their work must aim at merging our people into a single bloc in full support of the Party, firm confidence in national salvation, and not becoming despondent when faced with difficulties and hardships. Equally, their work must aim to dishearten the enemy troops by any means necessary, to lower the enemy's morale, and cause defections from their ranks into ours—the correct path.

There are numerous methods that can be undertaken in order to achieve these ends. Our cultural workers must frequently utilise the most uncomplicated of artistic methods so as to instigate a keen response from the masses. For example: newspapers (particularly *dazibao*), leaflets, posters, sketches, pictures, talks, songs, dances, etc.

Equally, we should not be afraid to make use of the artistic methods of the old culture for our propaganda as, owing to their established familiarity with the masses, such artistic forms are the most influential. For example, the various styles of folk song, such as *trong quan*, *quan họ*, *bat dum*, and *bat boi*,<sup>2</sup> should be widely used,

provided that they are imbued with “new content and new spirit.”

To use culture in service of the resistance, as described above, is to build a new culture for the country.

It is of our opinion that culture must be grounded on the following three principles:

1. Vietnamisation;
2. Scientification;
3. Massification.

That which is contrary to these concepts—namely, Vietnameseness, science, and the masses—whether in form or in content, must be eradicated.

The war is, in part, assisting us in this endeavour. Of course the war has brought about great upheaval, but in doing so it has also provided us with the opportunity to boldly “revolutionise” culture. Major events are taking place: many towns are being destroyed and their inhabitants forced to evacuate into the countryside. These towns, once centres of culture, are now under enemy occupation and are being turned into dark and savage places through the proliferation of the aggressors' depraved, obscurantist “culture.” On the contrary, the countryside, once a dark and backward place, is now becoming civilised and progressive. Whereas culture was once something to be enjoyed by only a handful of rich people in the cities, it has, in this short span of time, been brought closer to the masses. In order to serve the fatherland and its people, cultural workers must create works which are legible and accommodate the level of the masses who, for the most part, are illiterate or have only basic education. Thus, our cultural works must be massified. During this war, old methods and habits that are ill-adapted to the current context (bureaucracy, for example) have tended to disappear. In the resistance, every task must be performed both rationally and economically—and must serve a precise purpose. That which is not scientific therefore tends to disappear. Thus, our cultural works must be scientific. The resistance seeks to rouse our hatred for everything

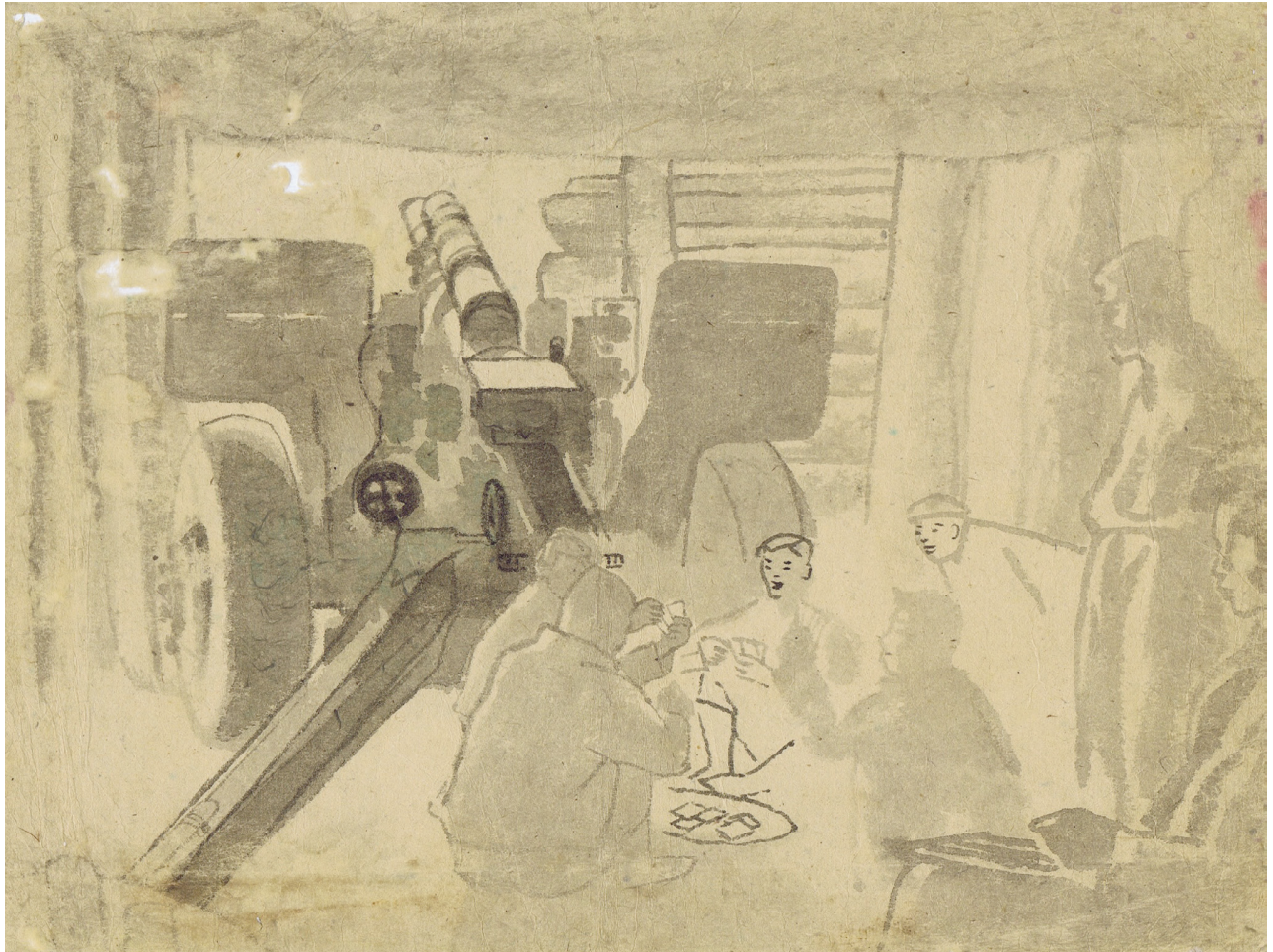
<sup>2</sup> Quan họ is a folk music style originating in Bac Ninh Province, characterised by pairs of male and female singers issuing antiphonal musical challenges and responses. Traditionally, a *câu ra*, a challenge phrase from a collective body of songs, is sung by a pair of female singers. In response, a pair of male singers must sing a *câu đối*, a phrase that corresponds to the original *câu ra* in the same melody. If they succeed, the roles are reversed and the men, following a new melody, will issue their own *câu ra* to which the women must respond.

Trống quân is a less sophisticated form of quan họ, where the *câu ra* and *câu đối* can be improvised, and the rigid following of specific melodies is not required. Unlike traditional quan họ, trống quân allows for the use of instruments.

Hát đúm is a similar folk practice, originating in Thuy Nguyen, where masked male and female singers playfully woo each other through song, following a specific melody and syntax. Although the singers are expected to improvise lyrically, a precise six-part lyrical procedure must

be followed: (1) a greeting, (2) an invitation to the singer's home, (3) conversational topics such as family and career, (4) a discussion of emotions using nature-based metaphors, (5) an expression of love or feelings for the other, (6) a goodbye.

Hát bội, also known as *tuồng*, is a Vietnamese adaptation of classic Chinese opera. During this time, it underwent significant reconstruction: its rigid structure (such as using stock characters, for example) was loosened, and the high proportion of Chinese loanwords (that



Phạm Thanh Tâm (1954)

that opposes Vietnameseness, and everything which apes the colonists. Owing to this, our cultural workers are quickly able to ascertain their slavish afflictions of “half-breed Frenchness” and “half-breed Chineseness” in order to cure themselves. Thus, cultural works must be vietnamised.

The opportunities are good. The conditions of the resistance are very favourable to the building of a new culture. It requires only that the Vietnamese cultural workers take bold steps and avail themselves of the opportunity to develop Vietnamese culture on the basis of new-democracy. Their practical tasks are:

1. To use art and literature for the purpose of propaganda and for mobilising the forces of the resistance;
2. To struggle against illiteracy and develop education;
3. To build a new life;
4. To popularise the practice of hygiene among the people;
5. To eliminate all subjugative colonial vestiges in the field of culture;
6. To develop the cultural characteristics of Vietnameseness, science, and the masses.

If we are to advance, our cultural spheres must engage in extreme self-criticism, surrendering their tendencies towards arrogance of, contempt for, and aloofness from the masses. Further, they should shake off their tendencies towards selfishness, the avoidance of that which is difficult or risky, as well as wavering and opportunistic behaviour.

While we should refrain from overly harsh criticism of traditional and foreign cultures, we should not blindly follow their examples either. We should maintain a critical spirit in regard to these cultures, assimilating that which can be deemed good and rejecting that which can be deemed bad.

In this great struggle, those who fail to keep pace with

the movement, and those who do not adapt to the rapidly changing situation, will certainly be left far behind. Our cultural workers should pay close attention to this fact.

made it difficult for ordinary Vietnamese to appreciate) were reduced. Notably, hát bội differs from the older *chèo*, which combines dance, folk songs, and poetry, creating often satirical folk plays that combine the operatic style of hát bội with humorous sketches criticising everything from inept politicians to French, American, and Chinese aggression to, most recently, social media culture and the COVID-19 pandemic.



Phạm Thanh Tâm (1954)

## EIGHTEEN PRINCIPLES FOR WRITING

*Trường Chinh, 1947*

### VIETNAMISATION

1. Do not use any foreign word if not absolutely necessary.
2. Do not write any sentence in a foreign manner if not absolutely necessary.
3. Do not make use of allusions if not absolutely necessary.
4. Do not deviate from the precious literary traditions of our people.
5. Do not underestimate the literary capital of our people.
6. Do not lambaste the good and beautiful elements of foreign art and literature.

### SCIENTIFICATION

1. Do not write any sentence that is grammatically incorrect in Vietnamese.
2. Do not use any redundant words—except when deliberately repeating for emphasis.
3. Do not write any sentence that may be misunderstood or that might have two meanings.
4. Do not separate your writing from the manner in which the people speak.
5. Do not write messily.
6. Do not use old Vietnamese or foreign clichés (do not confuse such clichés with proverbs and idioms).

### MASSIFICATION

1. Do not be afraid to use the common words of the masses.
2. Do not write any sentence that the typical reader would not be able to understand.
3. Do not write solely for a few “upper-class intellectuals.”
4. Do not write verbosely—or aimlessly quote books and papers simply to glorify oneself.
5. Do not forget, when engaging in massification, to raise the standards of the masses.
6. Do not use massification as an excuse to write vulgarly or rudely.



Phạm Thanh Tâm (1955)

## MARXISM AND VIETNAMESE CULTURE

Trường Chinh, 1948<sup>1</sup>

Dear comrades and friends,

The guns ring out on the battlefield. The fresh rice paints the fields green. The sounds of screeching iron and factory engines are in rhythm with the creaking of wagons and poles on the shoulders of the supply and transport convoys. Scientific minds cluster in military laboratories and around hospital operating tables. The voices of children in classrooms echo throughout remote hamlets. The radio stations increasingly spread news to the outside world of Vietnam's resistance, followed by the tunes of *Destroy the Fascists* and *Army Marching Song*.

The entire resistance machine of the Vietnamese nation has rumbled into motion. An entire nation, united under the leadership of President Hồ, is actively endeavouring on all fronts: militarily, politically, economically, and culturally.

Our total war has followed the momentum set by our patriotism, and advanced fiercely into its second phase.

We meet now for the sole purpose of defining the philosophy of cultural activities, uniting our country's creatives into a single front, and mobilising our cultural forces so as to devote ourselves to the ongoing struggle, expelling the enemy, saving the country, and building a new Vietnamese culture.

On this occasion, comrades and friends, we would like to present a new cultural position and perspective, a philosophy of resistance and national construction within the field of culture: *Marxism and Vietnamese culture*.

## CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Dear comrades and friends,

Culture is a vast domain, encompassing literature, art, science, philosophy, customs, beliefs, and so on. Some think that culture and civilisation are synonymous, yet history has shown us that there are many races who, although not yet civilised, maintain the defining characteristics of culture. It is not until culture is filtered of all its complexities and nuances, and advanced to a certain level, that it becomes civilisation.

Only once one's basic material conditions (being born, surviving, being fed, clothed, etc.) are met can one sing, dance, draw, write, or philosophise. Economy is the foundation of a society—the *base*—while politics, law, and culture, built upon this base, are the *superstructure* of society.

Man's geographical circumstances have a defining effect upon the spirit of society, but it is the means of production—more broadly, the economy—which is the primary determining factor. Of course, the economy is not the only determining factor, nor is it always the direct one, but, in the final analysis, the primacy of economic factors can be consistently observed. While literature, art, education, ideology, etc., all forming part of the superstructure, are built upon specific economic conditions, they are deeply influenced by other elements within the superstructure, such as politics and law. Although it may appear as if the superstructure develops autonomously, it is primarily determined by the existing material conditions of society, and, simultaneously, is able to affect the material life of the society and contribute towards social reform.

What was Western Europe's Renaissance period (the fifteenth- and sixteenth-centuries) if not a reflection of the intense vitality of society at the time, where new methods of production spurred manufacturing, and where, evoked by the global market, there was vibrant experimentation across the fields of science, technology, and commerce? What was China's May Fourth Movement (1919) if

<sup>1</sup> Speech delivered at the Second National Cultural Assembly, 16 July 1948.

not a reflection of the intense vitality of China, whose industrial and commercial infrastructure had begun to develop, despite having her land torn between imperial powers and her economic development hindered by feudal remnants?

In our country, Nom literature, and national culture in general, developed strongly towards the end of the eighteenth-century with the Tay Son peasant uprising. During that time, new means of production fell into the hands of the Vietnamese due to the southern advances of the Nguyễn Lords. The domestic market expanded; the masses, particularly farmers and craftsmen, were brutally oppressed and exploited by the feudal aristocracy. They rebelled against the greedy and treasonous kings and traitors of the Lê dynasty, determined to preserve the land and country and protect its agriculture, crafts, and commerce—which were very likely to develop as they were in contact with foreign markets—from stagnating due to the destruction of the Nguyễn–Trịnh Civil War.

It should be noted that the arts and literature of one country can only profoundly influence that of another in certain socio-economic conditions. Our country's romantic writers, from around 1926–1945, were only able to clumsily copy French romantic writers because the socio-economic conditions that gave rise to French romanticism were too dissimilar to Vietnam's socio-economic conditions at the time. The reason that Vietnamese romantic literature flourished in 1926 and 1927 is that, during this period in Vietnam, state capitalism was rapidly developing, and, over time, the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie lifestyles began contradicting the rituals, customs, and practices of Vietnam's decaying feudal society. Another reason is that the national bourgeoisie and the intellectual petty bourgeoisie found an anti-colonial voice in Vietnamese romanticism.

However, does saying that economy determines culture imply that a culture born under certain economic conditions will disappear alongside the disappearance of those conditions? Of course not, granted that every

culture has its peak, yet when the economic conditions that birthed the culture have changed, its works, no matter how good, are no longer as “worshipped” as before. Thus, its historical value weighs heavier than its actual value. There are many works that were produced during times of human exploitation that are still praised even though such human exploitation no longer has any place in our contemporary society. The reason for this is simple: labour, love, and fighting (against the reactionary forces in society or against the indifferent forces of nature) are timeless and enduring inspirations for art. And works, based on social reality, that correctly envision the inevitable progression of history, are even more valuable for the evolution of society.

Further, does saying that economy determines culture imply that culture and economy always develop hand-in-hand, or parallel? Does such a statement imply that culture blindly follows economy? Of course not. Disparity between economy and culture is a feature of class society. There are times when the economy burgeons, but the culture stagnates or develops slowly. That is to say, sometimes the economy has excelled, but political theories and forms of cultural consciousness lag behind, unable to describe the changed economic reality. On the contrary, when it comes to political theories and literary works that express avant-garde ideas, they often precede the economic reality.

The dominant culture of a society is always that of the society's ruling class. As Marx and Engels wrote: “The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.”<sup>2</sup>

By owning the key means of production, the ruling class has the capability to propagandise its cause on a mass scale, train its henchmen, and idealise the system it seeks to maintain and develop indefinitely. The historical progression of human society from slavery to capitalism has proven this.

We are uniting the nation to fight against the invading French colonists and their Vietnamese cronies. We often emphasise “national culture,” but it is important

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, translated by Samuel Moore (London: Penguin, 2002), 241.



Phạm Thanh Tâm (1956)

to realise that in the areas temporarily occupied by the enemy, there exists a culture of the French colonists and unpatriotic Vietnamese that opposes our national culture, and seeks to represent only the classes of feudalist landlords and pro-French comprador bourgeoisie (this culture prevails in areas under French occupation). At the same time, there is a culture of patriotism and resistance, one that defends the interests of the nation and people, a new-democracy culture (this culture is dominant in the free zones). However, a contradiction exists within our country's national culture: on one side, it works towards the interests of the working class, and, on the other, it works towards the interests of the national bourgeoisie. Without fully grasping this, it would not be possible to fully comprehend the cultural currents and internal conflicts between these contradictions in our country today.

Since the August Revolution, Vietnamese society has been one under a people's democracy, the new-democracy. The official culture of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was a people's democratic culture, the new-democracy. It defends and upholds the people's rights, promotes the development of the people's democracy, and fights against the colonial invaders and traitorous Vietnamese classes. Our people's resistance against the French colonists was aimed at annihilating the reactionary culture in the areas temporarily controlled by the enemy, and spreading the people's democratic culture throughout the country.

Now, let us speak about the formation of revolutionary thought and culture.

As society develops, the means of production are becoming significantly more complex, and the productive forces are growing day by day. At a certain point, these productive forces become constrained by the framework of the old society and its outdated relations to production. They need to be liberated, but the entire system squeezes them. This contradiction struck the most cognisant minds in the oppressed and exploited classes.<sup>3</sup> They used spiritual values to fight against the

oppressive and exploitative classes and, in the process of that struggle, they created revolutionary theories. They utilised every legal and illegal method to spread these theories among the masses. Those of the revolutionary class who were the most advanced became stars, shining through the thick clouds of ignorance brought about by the ruling class. Thus, the struggle between the forces in need of liberation and the economic-political framework of the old society first appeared in the form of an ideological struggle. It was then that revolutionary literature flourished. The revolutionary masses took ownership of that literature, legitimising it, and seeking in it the pioneering ideas needed to guide them, illuminating their progress in the liberation struggle. At that time, the revolutionary theories and literature served the purpose of enlightening, motivating, and organising the masses; bringing the masses into the revolutionary ranks, giving them courage, determination, and a cause; calling upon the masses to rise up and revolt—to overthrow the oppressive and exploitative classes, to break the old relations of production, liberate the forces of production, and establish a new society in accordance with their interests and aspirations.

The age of social revolution began.

The ideological struggle became an armed struggle. Attacks with pens were replaced by attacks with weapons. Revolutionary culture had preceded the economic reality and exerted a strong influence back on society.

The economic and political defines the cultural, and, in turn, the cultural affects the economic and political—sometimes with extraordinary force.

## THE MARXIST CULTURAL STANCE

Marxist culture in general, and Marxist literature and art in particular, adores the truth. It exposes the ills of the old society. It unmasks the oppressive rulers who, having exploited their own people, exploit those in foreign lands. It dissects the old society. It posits that the schemes and

<sup>3</sup> TC: These people do not necessarily have to come from the exploited class, however. Owing to their close relationship with the masses, their keen awareness of the process of social development and of the historical mission of the working class, which is at the same time the vanguard class, they have abandoned their inherent class position and voluntarily joined their ranks so as to fight for their revolutionary aims. [This note was later removed in published editions].

tricks of the ruling class, no matter how clever or cunning, cannot maintain a corrupted regime indefinitely. It clearly points out the historical mission of the working class—the radical revolutionary class—and resolutely fulfils it. Not only does it explain why the old society must die, but equally why a new society must be born, and what this new order will look like. While professing reality as it is, it marks the immediate path of history. Therefore, in our present time, the most revolutionary culture is a socialist realist culture. Its method is scientifically-based. Its stance is materialist. It is in stark contrast to the fatuous, reactionary “culture” of the exploiting classes (the bourgeoisie landowners, etc.) whose purpose is to conceal the evils of the old society; to distort the truth and hide the rotten wood of old society under a coat of shiny paint. The counter-revolutionary culture is one that fears the truth like an owl fears sunlight. Even in its many bizarre and devious forms, one can still see its idealistic and mystical tail sticking out.

A feature of counter-revolutionary culture is that anti-scientific content is presented scientifically—poor content is concealed in rich, glossy, delicate, sophisticated forms. It is thus unsurprising that from the rotten trees of modern imperialist culture grow colourful mushrooms: cubism, impressionism, surrealism, dadaism, etc.

Some have said that with such art movements, “an era of technology has replaced the era of humanism.”<sup>4</sup> In reality, however, these were just anti-scientific, anti-progressive movements hidden under a coat of flashy aesthetics to entertain the few exploiters who, in their competitive tussling for the colonial market and exploitation of cheap labour to sell goods for profit, cause carnage among mankind. And the writers and artists who deeply involved themselves in these movements are either those who dedicate their talents to serve the interests of the reactionaries, so as to feed on their scraps, or simply cowards who do not dare to fight for an ideal, instead finding a way to “escape” or “distract” themselves by using obscure, eccentric forms alongside superior techniques to deceive not only themselves but others—

whether intentional or not.

Some writers and artists have been unconsciously influenced by these depraved schools of art. Occasionally they too sought to protest against the injustices of capitalist society, but, as if travelling within the tapering horn of a buffalo, become trapped. Their prospects are thus very bleak if they are not soon awoken, find another path, or are saved by social revolution.

In our country, French debauchery held a strong influence. In the past, some writers and artists who were dissatisfied with the colonial regime sincerely and innocently followed the schools of cubism, surrealism, etc., not daring to boldly embrace critical realism. Thus, they succumbed to—and became stuck in—these ridiculous arts. The August Revolution rescued most of them from the trap of the depraved arts of the French bourgeoisie. Fortunately!

It is said that culture is something noble that transcends all classes and political leanings, only serving “pure ideals” and humanity as a whole. Can such be true? No! Within a society, particularly a class-divided society, it is impossible to have a culture (especially manifesting in art and literature) without bias. Every work of art implies a certain attitude toward society. Either it stands against oppression and exploitation, or it stands with it. Either it advocates for justice and freedom, or it opposes it. “Art for art’s sake” is a misleading, ambiguous view. Socialist realism is an artform which does not tend to reflect the author’s subjectivity, but rather reflects the objectivity of the historical development process. In order to serve humanity, serve the nation, and contribute to historical development, cultural soldiers must take a revolutionary stance, that of socialist realism, opposing reactionism and all forms of depraved, regressive, obscure culture.

How can culture be neutral? When given a choice on which side to take, either national resistance or colonial aggression, creatives must unequivocally decide whether they are on the side of democracy (the progressives) or imperialism (the reactionaries); join the national resistance or support the invading colonialists; endorse

<sup>4</sup> René Huyghe, *La peinture française: La peinture actuelle* (Paris: Bibliothèque de l’Atlas des Arts, 1945).



Phạm Thanh Tâm (1956)

progressive democracy or serve the barbaric empire. Two paths have been demarcated—one must be chosen. To be neutral, to have nothing to do with the sacred struggle of the nationalist and democratic forces, is to slow down historical development, and to inadvertently help the reactionaries maintain and add their shackles to their slaves, humanity, the nation, and oneself.

“Completely neutral culture,” “absolute freedom,” “to stand above politics,” “to be indifferent”—such terms are meaningless. The allegation that “neutrality is to be noble and absolutely free” is one of a coward or a reactionary!

There are still writers and artists who declare “I am divided: as a citizen I have defined characteristics, but as an artist I am completely free.” Nonsense! Freedom is precious, but in reality, there is no freedom separate from necessity. Engels wrote: “Freedom therefore consists in the control over ourselves and over external nature, a control founded on knowledge of natural necessity; it is therefore necessarily a product of historical development.”<sup>5</sup>

Why must “freedom” and “necessity” go together? Because a free person is one who understands the necessary and objective laws of nature and society, and works within the scope of such understandings to progress their nation and humanity as a whole. If you oppose the historical development of society—to be anti-democratic or anti-progressive—you will certainly be crushed like grain under the wheel of history, and enjoy your “freedom” as fertiliser for plants.

Some question: “is there really freedom if one must take a side in support of a political ideal?” The answer: yes, there is! The nationalist and democratic factions fight for freedom and progress, and fight according to the laws of history and the universe. We cultural soldiers cannot find freedom outside of the epic struggle of the nation and democratic world against imperialism.

It is worth noting that the writers and artists who love “absolute freedom” often do not understand that in a society where there is the production of goods to be sold for profit, their artworks must also follow the law of

supply and demand (irrespective of whether they want it to or not). Those artists and writers who are legitimised within capitalist society generally create their works in order to sell them. They are not allowed to do as they please. On the contrary, they are more or less expected to follow the proclivities of the customer. And who are the largest consumers? The exploiters and parasites of society. Therefore, in order for their works to be popular, writers must satisfy the most reactionary and most bizarre wills of these parasites. They cannot practise their “art for art’s sake,” but instead have to kneel before their “golden cow.” There is nothing remotely neutral in such a situation. Is that freedom? Therefore, the most progressive writers and artists are those who stand firmly for the interests of the revolutionary masses and use their art to serve a revolutionary ideal; to overthrow the exploitative regime of one nation oppressing another, wherein everything is a commodity, even common sense and knowledge, and to quickly build up a society that guarantees true freedom within art and literature.

We have spoken about the revolutionary class. Now, let us speak about the nation.

In imperialist countries, such as Britain, the United States, and France, the truly revolutionary class is the working class (the proletariat). In an invaded country like ours, there are many revolutionary classes among the people, although it is the working class which too is the most revolutionary. They are the most revolutionary because, having lived under the yoke of colonialism and feudalism the longest, they are the most oppressed and exploited; the manner in which they work and live makes it easier for them to unite; they represent an abundant and creative work force. They have many allies across the world, so they are strong, fervid, and trustful. By now you know that the working class already owns one-sixth of the world in the form of the Soviet Union, the first socialist country in history, and this ownership is expanding to people’s democracies. The sacrifice and devotion of the Vietnamese working class to the cause of national liberation in the past twenty years is crystal

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Engels, “Anti-Dühring,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, translated by Emile Burns (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987), 106.

clear. Equally clear is the achievements in resistance of the working class in the lifeline of the enemy's economy.

The core interests of the Vietnamese working class and the Vietnamese nationalists are one and the same. Like the other classes in Vietnamese society, the working class realised that they could only move towards total liberation if the nation itself was totally liberated; they could only have happiness and freedom if the nation as a whole had happiness and freedom. Therefore, the Vietnamese working class voluntarily put their ultimate interests on hold, so as to fight for the sacred and immediate interests of the nation. Thus, the working class volunteered to be the vanguard army in the National United Front and fight against the French colonists and gain independence and reunification for the fatherland.

In order to serve the national interests to the fullest, and in the most loyal manner, Vietnamese cultural soldiers must boldly stand under the flag of the vanguard army, or at least be close allies of the vanguard army.

If the position of Marxist cultural soldiers is that of the working class and of the nation, then the position of patriotic cultural soldiers outside the Marxist ranks must be a nationalist stance alongside a close allyship with the working class.

Is it possible to fight for our nation from only a nationalist stance, however? No. Our nation is a democracy, moreover, a new-democracy; it is not a pseudo-democracy of a few oppressors, but a democracy of the people (the majority) fighting to destroy these thieves and traitors (a minority). It is impossible to fight only for the nation and the people while being against democracy. Those who say “whether the state is a democracy or monarchy is unimportant, so long as it is independent and united” will sooner or later fall into the trap of the colonists, doomed to be their slaves!

Our Democratic Republic of Vietnam is part of the ranks of the world's democratic forces. It is an advanced division, not only for its new conception of democracy, but because our people are actively shedding their blood in fighting for us, and for peace and democracy across the

world.

Our nation's cultural fighters, as well as all progressive cultural fighters across the world who are loyal to their own people, would naturally fall in with the ranks of the new-democracy forces of the world, against all those imperialist and colonialist forces within it.

The new-democracy stance is equal to the scientific stance. This is because democracy is an important step for the development of society.

Cultural soldiers, particularly those of the new-democracy culture, must understand the universe, society, and man; they must understand the evolutionary laws of nature and society, and must clearly understand their scientific framework. “Good will is not enough to create good work,” said the French writer and critic Jean Fréville, “science without art is weak science, art without science is mediocre and tasteless.”<sup>6</sup>

We would like to add: not only is it tasteless and mediocre, but sometimes reactionary as well.

Marxism is a science. It helps cultural soldiers grasp the objective, universal rules governing society; to understand the evolution of society and the universe. It gives one a sublime method of learning and understanding life and man. It helps genius thrive.

Marxism, which many contemporary cultural geniuses—professor Joliot-Curie, physicist Paul Langevin, poet Louis Aragon, writers Ilya Ehrenburg, Aleksey Tolstoy, Mikhail Sholokhov, Chinese writer Guo Moruo, painter Picasso, etc.—have recognised as true, and are proud to follow, guides all hardworking and progressive peoples to strive for a brighter tomorrow. That is Marx's theories of dialectical and historical materialism.

Scientific discoveries have increasingly confirmed the aforementioned theories. We must mention three major areas of discovery of the nineteenth-century: Darwinism, energy transformation, and cell theory. Though, we ought to equally mention the many discoveries made in regard to quantum mechanics, the theory of relativity, electronics, the atom, etc., and the twentieth-century

<sup>6</sup> Jean Fréville, *Sur la Littérature et l'Art: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels* (Paris: Éditions sociales internationales, 1936).



Nguyễn Sỹ Ngọc (1957)

advances within the realms of physics, chemistry, biology, and other sciences.

From a materialist standpoint, by studying and applying the inherent dialectical laws of nature and society we can gradually explain their mysteries. No longer mystified by them, we now have an extremely acute method of inquiry and reasoning. It can be said that our nation was not deceived by France and, although weaker than them from a military standpoint, we were able to defeat them owing to that extraordinary method which we applied politically and militarily.

Those who create and foster cultural work in our country and want to serve the people, the nation, and humanity in the most effective way possible, must learn Marx's theories of dialectical and historical materialism.

All of the above leads us to the following conclusion. Today, the most revolutionary cultural stance in our country (and the world) is:

- To regard the working class as the social foundation.
- To regard national independence, people's democracy, and socialism as the political foundation.
- To regard dialectical and historical materialism as the ideological foundation.
- To regard socialist realism as the cultural foundation.

## **VIETNAMESE CULTURE, PAST AND PRESENT**

Dear comrades and friends,

We have just briefly presented the perspective and stance of Marxist culture. Now, let us delve straight into the subject of our country's culture.

Vietnam is a country which has maintained civilisations and traditions for thousands of years, but it is a small country, and one that is economically backward with people's livelihoods primarily dependent

upon agriculture. Our country's agricultural economy has, over the centuries, remained feudal in nature. The "Asiatic mode of production" and influence of the Chinese feudal regime has left it stagnant and unable to advance to the levels of capitalist developments.

This backward, agricultural country is located on the Indochina peninsula. Here, the two strongest winds of oriental culture are that of China and India, blowing across the fertile plains of two large rivers: the Mekong and the Red River. However, as the country is close to China, it has been dominated by Chinese feudalism for more than a thousand years, and remains deeply influenced by Chinese culture. In the South, our people absorbed elements of Chenla and Champa culture.

The previous generations, for decades, studied Chinese, wrote Chinese, thought according to the Chinese way of thinking; followed Chinese-imitated laws; read Chinese philosophy, performed Chinese rituals; and practised the religious beliefs of both China and India. Literature in our country was quite developed, but science and art developed far slower. The way that we ate, dressed, and lived was outdated. There are, of course, still many gems in our ancient literature, hidden under layers of dust, and it is our duty to continue the work of archaeologist Nguyễn Văn Tố, to search, gather, and closely study them so as not to miss a single one. Nevertheless, objectively speaking, we cannot help but notice that our ancient culture had two major disadvantages: Chinese dilution and a lack of science.

However, through many extreme ordeals under the yoke of foreign countries, our people were still able to maintain the Vietnamese character and essence, reflected in our voice; our fervid patriotism, spirit of national independence, laboural diligence, and courage in the struggle for freedom.

Military scientist Ngô Quyền; military scientist Trần Hưng Đạo; linguist Hàn Thuyên; political and military scientist Lê Lợi; writer and political and military scientist Nguyễn Trãi; mathematician Lương Thế Vinh; philosopher Nguyễn Bình Khiêm; physician Lân Ông;

writer and scientist Lê Quý Đôn; political and military scientist Quang Trung; writer and political scientist Ngô Thời Nhiệm; writer Nguyễn Du; historian Phan Huy Chú, and so on. Such geniuses will forever be the brightest stars in the Vietnamese sky, glorifying our race.

Aside from mainstream culture, there exists a folk culture in the dialects, proverbs, songs, fairy tales, chicken and pig paintings,<sup>7</sup> etc. This culture describes the struggles of the workers (farmers, bricklayers, traders, etc.), their dreams of a brighter future, their resistance to the elites; it ridicules backward customs, superstitions, and those who preach doing “good” and avoiding “evil.” It is a very rich treasure which our writers, historians, and archaeologists still have to work hard at fully grasping.

By the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries, merchant ships from Western Europe arrived at our country. They carried goods to be exchanged for agricultural and forestry products, and also Christian missionaries. This was the start of our country’s contact with Western European culture.

In the nineteenth-century, the French colonists invaded our country. At first, they only sought to use our country as a consumer market; but then gradually expanded their industries, exploiting workers and raw materials so as to produce goods on the spot. Following the end of the First World War (1914–1918), they implemented a policy of “vigorously exploiting the colonies” in order to recoup the losses of the French empire that had occurred during the prior four years of war. Here, there were two notable phenomena:

1. The French colonists spread French culture to Indochina to exert spiritual influence and gain control over the intellectuals and youth. However, they simultaneously tried to retain the old moralities, customs, and practices, so as to oppress our people and hinder our progress.
2. The French people invested in Indochina, opening our country to industrial commerce, and creating the industrial proletariat and



Dong Ho village (c. 2020)  
*Lợn đàn* (above); *gà đàn* (below)

<sup>7</sup> Trường Chinh is referring to Đông Hồ painting, a Vietnamese folk art created using woodblocks and traditionally thought to bring luck during Tết, the Lunar New Year. The creative process follows a precise method, originating in the Song Ho commune, wherein spongy paper, made from the bark of the dó tree, is coated with a mixture of ground oyster shells and steamed rice powder to create a shiny glaze. Paints, made from various indigenous plants, are applied to woodblocks which are stamped onto the paper in a layered fashion building an image. The most

popular images are *lợn đàn*, a corpulent pig with suckling piglets, and *gà đàn*, a hen surrounded by chicks, symbolising prosperity and happiness respectively.



Nguyễn Văn Thiệu (1957)

national bourgeoisie. To a certain extent, these two classes jumped into the fields of politics and culture.

In 1940, France capitulated to Germany, allowing Japan to leap into the Indochina peninsula, taking over France's control of the region. Our people were thus oppressed and exploited by both of these thugs. As such, Vietnamese culture has been partly influenced by Japanese culture. That said, its influence is obviously not profound, but traces still linger.

The common characteristics of the dominant culture in our country during the period when our people lived under the yoke of French colonial rule were complicated and disarrayed content, and a French–Chinese amalgamated form.

That being said, we are not seeking to disparage our country's culture. We simply seek to affirm, from an objective assessment, that our country's scientific and technological proficiency is weak, and our country's economy is basically feudal and semi-feudal. We are still hindered by the archaic vestiges of our past: politically, our country was sometimes colonial and sometimes semi-colonial, and while there was a long period of independence, we remained, to some extent, under the influence of Chinese feudal society. Now, for nearly a century we have been dominated by the French colonists. Thus, the essence of the nation has been suppressed and our cultural identity has not been able to truly express itself. Is it pessimistic to recognise this? Decidedly not! On the contrary, it should be recognised in order for us to bravely set out the task of resolving it.

Following the August Revolution, Vietnam achieved independence, but the French returned to invade yet again. As it stands, our country is still not a fully independent country: although a large part is free, there is a small part that remains temporarily occupied by the French. Thus, our country is not a colony as before, but a democratic country with semifeudal, semi-colonial characteristics. Therefore, the aim of our resistance is

to complete the goal of national liberation, wipe the colonists and imperialists from our country, and destroy the feudal ruins, creating a new-democracy economy, new-democracy politics, and a new-democracy culture.

We have spoken generally about Vietnamese culture. Now, considering that Vietnam has been dominated by France, how has Vietnamese culture developed? It can be divided into four distinct periods:

*The first period: from the invasion of our country by the French colonists to the end of the First World War*

At first, the French colonists only exercised control over the South, leaving our country partly independent, partly under French occupation. Faced with the risk of losing the country, some feudal intellectuals and peasants—led by Trương Công Định, Nguyễn Trung Trực, and Nguyễn Hữu Huân—revolted against the French (1861–1868). It was not until the Nguyễn dynasty signed the 1884 treaty with France that our country completely became a French colony. Prior to the First World War, France had not invested many efforts in exploiting our country. Nor had French culture impacted ours yet. Our old culture, still under Chinese influence, remained prevalent. During this period, the Vietnamese feudal class was divided: one part surrendered to the French colonists, while the other mobilised intellectuals and peasants to act against France, believing that the invasion jeopardised their futures. Some feudal intellectuals organised the Can Vương movement, opposing French politics and culture. Heading these movements were Phan Đình Phùng and Tôn Thất Thuyết (1885–1896).

Alongside the Can Vương movement, there was the Van Than movement, a Yen The peasant guerrilla movement led by Hoàng Hoa Thám (1887–1913), and the Hanoi Poison Plot (1908). Around the same time (1906–1908), a reform movement and tax resistance movement broke out, led by the likes of Phan Chu Trinh, Huỳnh Thúc Kháng, etc.

In 1905, Tsarist Russia lost to Japan. For the first time,

the small and weak peoples of Asia were confident that they could defeat the “white man” and raised their eyes to Tonkin. So began a journey to the East. The patriot Phan Bội Châu recruited youth to study in Japan. Immediately, some intellectuals set up learning associations in the country under the guise of teaching culture, but in fact used these associations to spread democratic reformist ideologies from China (those of Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei) and Japan (1907). These associations were termed the Tonkin Free Schools, and inaugurated in Hanoi and Ha Dong. At the time, the *Dang Co Tung* newspaper and the *Dong Van* daily newspaper were two mouthpieces with reformist dispositions.

One after the other, the French suppressed the Can Vuong movement, the Yen The Insurrection, the Hanoi Poison Plot, the tax resistance movement in Central Vietnam, and the Tonkin Free Schools. They published the *Indochina* periodical so as to spread pro-French sentiment. Furthermore, they abandoned the Chinese-language exam, and opened administrative officer training institutions, interpreting schools, French–Vietnamese schools, and the Hanoi Medical College.

The First World War erupted (1914). The French people propagated their war and forced our people to pay very heavy blood and silver taxes. People still remember the popular book *Crimes of the Germans*,<sup>8</sup> circulated in urban and rural areas, and the painting *Southern Dragon gushes silver*,<sup>9</sup> displayed on streets throughout the villages.

Enraged by the savage policies of the French, and taking advantage of their difficult circumstances in Europe, Emperor Duy Tân planned to act (1916). At the same time, the patriots Đội Cấn and Lương Ngọc Quyến led soldiers and revolutionary prisoners in an uprising in Thai Nguyen (1917).

#### *The second period: from 1918 to 1930*

The French empire had promised that, following the War, the Vietnamese people would enjoy freedom. However, when the War had finished, the colonial chains

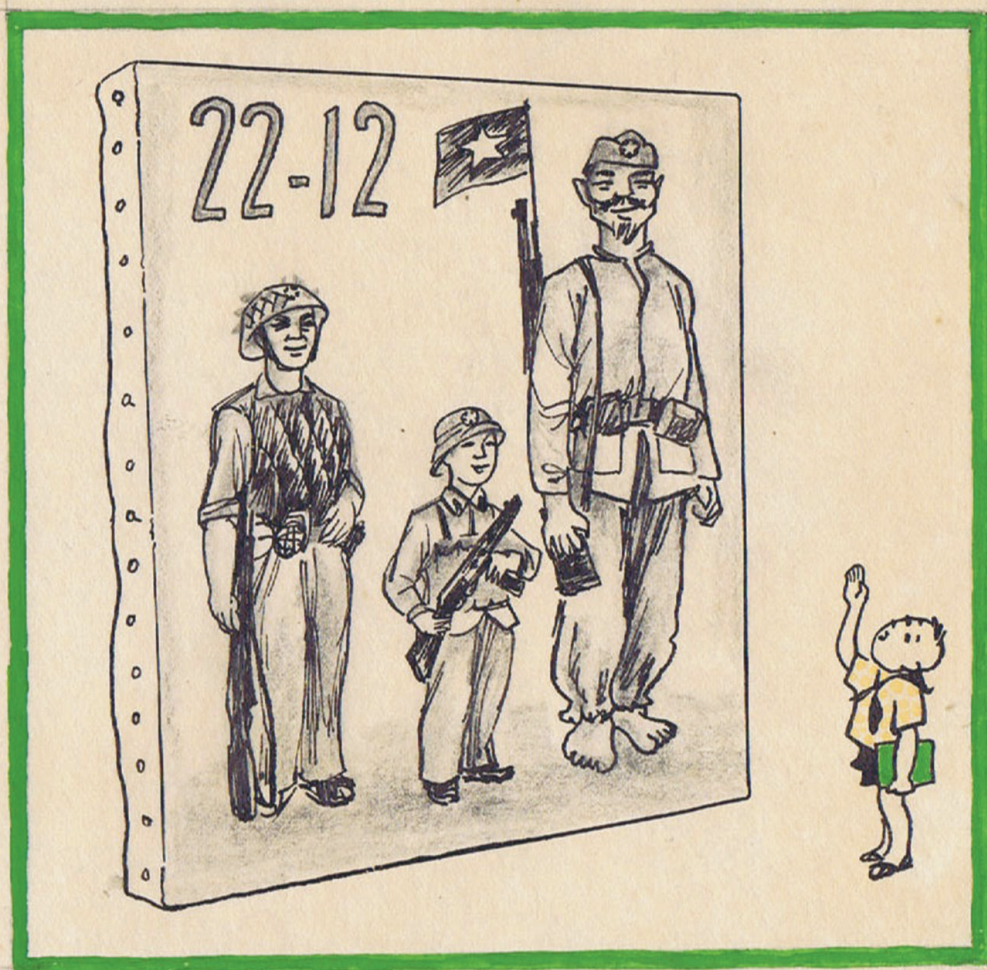
only tightened.

More plantations, mines, factories, and stores were opened. The industrial working class was born, along with the artisans and agricultural workers in the plantations. Together, they made up the Vietnamese working class and, concentrated in large numbers, began the struggle alongside the masses. Without the means of production, and under three layers of oppression (the imperialists, feudalists, and national bourgeoisie), the Vietnamese working class, the most advanced productive force in society, courageously and voluntarily stormed into the class struggle. Although emerging spontaneously, the working class struggle soon became self-cognisant and organised. In the course of the revolutionary struggle, the working class, in alliance with the peasant masses, united the broad classes of the people, consolidating revolutionary leadership and building a national front against imperialism and its cronies.

The Vietnamese bourgeoisie was formed. Owing to the trade of French merchandise, they sided with France and established light industry and crafts on a new scale to enrich themselves. The development of capitalism in Vietnam created the conditions for the Vietnamese bourgeoisie to come into existence, whilst suppressing and restricting the business of the class. Developed to a certain extent, the Vietnamese bourgeoisie divided into two distinct categories: the comprador bourgeoisie, whose interests were closely linked with those of the French colonists, and the national bourgeoisie, who tended to oppose the comprador bourgeoisie, French colonists, and those who still maintained a form of feudal rule. Despite being suppressed by the French colonists, the Vietnamese national bourgeoisie still maintained a partial relationship with the French for the purpose of business. Some maintained farmlands from which they could extract rent, and thus tended to be not only independent and libertarian, but inclined to reform and compromise. The revolutionary movement of the national bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie held a bourgeois–democratic character.

<sup>8</sup> TC: The name [*Đức Tặc Ân*] of a propaganda book, written in the style of the French colonists, was printed to condemn German imperialism, and encourage our people to serve in their army and die instead of them.

<sup>9</sup> TC: The name [*Rồng Nam phun bạc*] given to a large poster depicting a dragon, symbolising Vietnam, spitting out silver coins. The purpose was to encourage our people to spend money buying “waste” [*công thái*—old slang for government bonds] in order to help the French colonists fight Germany.



- Chào chú bộ đội ạ, chào anh ạ,  
chào... bác Giải phóng quân ạ!

22/12-1959  
Đ. Tâm

Phạm Thanh Tâm (1959)

The global situation after the First World War (1914–1917) gave rise to quite a lot of national liberation movements. In 1917, under the leadership of the Russian working class, and on the basis of a union with the peasantry, the October Socialist Revolution was a great success. It was the most profound and radical revolution in human history. Once established, the Soviet government immediately implemented the slogan of NATIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION, liberating the peoples from the Tsar in 1919. Equally, the May Fourth Movement in China was strongly anti-imperialist.

In 1919, due to a jealousy towards Britain and France, the American imperialists—through the mouth of President Wilson—proposed the theory of “widening the gateway” and espoused “national self-determination.” All of these events, particularly the October Revolution, provoked revolutionary movements in the colonial and semicolonial countries.

During and after the War, the French people were terrified of the awakening of the Vietnamese nation, so they allowed Phạm Quỳnh to publish the *Nam Phong* periodical in order to harmonise Eastern and Western cultures, the old and the new. They established the Association for the Intellectual and Moral Formation of the Annamites to preserve feudal morality. They promoted backward customs under the slogan NATIONAL SOUL, NATIONAL ESSENCE and introduced the conservative ideas of French literature. Furthermore, they allowed Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh to publish the neocolonial newspaper *Central-North Literature*,<sup>10</sup> and establish the “Western Thought” publishing house for translating French romantic classics. The radical and scientific thoughts of the eighteenth-century materialists and the revolutionary thoughts of European sociologists, however, were banned from translation. Quỳnh and Vĩnh tried to foster a reverence for *the Tale of Kiều*, offering feudal morality as a moral precedent in order to indirectly sabotage democratic and revolutionary ideologies, distracting young people and intellectuals from politics.

Despite the deceptiveness and treachery of the French colonists and their cronies, our national independence movement continued to grow sharply. In 1919, Comrade Nguyễn Ái Quốc—today, President Hồ Chí Minh—sent a letter to the World Peace Conference, held in Versailles, outlining eight demands of the Vietnamese people. Around 1921–1922, he founded the newspaper *Le Paria* in Paris, fighting for the rights of the oppressed.

In 1924, the sound of explosions rang out as martyr Phạm Hồng Thái attempted to kill the all-powerful Governor-General Merlin in Shamian (China), awakening the Vietnamese nation and shaking the skies of East Asia. In 1925, Phan Bội Châu was arrested by the French colonists in Shanghai and returned to Vietnam to be tried by the council, who sentenced him to death. This provided an opportunity for nationalist movements to develop under the auspices of a campaign for amnesty for the old man. Also in 1925, Phan Chu Trinh returned to the country, where he died the following year. His death was a spark that ignited the dry grass of Vietnamese patriotism. Students across the country skipped school to mourn. People from all walks of life commemorated him.

Having just returned from Con Dao, Ngô Đức Kế lambasted the overt “worshipping” of *the Tale of Kiều*, which he rightly criticised as a trick to enchant intellectuals and young people.

The rhymes of *Recalling the Soul of the Country* by Phạm Tất Đắc echoed in the Northern skies, while, in response, the *Free Drum*<sup>11</sup> of Trần Hữu Độ was beaten in the South, encouraging the fighting spirit of the people. In Paris, Comrade Nguyễn Ái Quốc was *Condemning the Policies of French Colonialism*.<sup>12</sup> *The Soul of Vietnam*, a newspaper published by Nguyễn Thế Truyền, flocked back to his home country. Nguyễn An Ninh rung the *Broken Bell*<sup>13</sup> in Saigon, while Huỳnh Thúc Kháng spoke with the *People's Voice*<sup>14</sup> in the citadel of Hue. Comrade Trần Huy Liệu *Poured his heart out*.<sup>15</sup> Phan Văn Trường and Nguyễn Khánh Toàn voiced radical public opinion in the newspapers *Annam*, *Essential*, *Morning Bell*,

<sup>10</sup> *Central-North Literature* [Trung Bắc tân văn].

<sup>11</sup> TC: The name [Hồi trống tự do] of a book, filled with enthusiasm, by Trần Hữu Độ, published in the South.

<sup>12</sup> TC: The name [Lên án chính sách thực dân pháp] of a book by comrade Nguyễn Ái Quốc denouncing the crimes of the French colonists, written in French and published in Paris (*Le Procès de la colonisation française*).

<sup>13</sup> TC: The name [Cái chuông rền] of an anti-colonial French newspaper, edited by Nguyễn An Ninh.

<sup>14</sup> TC: The name [Tiếng dân] of a radical newspaper, published by Huỳnh Thúc Kháng.

<sup>15</sup> TC: The name [Một bầu tâm sự] of a book by comrade Trần Huy Liệu, promoting patriotism and national spirit, published in Saigon.

etc. In Saigon, Mrs. Nguyễn Đức Nhuận published the periodical *Women in Literature* with the tendency to be relatively progressive, taking a bourgeois and nationalist stance to engage in feminist issues. In Hanoi, Phạm Tuấn Tài and Nguyễn Thái Học established the Nam Dong Thu commune, publishing the booklet *Exemplary Youth*,<sup>16</sup> highlighting the heroic and patriotic exploits of heroes and martyrs around the world. Romantic, anti-feudal literature began with the novel *Tổ Tâm* by Professor Hoàng Ngọc Phách. Reformist ideology fought conservative ideology in the combative polemics on Confucian–Mencian philosophy by Phan Khôi and Trần Trọng Kim.

From 1925 until 1927, the Northern Expedition grew steadily in China, opposing imperialism and its militaristic henchmen. Vietnamese youths eagerly travelled to China to study revolutionary ideas. Comrade Nguyễn Ái Quốc returned to China from the Soviet Union in order to assist Vietnamese youths with attending political training classes in Guangzhou, and to personally train cadres for the Vietnamese revolution.

During that time, many revolutionary organisations were secretly established in the country: the Vietnam Nationalist Party, the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League, the Revolutionary Party of the New Vietnam, the Workers' Union, the Farmers' Union, the Students' Union, etc.

In December 1927, the Guangzhou commune was established for three days. Despite their defeat, Cantonese workers showed that authority was indeed attainable for the working class peoples of colonial and semi-colonial Asian countries. Vietnamese workers and students were enlivened. They operated enthusiastically and, by 1929, the first communist organisation was established in the North. In June, the Indochinese Communist Party was born with a powerful manifesto. Revolutionary publications circulated in secret among the public, including the *Hammer and Sickle* newspaper, *Red Union* periodical,<sup>17</sup> etc.

In February 1930, the Yen Bai mutiny, led by the

Vietnam Nationalist Party, erupted but ultimately failed. This defeat ended the period of campaigning for a passé bourgeois democratic revolution in Vietnam—that is, a bourgeois democratic revolution led by the Vietnamese bourgeoisie class. It marks the end of the very short development period of old democratic culture in our country.

### *The third period: From 1930 to the 1945 August Revolution*

On 3 February 1930, the communist organisations in Vietnam unified into a single party, the Communist Party of Vietnam (later renamed the Indochinese Communist Party). Comrade Nguyễn Ái Quốc presided over the conference on the consolidation of Indochinese communist forces and drafted the Party's manifesto. Following the Yen Bai bloodbath, worker and peasant strikes, led by the Indochinese Communist Party, spread across the country. From September 1930 to June 1931, Nghe Tinh peasants took power, establishing local Soviets.

Vietnam's revolutionary leadership passed from the hands of the national bourgeoisie, who had just fallen in Yen Bai, to the hands of the young working class who bravely rose up to accept their glorious historical mission.

The Nghe Tinh Soviets were brutally repressed. An unprecedented terror raged throughout the North, Central, and South. The French colonists believed that they could use violence to destroy the Vietnamese communist movement, but they were wrong. Vietnam's crippled industry needed to rid itself of the shackles of imperialism in order to advance to a level of heavy industry and develop independently of the industry of the French empire; Vietnam's agricultural economy needed to be freed from feudal relations to production—tillers must have land; the Vietnamese people needed to free themselves from the yoke of the colonists and their feudal henchmen, no matter how savage and cruel the French invaders were. The Vietnamese revolution had the character of a new bourgeois–democratic revolution:

<sup>16</sup> *Recalling the Soul of the Country* [Chiêu hồn nước]; *The Soul of Vietnam* [Việt Nam hồn]; *Essential* [Thực nghiệp]; *Morning Bell* [Thần chuông]; *Women in Literature* [Phụ nữ tận văn]; *Exemplary Youth* [Gương thiếu niên].

<sup>17</sup> *Hammer and Sickle* [Búa liềm]; *Red Union* [Công hội đỏ].



Nguyễn Quang Phòng (c. 1960s)

a bourgeois democratic revolution under the leadership of the working class.

The White Terror of 1930–1931 could only temporarily slow the Vietnamese revolutionary movement, which then erupted a hundred thousand times stronger.

In 1931, the slowly developing Indochinese economy was suddenly affected by the crisis in France and the world, resulting in upheaval here too. The crisis of capitalism shook the entire imperialist system to its core. Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union, socialism triumphed. The fundamental contradictions within capitalist society were increasingly deepening: the proletariat contra the bourgeoisie, colonised peoples contra the imperialists, colonised nations contra imperialist nations, disputes between competing imperialist empires, market disputes, etc.

In 1933, Hitler's fascists came to power in Germany and were readily about to engulf the world. In order to resolve the internal contradictions of capitalism, escape its crises, and prepare for a new world war, the fascist imperialists brought about localised wars in the Eastern Three Provinces (of China) and Abyssinia. Anti-fascist, anti-war movements spread to all countries. The Popular Front, founded in June 1936, had a great victory in the French general election. A Popular Front government thus came to power. In Indochina, most of the political prisoners were released. The Indochinese Congress, which was amassing volunteers with its demands for freedom and democracy, was active throughout the country. Around late-1936 and early-1937, a wave of unprecedented and far-reaching strikes took place in Indochina. The Indochinese Communist Party, together with other progressive political organisations, established the Indochina Democratic Front with the aims of uniting the democratic forces on the peninsula—the Indochinese people and the progressive French—against fascism, war, and colonial reactionaries, while supporting the Popular Front and demanding “freedom, food, and peace.”

After Germany occupied Czechoslovakia (March

1939), Italy attacked Albania (April 1939). Germany invaded Poland (September 1939), and the Second World War broke out (September 1939). The Indochinese revolutionary forces withdrew into secrecy. A wind of terror blew throughout Indochina, especially in Vietnam.

In November 1939, the Central Committee of the Indochinese Communist Party convened in Ba Diem (Gia Dinh) to decide on the establishment of a combined national front to oppose imperialism and the fascist war, and gain independence for the Indochinese peoples.

In June 1940, France was defeated. Hitler's armies occupied an important part of France, and the Japanese fascists leapt into Indochina, inciting Thai reactionaries to attack France. Not allowing the colonists and fascists to tear our country apart, nor allowing ourselves to serve as a cannon fodder for the French, around late-1940 and early-1941, our people took advantage of the opportunity and instigated three revolts: Bac Son, Nam Ky, and Do Luong. The Central Committee of the Indochinese Communist Party convened in Pac Bo (Cao Bang), under the chairmanship of Comrade Nguyễn Ái Quốc, to deliberate on the broad national unity of Vietnam against the Japanese–French fascists, and the gaining of independence and freedom (May 1941). The League for the Independence of Vietnam (the Viet Minh) was born in that revolutionary climax. The whole Vietnamese people—the workers and peasants, the urban petty bourgeoisie to the nationalist bourgeoisie, and some landowners (particularly those who operated on a small scale)—all stood under the flag of national salvation. It was the first time that a national united front against imperialism in Vietnam, in the form of the Viet Minh, was so extensively established and developed.

The inherent characteristics of the Vietnamese revolution was still that of bourgeois democracy, however, the task of opposing imperialism was more urgent than the task of opposing feudalism. Besides, since the start of the Second World War, and especially since the invasion of France by Germany and Japan, the attitude of small landowners changed somewhat. They no longer trusted

the French colonists, but instead agreed to save the country. Therefore, the Viet Minh advocated uniting the entire nation first, in order to complete the task of national liberation. Any proposed tasks that hindered a broad national unity against the Japanese–French fascists were dismissed or temporarily put aside.

At the beginning of 1944, the heroic Soviet army counter-attacked Hitler's fascists and, in May 1945, annihilated them right at their lair. A number of countries in Europe were liberated from the fascist yoke.

In March 1945, the Japanese fascists instigated a coup, expelling the French colonists and monopolising Indochina. The Indochinese Communist Party Central Committee Standing Committee held a meeting in Dinh Bang (Bac Ninh) to deliberate on the launch of the Anti-Japanese Movement to Save the Country. The people's armed forces were active in many northern provinces, and the people—some armed with guns, others with rudimentary weapons—protested and broke into granaries to solve the problem of hunger. The pre-insurrection period began. In August 1945, Japan surrendered unconditionally to the Soviet Union and its allies. The Vietnamese people—under the leadership of President Hồ, the Central Committee of the Indochinese Communist Party, and the central command body of the Viet Minh—rose up and seized power throughout the country. The August Revolution was successful.

On 2 September 1945, President Hồ presented the Declaration of Independence, declaring to compatriots across the nation and the people of the world that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had been born.

The August Revolution was a “life changer” for the Vietnamese nation in general and Vietnamese culture in particular.

This political change was still taking place within the Vietnamese colonial–semi-feudal economy. On that basis, how did Vietnamese culture develop?

After the White Terror of 1930–1931, sadness and melancholy filled the hearts of the Vietnamese people. The romantic literature of the Self-Strengthening

Literary Union was born. The national bourgeoisie did not dare fight against the imperialists politically or militarily, instead opting for an anti-feudalist, bureaucratic cultural struggle (through publications like *Phong Hoa*, *Ngay Nay*, and those of the Literary Union). Romanticism in literature and art goes hand in hand with “youthful indiscretion”—the depraved nature of the youth, intellectuals, and urban bourgeoisie. The French colonists encouraged these tendencies in order to distract the masses, especially the youth. They opened many opium dens and dance halls in the cities, published books on swordplay and mysticism, revitalised Buddhism, published many Catholic books that sought to degrade communism, and developed a scouting association to attract the youth.

That said, the activities of the Literary Union did play a significant role in pushing our country's cultural movement one step forward.

While the reformed bourgeoisie and French colonists were active in the sphere of culture, as mentioned above, there were two polemics that strongly impacted local public opinion and brought victory to proletarian literature. Owing to Comrade Hải Triều, materialism triumphed over idealism—“art for life's sake” defeated “art for art's sake.”

During the period of the Democratic Front (1936–1939), under the leadership of the Indochinese Communist Party, democratic culture and artistic movements flourished. Newspapers and books about democracy were published openly, such as the French newspapers *The Struggle* (*La Lute*), *The People* (*Le Peuple*), *Labour* (*Le Travail*), *Union* (*Rassemblement*), *Our Voice* (*Notre Voix*), etc., and the Vietnamese newspapers *Citizen*, *The World*, *This Life*, *News*, *Rice Stalk*, *People*, *Friend of the People*, *Voice of the Youth*,<sup>18</sup> etc. They competed in denouncing the crimes of the colonial reactionaries and their minions, as well as demanding democratic reform and civil rights. Official publications of the Indochinese Communist Party and of the Indochina Democratic Front openly defended

<sup>18</sup> *Citizen* [Dân chúng]; *The World* [Thế giới]; *This Life* [Đời này]; *News* [Tin tức]; *Rice Stalk* [Nhành lúa]; *People* [Dân]; *Friend of the People* [Bạn dân]; *Voice of the Youth* [Tiếng trẻ].



Phạm Thanh Tâm (1961)

the interests of the people, the workers, and (especially) the peasant masses. Issues around free trade unions, eight-hour working days, minimum wage, and farmers' concerns were fiercely debated. A wide variety of books popularising democratic ideas and Marxism–Leninism were printed and picked up by the public. For the first time, the Vietnamese people were able to openly participate in political activities. And, also for the first time, revolutionary and progressive literature, music, and painting—taking advantage of its new legitimisation—took on an important role in serving the masses.

In addition to the national–democratic cultural movement, there was another emerging cultural reform movement. This movement, at the time, consisted of two trends: a progressive tendency of the people taking advantage of their newfound legitimacy to practise democratic reform, and a reactionary tendency of the French colonists and their henchmen to use the façade of reformist policies to deceive and bribe the masses. The “League of Light”<sup>19</sup> stands alongside the “Society for the Propagation of National Language”; the “Le Mur” fashion styles were in sync with the modern architecture. Novels promoting reform from the Tân Dân Publishing House were often associated with the humanitarian and social activities of the scouts, the religious congregations, and the “reforms” of the French colonists.

In addition to exploiting reformist movements, the French colonists continuously sought to distract young people by luring them into debauchery. Tonkin Governor Châtel placed a great focus on organising beauty pageants and fairs.

What can we observe in terms of Vietnamese culture during the Second World War (1939–1945)? We see revolutionary literature, imbued with the national and democratic characteristics of the Indochinese Communist Party and the Viet Minh—a revolutionary literature that not only thrived in the darkness but shone through it. In addition to the secretly published books, a forest of illegal newspapers circulated around the country:

*Liberation, National Salvation, Liberation Flag, The Communist, Independent Vietnam* (Viet Lap), *National Soul, Bai Say, Expelling the Invaders, Breaking the Iron Chains, Girls of War, Pioneer, Bugle Call, Labour, Collaboration, Me Linh, Resistance, Revolution, Determination, Independence, New South Country, Liberation Army*,<sup>20</sup> etc. The prison literature of political brothers and sisters during this time is equally remarkable. For example, the writings *Sound of the Stream* (written in Son La Prison) and *Cong River* (in Ba Van).

In 1943, the Indochinese Communist Party issued *Thesis on Vietnamese Culture* in order to build and further develop the National Salvation Cultural Association. Newspapers published by the Viet Minh and the Indochinese Communist Party heavily criticised the misleading and reactionary tendencies of the arts deemed legitimate at the time—the mainstream art. It also had its own currents of progression and regression. Books and periodicals were frequently published. Hoàng Xuân Hãn published the book *Scientific Vocabulary*.<sup>21</sup> Nguyễn Văn Tố published about archaeology in the *Tri Tân* periodical. Ngụy Như Kontum and Comrade Đặng Thai Mai introduced our compatriots to democratic literature of China. He received a great deal of acclaim for his book *Conceptual Literature*<sup>22</sup> and his translations of Lu Xun's writings. A group of radical intellectuals published the *Thanh Nghị* periodical. There was a movement to focus on Vietnamese literature and eliminate the disease of French–Vietnamese codeswitching. The bourgeois idealist philosophies of Western Europe were ubiquitous. The books of Hàn Thuyên distorted Marxism through lengthy social thoughts and mechanical materialist underpinnings, and were thus printed and utilised by the French colonists in order to reduce the patriotic and democratic efficiency of Viet Minh propaganda. The *Spring–Autumn* collective was nationalist in character, but its art remained separated from the masses owing to its sophistication, smugness, and tendency toward “escapism.”

During this period, fascist culture was unbridled.

<sup>19</sup> The League of Light was a public housing philanthropic subsidiary of the Self-Strengthening Literary Union to address unsanitary housing conditions in urban and rural areas. The League's principal architects, including its president, Nguyễn Tường Tam, were all trained by the Indochinese Fine Arts University, and thus heavily influenced by Western discourses of environmental determinism, legitimating a racist imperialism.

<sup>20</sup> *Liberation* [Giải phóng]; *National Salvation* [Cứu quốc]; *Liberation Flag* [Cờ giải phóng]; *The*

*Communist* [Cộng sản]; *Independent Vietnam* [Việt Nam độc lập]; *National Soul* [Hồn nước]; *Expelling the Invaders* [Đuổi giặc nước]; *Breaking the Iron Chains* [Bẻ xiềng sắt]; *Girls of War* [Gái ra trận]; *Vanguard* [Tiền phong]; *Bugle Call* [Kèn gọi lính]; *Labour* [Lao động]; *Collaboration* [Hiệp lực]; *Resistance* [Kháng địch]; *Revolution* [Khởi nghĩa]; *Determination* [Quyết thắng]; *Independence* [Độc lập]; *New South Country* [Nước Nam mới]; *Liberation Army* [Quân giải phóng].

<sup>21</sup> *Scientific Vocabulary* [Danh từ khoa học].

<sup>22</sup> *Conceptual Literature* [Văn học khái luận].

The Decoux fascists established the Information and Propaganda Office,<sup>23</sup> headed by the secret agent Cousseau,<sup>24</sup> in order to inject Pétain's venomous defeatism–collaborationism into the hearts and minds of our people. As such, many shameless writers have brazenly praised the French fascist slogans of A FRANCO–VIETNAMESE RENAISSANCE and NATIONAL REVOLUTION.

Furthermore, the Decouxists encouraged the restoration of outdated fashion styles, a reverence for old customs, stoicism, and idealism. Some conservatives and patriotic intellectuals, who had not yet discovered the correct path, unintentionally benefited the enemy in this regard.

In addition to this, the French fascists initiated vigorous youth gymnastic programmes in order to enchant and subjugate young Vietnamese by making them forget their task of saving their country—but be strong enough to serve as the buffalo and horses for the Japanese and French. Comrades and friends, surely you still remember the fascist Ducoroy's slogan STRONG ENOUGH TO SERVE.<sup>25</sup>

Stepping into Indochina, the Japanese fascists exploited local culture to propagate their “Greater East Asia” ideology. Some Vietnamese painters were afforded the opportunity to visit Japan. The Institute of Japanese Culture was established. Some writers and artists praised Japanese customs and practices, as well as the virtues encoded in *bushido*. These Japanese imitations were laid before our eyes in the most abominable ways! Shaving one's head and donning boots became “fashion.”

Over the past half century, our culture has been primarily influenced by French culture. However, French culture has two distinct partitions: the reactionary culture of the colonists and imperialists, and the progressive culture of the French people. One should not think one dimensionally so as to deny all the progressive influences of French culture. Historically, it is common for the oppressed to fight against their oppressors but, simultaneously, it is common for the oppressed to

positively learn from their oppressor. While we opposed the malicious cultural policy of the French colonists, we did not forget to subsume the quintessence of French democratic culture. It must be admitted that, under the French, and against the will of the colonists, we generally practised scientific methods in our work and thinking. This equally extended to progressive French literature, painting, music, and arts. In any case, when summarising the influence that French culture has held over us, we see that the positive aspects are few whereas the negative are many; the good is superficial while the bad has seeped into the bones. Therefore, one of the tasks of our cultural revolution is eliminating those influences deemed bad, whilst retaining those deemed good.

#### *The fourth period: from the August Revolution (1945) onwards*

After a successful general uprising by our people in August (1945), a new-democracy formation of politics and economy was developed in our country. Thus, the new-democracy culture had a basis for growth and development. Our purpose was clear. Our horizons were broadened. The revolution was the wind under the wings of our soaring cultural industries.

Although preoccupied with resolving many domestic and foreign issues—not to mention the extremely complex problems we face within the military and economy—our government continues to encourage creatives and intellectuals. The National Salvation Cultural Association, for example, remains active and continues to publish the *Pioneer* journal. Our art carries with it a powerful impetus; we are free to express ourselves; our political literature is developing at an unprecedented rate; and our music in particular has progressed very quickly. After more than eighty years of subjugation, the Vietnamese people have rid themselves of their chains and are endeavouring, with their utmost strength, to promote labour, to rush to the front and defend their

<sup>23</sup> The Local Information Office for Propaganda and the Press in Tonkin.

<sup>24</sup> Jean Germain Noel Bernard Cousseau, a highly influential colonial official and, prior to the Japanese coup, interim resident of Son La province. Whilst Cousseau headed the Office, famed Vietnamese novelist Nguyễn Công Hoan occupied the position of “official censor.”

<sup>25</sup> TC: Although the French and Japanese fascists were extremely powerful, patriotism emerged within these legitimised youth and student

movements. Such was that of Dương Đức Hiền and Đặng Ngọc Tốt. Following the Japanese coup, the liberation movement—through cooperation with the National Salvation Youth Union—took advantage of the existing social conditions and developed the Vanguard Youth in the South, led by Doctor Phạm Ngọc Thạch.



Dương Hương Minh (1965)

newly reclaimed essential rights, and to sing brave and joyful melodies! The exhibition held last August has reminded us that our paintings and sculptures are still very limited. However, since the uprising, and especially since the war of resistance, these mediums have made significant progress despite the many difficulties faced. The most remarkable forms of art, as they are practically the most beneficial in this period of resistance, are propaganda paintings, dazibao, short plays, and songs.

The Popular Education campaign<sup>26</sup> spread quickly, with its sights set on the least developed of the classes. Seven million compatriots overcame illiteracy within three years. We are indeed the champions in the fight against illiteracy!

Each army unit has become a cultural school for the common people, wherein the soldiers are literate, politically informed, display military proficiency, understand the nature of the mass movement, and know how to maintain appropriate hygiene.

The physical movement of the arms and legs of those practising aerobics was harmonised with the “train the troops, make achievements” campaign. The guerrilla movement—with its crawling, rolling, leopard crawling, ambushing, and raiding—is the most popular “athletic sport” amongst the Vietnamese youth today.

The New Life campaign,<sup>27</sup> under President Hồ’s slogan of INDUSTRIOUSNESS, THRIFT, INCORRUPTIBILITY, AND RIGHTEOUSNESS, is being actively employed. Gambling, alcoholism, and theft have decreased significantly in the communes—and have disappeared altogether in some places. Backward and rural customs are also gradually disappearing, especially those pertaining to marriages, funerals, and wedding ceremonies like the “meat and sticky rice” custom and “paying debt by mouth.”<sup>28</sup>

Our country’s scientists have produced many inventions, predominantly in the fields of medicine and combat, despite very limited resources. Major General Trần Đại Nghĩa, for example, developed new modifications to the bazooka as well as other weapons;

Doctor Nguyễn Đức Khởi discovered the freeze-dried smallpox vaccine; Doctor Tôn Thất Tùng put a great deal of effort into training medical staff and advancing invasive surgeries in combat situations; Doctors Phạm Ngọc Thạch and Vũ Văn Cẩn overcame great odds in organising the prevention and treatment of people’s diseases in both the civilian and military sectors. There is such a vast number of scientists and professionals, with countless contributions, that the scope of this report simply does not afford us the opportunity to list them all.

The recent Education Conference, as well as this National Cultural Assembly, have provided clear indication that our country’s national culture and democracy are currently advancing rapidly, despite pushback from the enemy. However, we cannot help but admit that Vietnamese culture has many branches, such as education (particularly higher education), literature and art, which have not yet caught up with the national struggle. The war of resistance has reached its third year and we are still yet to have any worthy defence education. This is a weakness that we need to strive to overcome.

Currently, the French invaders are destroying and desecrating culture in our land. They are extremely barbaric in their ways—burning, killing, looting, and raping. They trample idols, break crosses, kill both monks and priests, rape both nuns and canonesses. They butcher and sell human flesh, tear apart the bodies of children, and burn people alive. They trample beliefs and human dignity into the mud. Wherever they go, they sow destruction, pain, and sickness. Their war of aggression is, at the same time, a cultural genocide. Thus, we are not only fighting for our own independence and democracy, but to protect culture and civilisation as a whole.

In the areas under temporary occupation, the French invaders are implementing an extremely reactionary “cultural” policy. They have reverted to their old tricks: fabricating news to deceive the world; propagating hedonism, romanticism, pessimism, defeatism, and scepticism; indoctrinating our people with metaphysical and fatalistic ideas; opening many opium dens and

<sup>26</sup> Popular Education [*Bình dân học vụ*] was a socio-political campaign launched by the Provisional Revolutionary Government in September 1945 that sought to eliminate illiteracy among the Vietnamese population. The campaign was highly successful owing to its unique methods, such as displaying the alphabet and easily recitable phrases in busy areas, and setting up “illiterate gates” at market entrances—those who wanted to enter the market had to read a few words which, depending on their performance, determined whether they could enter through the main gate or

were forced to use an “illiterate gate.”

<sup>27</sup> The Party launched the New Life [*Đời sống mới*] campaign in April 1946, seeking to instil the virtues of “industriousness, thrift, incorruptibility, and righteousness” (with the later addition of “public spirit and impartiality”) in the masses in order to create the social climate needed for economic and socialist development, maintaining and solidifying the gains of the revolution.

<sup>28</sup> “Paying debt by mouth” [*trả nợ miệng*]

refers to a cultural phenomenon where one is pressured to host community parties (“meat and sticky rice”) as elaborate as those previously hosted by one’s relatives or neighbours so as to pay off the social debt incurred by eating their foods. This often results in one having to borrow money (and incurring one’s own financial debt) in order to avoid ostracisation.

tearooms where so much lewdness and debauchery takes place that it has rendered the youth of these occupied areas utterly depraved and delusional. At the same time, they have opened schools and exams to tempt our country's studious youth. But we are no stranger to these methods: we know that studying at their schools is nothing but indoctrination—a way of turning students into a class of machine-like servants, loyal to the French and opposed to their own fatherland. The culture of the occupied areas is still basically the ignorant, reactionary culture of the old “Protectorate” era. We must fight this “culture” by developing our own culture of national and democratic resistance, and shine the light of this resistance culture into the occupied areas, dissipating the thick darkness and suffocating air that rests there.

### **CHARACTERISTICS AND OBLIGATIONS OF VIETNAM'S NEW-DEMOCRACY CULTURE**

Dear comrades and friends,

Within the realm of Vietnamese culture, creatives are enthusiastically resisting the enemy and building the nation on the cultural front.

The obligation of our creatives is to defeat the enemy, defend the country, and protect the people; to strengthen their resolve, their faith, and their happiness; to fight against the French colonists' culture of enslavement and ignorance, and equally overcome the feudal and backward ideas in our own culture; to build a new-democracy culture in Vietnam and contribute towards Vietnamese culture achieving its place among other cultural treasures on the world stage.

Vietnam's new-democracy culture must be inclusive of the following three characteristics: *Vietnameseness, scientificness, and massness*.

Contrary to the subjugative and colonial elements that saturate old Vietnamese culture, the new-democracy culture struggles for the independence and freedom of its own people whilst respecting the independence and

freedom of other peoples in the world—it resists all oppressive and invading forces everywhere, and opposes all thoughts of weakness, reliance, and inferiority. Vietnam's new-democracy culture builds upon the inherent characteristics and virtues of the nation, and advances only by developing those which are correct and beautiful, and eliminating those which are bad. Vietnam's new-democracy culture represents the quintessence of the people, while, at the same time, it stands ready to absorb elements of foreign cultures that are deemed correct, beautiful, and progressive. It is neither xenophobic nor ethnocentric. It opposes hybridism, rootlessness, wolfish appropriation, parroting, and the mechanical copying of a foreign culture without taking into account the particularities and conditions of its country and people.

In order to develop the vietnamisation of our culture, we must actively propagate the resistance against the French colonists, combining the attack of the pen and word with the attack of the weapon. Be it in paint, ink, silk, sculpture, sequences of thought, we must strengthen our patriotism while intensifying our hatred for the invaders. Regarding French culture, we must distinguish between the subjugative imperialist influences and the progressive democratic influences, in order to eliminate the former and retain the latter. While we should learn from the advanced cultures around the world, we must criticise and attack those cultures which are reactionary.

And while we must explore and study the literary and artistic works bequeathed to us by our forefathers, we must exercise criticism, and promote only the positive traditions of our national culture.

Vietnam's new-democracy culture must be scientific in character, contra the backward, corrupt, and feudal characteristics that have persisted in the old Vietnamese culture. It respects freedom of religion, but opposes biased superstition, idealism, mysticism, and all forms of careless, unreasonable, and anti-progressive practices. It promotes the “New Life” campaign, opposing liberalism, lack of focus, and backward customs. It brings elementary science and knowledge about disease prevention and



Nguyễn Đức Thọ (1965)

hygiene to the masses. It propagates scientific thought and Marxist philosophy, opposing biased, outdated, and fallacious viewpoints. A fundamental feature of new-democracy culture is its pragmatic fusion of theory and praxis. It resists the French colonists' policy of deceit and ignorance and upholds the truth. It promotes progress and destroys that which hinders the nation's advancement. This progress, however, is not one divorced from the past of the nation, but a progress that is neither hybrid nor rootless, neither imitative nor mechanical. A progress that does not put its faith in cosmism,<sup>29</sup> wherein it is only with modern science that the foreign aggressors, equipped with their high technology, can be defeated, and that we, with our poor performance in science and technology, are doomed to fail. In terms of artistic creation, the new-democracy culture approves socialist realism.

In our present wartime situation, we want to utilise modern sciences, rapidly improve our technology, and seize the latest global scientific breakthroughs and inventions to resist the colonisers and construct our nation more effectively, but, as of yet, we have been unsuccessful. This is a shame. However, we do not have to wait with our arms crossed. Even in this period of resistance, we can go abroad to learn new sciences, or, alternatively, we can attempt to improve our own technology with regard to the agricultural backwardness and scarcity we face. We should not dream of using the classical methods of the industrialised nations, nor should we hesitate to use manual and semi-mechanised methods in combination with mechanisation, so as to advance step-by-step and gradually improve. Following such, conditions will be stronger. At the same time, we should streamline production and improve working styles by boldly encouraging the inventions and innovations of workers, farmers, soldiers, and intellectuals, and summarising the experience of the working masses to supplement the limited knowledge of our scientists and technicians.

Our new-democracy culture rejects the alienation

of man (from aspects of his human nature) and those characteristics that oppose the will of the masses, inherent in the dominant traditional cultures of our country and those in areas currently occupied by the enemy. Thus, Vietnam's new-democracy culture must be of the *masses*. It serves them—the working people who form the largest group in a society. We must oppose the view that culture is transcendent and that the more ethereal and complex it is, the better. Instead, let us advocate that culture must be close to the masses so as to guide and educate them, improve their cultural literacy, and learn from—not ape—them. The joys and sorrows of the masses must equally be the joys and sorrows of our soldiers on the cultural front. Creatives must fully conceptualise these joys and sorrows so as to successfully complete the task of ideological education and assist in solving the public's many questions in a timely manner. A culture for the masses must faithfully reflect the aspirations and will of those involved in production and combat, and must seek to instil the people with enlightenment, enthusiasm, confidence, and determination.

In order to achieve this, we, the pioneering cultural soldiers of the new Vietnam, must make every effort to help the masses completely break free from illiteracy so as to quickly attain political enlightenment. Simultaneously, we must resolutely eliminate the incorrect trends within art and culture—those diseases inherent in our own culture or transmitted by the depraved culture of the French colonists. For example, individualism, insouciance, escapism, neutralism, aestheticism, etc.<sup>30</sup>

For almost a century, our country, under French colonisation, was dominated by a culture that was contra Vietnamese-ness, scienceness, and massiness. Therefore, the new-democracy culture must be vietnamised, scientific, and massified.

These three defining characteristics must exist simultaneously and be tightly interwoven, inseparable from each other.

A vietnamised culture that lacks a scientific basis and mass appeal, or that too heavily relies upon outdated and

<sup>29</sup> Trường Chinh does not use the “official” term for cosmism [*vũ trụ luận*], instead opting for the slightly pejorative phrase *khoa học độc tôn* (roughly “almighty science”), which alludes to a worshipful primacy of science to solve all problems. While it is not difficult to see why Trường Chinh would hold reservations regarding cosmism's physicalist spirituality, it is likely that he chose not to openly name the philosophical movement for fear of alienating its powerful practitioners at the time.

<sup>30</sup> TC: “Individualism” is a self-centredness wherein one cares only insofar as they are able to profit from their work. Whether the work is beneficial or harmful to the masses is irrelevant to them. “Insouciance” is to avoid one's duty to the country and the resistance; to be aloof from the masses, focussing only on one's own peace and enjoyment. “Escapism” is to bury one's head in distraction; to immerse oneself in “pure” art with no regard for the people's happiness, struggles, desires, or needs. “Neutralism” is to hold culture above social class

and strata. It is to ignore the struggle of the people, not caring to partake, and remain ignorant and unmindful of politics. “Aestheticism” is to create an embellished, complicated, and superficial form in order to attract a small number of “aristocratic intellectuals,” exploiters, and parasites.

reactionary traditional traits, will inevitably go against the evolutionary path of history for the sake of selfish and narrow nationalist interests—or will focus only on that which benefits the state, neglecting that which matters most to the workers, peasants, and soldiers who represent the greatest, most industrious, and most patriotic class in the nation.

A scientific culture that lacks Vietnamese-ness and mass appeal will inevitably benefit the enemy under the guise of “nonpartisan science.” Our cooperation “for the sake of science” will commit us to being slaves to those elites who oppress the nation and exploit the people, using their scientific and technological advantages to serve only the interests of a few, against those of the majority.

A massified culture that lacks Vietnamese-ness and scientific basis will inevitably become narrow-minded, seeing only the interests of the workers, peasants, and soldiers without regard to the broader interests of the nation, at a time when uniting the entire nation is crucial to the victory of the resistance. Further, it will inevitably appeal to the masses through demagogic methods, unable to use objective observations to comment on and criticise the corrupt practices and prejudices of the masses. Such obstructs the political enlightenment of the masses and renders them incapable of fully discovering and utilising scientific and technological applications to production, combat, and everyday life.

To put it simply, Vietnamese-ness, science, and the masses are the three underpinnings of Vietnam’s new-democracy culture. At the same time, they are reliant upon each other like the links of a chain, holding together the new-democracy culture in a country still plagued by many feudal remnants and semi-colonial characteristics.

As soldiers on the cultural front, we must promote these three principles for our new-democracy culture advocacy work: *vietnamisation*, *scientification*, and *massification*. That which stands against Vietnamese-ness, science, and the masses must be resolutely rejected. That which is compatible with Vietnamese-ness, science, and

the masses must be preserved and built upon to the best of our abilities. At the same time, inspired by these defining principles, one must adopt a proper attitude on the basis of the following:

1. To remain absolutely loyal to the fatherland and the war of resistance; neither to accept any compromise with reactionary ideology and culture, nor to adopt neutralism or an attitude of apathetic detachment.
2. To make every effort to conduct scientific and technological research, and to apply the findings so as to benefit production, the struggle, and human life; to use Marx’s theory as a guideline to one’s praxis—understanding that theory and praxis must go hand in hand.
3. To wholeheartedly serve the people; to remain close to the masses of workers, peasants, and soldiers; to not only sympathise with and learn from the masses, but to equally educate and guide them.
4. This is the correct attitude for those fighting on the cultural front to have, as well as the secret to our success.

Such an attitude is essential to carrying out the mission ahead, as directed by President Hồ:

Culture aims at not only boosting our people’s moral and material forces for resistance and nation building, but also as highlighting our people’s great achievements for the whole world to see. Our cultural workers must create deserving works, not only to glorify our present efforts, but to bequeath future generations with shining examples of resistance and nation building.<sup>31</sup>

## **A UNITED CULTURAL FRONT WITHIN THE NATIONAL UNITED FRONT**

Dear comrades and friends,

<sup>31</sup> Hồ Chí Minh, “Thư gửi Hội nghị văn hóa toàn quốc lần thứ hai,” in *Toàn Tập*, vol. 5 (Hanoi: Sự thật, 2011), 577. [This quote was removed from future editions].



Nguyễn Đức Thọ (1965)

As it currently stands, the main enemies of the Vietnamese nation are the invading French colonists and those traitorous and treasonous Vietnamese who represent the forces of feudal landlords and comprador bourgeoisie. In order to construct Vietnam's new-democracy culture, it is vital that the French colonists are overthrown along with their colonial economy and politics. When the colonial regime falls, so too does the puppet government that clings to its heels, thus rendering it impossible for colonial and feudal cultures to continue existing. The revolutionary struggle of Vietnamese culture is part of the general revolutionary struggle of the whole nation. Those Vietnamese creatives who are fighting for the independence and freedom of the fatherland cannot exist outside of the National United Front Against the French Colonists.

The National United Front includes all classes of people: workers, peasants, petty bourgeoisie and national bourgeoisie, and some patriotic landowners. The task of the National United Front is to use force as a means of overthrowing the imperialist aggressors and their puppet government, while simultaneously using bold democratic reforms to gradually eradicate the vestiges of feudalism and re-innovate Vietnamese society.

We Vietnamese creatives have always stood in the ranks of the national movements against the French colonists. We fight at the front and operate at the rear. For this, the French colonists despise us. If the opportunity for them to kill our patriotic intellectuals and cultural soldiers arises, they immediately take advantage of it. Such is clearly evidenced by their recent crimes. In 1946, they killed the lawyer Thái Văn Lung in Saigon. Towards the end of that same year, they killed Doctor Nguyễn Văn Luyện and Nguyễn Quang Oánh in Hanoi, and the painter Tô Lý in Bắc Ninh. The previous year, they killed archaeologist Nguyễn Văn Tố, and, most recently, they killed poet Nguyễn Đình Thự in Thừa Thiên. These crimes have not discouraged our country's cultural soldiers. On the contrary, they have solidified our hate for the aggressors, and encouraged us to fight all the more

fiercely.

However, if we look closely at our cultural activities, we see that the various industries of culture, albeit relatively successful, still lack coordination and solidarity, which the letter from President Hồ to the Assembly clearly specified. The general programme of activities of these cultural industries is not available nor complete. The general slogan has not been determined. Energies and resources are scattered and frequently wasted. So many talents fail to be promoted in service of the fatherland! So much power not yet awakened. Each industry, each zone, depending on their interests, must organise their own cultural group—their own art association. The time has come for us to merge our cultural resources and industries into a cultural front in the war of resistance, under a clear organisational structure and inclusive of all workers and creatives, irrespective of class, political orientation, and religious beliefs—so long as two ideological underpinnings are agreed upon: national independence and a liberatory democracy.

Nationhood and democracy are the basis upon which creatives and cultural organisations can unite and consolidate their actions against the common enemy. In other words, nationhood and democracy are the foundation of the joint action programme of the Vietnamese cultural front against the French imperialist aggressors.

Creatives who are loyal to the nation and people, who advocate and support democracy, and who participate in the war of resistance are welcomed in this united cultural front. Those who are not as ardent, but display a certain level of enthusiasm in their participation in the war of resistance, and do not oppose democracy, are of course welcome too. Those who are active in the cultural sphere, and, for some reason, exercise a certain level of neutrality, but sympathise with or support the resistance, rather than directly participating in the resistance, may also be friends of the unification cultural front. The front is equally open to both patriotic Vietnamese creatives currently living in enemy-controlled areas and those operating

abroad. In summary, we propose to enact solidarity in the cultural world, in order to mobilise all the geniuses and cultural resources in our country, fanning the flames of Vietnam's cultural struggle towards the enemies of the nation—the French colonial invaders, and the traitors.

Some are under the impression that they can only join the united cultural front if they agree with the new-democracy culture principles of VIETNAMISATION, SCIENTIFICATION, MASSIFICATION—our slogan. It is wrong to think like this. Take for example one who produces creative works, is fervidly patriotic, and actively participates in the war of resistance, but, due to misconceptions and personal beliefs, does not agree with science. Is he not worthy of standing in the ranks of Vietnam's united cultural front? The three sloganistic principles of the new-democracy culture should not be confused with the slogan to unite all patriotic cultural forces, with a common stance between all current resistance trends within the cultural sphere.

Some have stated that only official cultural soldiers have the right to participate in the united cultural front, and that the old *chu nho* poets,<sup>32</sup> who write a few patriotic lines of resistance, but do not specialise in producing cultural works, should not be admitted. This view is also incorrect. For any cultural movement to be widespread, it must not only include professional creatives, but also cultural workers, amateur artists and writers, and those who, in one form or another, attempt to popularise patriotic and progressive culture amongst the masses.

Some of you appear to think that only a single form of a cultural front should be organised, and should not consist of too many organisations. Such a view is incorrect. Whether a people's organisation is needed or not depends entirely on its immediate practical effects, and whether its organisational conditions are ripe. If so, it cannot be prevented from being established for any reason. People's organisations are often diverse. It is impossible to simplify them. The same can be said of cultural institutions. There can be organisations of writers, poets, and journalists. There can be organisations

of musicians, painters, sculptors, scientists, technicians, etc. In the contemporary cultural sphere of our country, there are many different fields, almost each of which has a distinct organisation. As long as all these organisations are coalesced into a single front, united in action, and are led by an authority elected by the united cultural front, they should not be dissolved so as to gather individuals into a purified cultural organisation.

Some people think that a unified cultural front should be one composed of organisations, that it should be “a pure front.” In this sense, it must only admit cultural collectives and unions, such as scientific federations or literary and artistic associations, and should not admit individuals. We cannot endorse this view either, as it is not realistic. In our country today, in any national sphere, the number of people organised into groups or collectives remains very few. There are many individuals who are very enthusiastic about contributing to the war of resistance and national construction, and thus went straight to the cultural front, but, due to their own circumstances, did not join any organisations.

That said, cultural organisations, like all other organisations of the masses, should be practical in order to achieve unity, bridge action and success, bring people from all walks of life to the ranks of the revolutionary struggle, and gain independence and unification for the country. However, it is worth noting that organisations which share a field and common purpose, regardless of their location in the free zones, should follow the same charter. For example, all cultural associations within a province or region should agree on the same name and charter, so as to avoid the current issue of localised autonomous associations that hinder any unified action.

We sincerely hope that this Assembly will lay the foundation for a united Vietnamese cultural front; that the guidelines put forward by President Hồ in his letter to the Assembly be implemented; that those who produce cultural work in our country and who join the new organisation will feel something different than before: that they will meet the conditions required to

<sup>32</sup> *Chữ Nôm*, a locally invented logographic writing system based on Chinese script [*chữ Hán*, also referred to as *chữ nho*—“Confucian characters”], was developed in the thirteenth-century as a means for transcribing the spoken Vietnamese language. The *chữ Nôm* script was highly complex, owing to it never being standardised, and representing local, non-Chinese-derived words with unique characters created using phono-semantic compounds. As such, the composite script was accessible only to those who had mastered written Chinese, a minority of the population.



Nguyễn Thanh Minh (1965)

bring forth all their energies and talents in service to the country; that there be praxis, cooperation, mutual support, and encouragement, unified under a common leadership, creating a united cultural front within the framework of the National United Front, and opposing imperialist French aggression.

### **VIETNAMESE CULTURE AND THE GLOBAL DEMOCRATIC CULTURAL FRONT**

I would now like to speak on the relationship between Vietnamese culture and the prevailing global culture.

The prevailing global culture of today has two contradictions:

Firstly, the capitalist economy of the imperialist era was one that bridged all nations and races. The means of travel, freight, information-sharing, and communication between one location and another, one nation and another, developed to an extraordinary level. No country was completely isolated from the global economic system. Naturally, the global economy tends towards globalisation, which in turn fosters that same tendency in global culture—one should remember here that Soviet culture is the miniaturised epitome of cultural globalisation. Thanks to the advances in printing technology, the people across the world are able to exchange information, propaganda, and culture, and easily learn from each other.

However, owing to its tendency towards self-serving interests, imperialism inevitably causes enmity between peoples, imposes censorship regimes, constructs economic barriers between countries, and prevents communication between foreign cultures and countries. Naturally, this harms the amiability and solidarity between the peoples of one country and another, and therefore slows down man's common cultural development.

Secondly, culture is increasingly becoming a shared product of human intelligence—one which cannot help but benefit the whole of humanity. Cultural geniuses

are generally considered to be the elites of a society. However, in imperialist countries, through bribery and the withholding or suppressing of public opinion, the capitalists manipulate their way into claiming cultural works as their own. They purchase inventions to keep in their “drawer.” The latest discoveries in atomic science are, for example, actually the result of the joint efforts of many famous scientists from many countries, but the American imperialists have claimed it as their own. They use atomic bombs to threaten countries, intending to cause a Third World War. They prevent the exchange of ideas between American scientists and their scientific peers from around the world, and prevent the use of atomic energy as a means of improving life and fostering peace. Thus, culture that should have belonged to the people was taken by the warlords and tycoons as if it were their own, to be used for their own profit. Imperialism is indeed a major obstacle in the way of global culture's progress.

In order for culture to develop according to its natural trajectory, as well as contribute towards human peace and happiness, imperialism must be overthrown; the means of spreading scholarship and ideology must be available and unhindered; and scientific laboratories and technologies—even down to the raw materials necessary for experimentation—must be used for the common good. We must overthrow the colonists, the imperialist aggressors, that utilise science for killing, as only by defeating them will man finally have the opportunity to work as one, to do his utmost at utilising science for the improvement and advancement of life, and to conquer nature with science.

In order to achieve this, those who create progressive cultural works in the world must boldly join in the ranks of socialist culture and the new-democracy culture, and reject the reactionary “culture” of the colonists and imperialists.

Among the ranks of contemporary socialist culture and the new-democracy culture, there is also the culture of the Soviet Union, the cultures of the

people's democracies, and, simultaneously, potential revolutionary elements within the cultures of the oppressed peoples.

As it currently stands in the Soviet Union, socialist culture is synonymous with proletarian culture. This culture arose neither by chance nor accident. Rather, it was actively formed during the revolutionary struggle of the working class against the oppressive and exploitative regime, and equally against the eccentric and demagogical culture of the bourgeoisie. As noted by Lenin, "proletarian culture must be the logical development of the store of knowledge mankind has accumulated under the yoke of capitalist, landowner, and bureaucratic society."<sup>33</sup>

Proletarian culture must serve the interests of the working class and their ongoing class struggle; it must play an active role in building a new economic, political, and social system—namely, the socialist regime.

In the people's democratic countries, the new-democracy culture is a culture of the working class and the working people. It strives to actively serve the struggle and safeguard national independence; to build and develop a people's democracy; and to create the required conditions for the advancement towards socialism.

In addition to the aforementioned parts, the new-democracy culture can also draw from the inherent revolutionary characteristics of the oppressed peoples, particularly those who struggle against imperialism for national independence and a liberatory democracy—so long as the revolutions of those peoples are guided by the working class and, following the expulsion of foreign imperialist aggressors, lead to the establishment of a new sovereign state.

The new-democracy and socialist global culture is one of struggle and construction. It opposes misery, darkness, and criminal behaviour, and, instead, seeks peace, democracy, and happiness for all of mankind. The new-democracy and socialist global culture fights against alienation, while, at the same time, making man no longer "a wolf to another man." It fosters and maintains genuine humanitarianism.

<sup>33</sup> Vladimir Lenin, "The Tasks of the Youth Leagues," in *Selected Works*, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 464.

The Vietnamese resistance culture advocates the overthrowing of the French colonists in order to quickly end their cruel war of aggression; to afford Vietnam the opportunity to stand on par with the progressive nations of the world; and to warmly receive the French masses as comrades and brothers. Our resistance culture is an integral component of the world's new-democracy culture—or, to put it another way, our resistance culture is an integral component of the democratic world's resistance culture. We Vietnamese creatives must strive to be worthy of our great responsibility in advancing the global new-democracy cultural front.

If our country's new-democracy culture wants to advance firmly, it is necessary that it actively promotes those traditions and inherent forces deemed good whilst nourishing itself with emerging global socialist and democratic culture. At the same time, it must offer its quintessence to the world, finding a place in the planetary chest of cultural treasures. The act of exchange and mutual learning between Vietnamese cultural practitioners and those practitioners of progressive cultures from around the world is crucial—Vietnamese creatives must observe and analyse the world's progressive cultures. Furthermore, they ought to try their utmost to realise our country's struggle, promote it to the international community, and actively support it on the ground.

### **SOME CONCRETE PROBLEMS WITH OUR LITERATURE AND ART IN THE PRESENT ERA**

Dear comrades and friends,

Now, allow us to speak on some objective and practical issues that continue to puzzle some of our creative brothers and sisters.

Firstly, we would like to discuss art and propaganda.

On one hand, some of you believe that art and propaganda are distinct and separate entities—art is art and propaganda is propaganda. In this view, propaganda carries only a temporary value, serving short-sighted



Nguyễn Thanh Minh (1966)

quotidian interests, and is often created in haste. Art, however, is pure, sublime, transcending everyday things, etc.

On the other hand, some of you believe that propaganda and art are one—that there is no art that is not, to some extent, propaganda.

It is our opinion that both of these views are incorrect. Art and propaganda are not vastly different, yet neither are they vastly alike. Propaganda is a distinct medium of the arts, however, all works of art are, more or less, inherently propagandistic. Nonetheless, this is not to posit that art and propaganda are the same thing. When propaganda reaches a significant level of aesthetics, it becomes art. Likewise, when art reaches a significant level of practicality, it becomes propaganda. In this sense, one may find that there are many propagandists who are not artists, but there are no artists who are not propagandists.

Some people have suggested that, because art is truthful and propaganda is, more or less, fabricated, art and propaganda must be mutually exclusive. This is incorrect! While it is correct to say that art is truthful, in a class-divided society, there is art with much truth, art with very little truth, and “art” that is anti-truth. Art that serves a morally correct, justifiable purpose is truthful art whereas “art” that is unjustifiable or fallacious is, simply, not art. This defining separation equally extends to propaganda: the unjustifiable propaganda of the aggressors and reactionary forces contra the justifiable propaganda of the revolutionary forces (which is created in accordance with scientific truths). Morally correct, justifiable propaganda can rightly achieve the level of genuine art.

That said, we do agree that there are works of art that are made for immediate use, and works that are carefully cultivated over a long period of time (in order to perfect the work or enhance the medium). While art made hastily for immediate service to the resistance is by no means a lesser art, we should not confuse this practicality of propaganda art with art in general.

To those creatives who are qualified or enthusiastic

enough to work long and carefully on rendering their art “eternal,” we say: please do so. One thing is certain, if a creative remains loyal to the defining spirit of our time, to the struggle of our nation and its people, then, when their work reaches the apogee of art, it will equally have the highest propaganda value.

During the war of resistance, some of you suggested that because the people’s cultural literacy was limited, they only sought trivial and easy-to-digest art. And, in this sense, fulfilling their wishes would inevitably result in the debasing of art, and, if such debasing would then be tolerated, what would ultimately become of art?

One should remind themselves that, after having been subjected to the oppressive, exploitative, and ignorant regime of the French colonists for so many years, the cultural literacy of our people will, of course, be limited. But one should not make the mistake of assuming that the people do not know how to appreciate high art. They will certainly understand, feel for, enjoy, and love a work if it offers a vivid description of reality.

The sentiments of the masses are pure, honest, and extremely passionate. You will find that they are only indifferent to insincere or incomprehensible works of art—that which is abstruse, obscure, and ridiculous; they hate the monstrosities of fantasy.

The second question that many of our creatives ask is: *What is socialist realism?*

It is of our opinion that socialist realism is a method of artistic creation that represents the truths within the development of society towards socialism, according to objective laws. Regarding objective reality, we ought to focus on “typical characters under typical circumstances,”<sup>34</sup> so as to portray the natural course of society and the objective process of evolution.

Aleksey Tolstoy wrote:

The task of the artist ... is to draw from reality that which is typical, that which the audience can see at first glance; to gather the facts, concepts, and contradictions into a vivid image and indicate the correct path to the correct future.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Friedrich Engels, “Letter to Margaret Harkness, April 1888,” in *On Art and Literature* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 90.

<sup>35</sup> Aleksey Tolstoy, “The Freedom to Create,” in *The Penguin Russian Review*, vol. 2 (1946).

The attitude of socialist realism is an objective one. However, there are objective truths that are more beneficial to the enemy than to us. For example, should we truthfully report upon a battle we have lost? It is indeed possible to describe a lost battle, but it must be done so as to illustrate how our soldiers sacrificed their lives, what caused our defeat, if any gains were made in the process, and how, even though we lost, our soldiers remain undeterred and are eager to learn from the situation so as to secure victories in future battles. It is also possible to describe a local defeat while highlighting that the direction of the overall war remains in our favour. It should be noted that while there are truths worth mentioning, there are equally truths that are better left unmentioned—or, if mentioned, must be done so at the appropriate time, appropriate place, and in the appropriate manner.

A remarkable attribute of socialist realist literature is that writers must let the facts speak for the opinions they wish to say or propagandise. Engels posited that tendencies toward particular characteristics must arise from situations and actions, rather than be directly stated.<sup>36</sup> There is, after all, nothing worse than a drama in which the playwright uses the dialogue of a character to preach incessantly.

Another question that has been asked: *Is now the correct time for criticism and controversy?*

Our resolute answer: yes. The cultural life of our people is consistently observed as being too placid. As such, the majority of us have no way of knowing whether a new work of art is to be deemed good or bad, whether or not it has the approval of the public. No one criticises! No one praises! As soon as a policy or proposed direction is put forward, it is as if it is dropped into oblivion or coldly overlooked. As a result, the author is rarely supported, encouraged, criticised, or assisted. Without criticism and controversy, our cultural movement is placid and stagnant! It is like a horse that droops its head to the ground after taking a single step, never receiving the whip of criticism required for it to carry on.

Some people worry that criticism could potentially be harmful to unity. We believe that it is the manner in which criticism is undertaken that determines whether or not it is harmful to unity. For example, criticism that is untactful or insincere is harmful. Criticism that is undertaken with responsibility, sincere intentions, and using modest language, on the other hand, is not only harmless but serves as an impetus for personal improvement and mutual understanding and solidarity. Faced with the threat of our enemies, solidarity is necessary, but to engage in solidarity is not to withhold constructive objections. To do so would amount to one-way solidarity. True solidarity is built upon constructive criticism that aims to strengthen unity.

We sincerely await genuine critique within Vietnamese art and literature.

Some friends say that to criticise is to “air one’s dirty laundry in public”—to advertise our weaknesses to the enemy. This is not the case. We encourage criticism that is in accordance with our principles—not a “free criticism,” but one that exists under a democratic authority. There may indeed be those who use criticism to sow dissension and uncertainty within our ranks, or to provide the enemy with our weaknesses to their advantage. These, however, are not critics but agitators—those who seek provocation rather than progress. Such agitators do not belong on any debate stage in our democratic country, but rather in the prisons of the people’s government.

Not only is it necessary to criticise our wrong ideological, academic, and artistic inclinations, but we ought to equally, perhaps even primarily, focus on attacking the enemy’s reactionary ideology, literature, and art. The ideo-cultural struggle cannot be separated from the political, armed, and economic struggle. In areas under occupation, the enemy indoctrinates our youth with pessimistic and hedonistic thoughts. They hypnotise the masses with conceited and idealistic views, poisoning their spirit in the most profane manner. Yet do we expose them? Duhamel<sup>37</sup> came to Indochina to openly defend the colonists’ policy of pillaging—did anyone

<sup>36</sup> Trường Chinh is likely referencing Engels’ observation that “the more the opinions of the author remain hidden, the better for the work of art. The realism I allude to may crop out even in spite of the author’s opinions.” See Friedrich Engels, “Letter to Margaret Harkness, April 1888,” in *On Art and Literature* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 90.

<sup>37</sup> Georges Duhamel, a renowned French author, who at the time was also president of the Alliance Française, an organisation that seeks to propagate the French language and culture.



Phạm Thanh Tâm (1966)

in our cultural sphere issue him with an appropriate response? In this war against imperialist aggression, ideological struggle is vital!

As such, we eagerly await the masterful critiques of imperialist culture in general and French colonial culture in particular. We should not forget that the depraved literary and artistic ideas of the French colonists have, to a certain extent, penetrated the souls of our youth, our intellectuals, and our current generation of creatives. Therefore, criticising the reactionary and depraved literature and art of the French colonists is equally a path to reforming the thoughts of our own intellectuals and creatives.

We would now like to address the question of: *How can we create art that is up to scratch?*

Seeing the rapid progression of and mass participation in the war of resistance, many artists and writers struggled with the sense of being left behind. Days pass with them not knowing what to create. They are unable to produce anything—or produce inferior work with a negligible impact. They are in a state of bewilderment, unsure of what the “correct path” to progress is. In the *Art and Literature* periodical, our friend Nguyễn Đình Thi correctly describes the anxiety, confusion, and restlessness that torments the entire class of artists and writers in our country who want to rid themselves of the shackles of the past and surge forward so as to catch up with the movement.<sup>38</sup>

Such artistic creation is an important matter. Its process, in our opinion, includes a series of tasks:

1. Deciding upon a topic.
2. Determining who the intended audience will be.
3. Acquiring the conditions necessary for the realisation of the work.
4. Evaluating the work through the reaction of the masses to it.

There is no shortage of topics. The war is taking place across a thousand different mediums, reflected in our

minds and stirring our souls. It is thus vital to imbed oneself among the masses of the people. That is, to realise a worthy, militant life for oneself and the nation. One must investigate, research, collate information, study, and be in solidarity with the masses, committing oneself to the movement—one’s heart should beat in sync with the heart of the nation; share its joys and sorrows; to labour and struggle with the people; and to share their faiths and hatreds. If one does this, one would need not worry about a lack of rich ideas or intense emotions.

The object of our artistic creations is the people. For any creation, we should ask ourselves: who do we want to experience this? If we are indeed creating works for the people to experience, then we need to know who these said people are, what sections of society they are composed of, what their current level of cultural literacy is, what their aspirations are, etc. Only when the answers to these questions are clear will our work be practical and useful. It is precisely because these questions are not asked that many works have become an expensive biscuit placed next to the hungry masses. It is necessary to combat the disease of arrogance during the creative process—assuming that one’s own level of perception and experience is the general level for everyone else. Creating within the cultural level of the people does not mean that one should lower one’s art to the lowest artistic level of the people, but rather to use the average level of the majority as the standard while, at the same time, not forgetting to use one’s works to raise that level.

The conditions required for artistic realisation entails that which is directly necessary in order to complete a work of art. In this sense, any artist who wishes to create art that is up to scratch needs to meet the following three conditions:

They should have the opportunity to hear, feel, and observe the masses; to work within the movement, or, at least, be close to the movement. On the ground observation is always beneficial to the creative (we can call this the spatial condition).

They should have the time required to sharpen,

<sup>38</sup> See Nguyễn Đình Thi, “Nhận đường,” in *Văn nghệ*, vol. 1 (1947).

advance, and revise their work (the time condition). To have time, however, does not mean to abandon the war and hide in one's ivory tower. The French novelist Henri Barbusse spent much of his life writing and acting at the same time.

They should have the necessary means to live and create (material conditions).

In addition to these three conditions, there are two more secondary conditions (which are of no less importance, however). Firstly, a favourable climate for the creative process must be established, as a conducive environment offers a strong impetus for artistic creation. The war of resistance has provided our country's creatives with just such an atmosphere. Secondly, cultural organisations should complement this condition as publishing is essential for literature. Without the conditions to print and distribute, creatives lose enthusiasm.

To be correctly realised, a work of art must not only arise from the movement and the masses, but return to the movement and the masses. A play about the army, for example, cannot be correctly realised if the writer does not live with the soldiers or live in an army unit. Furthermore, as the play is inspired by the army, it should be performed not just for the people, but for the army too—and then be revised following the criticism from the many different army units in order to be perfected. The masses are the most impartial and discerning judges of art. Any work that is experienced, understood, appreciated, utilised, adopted, and chosen by the masses as their daily spiritual food is one of value. On the contrary, if a work is born without anyone noticing, or caring about it, it will surely die a premature death.

Do the masses have to learn about art before they are capable of criticism? No. The masses are the greatest art connoisseurs—they have many eyes and ears, multifield knowledge, and an impetus to fight, despite any esoteric shortcomings. No critic can match the masses in such a regard. And while the majority of the masses may not be knowledgeable in some of the technical aspects, one

should not forget that the whole is made up of both laypersons and specialists—what one person might fail to grasp, another surely will.

To the best of our knowledge, the most notable creatives do not feel condescension, superiority over, complacency, nor contempt for the masses. Rather, they will consult the masses, seeking their feedback, with the goal of perfecting their creation.

This creative method, alongside a correct ideological stance and a certain level of technical proficiency, will produce great art. We call upon our creatives to apply the aforementioned suggestions and actively participate in the vibrant patriotic emulation movement.

This leads us to the final issue: *Art and the patriotic emulation movement*.

Our whole nation is competing to accomplish a lot, accomplish it quickly, and accomplish it well; to eliminate hunger, wipe out ignorance, and defeat the imperialist aggressors. Our country's creatives also work to push the patriotic emulation movement forward.

However, our cultural and economic achievements lag far behind our military achievements. In this war, the exact cost of blood, sweat, and ink is not always realised. Those in the realm of art want to play a role in encouraging the spirit of the war and national construction. They want to strive to be more active, setting a precedent for other fields. Our country's creatives decided not to arrogantly compete amongst each other for profit. Rather, they attempted to create practical, useful things—to write books and newspapers; to produce plays, paint pictures, sculpt statues, compose music, conduct scientific experiments, improve technology, etc—for the immediate benefit of our production and military forces; to promote healthy competition that actually seeks to improve the wellbeing of all people. It is better to do a few things well, than to do many things badly. It is better to successfully complete one small deed than make a thousand promises. The atmosphere of competition is the atmosphere of artistic creation. The process of artmaking carries with it a strong source



Nguyễn Thế Vinh (1966)

of encouragement: the emulation movement. It must fight the emptiness of the soul, as well as the people's overreliance on external factors to save them.

Patriotic emulation is a fundamental element within labouring, fighting, and studying. Its profound meaningfulness continues to have a strong force on our nation today.

Many brothers and sisters involved in cultural industries have now joined the ranks and, pace-for-pace, have advanced with the whole army and the people. But how many of our people are still struggling, confused, or existing on the fringe of the fight for our country?

We hope that this Cultural Assembly will provide an impetus for patriotic emulation from our country's writers and artists.

## CONCLUSION

Dear comrades and friends,

The Vietnamese people are rising up in a glorious resistance against the colonial French aggressors. However, while we continue to break apart the remaining shackles of the imperialists, the colonists are attempting to add new chains to us.

We are living in extraordinary times. An arduous challenge is underway. So many traditional values are being re-examined, and so many new values are emerging.

Our virtues, such as sacrifice, courage, compassion, altruism, patience, endeavouring, etc., are growing, and stamping out our vices. Collective heroism is now an everyday affair. Are these not the perfect conditions to forge new geniuses and valuable works?

During the Great Patriotic War, Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg wrote:

The era is cascading. It conjures up the image of a waterfall streaming down a mountain. Tomorrow it will become a single river, with houses, castles, trees, and clouds reflected in its waves. There will come a time when great works of art will appear that

will reflect, with a classical purity, the work of our brothers today.<sup>39</sup>

These musings are very much in line with our own current desires.

Vietnamese culture, as it currently stands, must be a vivid representation of the war of resistance and of nation building, of destruction and construction, of the countless sparks that set fire to the enemy troops and shine our light abroad.

We Marxists dedicate ourselves to be the shock troops on the Vietnamese cultural front against the French, to be the volunteer workers igniting the blaze of the Vietnamese new-democracy culture.

We have already undergone the battles of Lo River, Bong Lau Pass, and La Nga—we now need these equivalent battles in the realm of art. We already possess bazookas, mortars, and cannons to shoot the enemy—we now need the artistic equivalent of bazookas, mortars, and cannons to destroy the enemy.

IMBUE CULTURE WITH THE WAR OF RESISTANCE,  
IMBUE THE WAR OF RESISTANCE WITH CULTURE!<sup>40</sup>

Long live Vietnamese new-democracy culture!

Long live President Hồ!

<sup>39</sup> Ilya Ehrenburg, *Cent Lettres*, translated by Alexandre Roudnikov (Paris: Hier et Aujourd'hui, 1945).

<sup>40</sup> TC: The slogan put forward by President Hồ. [This slogan encapsulated Hồ's letter to the Assembly—see Hồ, *Toàn Tập*, 577].



Thái Hà (1966)

# BUILDING A PEOPLE'S ART (OR A NEW-DEMOCRACY ART): FOR THE CREATION OF REVOLUTIONARY THINKING AND MASSIFIED ACTIVITY

*Tố Hữu, 1949*<sup>1</sup>

Ladies and gentlemen,

Last year, as the war of resistance entered into the phase of holding the line, brothers and sisters from every region gathered at the National Cultural Assembly, uniting creative forces into the Vietnam Arts and Culture Association (as well as other groups focused on the different branches of the arts). With the shared goal of serving the nation and democracy, we expressed our determination to actively contribute to the advancement of the war of resistance. When there exists an atmosphere of solidarity, and when we are in a well-organised state, the more excited we are to work, the more eager we are to create.

Four months have passed since then. The resistance moves rapidly, so every step must be strong. Artists, professional and amateur alike, are gathered together under a common name: art workers. Cultural troupes hit the road, they followed the army and guerrillas to the front; entered the enemy zone; they organised hundreds of theatrical and musical performances, picture exhibitions, campaigns to recruit artists, and training classes for different art disciplines; they gave countless lectures on art during the cadres training classes; they established schools, agencies, factories; they created artworks and published magazines; they founded arts associations throughout every region, spurring enthusiasm for grassroots groups centred on a people's art. All of this has

launched a cultural movement more vibrant than ever.

The rich, emotional life of the people craves the arts, and requires the enjoyment and practice of composing and creating. A vast movement has formed around the idea of a people's art, facilitating discussions on the problem of building, guiding, as well as evoking new observations and experiences.

This year, some of us are meeting here primarily to exchange our observations and experiences, and to arrive at a consensus regarding the issue at hand: building a people's art.

We would now like to present you with some ideas, with the hope that you will critique any shortcomings.

## BUILDING A PEOPLE'S ART

The August Revolution paved the way for a people's art.

After a hundred years of oppression, our people lost all their rights to life and liberty. The slave was trampled beneath the heel of the imperialist boot; his weak voice was drowned out by the gunshots of the powerful; mainstream art was merely the voice of the ruling powers, and of a small number of people who played by their rules. The arts did not care for the people and, likewise, the people did not care for the arts. The obscurantist agenda of the French empire was to turn the arts into an anaesthetic, making us forget the country, the people, and paralyse the spirit of progressive resistance.

Not only did the August Revolution dismantle imperial and feudal domination, but it broke the shackles of prejudice that bound the arts. The people had regained their rights and, thus, so too did art and literature. The people want art to not simply serve them, but to be built by them. When the matter of art is placed on a vast surface, one made up of the millions of humans involved in its cultivation, its unlimited potential can be observed.

The more the war of resistance boosts the nation's vitality, the more the new-democracy apparatus expands humanity's right to live. On the one hand, the artists tried

<sup>1</sup> Speech delivered at the Debate on Art and Literature, 25 September 1949.

to immerse themselves in the lives of the people—and it was their activities that gave momentum to new artistic conceptualisations. On the other hand, our people have consciously taken in various aspects of tradition—the fresh and healthy art of our ancestors—which used to hold only a small and obscure position.

These four fundamental factors contributed to a great movement: a people's arts movement. The enjoyment and creation of art is no longer monopolised by any one "company."

A people's art is an art which is no longer oppressed, unlike the art of the commoners, or the revolutionary arts of the past. It is the typical art of our people today. It is now considered a mainstream art form.

The characteristics of a people's art: new-democracy content, vietnamised form.

The arts, or to be more specific, the people's literature, is full of young but fast-growing sprouts. The strength of its vitality lies in its rootedness within the vitality of the people themselves: a collective vitality of free and disciplined people with a correct sense of human values and national progression.

The people's arts have started to take on the characteristics of vietnamisation, massification, and scientification.

Vietnamisation because it speaks of patriotism, hatred toward the enemies, a strong resolve in the act of resistance, and a belief in success; because it carries the inherent virtues of the people (optimism, a peaceful nature, a tactful irony, etc.); and because it embraces the *zeitgeist* without shameless imitation.

Massification because it serves the rights of the vast majority of people; it speaks about their actual activities, aspirations, and feelings; and it provides a solid, healthy, idyllic identity for those classes.

Scientification because it respects the truth; it progresses; it follows the evolution of society and the historical course of the working class; it carries the spirit of both criticism and self-criticism; it synthesises theoretical reasoning with revolutionary praxis.

However, the new-democracy essence of the people's art is still but an embryo. It remains somewhat vague and, so far, has only been represented in rudimentary forms: folk songs, newspapers, diaries, journals, old instrumental music, improvised plays, etc.—but it can also be observed in the general nuances of the new arts. And it is this essence—an essence that is becoming increasingly rich—that is the basic condition for creating exquisite works: realistic works that imbue the vietnamised, massified, and scientific spirit of the revolutionary people.

While recognising the new-democracy content of the people's art, we also see that in this embryonic stage, it still has many disadvantages.

### **CURRENT WEAKNESSES OF THE PEOPLE'S ART**

#### *1. The people's art is still heavily influenced by backward remnants*

In the context of our people's war of resistance, the people's art has gained strong momentum under the new motto of democracy, but because our country is one that only recently escaped the feudal imperialist regime, there are still many remnants of backwardness within the arts. We still have a lot more to do when it comes to that which we call vietnamisation, massification, and scientification—the infusing of these characteristics into arts and culture.

When it comes to vietnamising art, we also have to scrub away our ideological enslavement: our ignorance and habit of imitating anything foreign. It causes our culture to lack any true national identity. For this reason, we must resist alienating ourselves from our own treasures, especially our folk arts. To think otherwise would be to foster a culture without roots; a culture unable to feel the reverberations of millennia of profound emotions. We must also eradicate thinking that is separated from the reality of our nation and people; thinking that ignores the actual circumstances and needs of our country; an illusory mentality that causes art to lose any function



Nguyễn Thanh Châu (1966)

of real resistance, instead turning it into a luxurious commodity and, sometimes, an obstacle in the way of our nation and people's struggle.

Massification means making art widely available among the people as well as involving a large number of people in the artmaking and establishment process. We must admit that, thus far, we have not reflected much of the actual life of the masses in terms of form and content—indeed, our work is sometimes difficult to understand and alien to the masses. This is because the majority of creatives remain distant from the masses, unable to understand and empathise with the masses. This is partly because the publishing process stifles the arts in general, making them less popular among the people. However, an artistic life of the people has not yet been developed—nor knowledge of the arts disseminated—so the process of creating art and building a foundation for it has not yet taken place among the masses.

In the context of our country, science remains a slow development with the level of knowledge among the people still low. Therefore, scientification will, of course, face many difficulties. It is necessary to eradicate degenerate ideas and superstitious idealism in order to embrace scientific ideas to find the truth. It is necessary to create a new way of life, through the coordination of theory and praxis, while maintaining a constant spirit of self-criticism and self-reflection. We honestly acknowledge that in terms of knowledge and ideology, even our fellow creative brothers and sisters are still lacking. We have a lot to learn, not only from books but equally from practice in the field. We understand that cultivating art requires cultivating thought: without revolutionary ideology, there can be no revolutionary art—the true art of the times and of the people.

The culture of our people in its developing state is, of course, unable to immediately wash away its backward vestiges. Promoting the brilliance of its new-democracy nature is something that will require a lot of time and effort. We cannot be impatient or hasty. The key thing is that we know how to fix the root of the weaknesses of the

people's art today—namely, by carrying out these two fundamental steps:

1. Disseminate art to the people; train new art cadres from among the people.
2. Renovate the thinking and lifestyle of today's professional writers and artists; drive our brothers and sisters into becoming people's literary and artistic cadres, practically serving the masses and the resistance.

## *2. The people's art has not developed evenly or widely*

The current artistic movement has not developed evenly or widely, owing to two basic conditions: the strength of one's spirit of resistance (which has resulted in resistance activities being abundant in some regions while scarce in others), and the capability of art practitioners.

In regions and departments where both these conditions are met, the arts thrive. However, there are places where—while there is a significant spirit of resistance, and therefore abundance of resistance activities—there is a lack of artistic cadres to guide the movement, hindering any entrenchment or success. Likewise, there are places where there are capable art practitioners, but a weak spirit of resistance, wherein poor resistance activities lead to the fostering of a bland and backward culture.

The most vibrant art movements today are those in the military as the military generally meets both conditions.

Does this imply that it is only the military who meet the basic conditions required for the development of the arts? No. There are plenty of fertile lands left untapped. There are still many potential talents among ethnic minorities, as well as people from other classes that have not yet been trained into creative forces. And what of the main resistance forces: the workers, peasants, and intellectuals; those sacrificing and fighting for the cause? If those forces were to have a rich artistic life, why can't they be the main forces of art?

Here, I would like to talk about public officials, our most beautiful people: those responsible for creating people. We believe that if those officials were more interested in the arts, and if they could use the arts to their advantage when fighting for the cause, not only would their own work be more fruitful, but they could also be a huge creative force. The cadres' lives are intertwined with those of the masses; they have more opportunities to understand and sympathise with the masses than anyone else; the cadres' thoughts are the thoughts of the times, and, being the most advanced class of people, they have many opportunities to create valuable works. All we need to do is to make those cadres acquire new knowledge of the arts and get them more acquainted with artistic life, then we will have some excellent writers and artists who are truly of the people, bringing honour to the new Vietnamese art.

Simply put, we will have to promote a people's art movement more widely, appealing to all classes of people (particularly those vital to the war of resistance) and make the process of building an artistic foundation not just the work of a few, but indeed a common work of the majority. Only then can the art truly be a people's art, and the endless creative resources of the people be exploited, creating great works for the nation.

### *3. The disciplines of art are lacking*

The artistic life of the people remains weak. The old artistic capital has not been exploited much, so our arts are still in the rudimentary period wherein the various disciplines of art are still immature. Many disciplines are new to us and have not yet been extensively studied and practised. Although the masses began to love the arts—particularly music and drama—following the revolution, the progress of the various disciplines remained slow as the techniques and implementation strategies were poor. We cannot provide for the needs of the masses. Therefore, we ought to think about ways to enrich the various disciplines of art: on one hand, fully subsuming our national treasures whilst instigating and developing the

new initiatives of the people—which are abundant but scattered; and, on the other hand, widely subsuming new discoveries from around the world, learning advanced techniques from other countries, fostering the arts, and applying them to the circumstances of our country in a way that suits our people's mentality and perception on the journey to rapid progress.

In regard to building a people's art, based on the above comments, we present the following opinions. The process of building a people's art and culture aims to achieve two key outcomes:

1. Artworks are massified, elevating the ethos of the masses.
2. The endless creative possibilities of the people are utilised.

### *How can artworks be massified whilst elevating the ethos of the masses?*

In our opinion, if an artwork is to be massified with the aim of bettering the masses, first and foremost, the content of that work must be related to the lives of the masses; it must set and solve the urgent problems of the masses; it must connect life with their sufferings, joys, hatreds, and desires. The form of that work must be consistent with their level of perceptiveness.

No matter how sophisticated the technique of a work, if its content is backward and obscure to the masses, it cannot be positively received by them.

Therefore, if an artist or writer secludes himself from the people and does not understand their daily activities, is alien to their mentality, language, and customs, or does not have a deep sense of their responsibilities, how can he communicate their lives? Without massified activities, there can be no work of a massified character.

Further, once valuable works of art have been formed, their publication or dissemination by performance and exhibition is a matter of life and death to the artwork itself. In the context of our country, the means of publication and dissemination are severely lacking. We



Trịnh Kim Vinh (1966)

will try to overcome these obstacles with our hard work. We refuse to give up. The most organised creative teams will be the ones responsible for disseminating art among the masses—on the frontline as well as at the backline, in wards, communes, villages, and factories. All means of disseminating information, no matter how rudimentary, must be used. We cannot be fussy regarding form, insisting on complex techniques or means, making it difficult for the arts to reach as many people as possible. The masses are famished—they would rather have “tapioca” than have to wait for the fancy dishes that are not available.

It should also be noted that in the places where people struggle more fiercely, the spirit is always more intense and powerful emotions are abundant. Thus, the need for the enjoyment of art is more demanding. The arts need to reach these places and those people first; the arts need to do their duty: bringing passion and joy, improving one’s life so they can continue fighting for the cause.

#### *How can the creativity of the people be utilised?*

We can all clearly see that more and more people want to create, find it necessary to create, and “cannot bear not creating.” The emotional lives of so many vibrant souls demand to be expressed in literature and art. They wonder how they can even articulate this desire. Their confidence is overwhelming: “teach me how to write, how to draw, how to compose, etc.—I can create very well!” What a wonderful phenomenon! Therefore, a huge task for us—one of the most important ones—is to urgently train new art workers, and train them continuously in all disciplines of the arts. It is necessary to take advantage of all opportunities and circumstances to disseminate knowledge of the arts, especially to the major sections of the resistance and to those cadres among the masses. Observing the situation now, we have to open a lot of short-term classes and, if necessary, lecturers will have to come to the students, to the army management units, to the guerrillas, to the factories, and to the agencies in order to mentor and teach the simpler

forms of arts. Everywhere we can, we must organise many talks about art. Further, we must publish a “First Steps in Creating Art”<sup>2</sup> training and research book. The attitude of seasoned artists toward new talents with their first artworks should be to guide, support, monitor, and help them correct their works without hesitation.

Here, the question arises: how do we mentor, and who should those responsible for mentoring be?

There are places where cultural training is organised but where the views on art among the lecturers are inconsistent with each other, and sometimes do not conform with the new-democracy view of art.

In such situations, the mentees will be lost, and the training will not yield any worthwhile results.

In our opinion, those who are responsible for training cadres and leading new talents are equally responsible for adjusting their own ideas and views on the arts to be in sync with the new-democracy view of art and culture. They are to maintain sincere attitudes, while still being willing to debate during training.

In order to conduct the above two tasks, we have to do the following:

1. Collect our national treasures, especially within the folk arts, and develop them so that we can remain on par with the progress of our people today. However, with that said, we must also eradicate the defective aspects, that which is unfitting of the psychology and level of our people today. Studying the beauties of the ancient arts will assist in the national development of art, as well as make art easier to massify, because it is the masses who carry those beauties from generation to generation—they can resonate with the old forms of art and the idyllic emotions of our predecessors. In this sense, the adage “old bottle, new wine” is still relevant. We will imbue old forms with new content if it means we are able to reach the masses. However, at the same time, we must

<sup>2</sup> *First Steps in Creating Art* [Bước đầu văn nghệ].

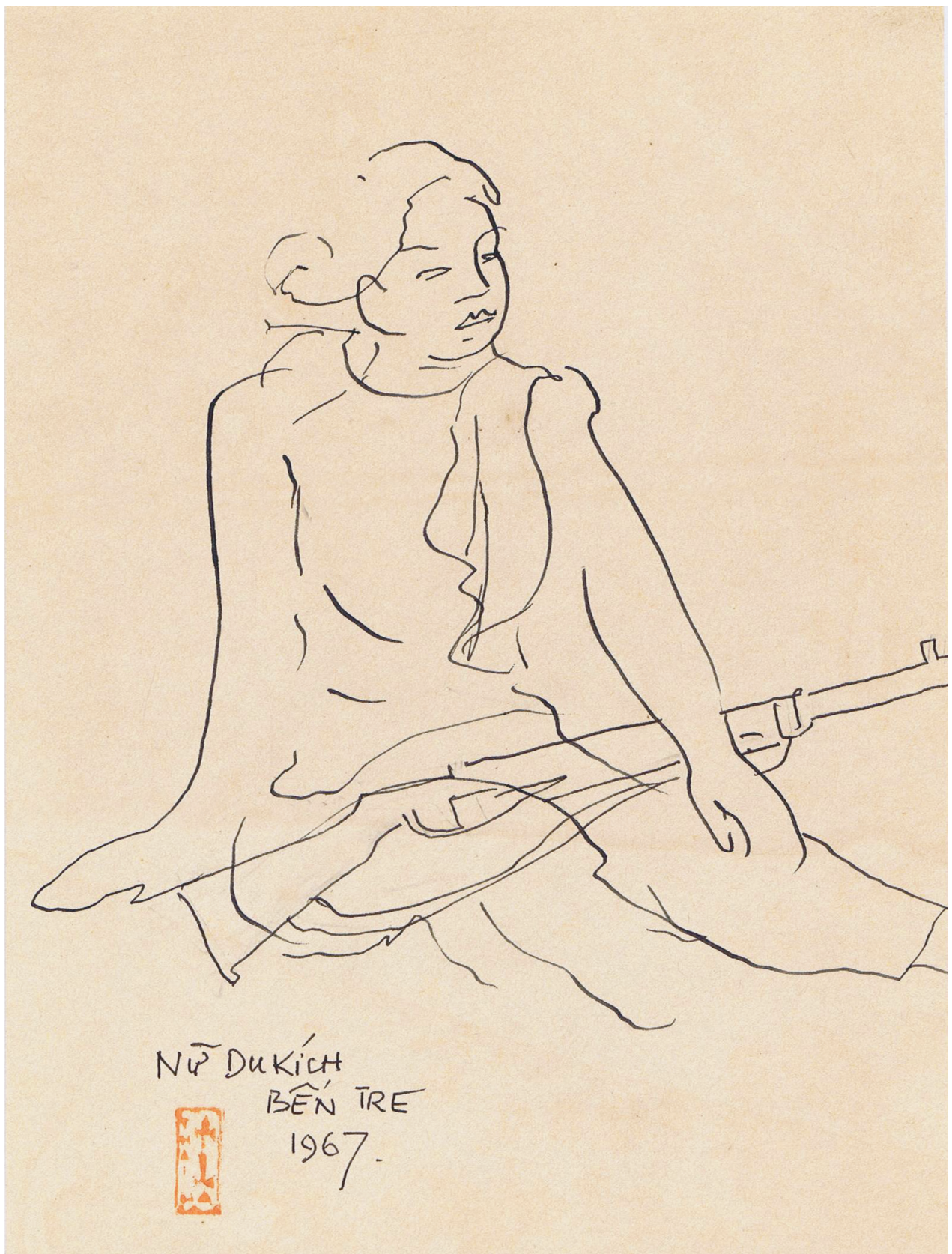
attempt to improve our techniques to improve the form—to create new forms so that the new content can be promoted to its fullest.

2. If we want our own art to become richer, we need to widely subsume arts from around the world. In the future, the situation will be more favourable for us, as we will be able to be closely involved within the arts of other new-democracy countries; to utilise advanced technologies; to enrich our art disciplines, for example: music and drama. But we must be wary of the tendency to follow foreign countries without regard for the actual situation in Vietnam or our language of affect. It is necessary to organise a systematic introduction of foreign literature and trends, and to criticise the backward and degenerate trends of the art of bourgeois countries.
3. There can be no arts movement without art theory. While our culture has developed, it must be recognised that we do not have a rich theoretical background nor rich practical experience, because there are many incorrect ideas and tendencies within the field, as well as many unresolved questions! We must resist the tendency to separate art and politics; the tendency to divide us between “citizen” and “artist”; the tendency to praise instinct while dismissing intellect; the tendency to think that technique is what matters most; that technology is somehow absolute and eternal; the tendency to formularise principles, making them into something that binds the arts. Furthermore, we must resist the tendency to be conservative and isolated, as well as the tendency to separate ourselves from the traditions and realities of the country. We should also eradicate the idea that people cannot understand art; that people must learn art in order to criticise it. We must fiercely destroy the attitude of those artists who are indifferent towards life, the people, and the

nation—those who turn art into an interesting game for a small group of selfish people. And, in order for our art to be sharp, we must create a movement of vibrant debate and criticism through conferences and newspapers. These critical debates should not just be about the writers and artists involved, but serve as means of getting the masses to participate and air their opinions. Such a mass movement of art criticism will serve as a great impetus for the advancement of the arts, allowing professional artists to learn extensively while also allowing us to improve the artistic level of the masses as effectively as possible.

4. In the development of a people’s art, we must also pay attention to the pernicious influence of the reactionary arts of the French colonists and American imperialists in the enemy-occupied regions. We must seek to eradicate those obscurantist, poisonous, depraved, and lewd arts that contain vile and escapist ideas. We must work to widely spread the influence of the new resistance art in the enemy-occupied areas so as to improve the spirit of resistance among the people there, restore their confidence in the government and achieve victory.
5. During the process of building a people’s art, how important should the role of professional artists be? First of all, we do not approve of the attitude of some comrades who consider themselves to be of no benefit to the resistance. They distrust their own abilities to contribute. In the face of the rapid progress of the masses, they are pessimistic and depressed towards themselves.

Neither do we approve of the arrogant attitude of some people who consider themselves to be the standard of art, refusing to take the criticism of the masses into account and distrusting the power of the masses. These



Thái Hà (1967)

two attitudes are not only harmful to the artists themselves, but also to our shared cause.

We believe that professional artists and writers can and are responsible for making an important contribution in the construction of a people's art. Because you have valuable knowledge and experience, you can greatly help in the training of new cadres and the massification of art.

But in order to complete the task of instructing, the artists themselves must take care to reform their own thoughts and activities. In our opinion, for the majority of our artists, the biggest focus—and perhaps most important slogan—is: REVOLUTIONISE THINKING, MASSIFY ACTIVITIES.

What does it mean to revolutionise thinking? As we understand it, it is the eradication of subjugated and backward ideas, idealism and religiousness, and individualism; simultaneously, it is the acquisition of progressive and scientific ideas, and a dialectical materialist way of thinking. This will help us find the truth, clearly recognising the trajectory of our society. Simply, it is to foster a spirit of ambition and self-criticism, fostering a spirit of service to the nation, the masses, and science.

Revolutionary ideas are practical ideas that must be coupled with actions. Therefore, having only a small amount of mere theoretical reasoning is insufficient—that reasoning needs to be practised among the masses. The true artist, the true people's revolutionary, must be the one who recognises his artistic abilities within the masses and for the masses. So, the issue of revolutionising thinking must inevitably go hand in hand with the issue of massifying activities.

What does it mean to massify activities? Is it just about improving the outer shell? It means, first of all, understanding the activities of the masses; understanding the feelings of the nation; understanding the aspirations of the masses; and knowing how to solve their problems. Therefore, we need to be close to the masses while they work and fight, to be emotionally committed to them so that we can deeply empathise with them. But

is massifying activities the same as blindly pursuing the masses, uncritically satisfying their wrong tastes? No. Artists stay close to the masses, integrating themselves so as to elevate the masses to a higher level. It is therefore necessary to recognise the good of the masses in order to develop them, but we equally recognise the bad—that which needs to be eradicated. Only then can art educate the masses and, in turn, be loved by them.

The aim to “revolutionise thinking, massify activities” is not one that can be achieved in a few days. It is something that happens throughout the life of the artist. But if we are determined to make progress and thrive, our success in terms of self-reformation will be a fundamental condition for artistic success.

The major problem of technique is equally one regarding creativity—but not a decisive one. We believe that the content determines the form, and therefore we also believe that the life of the people, revolutionary thought, and the examination of a work by the masses will definitely improve our technique into something more suitable for the level of the masses.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are in the midst of a period of fierce resistance, before the day of victory. We are likewise in the midst of a movement towards a people's art.

The destiny of the nation and the future of the arts demand great efforts from us artists. Each of us must contribute to the momentum that will lead us to victory, using art as a weapon to fight. We firmly believe that from this moment forward, the people's art will flourish, and the creative abilities of the people will blossom into beautiful works. Our country is one of new people. We will surely have a new culture: a people's culture worthy of the revolution.

We also firmly believe that our artistic brothers and sisters will be determined to carry out their duties—those of the people's artistic cadres—while resolutely cultivating ideas and renovating activities so as to be worthy engineers of the soul, leading teams of workers to

build a Vietnamese new-democracy culture.

### STATEMENTS FROM DEBATED SESSIONS

The goal of art is to help create a new life. The working class is at the forefront of creating this life because they understand the truth and direction of life. Their existence allows them to create a new life. They are one of the classes who have suffered the most under oppression. They did not get caught up in any ideology. Only liberation will allow them to benefit. It is for this reason that the working class is more devoted to the cause of national liberation than anyone else. Their aspirations are stronger and more radical than anyone else's. In national liberation, the workers are the pioneers, and therefore should equally lead the construction of a people's art.

In order to lead effectively, leaders must think and act correctly. We as a society must understand that the working class is the sole class capable of correctly realising the aspirations of the people and the progress of man. Why? The other classes are still hung up on individualist ideologies and personal gains. Therefore, their nature of affect is individualistic, not like that of a liberated peoples'.

So, what then of the participation of the other classes? While the other class cannot lead, they can participate. They can actively indulge in the influence of the workers, producing many beautiful creations. The working class cannot exist in isolation. To win, one has to ally oneself with other classes. In order to succeed in the war of resistance and foster new-democracy, it is necessary to unite the country. The same can be said for the arts.

Regarding the petty bourgeoisie, are they capable of harnessing the affective nature of their class? No. The petty bourgeoisie are a volatile class with an unstable ideology. They lack correct thinking or a stable outlook on life, so they do not interpret reality correctly. Thus, they cannot create artwork that expresses reality through affect. Mr. Đỗ Đức Dục raised this issue as some brothers

were attempting to draw depictions of a new life, but their thoughts were not entirely based in reality and, therefore, their depictions were wrong. They believed that there was no need to focus on the affect of their work as they catered to their own class—they could just illustrate their personal feelings and it would be applicable to their audience. That is not what this is about. The problem is that, in order to comment on life correctly, to understand new people, and to illustrate the new life, the primary objective is the revolutionising of thought and the massification of activities.

Mr. Dục also raises an important issue: all our artistic brothers come from the petty bourgeoisie class. How then are such artists to play a role in the building of a people's art? In my opinion, first and foremost, the petty bourgeoisie are fundamentally uncertain and stained with individualism—but we are an oppressed and exploited country, so the petty bourgeoisie in our country are devoted to the cause of liberation, the revolution, and the resistance. They still willingly follow the revolutionary path set by the Party and, under the leadership of the working class, contribute to creating a new life.

In regard to illustrating a new life, nation, and masses, it is impossible to operate on the level of affect without first revolutionising thought and massifying activities. However, the petty bourgeoisie—as well as all those who have expressed their own feelings of resistance—have already proven useful in today's world. To revolutionise our thoughts and massify our activities is now to go one step further.

We are in a society heavily influenced by feudal and capitalist vestiges. Having been subjugated for so long, we are imbued with outdated thinking—that of a slave.

The matter of revolutionising thought is a matter of destroying the above thinking. So, we have to have to trust that reason can help liberate the people; trust in the traditions of the people; trust in the power of the people, in our country and in the world as a whole. To maintain trust, however, thought alone is insufficient. It must be accompanied by action, and action must be practised by



Trịnh Kim Vinh (1967)

the masses.

Why should we massify activities? Because we have become so accustomed to an outdated way of life, we have to create new axioms. The masses will help us to eradicate the old ways. We cannot empathise with the masses just by living with them, dressing like them, and speaking their language. We have to massify activities so as to be sympathetic to the joys, sorrows, and pains of the masses; to be in complete solidarity with the masses; to share in resistance.

### *The “journey”*

Our artistic predecessors recognised both their successes and shortcomings, providing teaching moments not just for themselves but also for the greater arts community. Those who went ahead struggled greatly. When we think about it, all the pain we suffered contributed toward human progress. The young know little of the old. The pain of our predecessors helps us empathise and thus understand their lived realities. In this sense, works that capture the transformation of people were created by our predecessors—though, we also realise that we do not have many creatives. This is primarily an organisational problem. However, the effort of each individual has brought about significant results.

The Vietnam Arts and Culture Association has embraced the tradition of effective operation and expansion within the past year, with some progress recorded. Objectively speaking, the most important factor in the development of the arts is professional artists: those who, like the resistance artists, are not afraid of self-criticism. This revolutionary attitude has spurred the creation of the great works of our time.

The initial painful experience of self-criticism—even speaking from personal experience—will ripen into a precious fruit, justifying criticism and self-criticism as a healthy methodology for creation, as well as becoming the driving force for the advancement of art in Vietnam. In the people’s arts movement, the role of the professional artist is indispensable.

### *The issue of socialist realism and criticism*

—We are not yet in an era of socialism, but advancing towards it.

—When working to criticise the enemies, is it enough to just write about the facts and what we observe?

—While we agree that the arts are creative and must draw their raw materials from reality, we have to recognise whether or not our illustrations of reality offer an advancement, rather than being a mere polemic.

What does describing a social situation without an attitude say about the author’s viewpoint? If the artist wants to describe reality but lacks his own direction, he will only see life in decline, missing its upward trends. On the contrary, the socialist artist sees both the downward and upward direction of reality.

The reality described by Vũ Trọng Phụng is a social reality, not yet a socialist reality. Vũ Trọng Phụng was not a revolutionary—in fact, he held anti-revolutionary views. However, irrespective of the fluctuating nature of life at the time, Vũ Trọng Phụng outlined only the corrupt and evil elements of society in his works. If Vũ Trọng Phụng had joined the revolution, his vision would certainly be different. So, what is to be considered the status quo? We have to see that life is not just in decline, but that there are upward trends too. If we are unable to see the decline, we cannot reform it, and without seeing our reforms as moving life upwards, there can be no socialist reality.

Some say that socialist realist writers never talk about contemporary evils. This isn’t true. As for the question raised by Mr. Văn Cao: should we, at this point in time, talk about some of society’s evil ways? I feel that we should. But it should be understood that the bad is not representative of the times—it is only a small part of it. Life has such great beauty, but inside there remains some bad. It’s our job to realise that.

Some people say true reality is only that of the proletariat. This is incorrect. Our war is a people’s war. Our reality is now that of the entire peoples as a whole.

I repeat the words of Gorky: Art must stand above





Huỳnh Văn Gấm (1967)



Vũ Giáng Hương (1967)

reality for it to see clearly. In my opinion, this is not too far from reality. Life is similar to a colourful picture: It is easy to make sense of the complete work from afar, but if we are to focus on too small of an aspect, it becomes impossible to see the whole.

—Our enemy is he who goes against the progression of our people. Our friend is the one whose voice benefits our people.

### *On photography*

—Its main purpose is to collate extensive and accurate documentation. The focus should not be on creative compositions, as this only detracts from photography's primary aim of recording the truth. Another issue is the need for more photographers to receive training. It will be impossible to accurately collate documentation with only a few photographers.

### *On solo performances*

—They are much needed, because they can be regarded as literature reports. Consider the *vè* and *xâm* folk songs.<sup>3</sup> They have such significant effects. Therefore, I propose the further development of solo performances.

But I do not agree with Mr. Thanh Tịnh, who seeks easy success. His performance significantly lacks “soul.” The public praised *Heroic Messengers*<sup>4</sup> not because the creator was artistically successful, but because they were grateful for the representation of the messengers. If we are able to bring life into the performance, it will succeed. Even with my own poetry, I want it to be a story; a solo performance.

—Personally, I admire how Mr. Thanh Tịnh was able to perform in front of the crowd, something very few of our brothers would dare to do. With that said, if Mr. Thanh Tịnh were to remove some of the comedic gestures, those that generate cheap laughter, the audience would take the value of the solo performance, and its message, more seriously. And therefore, the solo performance will have a far greater effect.

<sup>3</sup> *Vè* is a north Vietnamese poetic and song form, usually performed with an accompaniment of percussion instruments. *Vè* poets recite satirical rhyming couplets, wherein the final syllable of every other row must rhyme with the final syllable in the next row. Performances are typically sarcastic and function as a form of social criticism. Like *vè*, *xâm* is a north Vietnamese folk music, but typically performed with an erhu or monochord. Originating during the dynastic era, *xâm* was performed by blind musicians who wandered from town to town, earning a living from their performances.

<sup>4</sup> *Heroic Messengers* [*Anh hùng liên lạc*].

<sup>5</sup> Ngô Xuân Diệu was a leading figure in the New Poetry Movement [*Phong trào Thơ mới*], a twentieth-century literary movement which sought to replace the chữ Nôm-based stylised forms of Chinese-influenced poetry with Vietnamese free verse. Diệu oscillated between French symbolism and socialist realism in his endeavour to represent truth, with the themes of his works shifting from love and desire to Party allegiance and the struggle against imperialism.

<sup>6</sup> Tố Hữu is referring to Nguyễn Đình Thi's poem *Country* [*Đất nước*], using the opening line: “The morning is clear and fresh, like those mornings of the past.”

<sup>7</sup> Nguyễn Đỗ Cung, a painter and active member of the resistance who, at the time, was playing a crucial role in the re-establishment of the Hanoi College of Fine Art (later the Vietnam University of Fine Art) following heavy destruction during the 1945 Japanese coup. In 1963, he would go on to found the Vietnam National Museum of Fine Arts.

### *On the poetry of Nguyễn Đình Thi*

—Mr. Diệu's<sup>5</sup> raising of the topic of Mr. Thi's poems is not simply about the rhyming styles and such. These poems contain strange content. Indeed, this is a different rhyming style from those seen in other poems (soulful rhymes) for you to consider, but we will speak about such styles later.

—Listening to Mr. Thi critique his poetry, one must think: “Why do you keep writing like this if you are aware of it?” Such is the mystery of the poet. Poetry is not simply intellectual work, but a result of lived experience.

During moments when I am feeling low or drained, or when I miss someone, I tend to read poems like “*The morning is clear and fresh...*”<sup>6</sup> Poetry is a dance of souls; it reaches out and harmoniously unites like-minded souls.

When I need to work, however, I don't like those poems—I hate the individualism that comes back to me. I become wary of myself. Sometimes when I see a good poem, I'm not sure whether it's actually beautiful. What are the standards?

I cannot use “me” as a standard applicable to everything. An artist must wonder: what do the people think about this piece? Can they sympathise with the work? Were their thoughts and feelings represented?

If the work does not speak to the masses, or if it speaks against them, it cannot be considered good. Mr. Thi's poetry, for me, is not good because it does not yet express the thoughts and feelings of the masses. That is the point.

I agree with Mr. Thi's self-critical attitude, however. This is the correct attitude to have. It is also essential that he re-examine his thoughts and feelings with the masses in mind. There are, after all, times when the masses are mentally exhausted and low in spirit—their fatigue is tangible.

We have to lead the masses, and evaluate whether our ideology is leading them towards a better life.

### *On painting*

—On this issue I am hesitant. I wonder: are we close

to the masses? When Mr. Cung<sup>7</sup> painted, he posed the question: for whom am I painting? There are distinct class divides within the arts, and when art is precisely tailored towards a certain class, they will love it.

#### *On music*

—Art is like a conscious being. If we ourselves lack consciousness, we cannot create or compose. It is better we gain knowledge first.

—Studying the music of yore, whilst also subsuming the musical trends of new-democracy countries, for the enrichment of Vietnamese music is a necessity

But in general, the issue of musical composition still rests on two fundamental points: the revolutionising of ideologies, and the massification of activities. Music, like poetry, is hard to describe without emotions.

In order to have a vietnamised character, it is essential that the musician empathise and resonate with contemporary life. By the way, I would also like to express my personal opinion on the song *Miss Mai*.<sup>8</sup> I resent that song not only for its lack of consistency regarding the mentality of the National Guard, but because it distorts and slanders the army. I suggest we eradicate that song.

If musicians want to progress, they have to turn a new leaf. To put it another way, they must be revolutionised.

#### *On characters in drama*

—Mr. Tường<sup>9</sup> made many points during his self-criticism with which I agree. There is, however, one point which I disagree with. Should we speak about the decaying class? Many believe that they are not worth mentioning. So, should we speak only of the rising class? It would seem that Mr. Tường is perhaps still confused and has not yet arrived at a suitable answer to this problem.

I have thought clearly on this matter: it is absolutist to say that the decaying class has nothing to do with the resistance. When we create a work, we seek to raise or address a problem that has something to do with people's lives. Therefore, our works can still speak of the decaying

class as it is inevitably related to the lives of people. Society has always had fluctuations, so if we're talking about life rising, we need to equally say something about life dying. The point is that when it comes to the decay of a person or class, it is also necessary to say how one sees what is rising above the decay.

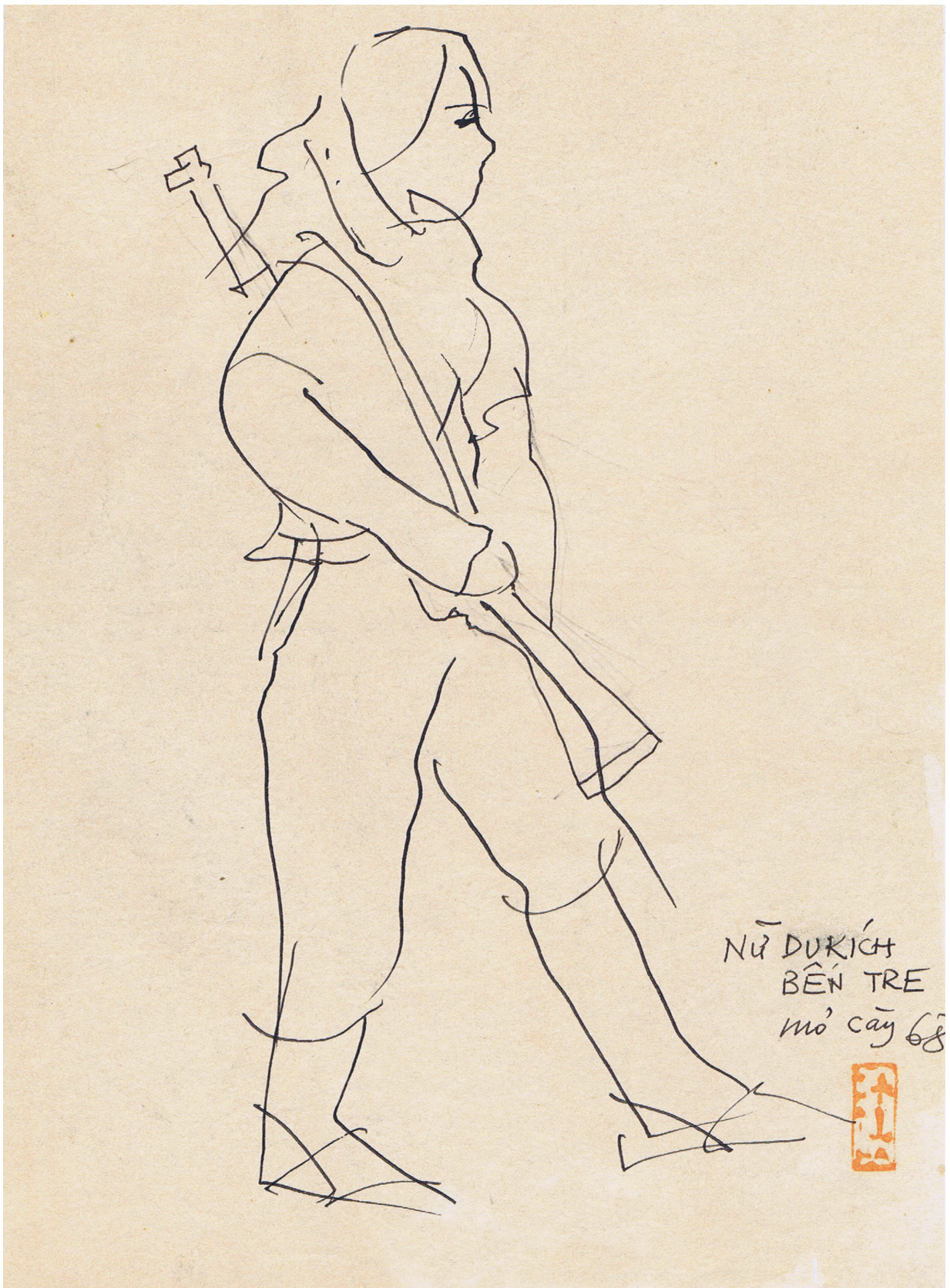
Mr. Tường's flaw is that he could not emphasise the rising class, so the decaying class is not clearly described either.

Regarding the character Sơn in the play *Those Who Stay*,<sup>10</sup> do you not wonder if, in reality, such a character could exist? Indeed, Sôns are not uncommon. However, in addition to the Sôns, the Union has many wise people too, and the number of these is ever increasing. So, Mr. Tường, if you could create characters, whether directly or indirectly, that are more correct than Sơn, it would be far better. With this adjustment, the audience will no longer make the mistake of thinking that the cadre of a large union—one leading the war of resistance—is “funny” like Sơn.

<sup>8</sup> *Miss Mai* [*Cô Mai*].

<sup>9</sup> Nguyễn Huy Tường, a playwright and Deputy Secretary of the National Salvation Cultural Association.

<sup>10</sup> *Those Who Stay* [*Những người ở lại*]



Thái Hà (1968)

## LETTER TO OUR ARTIST BROTHERS AND SISTERS

*Trường Chinh, 1951*<sup>1</sup>

Dear friends,

I am overjoyed to learn that you will be holding an art exhibition. I am, however, unable to join you owing to my busy schedule—such a pity! That said, I continue to keep a close eye on your work, so please allow me to express some thoughts in this letter.

You have worked tirelessly to serve the people and the resistance. Through your work in the arts, you have actively participated in our people's great struggle for freedom, independence, and world peace. You have faced many hardships in your attempts to overcome the difficulties of creating art with very limited resources and, during the last mobile exhibition, you were open and willing to accept the people's comments and criticisms.

These are noteworthy advancements. I sincerely congratulate you all.

However, as you must have noticed, our resistance art—our painting and performing arts—continues to face many shortcomings and weaknesses despite our best efforts and successes.

Our achievements in painting have yet to live up to the requirements of the resistance. And while our people are currently working and fighting tirelessly—their lives so rich—our painting arts remain somewhat poor.

Our painting arts have yet to capture the key characteristics of our people and our nation; they have yet to materialise the traits of the democratic socialist Vietnamese society or those Vietnamese in the resistance; they have yet to fully denounce the insidiousness of the crimes committed by the invaders—the destroyers of world peace—and their political puppets; they have yet

to educate and reform the thinking of the people on a deep and encompassing emotional level.

To summarise, our painting arts, in my opinion, have yet to truly illustrate the life and struggle of the Vietnamese people; they have yet to actively participate in the new moral education of the people, and have yet to fully serve the people.

Is this the result of a lack of incentive in our artists? Has the war of resistance left our artists without the resources needed to create?

No. After all, the majority of our artists are unable to answer these questions: for whom do they paint? Who is the audience? What do they paint? What is the content? What is the form? How does one paint well? We have yet to fully realise the concept of serving the people, as guided by the leadership of the working class, the majority of whom are workers, peasants, and soldiers. We have yet to fully grasp the revolutionary path for our country as laid out by President Hồ and the vanguard Party; we have yet to recognise that the working people and their struggles are an inexhaustible source of artistic inspiration. Therefore, we must immerse ourselves in their lives and become one with the masses in order to understand and serve them, and help advance the movement among them. We have yet to fully comprehend the content of art, which is to illustrate the role of the people, the working class, the vanguard Party, and its leadership; to illustrate the social conditions, historical circumstances, and natural environments in which the people, the working class, the vanguard Party, and its leadership operate. Or even if we have understood this content, we have yet to show any deep affection for the people and their aesthetics; we have yet to imbue our work with the tremendous passion and enthusiasm needed to inspire and foster the creation of more work. Or, our form has yet to effectively match our content (painting, like any other form of art, has its own language) or fails to express the content in any interesting or meaningful way. Moreover, we are still entangled in the false ideologies of “anarchist art,” “pure art,” or “art for art's sake.” Or, we may still be under

<sup>1</sup> Letter addressed to artists partaking in a painting exhibition, 18 December 1951.

the influence of French colonialism, yet to break free from the shackles of “formalist,” abstract, and decadent art. Or, they misinterpret the massification of art as the “vulgarisation” of art, forgetting that an artwork must be popular among the masses in order to be considered a masterpiece, and the larger the masterpiece, the more popular it is among the masses; however, not all massified art is a masterpiece.

As we have yet to solve the above problems, and remain perplexed by false ideologies and viewpoints, many of us are still unsure of how to go about creating art. Instead, we find ourselves producing work that the people cannot relate to; work that does not capture the aesthetics, emotions, and desires of the people—or only captures superficial details rather than any true essence. This is the case for some professional artists who have graduated from traditional institutions.

On the other hand, while new artists are emerging from the worker and peasant classes, they lack experience and technical ability so their work, although full of promise, remains mostly in the form of rough drafts and sketches rather than fully-developed artworks. The role of artists in general, and our resistance art soldiers in particular, is to elevate the standard of art to meet the demands of the era and the aspirations of the people, serving them in their endeavours, be it work, fighting, or education; to actively contribute to the national struggle for freedom and independence, as well as fostering peace for all of humanity.

What would the art community, particularly painters, need to do in order to achieve this? I recommend undertaking the following duties:

1. Improve and cultivate one’s own ideology, fully immersing oneself in the responsibility of serving the masses and, in doing so, realise that such is a great honour which must be served not only with the mind but with the very soul; maintain a long-term attitude of resistance; volunteer within the ranks of the resistance so

as commend and inspire the unwavering resolve of our army and our people in their pursuit of victory.

2. Condemn the crimes of the invaders and urge the people to not only unite in solidarity but fight tenaciously. This can only be accomplished if we replace the fear that drives our people to retreat with a hatred so strong that they can only charge forward and destroy the enemy. At the same time, oppose the pernicious effects of the obscene, caddish, and aggressive art of the American imperialists and the empty, stagnant, and perverse art of the French colonists.
3. Promote those virtues currently gaining popularity among our people, namely: heroism; courage; self-sacrifice; self-respect; patriotism; hatred for the enemy; dedication to the service of the people; respect for the work of public servants; a love for labour, science, art, and so on. Further, one must resolutely resist corruption, wastefulness, bureaucratism, individualism, disorganisation, lack of discipline, laziness and opportunism, failure and desertion, selfishness, passivity, and so on.
4. Study politics and follow the advice of the vanguard Party; diligently research and investigate the people and their aesthetic, learn from lived experience among the masses, actively participate in the practical work of the masses, be close to them, understand them, and serve them effectively.
5. Be determined to break free from the shackles of outdated, obsolete artistic perspectives; boldly embark on the path of revolutionary realism, advancing towards a socialist realism, and do not make the mistake of believing that revolutionary realism does not allow us to be creative or stifles our dreams—it reflects the realities of life while reaching for the future; not merely slavishly recording the present but vividly illustrating

the historical content and revolutionary development of the subject, taking on the active responsibility of contributing to social reform and the transformation of humanity.

6. Research, nurture, and develop the precious artistic traditions of the Vietnamese people in general, as well as those of the ethnic groups who have coexisted for centuries in our country. At the same time, learn from the progressive artistic experiences of foreign countries, especially the Soviet Union, socialist countries, and other democratic nations.
7. Strive to create works that have both ideological and artistic value, critique and self-critique with integrity. Take competition as a working style and criticism and self-criticism as a progressive rule. Utilise powerful art to guide the movements of production, struggle, work, and study that are actively emerging among the masses.

Performing these duties means that our country's artists, including painters, assume and serve both the roles of citizens and artists; to be deserving of the title "engineers of the soul," a title reserved for pioneering artists; and to be worthy of the role of "soldiers on the cultural front," as President Hồ mentioned in his letter to you.

I wish you luck with the exhibition and the subsequent discussion on art.

Yours respectfully,  
Trường Chinh



Nguyễn Thanh Minh (1968)

# BUILDING A VIETNAMESE PEOPLE'S ART

Tố Hữu, 1951<sup>1</sup>

## I. VIETNAMESE ART PRIOR TO THE AUGUST REVOLUTION

### *A glimpse into the past*

Our country's ancient art and literature had two streams: feudal and folk.

The mainstream literature of the feudal society was created by Confucian scholars. It heavily bore the influence of Chinese feudalism. The Vietnamese feudal class adopted Chinese characters as the official writing, giving rise to a Sino-Vietnamese literary foundation. This script bore historical masterpieces like Trần Hưng Đạo's *Exhortation to the Military Generals* or Nguyễn Trãi's *Great Proclamation Upon the Pacification of the Wu*.<sup>2</sup>

Alongside Sino-Vietnamese literature, literature using chu Nom characters gradually developed. However, the ruling class despised it and, as such, it was not used as the official writing. It was only in the eighteenth-century that chu Nom literature gained value and a significant position. With figures like Nguyễn Du, Hồ Xuân Hương, Đoàn Thị Điểm, and later Nguyễn Công Trứ, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, Nguyễn Khuyến, Trần Tế Xương, chu Nom literature became increasingly rich, eloquent, and popularised among the people, passing down its legacy and forming a precious heritage in the literature of the feudal era. The mainstream arts, such as architecture, classical theatre, ceremonial music, dance, and imperial rituals also drew heavily on those arts of Chinese feudalism. In general, they merely imitated the original styles and rules of their Chinese counterparts.

Folk art is a vast treasure in the ancient cultural heritage of Vietnam. It is the art of the broad masses, the toiling people, expressed through many forms: folk songs, proverbs, ve songs, fairy tales, comedies, cheo and tuong,<sup>3</sup> and Tet paintings<sup>4</sup>... Over a long history, the Vietnamese peasants have found in this anonymous art the shapes of their lives and souls—the shapes of their struggles against nature and the cruel oppression of the feudal rulers and mandarin regime. Folk art is a rich repository of practical experience from agricultural life, representing a significant aspect of feudal society's story. It is the hearty and simple song of the peasants, a clever and surreptitious laugh at the oppressive laws of the kings and mandarins, at the unjust norms of feudalism that crushed the people and bound the women, at those backward beliefs of individuals such as shamanism, fortune telling, and sorcery. Intertwined with these songs and laughter is the sound of resentment and sighs, the expressions of a people oppressed and helpless, desperately seeking a way out.

Through many dynasties and despite suffering losses, folk art still persists. It continues to be passed down, to this day, throughout the villages of Vietnam, in the lowlands and highlands alike. It deeply roots in the hearts of the hardworking and fighting people of the countryside. It possesses a vibrant and resilient vitality, demonstrating that Vietnamese peasants have long been a significant creative force in our country. The Liberation and development of the creative force of the masses is a critical task in today's ongoing effort to build a foundation for a people's art.

Throughout the long feudal era, the two streams of feudal and folk art coexisted, running parallel. However, during times when the feudal class needed to rely on the peasants to fight foreign invaders or overthrow a dynasty, feudal art would combine with folk art. This left a strong influence on feudal art, reforming it in both form and content. A prosperous era in the national arts under the feudal system was ushered in, as we can see in that of the Lý, Trần, and Lê dynasties. However, when the foreign

<sup>1</sup> Speech presented at the Second National Party Congress, 17 February 1951.

<sup>2</sup> *Exhortation to the Military Generals* [*Hịch tướng sĩ*]; *Great Proclamation Upon the Pacification of the Wu* [*Bình Ngô đại cáo*].

<sup>3</sup> See footnote 2, *Resistance in the Field of Culture*.

<sup>4</sup> That is, Đông Hồ paintings.

invaders were driven out, or the old dynasty was usurped, a new ruling feudal class would return to suppress the people; conservatism would reign again. At that time, the nation's literature and art again split into two opposing streams: the mainstream art of the ruling class led to a period of stagnation and impoverished formulas, while folk art retained the enduring vitality of the nation, striving to rise despite being unable to establish itself as a strong and stable cultural foundation for the nation. There were periods like that of the Later Lê dynasty (during the Lê emperor-Trịnh lords reign) when the feudal regime in Vietnam entered a phase of decline, disintegration, and intense contradictions with the people, especially the peasantry, the main force of society. The revolts of the peasantry (most notably the uprising led by Nguyễn Huệ) and the resistance of the nation stimulated the development of art.

This cycle (the rise and fall of dynasties) repeated itself *ad nauseam*, hindering the strong and continuous development of Vietnamese art under the feudal system. The cultural capital of the past, that which still remains, like the precious art of the prosperous Lý, Trần, and Lê dynastic periods, as well as the period from the mid-eighteenth-century to the first half of the nineteenth-century, holds great value. However, the most substantial cultural capital remains in folk art, an art deeply imprinted in the aesthetic and soul of the nation for millennia—especially in the legacy of the Vietnamese language, with its idioms and intonations (both in speech and song), a unique aspect of our national heritage.

### *Under French colonial rule*

The history of Vietnamese art during the first eighty years of French colonial rule is a history of the struggle between two literary and artistic currents: that of servitude and degradation, and that of revolution and progress. The French empire faced immediate resistance from the feudal class upon invading our country. Once again, this class relied on the strength of labouring peasants. Patriotic

chu Nom poetry by the Confucian literati who were sympathetic to the people was born, as were folk writings and ve songs depicting the battles against the French. The poetry and writings of figures like Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh were passed down, serving as powerful encouragement. Patriotic intellectuals with bourgeois tendencies (like the Tonkin Free School movement in the North, or the Duy Tân Movement in the Centre) sparked movements for national language education, advocated for lifestyle reforms, condemned old customs, and promoted “modernisation.”<sup>5</sup> However, the failed May 1916 uprising of Emperor Duy Tân (which was essentially a rebellion led by patriotic soldiers initiated by the feudal intellectuals) marked the end of the feudal intellectuals' struggle. After the end of the First World War, the French empire began exploiting its colonies, giving birth to traitorous pro-French collaborators like Phạm Quỳnh and Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, who disseminated the writings of the Association for the Intellectual and Moral Formation of the Annamites, like *Southern Wind* and *Western Thought*,<sup>6</sup> praising the so-called “merits” of the French colonial empire. The colonial exploitation policy of the French empire gave rise to the proletariat and the bourgeoisie classes. In a very short period of time, a mere five to seven years, the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie simultaneously conducted political, ideological, and artistic movements in opposition to what they saw as colonial and feudal values. From 1921 to 1930, propaganda books advocating patriotism and progressive struggle by the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie had a significant impact on the people. Works like Phạm Tấn Đắc's *Recalling the Soul of the Country* and Trần Huy Liệu's *Wine Gourd of Confiding*,<sup>7</sup> as well as articles by Bùi Công Trừng, Nguyễn An Ninh, and others served as a great catalyst for patriotic spirit.

However, the Yên Bái uprising failed in 1930, and the bourgeois art movement, along with its class, dwindled, its revolutionary morale shifting towards that of romanticism, individualism, and reformism. The petty bourgeoisie's artistic tendencies also

<sup>5</sup> Tô Hữu uses the term “*duy tân*” [literally “new thinking”] as a pun, referencing the name of Emperor Duy Tân.

<sup>6</sup> *Southern Wind* [Nam Phong]; *Western Thought* [Âu tây tư tưởng].

<sup>7</sup> *Wine Gourd of Confiding* [Một bầu tâm sự].



Nguyễn Thanh Minh (1968)

differentiated based on their alignment with class: those who toed the bourgeois reformist line, contra those who toed the revolutionary proletarian line. The Indochinese Communist Party was established in 1930, taking leadership of the revolutionary movement and initiating its own political and ideological campaign. In its early stages, the Party lacked a new cultural agenda and primarily relied on newspapers and pamphlets for propaganda. During the Party's period of decline from 1931 to 1934, a period of romantic art and literature spread ideas of reform, compromise, and detachment from the overflowing of life. The Self-Reliant Literary Association and its publications disseminated these ideas further, influencing the urban bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie but also contributing greatly to the effort to reform the complicated existing literary methods. As such, new narrative styles emerged, brighter and richer, using the language of the people in a simpler but more diverse manner, raising the position of Vietnamese literature one level higher. From 1935, the Party's revolutionary campaign regained its strength. The Party openly engaged in political activities and began a robust campaign to promote ideological and artistic thought with a democratic stance. The Party collaborated with the (reformist bourgeoisie) Today group<sup>8</sup> in political struggle—but Party comrades did not forget the ideological struggle, discussing and writing on issues, like the distinction between art for art's sake and art for life's sake, idealism contra materialism, and polemicising the romantic tendencies of bourgeois art. To ensure that its political and ideological campaign reached the majority of the illiterate masses, the Party initiated the Association for the Popularisation of National Language. The Party's stance also attracted some socially conscious artists and writers with a tendency towards realism and who were critical of the colonialists, the kings, mandarins, landlords and the bureaucratic regime; artists and writers who sought to express the harsh life of the peasant and worker.

The Second World War erupted, imperialists became

fascists, and France lost control of the country. The defeatist–collaborationist ideology of Pétain gave rise to dictatorship. The “Marshal's Word” insidiously infiltrated schools and spread its venom throughout the cities and villages, while collaborators like Ducoroy launched the “Joyful Youth” campaign, enticing the young into dancehalls and dens. The Japanese fascists imported writings and films propagating the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere to deceive our people and drag them into their war of aggression.

During the period from 1940 to 1944, our country's public art was darker than ever before. Under the yoke and toxic atmosphere of the Japanese and French invaders, most petty bourgeoisie and bourgeois artists expressed a sceptical and melancholic attitude. More and more gradually they leaned towards escapism, returning to old Confucian ideologies, falling back into the metaphysical world. Indeed, some sought for national elements, but were hesitant to engage too deeply in the reality of revolutionary struggle, ultimately adopting a disconnected passivity, alienating themselves from the masses, and becoming the oppressors' tools for mind-disruption.

During this time, the Party's revolutionary campaign expanded deeper into the masses, and our propaganda and education increasingly employed simple, tangible art forms. The newspapers of the Party, the Viet Minh, and organisations for national salvation developed extensively, bringing poems, proverbs, and songs to the people. They denounced the crimes of the enemies and traitors, lit the path of the revolutionary struggle, and inspired patriotism and trust in the future of the country and people. Some who sympathised with the Party engaged in public cultural activities, introducing the revolutionary literature of China. By the end of 1943, *The Outline of Vietnamese Culture* was established, explicitly outlining the principles of vietnamisation, scientification, and massification as the guiding principles for the cultural revolution campaign.

The National Salvation Cultural Association was

<sup>8</sup> Today group [Ngày Nay]

founded, bringing together a host of progressive artists. Some revolutionary songs were born. These songs sparked patriotism and accelerated the Liberation Front's progress in the liberated areas. Revolutionary art began to develop a clear path. However, looking back at the period of hardship and heroism from 1939 to 1945, which witnessed three uprisings—those of Bac Son, Nam Ky, and Do Luong—and the pre-revolutionary period of the Viet Bac base and the spirited anti-Japanese movement, our revolutionary art remained lacking. Apart from political writings, a few poems and songs, we lacked substantial artworks that portrayed the hardships of our people under the domination of French and Japanese occupation; artworks that rendered tangible the revolutionary struggle of the people and the leading role of the Party. During those times, due to the lack of cadres on the cultural front, the Party was unable to spark any great ideological direction to counteract the influence of slave culture, perverseness, escapism, and distortions of Marxist theory by groups of pseudo-materialist literary activists. Therefore, only a very small number of artists joined the Party during that time.

After a century of colonialism, what cultural legacy do we have?

How much beautiful heritage from the old culture, especially folk culture, has been trampled or covered by the veil of decadence, reformed into tools to lull the masses to sleep? The working people were denied any enjoyment of a healthy culture, they were denied the ability to develop their artistic creativity; progressive and revolutionary art was violently suppressed by the colonial terrorist regime. The poisonous mushrooms of the debauched French bourgeois culture spread and the decaying culture of imperialism flourished on the Vietnamese art-scape. These poisonous mushrooms have withered many of our country's artists—all of whom were of the petty bourgeoisie class—driving them even further from the reality of the masses, detached from the roots of the nation, from science, from progressive thought, and from revolution. Under the rule of imperialism, the fate

of the nation and its art are intertwined. Imperialism must be overthrown to liberate the nation and subsequently liberate Vietnamese art. It must be overthrown in order to develop the artistic creativity of the working people and to transform the old generation of artists who have lost their way into a new generation of cultural workers for the people.

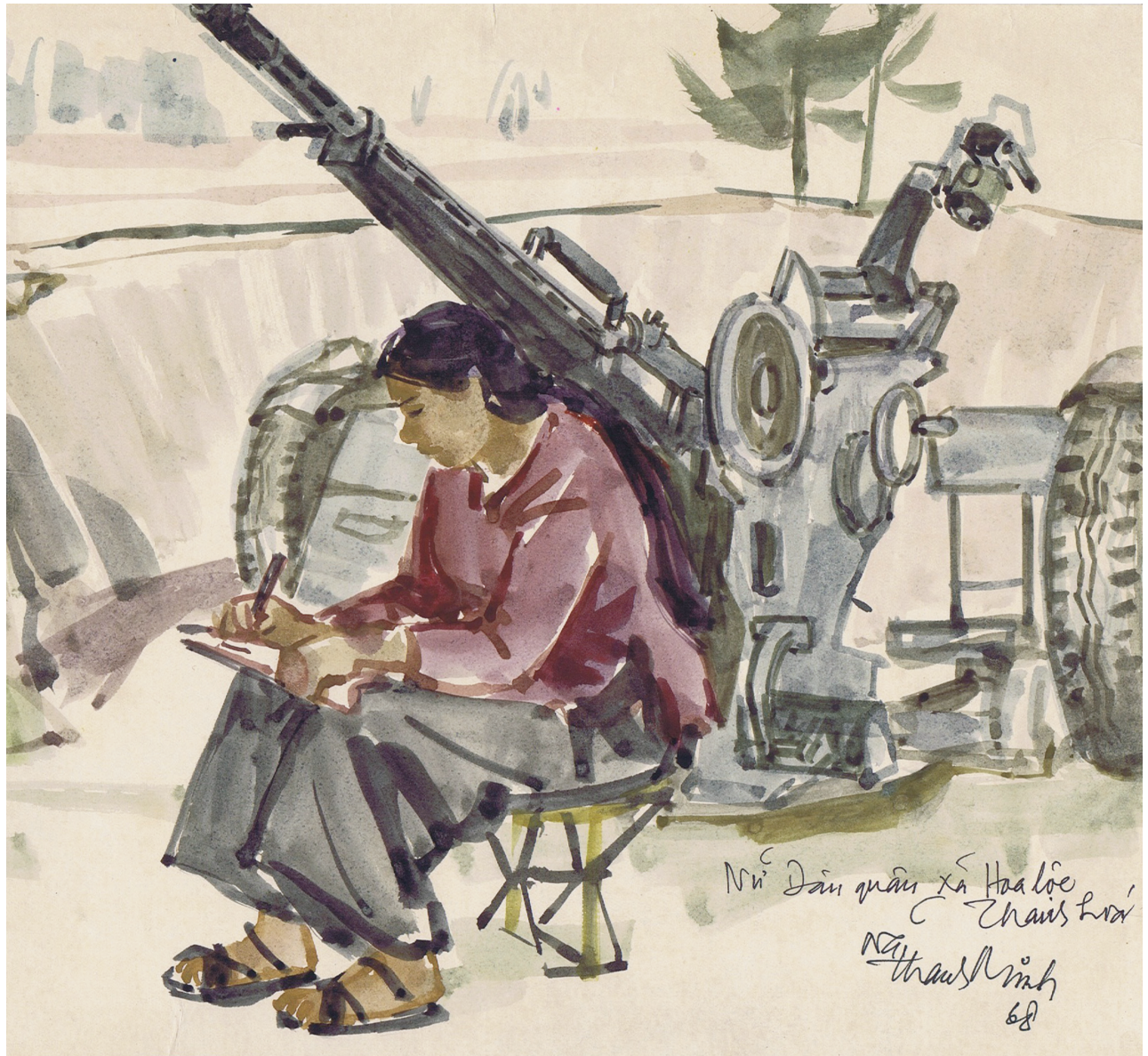
That is the inevitable path of Vietnamese art, and it is also one of the great undertakings of the August Revolution.

## II. THE BEGINNINGS OF VIETNAMESE ART

The August Revolution of 1945 ended the colonial regime and toppled the feudal throne, opening a new era for Vietnamese art.

Under the leadership of the Party, the people regained their power, reclaimed their right to live as human beings, and seized the right to enjoy the artistic achievements of the nation—that is, the right to create new art. Art is no longer the exclusive domain of a few individuals separated from the nation and the masses. It can no longer be a tool for oppression and domination, used to lull and poison the masses.

Art must abandon the ivory towers, the pseudo-sophisticated theatrical stages, and immerse itself in the masses, serving the people. It must become a movement, a great endeavour in which the entire people participate in its construction. Art must submit to and be guided by the working class and the Communist Party so as to progress in the right direction. Art must be for the people—of the people—and follow the path of the proletariat's Party. The new art of Vietnam must be a people's art. This new art began with the August Revolution. In the past five years, amidst the war of resistance, under the people's democratic regime, Vietnamese revolutionary art has gradually developed. Although not yet sharp enough, it has truly become a powerful weapon in the revolutionary struggle, an effective means of encouragement and



Nguyễn Thanh Minh (1968)

education.

### *Art in service of the resistance and revolution*

In our five years of resistance, new expressions of art have emerged, taking a significant step forward amidst the battlefields of creative spirit. Compared to the pitifulness of the art hiding among enemies in the temporarily occupied areas, we can clearly see the great blossoms of the art flourishing on free soil. However, when compared to the magnificent achievements of our people in military, political, economic, and cultural fields, along with the leaps and bounds of our people in recognising the essence of life, the new art still lags behind, showing signs of stagnation.

How has art served the revolution and resistance?

After the August Revolution, the Viet Minh's National Salvation Cultural Association revealed itself in order to attract more artists. In doing so, it published the newspaper *Vanguard*. At that time, the freshly seized people's government was threatened by the French colonialists, supported by the British empire, who returned to invade the South, and the Chinese National Army, led by Chiang Kai-shek, invaded the North. The traitors were constantly sabotaging the revolutionary efforts, and, as the leadership of some comrades was still narrow-minded, many individuals who initially welcomed the revolution later became sceptical, standing outside the organisation, and were not determined to support the government and the National Front. This situation was quickly resolved, and by the time of the nationwide resistance on 19 December 1946, most artists had ventured into the free zones to join the resistance, using their art to serve the struggle. Only a very small number, not even worth mentioning, remained in the temporarily occupied areas, and even among them, there were only a few opportunistic and incompetent individuals who willingly became servants for the enemy. Due to this lack of puppet artists, the French invaders often resorted to stealing the works of resistance artists to

better their own propaganda and decorate their puppet government.

During the war of resistance, the National United Cultural Front truly took shape in the form of the Vietnam Arts and Culture Association, established in July 1948, following the First National Arts Assembly.

The Vietnam Arts and Culture Association, under the Party's leadership, assisted most of the artists in the resistance, organising their artistic lives, inspiring their work, and encouraging new behaviours. Even up until now, they have branches nationwide, throughout various regions, laying the groundwork for a people's art. As the enemy couldn't entice any reputable artists to their side, they resorted to stealing from us—they stole and distorted many of our resistance songs, creating dummy "national anthems" which they broadcast across their traitorous radio stations; they stole our resistance literature to publish in their newspapers; they even stole our resistance paintings for their propaganda.

The most notable way in which today's artists contribute is through organising art groups to participate in campaigns; venturing deep into the countryside, the factories, even the enemy areas; using their creative abilities to immediately assist in resistance activities; nurturing the creativity of the masses; and guiding the art groups that have achieved popularity within the army, factories, and offices.

Some of our artist brothers have given their lives to the fight: singer Tô Lý carried a bomb to destroy the Cai River bridge; writer Trần Đăng and musician Bằng Cao were martyred on the frontlines; poet Nguyễn Đình Thư was tortured to death by the enemy. The shining examples of those artists had a significant impact on the spirit and ideology of our artists at that time.

Critical and self-critical approaches began to be implemented in study sessions and debates among artists.

Over the past five years, the ranks of resistance artists have grown with the emergence of young artists, especially in the military. The Party's ranks in the arts are also larger than ever before.

The artists who are the most progressive, most conscious, and most embody the Vietnamese culture of today are now part of the Party, serving as the primary driving force for a people's art. The Party's stance has influenced all resistance artists. It is a positive phenomenon, an advancement of the movement.

However, with that said, the level of ideological and political understanding of Vietnamese artists, including the majority of Party-affiliated artists, remains very low. Most of them come from a petty bourgeois background, their thoughts still heavily influenced by the negative effects of class and the old regime. They have not yet absorbed the rich heritage of Vietnam's old culture, nor have they been exposed to global cultural trends and advanced art movements from abroad. Efforts to reform their thinking and bring them closer to the masses have only just begun with the participation of the people in artistic activities. Therefore, to this day, we have not seen any truly valuable work that reflects the heroic resistance of our people and the great cause of our Party.

Reviewing the literary and artistic achievements of our artists in the past five years, what do we observe?

**LITERATURE:** Political literature holds the primary position in our literature. The literature of Hồ Chí Minh is the clearest representative of the new literature, that which adheres to the slogan of VIETNAMISATION, SCIENTIFICATION, MASSIFICATION. President Hồ, after all, is not only our country's political and military leader but also a great writer. Whether it be educational books on ideology, national appeals, or short letters to the elderly, soldiers, veterans, or children, President Hồ's writings always remain both simple and profound, succinct and neat, intense and convivial, practical yet ornate, sometimes subtly humorous but maintaining a dignified tone, penetrating into the hearts and minds of the people like the warm light of a spring morning. As if magic, it combines scientific ideas with the emotions and expressions of the masses. It moulds the subtle beauty of folk literature with the sharp beauty of proletarian literature. Hồ Chí Minh's literature, deeply imprinted upon the spirit of our era, serves as an endless source of

inspiration for our artists.

Comrade Trường Chinh's writings in books and magazines have sparked a new trend of thought and expression in our literature. Contrary to the vague, verbose, and florid language of past writers (and a fairly large number of contemporary writers), Trường Chinh's words are sharp, concise, and forge the flames of battle.

In Vietnamese literature, a communist writing style has emerged.

In the field of composition, the literature of the resistance has made some progress, but generally remains impoverished. Some short stories, essays, and a few reports from the Front have been published. However, we have not yet seen a significant novel or notable report that vividly reflects our heroic people's war, the arduous hardships and glorious victories of the army, the great land reforms brought about by the Party's policies, or the significant changes in the new life of the people, particularly in the countryside. We do not have a work that portrays the image of the resistance fighters and the societal transformations, the image of the communists and the heroic sons and daughters of the nation, the image of the great leadership of the Party. No work has yet to depict the dark life and arduous struggle of the people in the enemy-occupied areas, vehemently condemning the policies and atrocities of the invaders and the Vietnamese traitors and fanning the flames of the of the progressive world's hatred towards the colonialists and their lackeys.

Our new poetry has seen considerable development. Folk verses and proverbs, once dormant, are now flourishing among the worker and peasant masses, carrying with them a new revolutionary content, themes of resistance, and new rhythms.

*Crack-thud! Crack-thud! Swish!*

Three French enemies catch chickens and pigs.

*Crack-thud! Crack-thud! Slash!*

Three French enemies catch pigs and chickens.

Once we fight, let's fight to the end,

Kill the enemy who resists, feed the enemy who surrenders.



Nguyễn Thanh Minh (1968)

Abundant and widespread along the streets, on walls and newspapers, folk verses and proverbs educate and encourage the people, carrying with them wholesome sentiments. The soldier, while enthusiastically fighting the enemy, simultaneously composes folk verses, passionately singing about their life and the struggle of the people. The creative works of the masses—especially the peasants and soldiers—may still be simple in technique, but they already contain the immensely rich emotions of the people in the resistance. Such is an infinite trove that our poets must learn to explore, embracing these new themes and the emerging rhythms in folk verses. From this foundation, they can elevate the level of folk verses, creating our new poetry. The resistance poets are still burdened by old habits, often infusing their work with romantic and unrealistic content, embellishing the resistance, singing of the people's struggles in abstract ways, and expressing hatred towards the enemy in a tedious and formulaic manner. They have yet to widely incorporate into their poetry the specific joys, sorrows, anger, and genuine hatred harboured by the people.

The forms of poetry are still unfamiliar to the masses, often carrying the rhythmic patterns of Tang poetry, Western poetry, and sometimes appearing mysterious.

The literature of the ethnic minorities in the mountain regions, while not yet extensively collated or developed, has produced some valuable poetry, and several young poets have created very promising works.

In terms of literary forms, since the August Revolution and the various political, military, and economic movements, our language has become more enriched. However, the writing style and sentence structures in news articles and essays still lack vietnamisation, and recently, there has been an unnecessary influx of styles and loanwords from China that are unnecessary and difficult for the general public to understand.

Our literary theories still have many shortcomings and we have not yet shed light on the issues of literature that remain questions for writers. The three principles of vietnamisation, scientification, and massification, the

theoretical foundation of a people's art, and the socialist realist method are still topics of confusion, with the methods of practice needing to be clearly explained. We still lack a robust body of literary criticism to guide those working in the creative field. Some scattered critiques in newspapers lack sincerity and have not generated a lively or conducive atmosphere in the arts. The work of literary criticism is still the work of a few people interested in the arts, and has not yet become a broad-based mass movement with a clear leadership. As Comrade Trường Chinh noted, "without criticism and controversy, our cultural movement is placid and stagnant! It is like a horse that droops its head to the ground after taking a single step, never receiving the whip of criticism required for it to carry on."<sup>9</sup> The literary magazine of the Vietnam Arts and Culture Association has not yet fulfilled its duty as a combat agency, so theoretical articles and critiques are far too scarce and ineffective—not to mention many are subjective and superficial.

Further, we still do not have any writings or studies of our literary history from a Marxist perspective, opposing the colonialist and feudal perspectives. Within our educational institutions, there are still books circulating that promote the degenerate views of the French colonial era. The shortage of new books and lack of teachers providing proper literature education in our schools under the people's government's administration is a major concern that needs to be addressed promptly.

MUSIC is perhaps the most widely impactful and rapidly developing art form. Resistance musicians have timely provided many songs for the military and the people, popularising them even in the remotest of areas. However, there are still trends in current music that need correction. Many musicians are still heavily influenced by the music of the European–American bourgeoisie. They want to play in over-the-top cantatas, rather than creating catchy and simple songs for the masses. They are too busy experimenting with and waiting for fancy, modern instruments, paying little attention to the cheap instruments available in the context of the

<sup>9</sup> Trường Chinh, *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*.

resistance, resulting in music performances being less popular among the masses. Some musicians already have the advantage of learning our country's old music, attempting to build new military orchestral music based on the foundation of folk tunes. However, they also make a mistake in their exploration of traditional elements: They mistakenly believe that vietnamisation involves clumsily imitating the melodies of traditional music, of old folk tunes, not knowing how to distinguish between what is good (and to be kept) and what is bad (to be discarded), unintentionally hindering the progress of music to a higher form. The lyrics of many songs are often too lofty, full of romantic images. Slogans are dry, words lack meaning, and the lyrics are not practical, simple, or popular enough to pierce the hearts of the people and encourage and educate them for the tasks at hand. The genre of choir music has not been well-developed. Performance groups are too scarce, and the publication of musical works is still weak. For a long time, we have not been exposed to the new music of our brother countries, unable to learn from healthy examples like the socialist realist music of Soviet composers. Such has been a great disadvantage for contemporary Vietnamese music.

DRAMA is a novel art form for our people. Prior to the Revolution, in major cities, only a few theatrical performances were organised each year on expensive stages for a small audience. After the Revolution, however, the theatre became a popular art form, cherished by the masses. During the war of resistance war, especially in the North, the mountain provinces organised theatre troupes but, due to the lack of resources, scripts, facilities, and directors, these troupes gradually disintegrated. Only a few have been reorganised to date. Today, among the people and army, most of the plays remain somewhat traditional, lacking comprehensive guidance and hindering their progress. Theatre serves as a powerful tool for directly educating the masses, but in spite of this, it has not been adequately nurtured. We lack cadres who understand the art of theatre—and the performing arts in general—and are able to rehabilitate old artists and

train new ones. The performances are greatly lacking, and the content is often very poor, unable to address issues closely related to the revolutionary period and the practical life of the people. Instead, they prefer to linger in the old framework of Western bourgeois theatre with complicated plots, fabrications, and individualist sentiments.

The characters portrayed often do not represent the active members of today's Vietnamese society. The masses, especially the peasants and soldiers, seldom find themselves on stage, and when they do, it is often portrayed falsely and inaccurately. Owing to the lack of new and quality scripts, audiences in many places have to settle for watching outdated traditional dramas and cheo performances filled with fictional characters and silly swordplay. As with music, Vietnamese theatre has not learned from the rich experiences of Soviet and Chinese performing arts.

The improvement of our tuong and cheo performances has not been given the attention it deserves, despite being favoured by the peasantry (tuong in the South–Central region, cheo in the North). Several attempts to improve these forms have yielded no significant results. Drawing from our experiences in reforming old Chinese forms could help us improve tuong and cheo more effectively, reviving these art forms as educational tools alongside modern theatre.

PAINTING has also been slow to progress in Vietnam, especially when compared to the other art forms. It still retains many remnants of formalism, along with the bizarre tendencies and influences of the Parisian art scene. Some artists have shifted their focus to creating popular paintings to aid our propaganda work and demoralise the enemy. That said, a significant number are still caught up in experimenting with lacquer techniques, considering them to be pure Vietnamese techniques. Lately, some artists have made a shift, attempting to explore new themes related to the activities of the military and the people during the resistance. Nevertheless, the majority remain somewhat hesitant and tied up in the trend of



Trương Văn Liên  
chính Sĩ Hải Thuyền  
Cà Mau vùng Cam  
1968

Thái Hà (1968)

trying to emphasise their technical prowess. Due to a lack of ideological and political depth, and an estrangement from the masses, these artist brothers and sisters fail to recognise the typical images of the new life along with all its new beauties. We need to know how to pay attention to the ideological content of the artwork—the guiding character of art—and how to compose in a timely manner, utilising practical themes to support the resistance, socialist construction, and the implementation of the Party's policies and directives.

PHOTOGRAPHIC ART has played a strong role in propaganda in recent years. Many photographers have been following our campaigns and documenting our military's victories in battle—and holding timely exhibitions to boost morale. However, images portraying the daily lives of the people and documenting the atrocities of the enemy are still scarce. Our photographers have not fully grasped the typical characteristics of various movements, resulting in images that are often completely devoid of politico-ideological content, and therefore offer very little in the way of educational value. They have not moved beyond the old technical conventions. The number of photographers today remains far too small, and the resources available to them are insufficient, often misused for personal indulgences and meaningless, leisurely entertainment.

CINEMA has gained early popularity in the South while the North has only recently begun to have the means required for its operation. Nonetheless, we have produced several documentaries and newsreels depicting the battles.

ARCHITECTURE has been the art form that has faced the most stagnation in recent years, primarily due to the scorched earth tactics during the war of resistance. The focus on architecture has narrowed, being primarily limited to the construction of a few bamboo offices and auditoriums. Our architects have yet to learn how to pivot architecture towards the context of the resistance, or to take advantage of the transformation of rural areas in relatively stable regions. In terms of construction

techniques, our architects have become too accustomed to modern methods and materials; they are unfamiliar with the use of bamboo and thatch in the rural, forest, and mountain villages. They have yet to have the learning experiences needed to enhance our traditional peasant architecture.

DANCE is always eagerly awaited by the masses—especially the soldiers—during festive occasions. But, up until now, we have not seen any new dance styles beyond the traditional dances of the Tai, the traditional dances of the Tay Nguyen ethnic minorities, a few Western-inspired dances, and Chinese *yangge* dances<sup>10</sup>.

### *Cultural activities of the masses*

A noteworthy example of the new art of Vietnam is the artistic activities undertaken by the labouring masses—the workers, peasants, and soldiers.

Reality has proven that in places where strong revolutionary movements exist, where community organisations are solidly established, and where Party leadership pays attention to the arts with dedicated artist cadres, the cultural activities of the masses flourish—even in the most challenging and resource-scarce circumstances.

In recent years, the Vietnam Arts and Culture Association has been attentive to harnessing the creative potential of the people, organising cultural activities within the community. With the support of various Party ranks, the cultural movement has been gaining momentum within the masses.

As it currently stands, the cultural movement has a solid foundation within the army, and cultural work within the military has become an integral part of political activities. Regiments have cultural units, companies have clubs, and hand-written newspapers circulate amongst platoons. Folk verses, poetry, diaries, storytelling, plays, campfire activities, folk songs, cheo, and traditional dances are prevalent and popular. The army's appreciation of art, as well as its ability to criticise, has advanced rapidly, and new talents have begun to

<sup>10</sup> The *yangge* [*ương ca*] dance is a traditional Chinese folk dance created during the Song dynasty by peasants working in the rice fields. Originally functioning as a ceremonial dance to worship deities of farming and pray for bountiful harvests, the CCP attempted to reform the dance in the 1940s and adopt it as a means of rallying village support. Renamed “struggle yangge” or “reformed yangee,” socialist imagery was introduced and the dance was simplified into a pattern of three quick steps forward, one step backward, pause and repeat.

emerge.

In factories and offices, cultural groups are also developing, but due to a lack of officials and resources, their activities are not yet robust. Cultural activities in rural areas, in general, are not well organised. Despite the rich tradition of folk culture in our countryside, the cultural movement in rural areas is still sluggish and fragmented due to the large rural population and the shortage of cadres.

Specifically, the cultural activities of the people in the mountain regions have not received adequate attention or development. They hunger for art, yet there are no dedicated cadres to organise, utilise, or guide the artistic abilities of the community. This is a significant flaw that needs to be addressed.

In general, the cultural activities of the people, particularly the workers and peasants, are gaining momentum.

The Vietnam Arts and Culture Association has opened training classes to train grassroots artist cadres, organised numerous talks, guided some talents into cultural units, published works, disseminated research materials, and arranged music performances, plays, and art exhibitions. However, these efforts, in relation to the extensive cultural needs of the people, are but a drop in the ocean.

Organising the cultural life of the people and harnessing the artistic creativity of the masses cannot be the sole responsibility of a few professional cadres but must be a collective effort of the Party, the government, the Front, and various community organisations. Only in this way can the people quickly advance to take control of a new cultural era and truly shape a new people's art.

#### *Cultural activities in the areas temporarily occupied by the French and Americans*

The cities and urban areas that remain under temporary occupation by the enemy have become darker than ever. Within the pages of the treacherous literature

of the colonialists and Vietnamese traitors, a form of counter-revolutionary literature has emerged, cursing the resistance, slandering the communists, promoting psychological defeatism—that, or a pitiful and helpless cry. Alongside that pathetic literature, there is a flood of newspapers and books, pornographic films, suggestive and animalistic dances, ridiculous clothing, diseases, bizarre desires and fetishes, and propaganda of atomic war, sowing discouragement and doubt about the fate of humanity, instilling a fear of the United States, promoting pro-American sentiments, and advocating for living the American way. Reminiscent of the spirit of the French empire, the American empire casts a dark shadow over the temporarily occupied areas, seeking to spread further into the free zones.

In face of these tricks and tactics by the enemy, the artistic struggle of the resistance remains insufficient. We have not yet actively broken their hegemonic cultural influence and propaganda, nor have we exhausted all means to win over the masses in the enemy territory and provide them with the antidote to the enemy's poison. We have not strongly and promptly condemned the enemy's crimes, nor have we introduced the people in the temporarily occupied areas to the life of the people in the free zones, the victories of our army, and the achievements of our people in all aspects, allowing them to clearly recognise our just policies against the unjust ones of the French and American imperialists, their weakening forces, and their depraved culture. Therefore, encouraging the resistance spirit of the masses in the temporarily occupied areas should be more robust and practical.

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In general, looking back at the Vietnamese cultural movement over this past year, we can observe the following:



Trịnh Kim Vinh (1968)

1. Professional artists within the ranks of the resistance have made efforts to progress, and indeed have in many ways. However, their contributions to the resistance and the people remain insufficient and are yet to accurately reflect or capture the magnitude and bravery of the country's heroic war of resistance. Art has not yet become a razor-sharp weapon to fight against foreign enemies and motivate and educate the masses. In terms of ideological content and artistic value, our artworks continue to lack depth.
2. The mass cultural movement has begun to demonstrate the abundant and inexhaustible creative potential of the masses. Only by tapping into this immense creative potential of the masses—particularly the workers, peasants, and soldiers—can we change the current face of Vietnamese art and truly realise a people's art. However, this broad-based movement requires timely guidance from cadres if it is to continue progressing and gaining momentum.
3. Of the various forms of art, the performing arts (that is, drama, cheo, tuong, reformed theatre, etc.) have not been adequately elevated to their rightful position, considering their crucial role in the current context of our country. The stage is currently the linchpin of today's art, and only by giving it the recognition it deserves can we effectively utilise art in the service of the resistance and generate a widespread and dynamic mass cultural movement.
4. The cultural movement has not been widely carried out across various localities and social groups and lacks stable leadership—particularly in Zone 3, Zone 4, and the South. Art and culture in the mountain regions has not received sufficient attention. In the temporarily occupied areas, there is no foundation for cultural resistance. The abilities of the progressive

workers, peasants, and intellectuals—especially the youth who are the most enthusiastic in the cultural movement—have not had their potential fully exploited.

### *The Party's leadership in the arts*

Since the August Revolution, despite the harsh and resource-limited conditions of the resistance, our Party has exerted great efforts in leading the cultural movement.

The Party has consolidated most of the artists into the unified front of the Vietnam Arts and Culture Association in order to help reform their working methods and ideologies. Comrade Trường Chinh's 1943 *Outline of Vietnamese Art and Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* (presented at the 1948 National Cultural Assembly), along with the directives of President Hồ laid out in *Change Your Way of Working*, have clearly outlined the direction for Vietnamese art. Party art cadres have made efforts to unite and support old artists, guiding them towards the path of the Party; fostering awareness of serving the masses; instilling a consciousness of studying Marxism–Leninism, Party policies, and government directives; learning how to engage in criticism and self-criticism; training them in the reality of the arduous and heroic struggle; and making them enthusiastic and confident in the nation's future and the Party's leadership. These are the strengths.

However, we also have some shortcomings that have hindered the progress of Vietnamese art:

1. The Party's views on artmaking, cultural policies, and art theory have not been widely disseminated within its ranks. Many Party officials have failed to recognise the important role played by art; they do not see it as a profound tool for motivating and educating the masses—which is of great benefit to the military, political and economic struggles. Many comrades still regard art as something done while one “lingers over a drink,” as something

optional and superfluous. Consequently, they do not prioritise the development of the cultural policies and artistic theories needed to guide the arts.

2. The majority of the Party's artistic comrades have not yet been reformed in terms of ideology, received sufficient political education, or gained a thorough grasp of the Party's policies and directives. They lack a solid foundation in both traditional Vietnamese art and foreign art. They have not been trained in the practical struggles of the masses, which has resulted in a lack of connection with the masses and a lack of genuine empathy for them. Therefore, our comrades have not produced artworks worthy of illuminating the artistic path of the Party nor shown the capability to lead those outside the Party. Some Party members even exhibit a narrow and arrogant attitude towards those outside the Party, failing to show any genuine solidarity. Instead of fostering unity through struggle and education, they either isolate themselves or engage in unity without struggle, failing to guide and criticise in order to progress. For new artists, our comrades have not made sufficient efforts to establish contact and support, so the ranks of resistance have not seen many new faces. The organisation of cultural activities remains narrow, lacking massification and not relying on the extensive cultural foundations of the masses (such as art groups). The organisational methods of the Vietnam Arts and Culture Association have certain shortcomings, especially in terms of membership criteria and the hierarchical system, which need to be reconsidered. The training of grassroots officials is sluggish and sporadic. The leadership in various art fields is not stringent, often leaning towards literature and neglecting theatre, music, and visual arts. In

terms of audience, the direction of the cultural movement is skewed towards the military, overlooking important targets such as the rural areas, factories, schools, enemy-controlled areas, and mountain regions—heavy in Viet Bac, light in other areas, especially Zone 3, Zone 4, and the South (though efforts are being made to rectify this deficiency). The creative direction tends to focus on long-term construction at the expense of timely dissemination, making art less effective at aiding the resistance.

### **III. STRIVING TO BUILD THE FOUNDATION FOR A VIETNAMESE PEOPLE'S ART**

The foreign invaders are making every effort to destroy the spirit of our people's resistance in an attempt to break the strength of our resistance forces and overthrow our democratic people's regime. To achieve victory in the resistance, to protect the people's democratic government, and to advance towards socialism, our Party must educate the masses, encouraging constant hatred towards the enemy whilst nurturing the people's love for their country. Art is a highly effective educational tool that our Party needs to fully embrace. Cultural work is inextricably linked to education and propaganda. Thus, propaganda and education tasks must be combined with cultural work.

The task of art does indeed weigh heavy. To accomplish it, there must be a team of professional cadres, but at the same time, a broad-based mass cultural movement must be stoked. We must build a cultural foundation that truly reflects the spirit of the people. The process of building a culture of the masses sets forth the following specific tasks:

*1. Broadly unite cultural workers in the service of the national resistance and the protection of world peace.*

The Vietnam Arts and Culture Association needs to



Trịnh Kim Vinh (1968)

foster a broad but strong solidarity. The mass cultural movement must also grow, attracting those new talents emerging among the soldiers, workers, and intellectuals and integrating them into the Association's organisation and activities. Doing so will allow the Association to grow in tandem with the masses, absorbing the vitality of the people. In various units, art groups need to establish tight connections with the Association, further massifying it.

Those working in the arts must form a close-knit unity, tied to the masses, the workers, peasants, and soldiers; they must contribute to the war of resistance, destroy the French colonialists, oppose the American interventionists, support anti-feudal reforms, consolidate the Vietnamese people's democratic regime, and safeguard world peace. The mission of the arts is to instil in the people a hatred for the French colonialists and American interventionists as well as all imperialists and Vietnamese traitors; to unite the people under the guiding banner of the Party and President Hồ in order to enhance patriotism and proletarian internationalism, praise struggle and production, elevate labour consciousness, applaud progress, and instil a spirit of truth-seeking, progress, criticism, and self-criticism.

We must vigorously promote the artistic movement so that it can keep up with our political undertakings, military campaigns, and so forth that support the practical implementation of the Party and government's policies and guidelines. If we are to complete this monumental task, we must be broadly united. However, solidarity must be founded on the principle of serving the people and the resistance—it cannot blindly follow those in the arts who remain backwards. It requires resolute and sincere criticism of mistaken tendencies in the thoughts, conduct, and art of fellow artists. Party members, especially those in leadership roles, must strive to serve the resistance and the masses as only by doing so can the Party's leadership role be genuinely fulfilled. We must remember that solidarity can only be firm and far-reaching when working together in practical tasks that contribute to the resistance and the masses in daily life,

especially as we struggle through hardships together—not merely through sloganeering, resolutions, debates, and empty theories.

## *2. Push creation and performance, elevate the ideological and artistic value of artworks*

The crucial task of the art campaign is to encourage the creation of artworks. Art is a weapon to mobilise and educate the masses, setting the standards for guiding the artistic activities of the masses.

If we want to promote creation, we must first resist the attitude of insecurity in the face of rapid and great changes in reality and the significant progress of the masses within the arts. This attitude gives rise to two dangerous tendencies. One is to detach from cultural work, to abandon the pen in favour of the gun, plough, or hammer, thinking that only this constitutes life, that only this constitutes massification. These brothers and sisters forget the primary mission of artists, which is to use cultural work to participate in resistance and nation-building, and to actively transform their own thoughts and art to serve that purpose. The second dangerous tendency is to believe that if one cannot keep up with the masses, or does not have the potential to create on par with the new talents, that one should simply resign from creative work and devote their efforts to cultivating young talents. While this attitude may seem progressive it is incorrect. If we are to develop a massified art, we must be guided by our experiences as well as the art of those who have come before us. Thus, professional artists need to be more daring in their creativity than ever before, striving to enhance the ideological and artistic values of their works to timely serve the resistance and guide the masses on the path of artistic development. The reality is that the resistance is in constant flux. Images of the people and events move so quickly that it is difficult to fully capture everything. However, as the demands of the war of resistance grow, and the masses increasingly fall in love with the arts, the timely creation of work to

meet immediate needs becomes necessary. This is not the time to create large-scale works that require much effort and time. Let us not think about delicacies yet, but rather first focus on providing enough hot rice for the people. Therefore, the tendency towards extravagance or perfectionism is impractical and unsuitable for the times. We should learn from the spirit of responsibility and practicality demonstrated by our Soviet and Chinese artist brothers and sisters during their resistance and national construction periods. We should not be concerned about the lack of grandiose artworks, but instead, worry about the lack of works that have practical benefits for the resistance and educational value for the masses. To ensure strong educational value in artistic creations, we must elevate the ideological and artistic values of the works.

What steps should we take to elevate the ideological and artistic value of artworks?

1. We must delve deeply into reality, into the layers of the masses, particularly the workers, peasants, and soldiers in both the free and temporarily occupied zones, in the lowlands, and even in the mountainous regions. Artists should actively engage with various aspects of reality, not confining their efforts solely to military units and neglecting the countryside, factories, behind the enemy lines, and so on.

Those engaged in cultural resistance must focus on those themes—those key characters in their creations—thoroughly researching them in reality. They should not base their subjective preferences on themes or characters that are not central to the reality of the resistance. To master these themes, and avoid the disease of subjective creation, cultural workers must unite closely with the masses and cadres, learn how the grassroot systems work, and understand the perspectives and thoughts of the masses. To discern what is good or bad, what should be said or avoided in reality, and to unite with the masses

and cadres, cultural workers cannot approach them as passing guests, indifferent to their daily worries and joys. Cultural workers must find ways of using their abilities in order to provide practical benefits, helping the masses solve the immediate problems that they face. They must simultaneously become political cadres if they wish to be close to reality and the masses. It is time for cultural workers to be assigned to specialise in specific issues, collaborate closely with officials in all aspects of their work in order to mobilise the masses for fighting and production, and, in the course of this collaboration, building our own art. Cultural workers must participate in and strengthen governmental information dissemination units, directly engaging with the masses in the military as well as in various peasant and worker unions, whilst receiving continuous guidance from higher authorities. This is a tangible means for our artist brothers and sisters to grasp reality, to delve into the themes and characters of their works.

2. We must thoroughly reform our thinking, study Marxism–Leninism, and learn the policies and guidelines of the Party and government. If one delves into reality without a firm viewpoint, without understanding the policies and guidelines of the Party and the government, one cannot understand reality and will certainly be subjective. The work of reform and learning must be combined with the practice of policies and guidelines to achieve results. From now on, the Party's artists must strive to study more on their own accord, and, in doing so, attract those comrades outside the Party to study alongside them. The Alliance of Arts and Literature Associations of Vietnam will regularly organise criticism and self-criticism sessions, study politics more widely and thoroughly,



Trịnh Kim Vinh (1968)

and be better prepared. Discipline within the artmaking process must ensure that, before we begin creating a work on any issue, the issue of researching the policies and guidelines of the Party and government—as well as studying the practice of those policies and guidelines among the masses—must be raised. We must break free from the habit of creating without proper research and investigation. Then, from the works created, examine the ideological political awareness of our artist brothers and sisters, helping them recognise both shortcomings and strengths, thereby enhancing the educational impact on the masses. The collaboration between political and cultural cadres in common tasks will enable cultural workers in the resistance to have a deeper understanding of reality and a more profound grasp of Party and Government ideology and policy. On the other hand, political officials can learn from cultural workers about artistic and creative experiences, gaining insights into various aspects of life, potentially becoming capable of making art themselves.

Diving into reality while carrying out ideological and policy-related studies is a concrete solution to elevate the ideological and political levels of artistic works.

In order to enhance the value of art, it is necessary to:

1. We must work to promote our nation's cultural heritage, particularly the folk cultural capital. As previously stated, we have a rich folk cultural capital in both the deltas and mountainous regions. During the resistance, we lacked the conditions to thoroughly collect these assets; artists had to discover this cultural capital directly in the perspectives, thoughts, and emotions of the masses—especially the peasants—who lived in places with a rich tradition of old cultural

heritage. However, learning from the old capital to foster the vietnamisation of art does not mean imitating the past or dragging up art from centuries ago; instead, we must discard the outdated influences of the old ruling classes and develop that which reflects the progressive and massified character of the people. Developing the old cultural capital means primarily exploring and guiding the artistic creative abilities of the masses, who now hold all the precious treasures of the ancient folk art. This is the most effective method for maintaining and promoting the beautiful national identity of our new art.

The assertion that the masses dislike traditional art forms is subjective and disdainful towards our nation's heritage. The truth is that the masses still enjoy traditional art forms such as folk songs, cheo, tuong, Tet paintings, and so on. The only issue is that they dislike the outdated content beneath these traditional forms, which contradicts their current progressive level.

However, insisting on using only old art forms may not effectively express new content or sufficiently portray the new life. In a similar sense, neglecting to improve upon old techniques is equally a mistake. The masses continue to enjoy traditional art forms because they recognise a part of themselves in them. However, their modern lifestyle demands fresh artistic expressions that resonate more with their contemporary spirit. They seek art forms that are superior to the old ones—but without losing their roots or being abruptly severed from the sentimentality and familiarity of forms that they have known for generations.

Therefore, we must strongly encourage the redevelopment of traditional folk art forms, revitalising folk songs, Tet paintings, and so on—especially in places where the resistance movement exists alongside a strong tradition

of old art styles. We should refine outdated content, gather new ideas from the masses, and improve old art to align with their current way of life. From these scattered ideas, a collective effort should be made to refine them into superior art forms. The task of creating new forms cannot be the sole responsibility of isolated artists but should be a shared endeavour, with artists closely connected to the masses, learning from them and equally guiding them towards a higher level. Any exploration of new forms and techniques should align with the character of the people; otherwise, it becomes an adventure with uncertain outcomes. However, the vietnamisation of art cannot be confined to the mould of a single nation but must be developed through the shared heritage of the entire world. The vietnamisation of art must align with the spirit of proletarian internationalism. Conversely, there is no international art without a profound vietnamised character. Therefore, to vietnamise art, it is essential not only to nurture the traditional cultural capital of the nation but also to study and absorb the global cultural heritage selectively and critically.

2. Absorbing the progressive cultural capital of the world—especially the arts of the Soviet Union, China, and other democratic countries—is a crucial task set for the Vietnamese resistance artists. Studying the experiences and works of our brother countries, particularly the Soviet Union, the homeland of the richest and most brilliant socialist realist art, will help our artists clearly realise their path and make rapid progress in both artistic and ideological aspects.

Therefore, it is necessary to encourage the introduction of works and the theoretical experiences of the new arts from the Soviet Union, China, and other socialist countries—as well as progressive global arts in general. This

effort not only contributes to the advancement of our artists but also vividly and profoundly helps our people recognise the zeitgeist. The introduction and interpretation efforts must be planned appropriately according to the current circumstances of the country, that is, the resistance and the building of a people's democracy. In each stage of the resistance, within each campaign, there are specific tasks to be accomplished. The introduction and interpretation efforts should focus on these specific tasks, and not be haphazard, avoiding confusion and deviation from the immediate struggle objectives. At this time, we recommend introducing and translating literary works that actively encourage hatred for the enemy and love for the country, such as Sholokhov's *The Science of Hatred* and Ehrenburg's *One Hundred Letters*, along with works about the struggle against land tax. Simply, works that align with the current policies of our Party and government.

Learning from the progressive arts of the world is not about blindly imitating but about recognising new ways of seeing, new ways of feeling, new ways of expression. It is about understanding the people of the world and gaining a clearer understanding of one's own view of reality. The goal is to create art that resonates with the circumstances of our nation and aligns with the current level of understanding among our country's masses.

We are determined to reject narrow-minded nationalism and the neglect shown to the study of progressive international arts.

However, we also firmly oppose dogmatism and the slave-like imitation of foreign countries, along with the belief that such is logical which only leads to hybridisation and dilution. Foreign art forms must be adapted to our people, they must go through a period



Trịnh Kim Vinh (1968)

of massification—having the masses participate in its adaptation before it can be considered a vietnamised art form. Artists who want to introduce new art forms must not bypass the involvement of the masses; instead, they should encourage them to participate, to contribute innovative ideas to adapt these art forms so as to align with their own lives. We cannot mould the world's art forms into a vietnamised art if we are to rely solely on the talents of a few isolated individuals, separate from the masses.

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In order to create rich works, we should practise the method of collective composition whereby artists should collaborate closely with each other, with the masses (particularly the cadres in the masses), using the ears, eyes, and minds of the people to observe, empathise with reality, and build the work. This is the most effective method to create a profound work. This method of collective composition can be practised in various ways: the artist can complete the work and present it to the public and officials for opinions and revisions; the artist may have only a general idea and organise the participation of the public in constructing the work; the masses themselves can create the work in a rudimentary way, and then the artist refines it, and so on. Regardless of the method, the essential thing is to stimulate the creativity of the masses, to encourage their participation, and absorb their opinions and constructive criticisms in order to nurture the work. Experience has shown that works with themes and characters taken directly from the daily lives of the masses, those familiar to them, are always attractive to the masses, and result in many worthwhile opinions and contributions from them. We should not fear that the masses lack opinions or the ability to properly criticise, but rather fear that we, the artists, lack the ability to learn from the masses' valuable opinions and accurate criticisms.

Along with our creative work, we must elevate the art of theatrical and musical performance. In this regard, it is necessary to organise many troupes for the masses. Our playwrights should compose many short plays based on actual needs which can be supplied to the troupes and those focused on the arts within relevant clubs. It is essential to train numerous cadres from within the masses of workers, peasants, and soldiers, selecting those with the most talent to contribute to the performing arts. Learning from the failures of previous organisations, we should refine and develop the current performing arts troupes. Additionally, we need to increase the resources available to these troupes to ensure that they have the necessary conditions and strength to work.

As our cinematic art is not yet fully developed or popularised, it is crucial that we organise mobile exhibitions of paintings and photography, serving as strong encouragement and education.

The Alliance of Arts and Literature Associations of Vietnam must pay attention to compiling art textbooks for schools, collaborating closely with the Ministry of Education and Training to train and nurture art teachers for the overseeing of specialised art schools (visual arts, music, etc.). Moving forward, it is important that we compile a history of the literature and art of our country, contributing towards the writing of our country's history.

If we want to encourage creativity, it is necessary to enhance publishing efforts. The Arts Publishing House and art journals need to be provided with additional resources in order to promptly publish creative works, encourage artists and authors, and meet the demands of the public.

Criticism and self-criticism are powerful motivations to promote creative artmaking. However, the atmosphere of criticism and self-criticism in the artistic community is still limited. With the completion or publication of works, the Alliance of Arts and Literature Associations must launch a movement of healthy and vibrant criticism and self-criticism, putting forward illuminating opinions on ideological and artistic issues, making artists and

authors clearly aware of the impact of their creations on the masses, and helping the masses recognise the merits and shortcomings of the works. It is necessary to develop forms of public gatherings to discuss and criticise works, to organise criticism sessions, debates with guidance. We need to make criticism sessions more appealing to the masses in order to attract them, rather than attracting just a few artists.

In cultural institutions, our critics must vigorously and consistently dismantle the dangerous influences of decadent European–American bourgeois art and formalism. These influences render art lifeless, strip it of its national identity, encourage deviations from national traditions and the country’s reality, and tend towards reformism. Embracing socialist realism as the best creative method for all art forms, critics can help artists understand the policies and directives of the Party and Government; artists can be introduced to the various aspects of reality and characters in society. Critics should be a friend, a midwife, to support the artist, rather than a cruel stepmother. Therefore, critics must exhaustively address all queries and concerns of artists, showing them both the strengths and weaknesses of their work with a sincerely genuine attitude.

### *3. Cultivate and guide the mass art movement*

A focus of the people’s artistic life is to cultivate and guide the artistic abilities of the people, primarily the workers, peasants, and soldiers, in order to create the conditions required for the masses to truly master the new art.

There are two aspects in the task of developing a mass art movement. On one hand, it is necessary to widely disseminate new art among the masses. Cultural activities in rural areas require special attention, including both liberated and temporarily occupied zones, as the peasantry constitutes a significant part of the nation. To successfully carry out the task of massifying art, artistic activities should be organised at all grassroot levels (communes, military units, factories, schools, and

agencies) under difficult objective conditions (material shortages, low cultural levels, chaotic resistance work). In this regard, the Alliance of Arts and Literature Associations requires extensive support from the Party and governing bodies, collaborating closely with communication and education agencies. The Alliance must promote and publish massified works that suit the cultural level and affordability of the time, printing and publishing them extensively for widespread dissemination. Troupes should introduce valuable works to the masses, organising discussions, poetry readings, art exhibitions, and artistic activities to help teach the masses, allowing them to confidently criticise and gradually elevate their artistic appreciation

On the other hand, we must encourage and offer resources, guiding the creative artistic potential of the masses. In teaching the masses, we should begin with simple art forms, such as ve, folk songs, proverbs, and drama, gradually progressing to more sophisticated forms like diaries, chronicles, short plays, singing verses, painting, and so on.

These first-hand creations of the masses are an endless source for inspiration for professional artists. The responsibility of artists is to carefully select and refine these healthy babbles of the masses, elevating them into the genuine artistic voice of the people.

We oppose any condescending or neglectful attitude towards the artistic creativity of the masses that discourages the development of new talents.

We equally oppose the tendency to blindly follow those within the masses who continue to worship the evil influences of imperialism, feudalism, and the remnants of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie—irrespective if they are workers, peasants, or soldiers.

The only correct attitude is to encourage the artistic talent of the masses and guide them according to Marxist principles and the policies of the Party and government. Therefore, those responsible for guiding the cultural activities of the masses cannot detach themselves from them, nor can they stand outside the position of the



Bùi Quang Ảnh (1968)

working class and the people.

In organising cultural activities for the masses, one must always pay close attention to the purpose of benefitting them—supporting their fighting spirit—and must never obstruct their livelihoods, harming the national resistance. Therefore, it is unnecessary to organise artistic activities everywhere, all the time; one must know when to choose the right time and place, ensuring that they are only beneficial and do not hinder the fight or production.

The main focus of developing the cultural force of the masses is to train a large number of new cultural cadres selected from the masses (workers, peasants, soldiers, and intellectuals). In addition to long-term fine arts and music schools, short-term classes should be opened to train basic-level cadres in various artistic fields, providing immediate support to agencies and organisations. Every professional artist has a responsibility to mentor and support emerging artists. The close collaboration between experienced artists and energetic young talents will lead to a new generation of people's art.

Regarding popular culture, special attention must be given to the arts of the mountainous regions. It is necessary to actively train cultural cadres to serve the mountainous regions. These cadres should primarily focus on local officials who are familiar with the languages, customs, and art forms of the local people. Publications for ethnic minorities should not be written in the mainstream language if it is not widely spoken there. Using the local language will be more effective in education, fostering a more sincere emotional connection. Local dialects should also be used in plays and songs. Even in paintings and photography, emphasis should be placed on depicting the lives and typical characters of the mountainous people, rather than portraying strange and unfamiliar scenes. It is crucial that we avoid the tendency of assimilating the ethnic groups of the mountainous regions into Kinh culture, erasing their unique characteristics. On the contrary, efforts should be made to encourage and develop the voice and all forms of art of each ethnic

group to further enrich our national cultural heritage.

#### *4. Actively fight against the reactionary French-American art*

The French invaders, who are robbing our country, are using their depraved culture to poison our people, especially the youth in the temporarily occupied zones. Even in the free zones they are injecting the venom of their corrupt culture into the souls of our people. Their filthy art is finding allies in the psychological weaknesses of seeking peace, fearing death, and indulging in pleasure. These psychological vulnerabilities can still be found among our resistance forces and in our liberated areas. Therefore, we must actively combat the enemy, not only with guns and grain but also with art. Therefore, we must win on the sentimental front, directing the emotions of our people in the temporarily occupied zones and elevating the spirit of our people in the liberated areas to make them more enthusiastic in resisting, more fervent in their patriotism, more confident in the nation's victory, and more resentful towards the invaders who rob our country, despising their forces instead of fearing them. We must use art in a timely manner so as to expose the atrocities of the enemy and highlight our victories, to introduce the lives of our people in the liberated areas to those in the temporarily occupied zones, revealing the oppression and exploitation suffered there and instilling hatred against the enemy. In summary, we must use art to illuminate the light of freedom and the flames of battle into the temporarily occupied zones and encourage and educate our people to fight against the enemy in coordination with the resistance in the free zones.

#### *5. Strengthening the leadership of the Party and government in the arts*

The Party's leadership in the arts needs to overcome the aforementioned shortcomings and focus on the following three main points:

The promotion of cultural work that aligns with its educational function of disseminating the Party's line, principles, and cultural policies at all levels of Party committees. Political cadres, particularly propagandists, must study art theory in order to correctly lead the cultural movement.

The education, ideological reformation, and cultivation of the political and artistic theoretical proficiency of cadres in the arts and, in general, for those involved in cultural work. You, comrades, must actively self-study and self-examine your thoughts, behaviour, and art within the Party's framework to promptly rectify any mistakes.

The encouragement of Party comrades—especially comrades with experience in mass work—who understand the Party's ideology and have artistic talent. These cadres, when educated in the arts, will quickly become the driving force of the new art, contributing to the rapid transformation of the current face of Vietnamese art.

The government will strengthen leadership in the arts by establishing a propaganda agency with two divisions: communication and arts. With the assistance of the Alliance of Arts and Literature Associations of Vietnam, this agency will organise cultural activities for the masses, fostering the development of artistic abilities among the people.

### *Good prospects of a Vietnamese people's art*

In the midst of the arduous struggle of a nation with an underdeveloped economy, long oppressed by colonialism, and cut off from international communication for many years, the new art of the Vietnamese people is taking its first steps. Despite the challenges, its direction is correct, and its momentum is strong. Under the leadership of the Party and President Hồ, exposed to progressive art movements worldwide, especially those of the Soviet Union and China, the prospects for a Vietnamese people's art are very promising.

Built upon the increasingly widespread and diverse cultural activities of the masses of workers, peasants, and soldiers, enriched by the precious heritage of the nation and, most notably, the beautiful Vietnamese voice, with a national language that is easily disseminated among the masses, and with the efforts of those cultural cadres and artists involved in the war of resistance, there will soon be meaningful and practical works that contribute to the resistance, national liberation, the building of a people's democracy, and the defence of world peace.

Work actively to build a Vietnamese people's art!

Complete the mission of vigorously transitioning to the General Counteroffensive phase!

Annihilate the French colonialists and oppose the American interventionists!

Long live an independent and unified Vietnam!

Long live the Vietnamese Workers' Party!

Long live President Hồ!



Trương Hiếu (1969)

# STRIVE FOR REALISM: ADVANCE TOWARDS ART THAT EXPRESSES THE NEW LIFE, NEW PEOPLE, AND NEW HEROES OF THE NATION

*Tố Hữu, 1955*<sup>1</sup>

## I. THE NATIONAL PERFORMING ARTS ASSEMBLY, A MAJOR SUCCESS IN PEOPLE'S ART

### 1. *A great success of art*

This marks the first occasion of holding a National "Performing Arts" Assembly. The images, colours, and melodies of Vietnam, from its past to its present, with their rich cultural background, depict Vietnam as a beautiful country with a longstanding cultural heritage—the great family of many ethnic groups, a Vietnam of freedom, heroic resistance, anti-colonialism, anti-feudalism, and a lasting culture.

Through various songs, dances, dramas, cheo, tuong and reformed theatre performances, the diverse and vibrant nature of the Vietnamese people emerges, expressing love for life and brave struggles for freedom, a love for the Fatherland, for labour, for peace, and love for all people who truly live up to those noble ideals.

To the artists who have worked so hard to make us love our great and beautiful Fatherland, love our heroic Vietnamese people, and love a life of freedom and peace, we thank you.

Thank you to the artists who have worked so hard to instil confidence in our rich cultural heritage, the culture of a people that has undergone numerous changes, many times trampled upon by brutal and dark forces, yet still maintaining its healthy, pure nature, waiting only for the air of freedom to blossom beautiful flowers.

As President Hồ said, "Art has grown in the war of resistance, especially in purging the decadent and corrupt elements of colonial and feudal art. It has clearly shown the extent of our people's courageous spirit and hard work." There is no more profound and poignant commentary than this.

### 2. *A political success*

In the ongoing struggle between two opposing forces today, one side is the warmongering imperialists and their lackeys, and the other side is the national and democratic forces. In the battle between the democratic republic led by President Hồ in the North, and the dark American–Diệm dictatorship in the South, the souls of the people living in the occupied zones breathe in the putrid air of a murderous, depraved, and perverted culture—especially the rotten culture of the United States, a culture detached from the country, a culture of rootlessness, impurity, a culture that is emaciated and poor, pessimistic and false. The National Performing Arts Assembly provides a resolute answer and bright light in the midst of this arduous struggle and these dark circumstances we have endured for many years. That answer is the democratic forces of the people of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam—obviously good, very good! Where there is President Hồ Chí Minh, there is light, the Fatherland, happiness, freedom, and a beautiful future.

President Hồ said:

A society is reflected in its art. Our national art is inherently rich, but under the colonial and feudal regimes, our people were enslaved, so our art also became enslaved, degraded, unable to develop. In the people's resistance, as our people rose to break the chains of slavery, our art also elevated itself to liberation...

Clearly, under the democratic republic regime, art has favourable conditions and the true value of the artist is genuinely respected, allowing for a broad development of artistic pioneers.

<sup>1</sup> Closing statement delivered at the National Performing Arts Assembly, 12 January 1955.

The arduous conditions of the resistance have indeed posed material challenges, but they have also created a healthy atmosphere. A free nation, with tens of millions of courageous people resisting imperialism, feudalism, and nature's hardships, serves as an endless source of nourishment for the flourishing and beauty of the arts.

Under the burning torches and oil lamps of the resistance strongholds, be they in the plains of the lowlands or the high mountains and dense forests of the highlands, whether on the frontlines or in the rear, it becomes clear that art shines brighter under the light of the oil lamps than under the electric lights of the colonial and feudal regimes. Clearly, the cultural foundation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam is a healthy one, contrasting sharply with the decadent imperialist art, especially that of the United States, which is like a lethal poison. Naturally, through this National Performing Arts Assembly, each person recalls and shudders at the repugnant regime and rotten culture of the United States, hating that subjugative and impure culture and developing a deeper love for our people's culture. On the other hand, in our thoughts, we feel a heightened sense of national pride, increased confidence in the enduring abilities of our people, who have a history spanning thousands of years, and a renewed appreciation for the glorious traditions of our country's art.

We have increased confidence in the mighty force of our working masses, not only in their courageous fighting and hard work but in their songs and dances too.

We have increased confidence in the creative abilities of all majority or minority ethnic groups living together in Vietnam. All these beliefs converge into a great collective trust in the leadership of President Hồ, the soul of the nation and our Party, the Party of Vietnamese wisdom.

### *3. Reasons for the success of the National Performing Arts Assembly*

The National Performing Arts Assembly is the result of a successful resistance, the courageous struggle of our

army and people from the North to the South. We thank you for the sacrifices of soldiers and fellow citizens who have given us a life of freedom and peace, enabling us to continue striving, working, dancing, and singing.

The Assembly is the result of the correct artistic policies and direction of the Party: praising patriotism and internationalism; encouraging hatred towards the enemy and love for the country; praising the working people; fostering a fighting spirit; and encouraging the entire people to unite under the leadership of President Hồ, the Party, and government, and steadfastly oppose imperialism and feudalism in order to liberate the nation and realise the slogan **LAND TO THE TILLERS**. President Hồ instructs us that "every artist must be a soldier on the cultural front," and to achieve this, we must have a firm stance, cultivate our political thoughts and consciousness, be close to the masses, study our national artistic heritage, and absorb the cultural wealth of progressive humanity, the Soviet Union, China, and other brotherly countries. This is the compass that will guide us to victory today.

The Assembly is the brilliant result of the efforts and sacrifices made during the years of hardship by our fellow artists. Today,

we do not forget the difficult days of the last few years, the cold and frosty nights in brown pants and patched shirts. Some chewed corn while penning plays on rocks or in thatch huts. Artists served the people, fought the enemy, and practised songs and dances under the rain of bombs and bullets.

These simple and loving words of Uncle Hồ spoke volumes about the arduous and heroic lives we have lived.

## **II. ARTISTIC ISSUES**

### *1. Delve into realism, oppose naturalism and formalism*

The noble mission of art is to contribute to the transformation of society and the refinement of humanity. Artists are not mere observers; they are



Nguyễn Đức Thọ (1970)

creators of life, helping humanity become better, nobler, and stronger.

We live in a monumental era, a time of struggle between two opposing forces: the progressive and peaceful forces of democracy and socialism against the forces of war, the regressive forces who are contra the people and democracy.

We are the children of a heroic people who, for thousands of years, have risen against foreign invaders and overthrown feudal rulers, a people who arose and led the August Revolution, fighting valiantly against the French–American colonialists for nine years, reclaiming freedom and peace. We are now engaged in a complex political struggle to consolidate peace, achieve national unity, complete nationwide independence and democracy, while vigorously advancing the land reform revolution, overthrowing the feudal landowner class, and ensuring LAND TO THE TILLERS, fulfilling the eternal dream of the peasant. The survival of our nation, the happiness of our people, and the dignity of every Vietnamese person require our patriotic artists to actively join the struggle alongside the people.

Art cannot merely be a form of entertainment; it must be an educational tool, a motivator of the people, a weapon in the fight against the enemies of the nation. Just like a soldier going into battle must aim in the right direction and at the right target, so too must our artists. They must know, in the great struggle of our people today, where, when, and under what conditions the fiercest struggle is taking place, what issue is a matter of life and death in the political struggle, and what phenomena are evil and dangerous in our society, in the consciousness of our people, and even within the essence of each individual, to clearly define the goals of the struggle.

Our art must uncover the contradictions in the daily lives of the people, actively coming forward and developing the struggle between the new and the old, the progressive and the backward—making the new triumph over the old, the progressive triumph over the backward.

Artists cannot stand outside of that struggle, nor

can they enter it unconsciously, like someone entering the jungle without knowing what to do or where to go, hacking every bush they see, plucking every flower they see. They must be aware of the current situation, define clear goals, and make an effort to delve into reality, investigate and study typical cases, typical personalities, and typical characters so that they can be accurately portrayed.

Realist art requires our artists to have that consciousness, to make that effort. It opposes the tendency to hastily seek reward without delving into the issues, without researching and exemplifying. Many of us often settle for an abstract idea about a certain issue with a very shallow understanding; a rough sketch of a character or situation, and with whatever limited knowledge we possess, we sometimes hastily construct a work, bringing to the stage bland and mundane slices of life—characters whose thoughts, words, behaviour, actions, and even clothing and decorations are not representative of their true essence.

With such “writing,” the audience feel as if they are witnessing the repeat of some part of life, not helping to deepen their understanding, enrich their lives, make them brighter, or elevate them a step further. And in this way, art ceases to be art. Art is not a piece of blurry, glossy piece of paper on which a tasteless piece of life is drawn, where a certain shape, colour, or sound is repeated; it must be a radiant mirror reflecting under a concentrated light that which is progressive, fresh, decaying, blackening, that which is truly lovely, that which is truly detestable.

Realist art consciously reflects the objective truth as it changes in response to societal development.

To embrace realism, one must vehemently oppose naturalism. It is the offspring of laziness and neglect within art.

We oppose naturalism because it limits the scope of the observer’s eye on the observed events and collected materials; it often conceals a fundamental aspect behind trivial details, presuming that a few factual details are sufficient enough to convey the truth.

This assembly has given us some examples of realism as well as many examples of naturalism.

### *Anti-formalism*

Every artistic creation must express a clear attitude, a certain tendency. However, realism opposes subjective, arbitrary, and mechanical tendencies, it criticises blatant propaganda or dry simplifications. Engels said “tendencies toward particular characteristics must arise from situations and actions.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the author’s tendency must emerge spontaneously, almost unintentionally, and not as a result of the author’s will; the author must avoid and not fully reveal themselves in the work.

Realist art demands that the artist thoroughly understand how each real issue unfolds, where the conflicts in life are, where their causes lie. Further, the artist must thoroughly understand the objective laws of development so that the truth can be accurately portrayed. Life is extremely complex; it cannot be simplified according to one’s subjective desires.

Formalism petrifies life within an artificial framework, causing people not to recognise real life or real people.

Our enemies are extremely cruel and cunning; they kill us not only with guns and bullets but with sweet talk too, with their venomous tongues and deceitful actions, their facades of independence and freedom.

However, many of our artistic creations depict the enemy, often portraying a formulaic beastly face with a few false gestures that are insufficient to incite hatred in our people—not only for their blatant, brutal actions but also for their extremely cunning schemes.

Our people are good, patriotic, and hateful of the enemy. But not everyone is equally good; each class has different attitudes towards the enemy. Some are enthusiastic and radical; others are hesitant, on the fence; and some are fearful and willing to surrender. Even within each class, there are progressive, intermediate, and backward elements. Within each person, there is always a

conflict between the new and the old, the progressive and the retrogressive, and the relationships between classes, the relationships between individuals in the complex struggle, are always changing like a flowing waterfall.

It is a naïve mistake to not understand these truths, to be content with a few formulaic characters and fitting them into any scenario.

Formalism can be seen in the devouring of slogans and policies. In many songs and plays, we often hear slogans and political terms repeated ad nauseum, like chewing on grit in one’s food.

Many have complained that our current art is too “political,” too filled with “policies.” Of course, the issue is not with the policies and slogans, nor because our works are too political; instead, it is because the political level, the level of ideological understanding, and the policy level of the creative works are still too immature, too rigid. It is because the authors have not fully internalised policies of the Party and government into succinct truths.

What are these policies and slogans? They are the highest crystallisation of the objective demands of the social reality, the requirements of millions of revolutionary masses that the Party and the government, as representatives of the deep aspirations of the masses, have synthesised into a guiding ideology, a goal to direct the victorious struggle of the masses.

The obligation of the artist is to strive to realise these revolutionary policies and slogans. Therefore, policies and slogans should serve as the torches illuminating our art, resolving the conflicts of social life.

Poet Mayakovsky proudly proclaimed, “I want to follow every Party slogan. I want the Party to tell me: ‘Mayakovsky, go this way, go that way.’” The issue is not that there are “too many policies, too many slogans,” but rather in fully understanding the profound meaning of policies and slogans—understanding them well enough to articulate, in the language of art, the constraints, demands, and aspirations of the revolutionary masses in their daily struggles. It is about laying out the revolutionary policies and slogans hidden within the

<sup>2</sup> See footnote 36, *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*.



Nguyễn Đức Thọ (1970)

revolutionary masses, within the social reality, to aid the revolutionary struggle and transform society.

Remember, artists must examine the process of mobilising the masses to implement policies, exploring the struggles and conflicts between the new and the old, the right and the wrong. One must look at the policies in action, the role of the people, the role of the Party and government, and what the implemented policies have brought to the masses. It is most definitely not about shouting slogans and policies in an empty, mechanical, or awkward manner!

Art must be educational, but it should not come across as pretentious or preachy. This means that artists should express what they want to say through living flesh-and-blood characters and actions that reflect real life, rather than delivering dry and dull moral lessons.

We must strive to overcome naturalism and formalism, the two enemies of realism. They are the offspring of a life that is impoverished, detached from reality and the masses, and lacking a vibrant consciousness to guide the masses in finding the direction of life

## *2. The issue of embracing a national cultural heritage*

Throughout this Assembly, it has become increasingly clear that President Hồ was entirely correct when he stated that “our nation’s culture is inherently rich.” At the National Cultural Assembly in 1948, Comrade Trường Chinh also expressed an observation and a hope: “There are, of course, still many gems in our ancient literature, hidden under layers of dust, and it is our duty to ... search, gather, and closely study them so as not to miss a single one.”<sup>3</sup> This admonition not only applies to literature but also to art. Thus far, we have accomplished a part of it. In this Assembly, artists have brought back many precious cultural heritages, those hidden gems that were long buried, now unearthed and cleaned up a bit. However, this is only a tiny part of the vast legacy left by our ancestors. This substantial legacy lies deep within the hearts of tens of millions of our people who have not had

the opportunity to bring it to the surface.

“Without the past, there can be no present.” We cannot create art today without fully embracing the heritage of our ancestors. In fact, even the valuable creations of today have been enriched by that heritage. Any artistic creation that does not stand on the foundation of that legacy lacks vietnamisation and becomes an impure art form.

Our mission today is to wholeheartedly and patiently overcome all difficulties and hardships in order to continue the task of understanding the treasures left by our ancestors so that we may use these beautiful legacies in the service of ideological education for our people. We must first develop an appreciation for the beautiful heritage of our nation, regarding such as the noble duty of a patriotic artist. We must wholeheartedly study the beautiful heritage of the nation, not just in terms of the form of art but also in terms of content. We should not assume that cultural heritage from feudal times can only contain poisonous and decadent ideas towards the people. Of course, within that cultural heritage, there are many poisonous elements glorifying the cruel and terrorising regime, defaming and cursing the working people, extolling feudal ethics, and sowing the seeds of submission and subjugation. These poisonous elements must be eliminated, and the task of detoxification is the first thing to be done in the process of refining historical works.

However, the feudal era did not only consist of corrupt kings and tyrants; it also had millions of working people and national heroes who staunchly resisted foreign invaders. Clearly, in the precious heritage of our nation, we can find many lessons left by our ancestors, highly beneficial for nurturing the spirit of our people today. For millennia, the noble qualities of the Vietnamese people have been a love for the Fatherland, an indomitable fighting spirit against invasion, a diligent and hardworking attitude, love for the homeland, loyalty between spouses and friends, optimism, humour, and ridicule for all that is violent, oppressive, greedy, deceitful, lazy, and so on, characteristics of the ruling

<sup>3</sup> Trường Chinh, *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*.

feudal regime. These precious qualities and spirit of resistance are vividly expressed in the old arts, especially in the folk arts. These are beautiful legacies that we must admire, support, and draw lessons from, educating our people today to harbour more hatred for imperialist warmongering, love and cherish national freedom, love labour, love peace, and love the virtuous qualities of the people. Therefore, we respect the cultural heritage of the nation not with blind admiration but with a scientific analytical and critical attitude. We need to eliminate the feudal scum, the rotten things of the feudal ruling class of ancient times, and attract the essence of folk culture that carries, more or less, a democratic and revolutionary nature.

We oppose the attitude of restoring the old without purging the rotten elements of the ruling feudal class. However, on the other hand, we also oppose the distortion of historical truth, replacing the present reality for the past, imposing current desires in place of the aspirations of the people in the past, forcing historical figures to live, think, act, and speak like present-day figures; making heritage lose all its essence and characteristics. Our task is to restore the truth of history that was distorted by the feudal and colonial classes; to find the real masters of history; to use historical materialism to reflect the truth of history, extol the progressive qualities, the people's nature, and the noble virtues of the heroes of the past under the historical conditions of that time, educating and encouraging the generations of today. "Modernising" historical figures is anti-scientific and goes against our historical perspective.

Promoting the reception of the good heritage of the nation does not mean advocating "nationalism," thereby underestimating the importance of studying foreign countries. On the contrary, our vietnamised art must be nourished from both the streams of present reality and the heritage of the world. For us, who have long been kept in the dark by the enemy, the study of the essence of art from other countries must be given significant importance.

We hope to be introduced to many songs, dances, and plays from our brother countries, such as the Soviet Union, China, and so on, so that we can understand and appreciate the healthy and progressive nature of new people and new societies.

However, it must be noted that studying abroad, learning from other nations, does not mean "the mechanical copying of a foreign culture without taking into account the particularities and conditions of its country and people."<sup>4</sup> Doing so is not genuine patriotism, nor is it genuine internationalism. True patriots and internationalists study abroad not to imitate others, to cease being Vietnamese, but to enrich the artistic identity of their own people.

### *3. New reality, new themes, new characters*

We strongly encourage all efforts to embrace the cultural heritage of the nation, extol the lessons of history. However, this does not mean promoting arts that turn their backs on reality. It needs to be emphasised that the development of a new cultural foundation is intertwined with the themes of current life.

While we should remain connected to the past, the deciding factor is whether we are connected to the present life, seizing the themes of the current era, caring about the people, the heroes of our time, describing them, and thereby contributing to the people's education.

It is impossible to love the lessons from history while trying to escape the current life, to be unaware of the lives and needs of the people, to be ignorant of the problems and policies that the Party and the government are actively addressing, using art for propaganda and education.

The Party and the government are concerned about issues that are critical to the fate of the people; art cannot be different, it must also focus on those decisive issues. Reflecting on the individuals and influences of previous eras to educate the people today is good, but it is even better to reflect on the new individuals, the heroes of our current era, to educate the people. Naturally, a

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



Nguyễn Đức Thọ (1971)

connection among people of the same era provides better understanding. Furthermore, the heroes of the feudal era can only educate people on certain issues because their ideologies and behaviours in that particular historical period cannot be similar to and as good as the heroes of today's era, the era of Marxism–Leninism, of proletarian ideology.

Therefore, it is necessary to emphasise the requirement: our artists must delve deeply into real life and the paramount issues of today, creating new characters and heroes of our time.

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What are the major themes today? The major themes today include the path outlined by President Hồ, the Party, and the government, namely, the path of uniting the entire people, steadfastly fighting to consolidate peace, implement unity, and achieve independence and democracy nationwide. In other words, it is the fight to defend peace; the fight to protect the Fatherland; the fulfilment of the cause of national liberation, peasant liberation; it is the abolishment of the colonial and feudal regime and the building of a new democratic regime in our country.

Centred around those central themes, we have the task of exposing the true face of the warmongering imperialists led by the United States, revealing their evil, ruthless, despicable, and crippled nature. We must expose their extremely cunning tactics in the North and the South, making our people see them as hated enemies, despise them, and shatter any thoughts of submission or fear towards them.

We must elevate the self-confidence and dignity of our nation, promoting patriotism combined with a genuine spirit of internationalism and the precious virtues of our people, upholding the heroic cause of our nation in the great war of resistance and in today's struggle and construction. We must elevate the spirit of vigilance

and fighting morale, making our people believe that under the leadership of President Hồ, the Party, and the government, our people are an invincible force, destined to be the masters of our beautiful country; destined to achieve peace, national unity, and national independence and nationwide democracy.

We also have the duty to expose the reactionary nature of the feudal landowner class as a significant obstacle on the path of progress for our people. We must applaud the great force of tens of millions of peasants, under the Party's leadership, rising up in the land revolution in the North, overthrowing the millennia-old dominance of the landowners, seizing their rightful sovereignty in the countryside, reclaiming their permanent right to own and control their land.

Regarding peace, the North has been fully liberated and we are currently carrying out economic recovery and healing the wounds of war. We are rebuilding peaceful lives in newly liberated urban and rural areas, building infrastructure such as transportation and irrigation. Every day, the creative forces of the working people create numerous impressive works. Our task is to commend the efforts in this struggle and building, praising these great achievements.

In addition to these three aspects of struggle and construction, every hour of every day, tens of thousands of people actively strive for the Fatherland, for the people. Among the millions of heroic collective masses, countless heroes of the era emerge: soldiers, exemplary workers, those peasants within the mobilisation movement of the masses, teachers, engineers, doctors, rescue workers, and others—and at the forefront of these millions of heroic masses are the great President Hồ and our leadership. Our task is to commend these new people, the new heroes of our era and our nation, elevating them as bright examples for the education and encouragement of the entire nation.

It is necessary to clearly understand the role of the performing arts in serving the policies of the Party and the Government. This means using vivid imagery to express

the people's struggle to implement these policies and praising the active individuals, the new heroes emerging in the various fronts of policy implementation. It is not simply explaining policies as a propaganda outline or a commentary. I recall a very apt saying by Ehrenburg: "The value of a piece of work is measured by how many heroes it produces."<sup>5</sup>

It can be said that the biggest flaw in the current works showcased at the National Performing Arts Assembly is the failure to highlight any typical individuals, the new heroes of the era. The positive characters in all of the works showcased do not reveal the essence of these new individuals; they fail to reflect the shining brilliance of Hồ Chí Minh. What is the essence of the new man, the new heroes of Vietnam today? This is an extremely important issue that we need to study first and foremost.

The new man fundamentally emerges from the working masses—be they workers, peasants, or members of other working classes—all sharing a clear and common ideology and a noble ideal of our people today: that is, striving and sacrificing for the democratic national revolution and, even higher, for the socialist ideal. The highest quality of the new man lies therein. He is unwaveringly loyal to the interests of the Fatherland and the people; he thinks and acts consciously for the revolutionary cause; he fears no difficulties, and hesitates at no sacrifice; he is public-spirited and selfless. He is a hero, but not an individual hero; he exists within the collective, as individuals nurtured, educated, and simultaneously serving as a driving force for the collective, compelling the collective into action to become a collective of heroes. His behaviour reflects this. The collective behaviour is the behaviour of the new man. As a result, he despises any individualistic, unorganised, and undisciplined behaviour. He is a disciplined human, but the discipline he adheres to is not the kind that turns humans into machines. He is principled and resolute, but not dry and emotionless. On the contrary, it is precisely because he possesses the highest emotions for the Fatherland, for the people, for values and the destiny of humanity, that he

upholds principles and discipline.

The new man passionately adores his country, created by his working hands, he loves his Fatherland and his fellow citizens. He is extremely loyal in his relationships, be it comrades, friends, spouses, brothers, father and son, mother and daughter, and because of this, he is willing to sacrifice everything, even his life.

The new man is a member of the revolutionary collective, scientifically conscious, and thereby very healthy; he has absolute faith in the correctness and success of the ideal. He is a revolutionary optimist. He despises deep, melancholic, pessimistic, and despairing attitudes. In our era, this new man is commonly referred to as a communist man (usually he is a Party member, but if not, he still is essentially communist).

The new man is, of course, not a perfect man. In life, no one is perfect, no one is without mistake or flaw, unless they are "in the womb or the coffin." The greatness of the new man, the communist man, lies not in his lack of mistakes or flaws but in his determination to rectify his errors, his imperfections, and overcome their weaknesses to advance continuously. He is an ideal man, but we should not "idealise" him.

#### *How do we portray the new man in our artistic works?*

First and foremost, it is not a matter of methodology but a matter of elevating our ideological level to the point where we can truly understand the new man. We cannot look at the courageous and trusting new man with the eyes of scepticism, weakness, and individualism. This is a fundamental issue, one that requires extensive self-training, but it is certainly something that can be accomplished. Daily interaction with these people, with a sincere attitude, humbly learning from them, aligning oneself with their ideology, their behaviour, and their actions, undertaking any task, no matter how small, as long as it benefits the revolution and the people, will help us understand them. At that point, our own character will inherently reflect some aspects of the qualities of the

<sup>5</sup> Ilya Ehrenburg, *Cent Lettres*.



Trương Hiếu (1970)

new people, and if, through prolonged self-discipline, we also become a new person, then portraying them in art is not difficult.

Perhaps the key reason why these new people, these new heroes, are not prominent—or entirely absent—in current artistic works is the gap between the ideological level of the artist and that of the soldiers.

The duty of the artistic soldier, in my opinion, is primarily to commend the soldiers of society, the soldiers of the revolution, in any field—military, political, economic, or cultural. Without doing so, art cannot effectively inspire and educate.

The portrayal of the new people, the new heroes of the era, cannot be separated from their social activities. The essence of these new people lies in revolutionary actions: soldiers in military operations; workers in factories, on construction sites; peasants in mass mobilisation movements, in agricultural production, in labour movements; teachers in schools; doctors in hospitals, and so on. Their actions are to implement specific policies and resolutions of the Party, the government, the collective. Therefore, one cannot understand and portray the new man without a clear understanding of the policies and resolutions guiding his actions. To fabricate actions that they did not take is misleading. If the policies are misunderstood, it will lead to portraying the characters of the new man incorrectly, not only failing to commend his noble qualities but also degrading him, distorting his essence. Such is not only unjust, but a crime against him. Therefore, based on elevating our ideological level, we must strive to study policies, at least the fundamental policies of the Party and the Government. Depending on our roles, we should study policies thoroughly in the respective fields. Learning is not limited to theoretical study but also involves practical application, participating in the execution and expression of policies, making them our own, understanding the impact of policies on the masses, and comprehending how our characters operate in accordance with the policies—only then can we hope to express them truthfully.

Firmly grasp the essence of the new man, understanding his activities within the revolutionary collective, and selecting typical cases from thousands in order to depict the most complete manifestation of his essence—that is the direction for portraying the new man of the era.

#### *4. Some thoughts on art forms*

Next, I would like to share some thoughts on the issue of art forms. In this Assembly, various rich forms have been showcased, including traditional forms such as tuong, cheo, singing, music, dance, as well as newer forms like that of reformed theatre and drama. Each form that has emerged in a specific historical and social context has its unique characteristics and is imbued with content suitable for it. Traditional forms that have been passed down for thousands of years, still exist among the people and are beloved, indicating that these forms have a strong connection to the sentimental life of our people today—they are sentimental threads that we must use to convey new ideologies and feelings to the people.

Each art form is a living form of the soul. It reflects a part of human nature, embedded in the flesh and blood of humanity, and often undergoes transformations more slowly than content. Therefore, for traditional forms, we cannot hastily and subjectively make modifications.

Thus, the requirements are as follows: correct the content first, then gradually adjust the form afterwards—because the content determines the form. Appropriately introducing new content into traditional forms in a suitable manner can bring about changes to these forms.

TUONG is a highly stylised theatrical art of the feudal era. If one knows how to utilise it to depict feudal life and historical figures of that era, it will undoubtedly work.

Can tuong be used to depict the new content and new characters of the new life? I think it's possible.

But we should be careful not to let certain formulas of tuong constrain the expression of new life content. If we attempt to portray the new hero of today, but still

dress him in the attire of an ancient general, carrying a horsehip to symbolise his horse-riding abilities, and allow him to step onto the stage with an introduction like “I am...,”<sup>6</sup> then it becomes truly laughable.

To portray the lessons of our country’s history, we should pay close attention to the vietnamisation and massification of *tuong*. It is better to express the voice of the nation and people using vietnamised characters.

CHEO is also a long-standing form of drama in our folk culture. Using it to depict the typical life and typical characters of ancient times can be very effective. Further, using it to portray the activities and characters of today’s countryside, in many cases, I think can be quite interesting. So far, our experiments with cheo and reformed theatre are still limited, so this issue should not be concluded too early. Let us continue to boldly experiment and learn from experience.

REFORMED THEATRE is very familiar to the people in the South, it is a new art form that needs to be valued and encouraged.

The issue for us is not which forms to keep and which to abandon. It should be stated unequivocally: any form that the people love is good and should be preserved. However, the key is to use them appropriately, at the right place and the right time, according to the characteristics and strengths of each form. A musical instrument has various pitches, some high, some low; do not blame the strings or keys, but rather blame the person who chooses the wrong tone for a specific mood and situation. You cannot force *Nam Ai–Nam Binh* to raise its voice in a war cry, nor can you force *Luu thuy*<sup>7</sup> to emit a voice of sorrow.

It is worth reiterating that content should be our primary focus. When using a certain form, it should be based on a deep understanding of its characteristics combined with the experience of multiple iterations of gradual transformation. We should avoid making arbitrary changes, but also refrain from being overly conservative.

Another issue is not to have prejudice that each art

form is only for a specific audience or region. Performing reformed theatre for the people in the North or Central regions, cheo for the people in the South or Central regions, or *tuong* for the people from all regions—why not! Society has many social classes, but the hearts of the Vietnamese people have many similarities and interests that transcend these classes—so why should we assume urban people would not enjoy cheo, or rural people would not want to watch theatre? Our duty is to promote the circulation of various art forms nationwide, enriching the artistic life of our people across the country, thereby deepening their patriotism.

In regard to SINGING, MUSIC, AND DANCE, it is very appropriate nowadays to explore new forms. There is still much work to be done in tapping into the folk art capital. We need to collect folk songs and dances from various ethnic groups and regions. This is a crucial foundation for the development of contemporary music and dance.

However, we should not stop there. New life brings new emotions and rhythms, requiring gradual adaptation of the forms to suit them. The key is to bring new content into folk songs and dances while considering the characteristics of each expression and what kind of emotions the content should evoke. We should avoid imposing rigid formulas and hindering the expression of new emotions and new life.

Some traditional dances of ethnic groups have been revived, but there is still room for further exploration. The transformation of the Muong people’s *sap*<sup>8</sup> dance into a modern performance is a successful example of this.

Regarding music and dance, we should strive to adapt and create more cheerful, lively, and heroic songs and dances that reflect the revolutionary spirit of our collective society today. We should reduce the heavy, slow, cumbersome qualities and avoid formulaic performance styles that opt for old techniques and thereby lack emotional depth. In terms of lyrics, it is necessary to sharpen them to be smoother in delivering emotion, to be more poetic, transforming them into “editorials” and

6 “*Như ta đây biểu tự...*”—a common *tuong* phrase used when a character introduces themselves to the audience, essentially saying “I am...” and providing their courtesy name or title [*biểu tự*], thus highlighting their Confucian background and hierarchical status.

7 Tổ Hữu is emphasising how fervent expressions would seem awkward and out of place if one were to attempt to utilise the gentle and relaxing—dare we say upbeat—stylistic tones of *Nam Ai–Nam Binh* and *Lưu thủy* [“flowing water”] as their vehicle.

8 *Múa sạp* [bamboo dance] is a traditional Vietnamese dance. Originating among the ethnic minority communities in the country’s mountain regions, *múa sạp* involves performers striking bamboo poles, typically around three-metres in length, on the ground and against each other in a rhythmic pattern. The bamboo poles are arranged to form different shapes and structures, and dancers move in and out of these formations, creating a visually captivating performance.



Bùi Quang Ảnh (1971)

flexible slogans, instead of clumsily-incorporated, dry political terminology. Our lyrics need to be in harmony with the music—we must turn *Strength*<sup>9</sup> into strength. Lyrics like those in the song *To Die a Heroic Death*<sup>10</sup> by Tây Nguyên are also very good.

We should also pay attention to further nurturing actors' knowledge of performance etiquette, especially in expressing emotions in singing, dancing and acting. It is necessary to assist actors in truly living their characters and being creative in their roles. We must avoid, as much as possible, formulaic and machine-like performances.

In conclusion, when it comes to traditional forms, one should not rush to conclusions; instead, one must courageously use and draw experience from them—as well as from the art forms of the people of other countries, especially our brother countries, which we need to make every effort to promote and study. There should be neither too much fear nor too little concern, as long as we are determined to eliminate the depraved, indecent, frivolous, obscene, terrible, savage, and filthy art forms, which bring harm rather than benefit.

#### *5. Form a united art front within the National United Front*

Among our brothers and sisters, there are those who joined first and those who joined later; our contingent has grown dramatically since the beginning of the resistance, and the level of ideological and artistic development has advanced significantly. However, the task of constructing a new cultural foundation is immense, and in many aspects, we are still inexperienced. Our responsibility is heavy, our work is still arduous, so we must unite tightly and extensively. We need to fully utilise the talents and creativity of each person so that everyone can contribute as much as possible to the common cause, without distinction between old and new, between the old free zones and the newly liberated regions, between the North and the South.

Brothers and sisters in the old free zones must

wholeheartedly cherish and assist brothers and sisters in the newly liberated regions to progress while eradicating the influences of degenerate culture. Brothers and sisters in the newly liberated regions should look towards a bright future and utilise their art to serve the Fatherland and the people.

Patriotic brothers and sisters in the South, trust in the love of your Northern brothers and sisters. No one can divide us, the patriotic and peace-loving Vietnamese artists. Together, we strive to be closer, to exchange art, and contribute to normalising relations between the North and the South, realising national reunification.

All those who work in the arts, regardless of field, locality, or ethnicity, who advocate peace, unity, independence, and democracy must come together—genuinely unite. We must be willing to learn from each other, identify mistakes together, and rectify them together. For the common interests of the Fatherland, for the advancement of a people's art, let us unite. This Performing Arts Assembly has been a beautiful symbol of such great solidarity.

In that spirit, we can sincerely help each other progress. Solidarity is for the struggle of the nation, for an art that serves the people.

We sincerely unite with progressive artists from around the world in the struggle for peace, democracy, the values of humanity, freedom, and happiness for all peoples. We have the duty to introduce our people's art to the world, as well as to introduce the progressive art of the world, of the Soviet Union, China, and other brother countries to our people.

To advance our progressive work, it is necessary to create an atmosphere of deep criticism within the arts. A criticism that is genuinely constructive. Only through such criticism can we gradually bring to light the existing issues.

We must unite; actively cultivate our ideological and political understanding; stay close to reality, close to the masses; cultivate our art, learn from the heritage of our nation, learn from the progressive culture of the world,

<sup>9</sup> *Strength* [*Sức mạnh*], the title of a popular song.

<sup>10</sup> *To Die a Heroic Death* [*Ra đi—euphemistically*].

of our brother countries; embody strong criticism and self-criticism. These are the fundamental principles that the Party always reminds us of. This Performing Arts Assembly is a significant initial step. Based on this victory, we must advance vigorously, striving for new victories.

President Hồ reminded us not to be complacent; we still have many shortcomings, many errors in ideology and art. We must always be self-critical and sincerely listen to the criticism of the masses to progress further.

Our arts are advancing towards an even more beautiful National Performing Arts Assembly, where the fierce and diverse images of our nation will be vividly portrayed, showcasing the new people, the new heroes of our era.

I wish all the performing arts troupes success as they embark on activities in the Hai Phong relocation zones, on train sites and other construction sites, in the countryside mobilising the masses for rent reduction and land reform, in newly liberated urban and rural areas, within military units, in ethnic minority regions, and in areas adjacent to the 17th Parallel.

Brothers and sisters, comrades, all members who spread these beautiful flowers throughout this Assembly, we hope that they may blossom into even more beautiful bunches everywhere.

We wish you victory, comrades! Keep moving forward!



Nguyễn Thế Vinh (1971)

## STRIVE FOR A RICH NATIONAL CULTURE, UNDER THE BANNER OF PATRIOTISM AND SOCIALISM

*Trường Chinh, 1957*<sup>1</sup>

Dear comrades and friends,

In the North, the Vietnamese revolution has entered a period of transition, that is, transitioning towards socialism. In the South, however, half of our people remain subjected to the brutal Diệm regime. We, friends and comrades, gather here, at the Second National Art Assembly, to reflect on our artistic developments since the August Revolution and to identify the immediate missions required of our creative community. It is indeed a significant moment in the cultural life of our people. On this occasion, I would like to share some thoughts with you, comrades and friends. I will discuss the three following issues:

1. Comments on the leadership of the Party in relation to the arts.
2. Immediate tasks of our country's artists.
3. Several issues regarding Vietnamese art at present.

### I. COMMENTS ON THE LEADERSHIP OF THE PARTY IN RELATION TO THE ARTS

Over the past decade, our nation and people have undergone significant changes. The successful August Revolution, the victorious resistance war, and the fundamental land reform programmes in the North have shaped our country. Colonialism and feudalism have been eradicated in half of the country and the people's democracy is overcoming all challenges to advance. The

material and cultural lives of our people are gradually improving. In fact, the people in the North are truly becoming masters of their own destiny. Deep passions and noble virtues are blooming daily in the labour and struggles of millions of our compatriots

These significant changes have created new opportunities for our country's literature and art, as well as generating countless new sources of inspiration. Along with the rest of the country, writers and artists are grateful for the opportunity to grow and live glorious lives. They also appreciate the freedom to speak the truth about the great struggle of the masses, the freedom to love their country, and the freedom to serve the people, which did not exist prior to the August Revolution. This fundamental freedom that we have earned allows the artist to create art in response to the call in their heart. The artist's soul is liberated, and the artist's quality is enhanced as a result.

For the past ten years, the former Indochinese Communist Party and today's Vietnamese Workers' Party have been assisting our artist brothers and sisters in finding their paths.

During the Second World War, the Party published *The Outline of Vietnamese Culture*, outlining our cultural revolution path and proposal for cultural renovation. This publication attracted some artists to join our movement for national salvation, resistance against the Japanese and French fascists, and the liberation of the country. *The Outline*, developed by the Party during the time of resistance, articulated the path and motto for cultural and artistic work, and sought to foster solidarity among our nation's artists, writers, and intellectuals, organising and imbedding them within the resistance.

In 1952, the Party assisted artists in ideological studies and conducting criticism and self-criticism sessions. This process aimed at helping artists determine their stance and take the first steps toward improving their thinking and behaviour. This training has aided you in understanding the democratic national revolutionary path, identifying who is an enemy and who is an ally, establishing your goal

<sup>1</sup> Speech delivered at the Second National Art Assembly, 24 February 1957.

of striving to be of service to the nation and the people, recognising the concepts of freedom and righteousness, and determining the true value of the arts. The Party has played a crucial role in helping you realise your duty to fight on the cultural front against the nation's common enemy and to take the initial steps in recognising your sacred mission as "engineers of the soul."

Long-term resistance has trained our literary brothers and sisters. It has also trained you, artist brothers and sisters, in the nation's arduous struggle. The ongoing land reform efforts provide an opportunity for you to conduct field research on the subject of class struggle. While immersing you in these great struggles, the Party has demonstrated the glorious potential of the nation and our class, allowing you to clearly observe what people have been talking about recently, namely, humanitarianism. According to the Party, this philosophy cannot be separated from political ideology, which aims to eradicate all oppression and exploitation caused by one person to another, to free one from all chains of slavery, and to develop all of their abilities. The Party assists you in practically reforming yourself so as to effectively participate in the reform of society and the moulding of a new man.

Under the leadership of the Party, Vietnamese culture has escaped from the shackles of colonialism and feudalism, transforming into a vietnamised, scientific, and massified culture—or, to put it another way, it has acquired characteristics that are vietnamised, realistic, and for the people. Although our culture is still in its infancy, its essence is wholesome and promising. It is a developing, progressive cultural foundation in the making, representing the national culture throughout the country today.

In recent years, numerous valuable works of art, including stories, poetry, music, plays, paintings, sculptures, dances, and more, have surfaced. These can be likened to the first blossoms of a season, heralding the arrival of a glorious spring for our national arts.

Despite limited resources, many of these artworks

have been widely distributed in factories, construction sites, farms, agencies, schools, and rural areas. As such, more and more new talents have begun to emerge among the people.

For the first time, the art of ethnic minorities in our country is being nurtured and protected. In fact, some poets from ethnic minorities have become well-known among all Vietnamese. There is literature, music, and dance from highland minorities that, once lost in time, have now been brought back to life. The art of one minority group is introduced to other minority groups in order to increase mutual understanding, love, and solidarity. The arts of different minorities grow together, learning from one another, and enriching one another.

Cultural relations between our country and its socialist allies are improving, allowing Vietnamese artists to learn a great deal from the progressive literature and arts of our allies. These represent significant achievements in our art over the last few years. Of course, we still have many shortcomings, but we must emphasise our accomplishments rather than succumbing to pessimism and self-deprecation.

The Party applauds the efforts and progress of our artist brothers and sisters in all fields of literature, poetry, music, drama, painting, sculpting, architecture, etc., since the August Revolution. The report by the Executive Committee of the Vietnamese Writers Association has already made this clear, so I will not repeat it here. In both war and peace, you, artist brothers and sisters, have contributed to the glorious revolutionary cause of the nation. Your accomplishments are largely due to your individual efforts and hard work, but they are not independent of the leadership of the former Indochinese Communist Party and the present-day Vietnamese Workers' Party.

Nevertheless, we should not be complacent with the achievements we have made; instead, we must constantly address our shortcomings, make corrections, and rectify mistakes so as to progress further and avoid disappointing and losing the faith of the people. For instance, more effort



Nguyễn Bằng Lâm (1971)

must be put into delving deeper into the typical lives of the people. We should overcome formalism, naturalism, primitivism, the disease of formulaic thinking, and so on.

Our cultural work remains flawed because the ideological stance of some fellow artist brothers and sisters has not been resolute, and they have not decisively eliminated the influence of bourgeois art. Their method of thinking is still subjective, and their application of dialectical and historical materialism in analysis and daily work is not yet fully realised. In terms of creative methods, the understanding of socialist realism has not been fully grasped. Since the establishment of peace, work and activities have kept some brothers and sisters away from the practical life of the masses; complacency and peacefulness of the mind have resulted in the loss of any desire to strive for advancement. In terms of organisation, there are still issues of isolation, narrow-mindedness, individualism, laxity, and so on.

Artist brothers and sisters, the Party has not assisted you in overcoming these shortcomings or progressing further because the Party's leadership in the cultural field still has many deficiencies.

Since the August Revolution, the Party has been slow to make resolutions on cultural work and has been delayed in formulating specific policies for artists. The Party's theoretical documents on art are too few and insufficient for meeting the requirements of the new situation, especially since the establishment of peace. There has been a lack of specific policies and plans to nurture artists in terms of political theory, ideology, and art. The Party's leadership has had limited contact with artists, thus having little understanding of their lives, aspirations, and concerns. Thus, they have not sufficiently listened to the criticisms and suggestions of artists.

The Party assigned a number of Party officials with specific and detailed tasks related to cultural work, however, this was of a temporary nature, and lacked supervision, urgency, and thorough research. Consequently, there was a failure to promptly rectify the shortcomings and mistakes of those in leadership

positions in the field of culture.

Over the past decade, comrades in charge of cultural work have made certain contributions to the construction of the country's new cultural foundation following the Party's guidelines. However, there have also been some mistakes that limited the development of Vietnamese literature and art.

In the months since the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the Vietnamese Workers' Party has actively engaged in criticism and self-criticism, particularly from the grassroots level. It has boldly highlighted mistakes and shortcomings in various aspects of its work. During the preparation for the National Art Assembly, comrades in charge of cultural work have initiated self-criticism and organised extensive and democratic discussions for artist brothers and sisters to criticise the leadership. Apart from some divergent opinions, in general, our artist brothers and sisters have contributed many valuable insights, which can be summarised as follows:

Regarding ideological leadership, we did not clearly recognise the risk of bourgeois influences when moving from rural to urban areas. Consequently, we have been slow in criticising bourgeois mentalities in the arts, and slow in educating artists so as to strengthen their stance, cultivate their ideology, and refine their character, leveraging the positive traditions of artists involved in the resistance. Simultaneously, we have not paid enough attention to helping artists in newly liberated areas with educational opportunities for self-improvement.

Regarding policy-making, while the Party has not yet outlined specific policies for artists, the attitude of many agencies and cadres has been narrow-minded, prejudiced, and inclined towards sectarianism, and undervaluing the progress of artists. At times, there has been too much complacency, too many compromises made in the face of the mistakes of some artist brothers and sisters. The training required for existing cultural workers and the training required for new cultural workers both have shortcomings. The rights of creative individuals have not

been fully recognised or respected.

Regarding organisation, there are a number of artists—including many from the South—who are scattered across various organisations and engaged in unrelated activities. As such, they are often neglected and do not receive enough encouragement and support for their creative work. Some artists have been stuck in routine administrative tasks for too long, leading to the unfortunate waste of their artistic potential. The Alliance of Arts and Literature Associations of Vietnam, established in 1948 during the guerrilla warfare period of the resistance, encompassed various fields, with some comrades who were writers and poets directly leading. As a result, the organisational structures and methods used in literature were also applied to other fields within the association, causing problems and hindering the development of those areas.

Regarding creative leadership, there have been simplistic and rigid views on the role of art in serving politics, leading to a disregard for personal responsibility and few incentives for personal thinking and exploration in the creative process. The choice of themes and forms has been narrow and inflexible, lacking diversity. Many works aimed to “serve policies” and “serve promptly,” but instead fell into the trap of trivialising art, producing premature and hasty art, or propagandising policies in dry and formulaic manners. Many works tend to be created through rose-tinted glasses, praising one-sidedly—and, if I am being honest, the praise is superficial. Works that portray reality in a negative light, inducing pessimism, doubt, and discouragement, have not been criticised in a timely manner. Leadership within the arts remains vague and lacks specificity.

We need to deeply analyse our shortcomings in cognition, ideology, and leadership style in order to identify the causes. Only by doing so can we hope to achieve total improvement. The causes of these aforementioned shortcomings and mistakes are comrades in positions of power with conservative, complacent, subjective, and one-sided thinking; leadership styles that

are bureaucratic, domineering, separated from artist brothers and sisters, and detached from reality.

The agency responsible for direct leadership within the arts has gradually become a narrow and isolated organisation, with little effect on uniting our artist brothers and sisters. This situation has had a negative effect on the Party’s overall leadership within the creative community, as well as on the enthusiasm of artists to create and serve. Naturally, such a situation creates opportunities for bad ideas to infiltrate the ranks of artists. Therefore, following this Art Assembly, we must improve the leadership within the arts in terms of ideology, policy, and organisation.

The solution is to undertake political and theoretical artistic studies, combined with the criticism of incorrect viewpoints; to resist the influence of bourgeois ideology in the arts; to oppose subjectivism, dogmatism, revisionism, liberalism, laxity, disorganisation, and lack of discipline; to overcome bureaucratic, domineering, isolationist, and narrow-minded behaviours. At the same time, we must establish regulations on policies for artists and organise support to help artists engage more deeply with the lives of the working masses, create better work, and actively participate in the struggle to achieve specific goals of the revolution in its current stage.

## **II. IMMEDIATE TASKS OF OUR COUNTRY’S ARTISTS**

Dear comrades and friends,

In the letter sent to the Second National Art Assembly, the Central Committee of the Vietnam Workers’ Party stated:

Over the past three years, Vietnamese society has undergone significant changes. The resistance efforts were victorious and peace has been restored to our beloved homeland. The North has been completely liberated from the shackles of colonial and feudal oppression, paving the



Nguyễn Bằng Lâm (1971)

way for a new chapter in the revolution, moving towards the future of socialist society.

On the other hand, the people's national democratic revolution has not been completed nationwide. The oppressive and dark American–Diêm regime is still weighing heavily on the southern part of our country. We must continue the mission of liberating the nation and reunifying the country. The revolutionary struggle will be long and arduous, but the ultimate victory will undoubtedly belong to the people. Our homeland will surely be unified; such is the iron will of the people, and no force can shake it.

Building a peaceful, unified, independent, democratic, and prosperous Vietnam is the common mission of our entire nation from the North to the South. To accomplish this mission, we must strive to strengthen the North, gradually advance it towards socialism, while vigorously continuing the struggle for national reunification.

Strengthening the North and achieving reunification are immense and complex endeavours. One fundamental condition to fulfil these tasks is to carry out a cultural revolution coupled with economic reform in the North. We must break the low cultural status of our people, overcome outdated thinking and harmful customs, eradicate remnants of the old society, and gradually raise the cultural, scientific, and technological levels of our country. This includes deeply rooting the new man in the ideals of patriotism and socialism through education.

The common mission of those engaged in ideological and cultural activities in the North is to contribute to the realisation of the cultural revolution in the new era, participating in the moulding of a new man for a new society in terms of ideology, intelligence, and emotion.

Artists from both the North and South must join forces in order to accomplish this mission; to build a rich national culture whilst actively contributing to the construction of a peaceful, unified, independent, democratic, and prosperous Vietnam.

Indeed, after wiping out the imperialist invaders and deposing the landlord class in the North, our people are working tirelessly to build a Vietnam that is peaceful, unified, independent, democratic, and prosperous. Over half of our country has now witnessed the completion of the democratic national revolution. However, the southern part of our country remains enslaved by imperialism, feudalism, and the comprador bourgeoisie. The task of liberating the nation and reunifying the Fatherland is not yet complete, requiring our people to continue the prolonged and arduous struggle until complete victory is achieved.

The struggle to strengthen peace and achieve reunification must be centred on increasing the strong foundation of the North. For the people in the North, a new era of revolution has opened up. Since the restoration of peace, the North has entered a period of transition towards socialism. Socialist revolution requires the close solidarity of workers, peasants, intellectuals, and the entire patriotic working class, under the leadership of the Party, courageously striving to complete the restoration and development of the economy and socialist reform in agriculture, home-based businesses, private enterprises, and small-scale industry. The economic development, especially the planned development of the state-owned sector and the cooperative sector, must gradually advance towards the industrialisation of the socialist society of our country; simultaneously, a cultural revolution must be carried out in order to build a socialist cultural foundation in the North. This is the only correct path, and it is the goal for which we are working tirelessly today. It is also the most effective means of ensuring victory in the struggle for reunification.

In summary, the people have proposed two crucial tasks:

1. Strengthen and gradually advance the North towards socialism.
2. Continue the struggle to consolidate peace and achieve reunification.

These are also the tasks of those in our country who are working in the cultural field. These tasks are very challenging, but they also open up unprecedented prospects and possibilities for the Vietnamese arts and culture community.

Indeed, the North has been completely liberated, and our people have gained the essential conditions to build an independent and self-reliant state in terms of economy, politics, and culture. More specifically, in the realm of the arts, this is the first time that our people have had the opportunity to create a national literature and art—which had previously suffered under suppression, denigration, distortion, generational exploitation by the ruling class, feudalism, and colonialism!

Today, our national culture in the North is vibrant and promising, but still faces many shortcomings. Our ancient autochthonous cultural resources have not yet been fully explored, critiqued, or accurately evaluated. Likewise, the advanced cultural achievements of our brother countries have not yet been systematically introduced and learnt here. Nevertheless, we have the necessary conditions to advance our country's arts movement to a new level.

In the South, the Ngô Đình Diệm regime recently organised what they called an “Art Assembly,” launching deceptive slogans like NATIONALISM, DEMOCRACY, PROGRESS, HUMANISM. They praised what they called “subjective,” “visionary,” and “spiritual” art. They propagated catchy but meaningless slogans to deceive our people. However, they cannot hide the truth that they are incapable of building any cultural value because they oppose the Fatherland and the people; because they betray their country, they sell out their people, they are

traitorous, exploitative, oppressive, and deceiving. On the other side of the front, one can see the corrupted culture of the American imperialists spreading freely and poisoning the minds of the people, propagating war and ethnic tensions, causing chaos, pessimism in the soul, rogue thoughts, “cowboy culture,” loose morality, obscene behaviour, and debauchery. However, on our side of the front, one can see a progressive and revolutionary culture of the people resisting the American–Diệm dictatorship.

In the face of such a situation, it is the responsibility of all patriotic and progressive cultural activists from North and South alike to lay the groundwork for a genuine cultural foundation for the country. However, the primary responsibility lies with the Vietnamese cultural activists in the North, as only the North is where free development for a new cultural foundation is currently possible. From the artistic heritage that our people have managed to preserve through fire and smoke, amidst a severe lack of cadres, experience, and resources, how can we build a cultural, scientific, and artistic foundation that is worthy of our nation and able to keep pace with the socialist cultures of our brother countries? Such tasks demand our utmost effort. How can we build in such conditions? The Party and the government bear responsibility for that grand undertaking, and each of us, as artist brothers and sisters, have our own fair share of responsibility.

The North, with its capital Hanoi, is now the cultural centre of the whole country; it is a place that shines a light on our national art and literature, offering a bright future for Vietnamese culture. Our compatriots and patriotic artists living in the South—those still under the yoke of the American–Diệm regime—all look to the North, eagerly anticipating our every action, closely following each of our steps. Every creative work we produce, every collection and research project we undertake in the process of building literature, art, science, and technology, resonates with our countrymen in the South and directly supports them. No border or imperialist plot can contain the voice of our national culture!



Nguyễn Thanh Châu (1971)

If the North wishes to advance towards socialism, there must be a corresponding cultural revolution. So, what does a cultural revolution entail in the current conditions of our country?

In short, a cultural revolution in our country today should be carried out in tandem with our efforts to build socialism and reform the economy, in order to create a cultural foundation with socialist content and vietnamesed form. It is a cultural system serving productive labour to strengthen the North, gradually advancing it towards socialism, while also supporting the struggle for peaceful reunification on the basis of independence and democracy.

A cultural revolution seeks to mobilise and organise all literary, scientific, and artistic forces to carry out an ideological front to defeat all invasive attacks from the American–Diêm slave–cowboy culture; to eradicate the influence of imperialist and feudal ideologies in the North, criticise bourgeois ideology, and resist its influence on the minds of the people; to promote education in patriotism, proletarian internationalism, communist ideals, and ethics; to instil a spirit of serving the Fatherland and the people, promoting a love for labour, science, and a sense of responsibility; it instils a hatred for imperialists, feudalists, reactionary forces, and the enemies of national independence and unity, socialism, and world peace; it encourages the people to strive to implement the State’s plans, adhere to labour regulations, resist wastage, and oppose corruption.

A cultural revolution liberates the people from the shackles of ignorance and stagnation, the legacy of colonial and feudal societies; it eradicates illiteracy, popularises science among the people, develops education, raises the cultural, scientific and technical level of the masses; it reforms old intellectuals, trains new intellectuals (from the working class), and nurtures talents to meet the increasing demands of the economic development and state management.

Our new culture must absorb the knowledge of humanity from the past to the present; raise the aesthetic

level of the people; encourage and organise creative work and innovations to serve the masses in nation-building efforts and struggle for national independence and reunification.

Our cultural revolution must transform the arts from being an expensive commodity confined to the privileged—displayed in glass cabinets that only a few may peek at—into something as common as drinking water and air; something that millions would be able to drink or breathe. We need more good books, beautiful paintings, theatres, concert halls, and clubs for the people. We need to renew the life of society and people, allowing one to be not only physically liberated but also mentally.

Any cultural transformation of our country has the responsibility of imparting a new humanitarian ideology: an ideology that loves humanity, respects human dignity, believes in the immense potential of people, and fights tirelessly for the freedom and rationality of human beings. It not only brings new perspectives on humanity but also transforms people, moulding an entirely new man, free from oppression and exploitation, who love their country and socialism, and are the masters of nature and their own destinies.

Of course, completing these immense tasks is not something that can be done within a few years, let alone overnight. Difficulties persist and our capabilities are limited. The work of building culture and the arts cannot be separated from the current economic, political, and social conditions of our country.

Our cultural revolution is not a spontaneous movement but one that is organised and led by our Party. Vietnamese cultural activists in general and Vietnamese artists in particular bear a significant part of that revolutionary cause. To achieve this, there is a need to actively study the advanced cultures of allied countries and the world; to learn from the achievements of modern science while still tapping into the cultural heritage of the nation. To carry out a cultural revolution, we must devote all our enthusiasm, love for the country, and commitment to serving the people and truth.

The people of our country are expecting from our artists works that praise the creative labour of workers, farmers and revolutionary intellectuals who are diligently restoring and developing the economy, promoting culture, healing the wounds of war, and building the nation. They want pieces that celebrate revolutionary heroism, reflect the truth of the patriotic emulation movements taking place in factories, mines, construction sites, farms, cooperatives, and the movement to encourage farmers to move towards agricultural cooperation. They look forward to works that honour the spirit and sacrifice of our military forces as they train to defend the homeland, gradually moving towards regularisation and modernisation.

The people are eagerly awaiting works that inspire ardent patriotism, the enduring will of struggle among their compatriots, the determination to complete the mission of liberating and reunifying the country. They anticipate pieces that sharply denounce the cruel American–Diệm regime and commend the unwavering spirit of resistance among the people in the South who are fighting for their rights every day, trying to fulfil the revolutionary mission of a people’s national democratic revolution in the South, and achieving North–South reunification.

We hope to see more works that exalt the tight-knit solidarity and heroic struggle of our nation during the nine years of resistance against the French, reflecting the great people’s war across the entire country, on the frontlines and in the rear, in the free zones, guerrilla zones, and temporarily occupied regions. Many comrades, from the North to the South, have tirelessly fought in the resistance, accumulating deep life experiences and profound emotions. With determination and well-organised creativity, we can undoubtedly create many works worthy of documenting the glorious pages of our history, with the educational power to transmit the heroic traditions of our people to others, encouraging patriotism and justifiable national pride, a selfless love for labour, and inspiring the courageous struggle of our

people today.

We look forward to works that reflect the struggles of the farmers in overthrowing the landlord class, vividly describing how the fundamental land reform was completed in the North; depicting the profound changes in the current rural areas of the North during the land reform and correction process, as well as the enthusiastic cooperation practices that are now taking place post-land reform.

We hope to have many artistic works from our country’s ethnic minorities, reflecting the indomitable struggle and sacrifices of our sisters and brothers throughout the country. These works should portray the miraculous transformations in the lives of those ethnic groups that were once oppressed, divided, and suffering. Today, unity prevails within the great Vietnamese family, and we must collectively build a free and prosperous Vietnam.

Our people warmly welcome works that commend the glorious historical traditions of our nation’s resistance against invasion and the fight against feudal forces. However, these are not enough. Our people also wish for more beautiful works that vividly depict the images, colours, sounds, and flavours of our country. This is to cultivate a deep consciousness and profound feelings about their own lives, fostering a more intense love for their homeland. We must strive for the people of Vietnam to have a deeper love for their country, homeland, and fellow citizens, to take pride in the glorious history of the nation, to love the regime in the North that is improving every day, and to harbour stronger resentment towards the imperialists and their lackeys. We should be determined to strive for the complete liberation, independence, and unification of the country. We should steadfastly fight for the true spirit of the nation while educating our people in proletarian internationalism, opposing all manifestations of revisionism. We should cultivate a sincere understanding and genuine love for our brotherly nations and all peace-loving peoples of the world.



Nguyễn Thanh Châu (1971)

Let us praise our new people in labour and love, in public and private life, in work life, family life, and friendships. While humble and ordinary, these people are very courageous—shaped by the revolution, the resistance war, and now giving their utmost to make our homeland increasingly prosperous, our country more beautiful. Let's fight uncompromisingly to protect them from the vices of the exploiting class: laziness, deceit, contempt for the peasantry, manifestations of individualism, bourgeois liberalism.

This is an extremely heavy and sacred duty for all our genuine artists.

The revolution has reached a new stage in which each of us are obligated to make an effort to overcome obstacles and move forward. In the transformation of the nation, we must all have a full awareness of our mission and our role in the realm of arts and culture. We must unite even more tightly, exerting our efforts for a culturally rich national landscape, under the banner of patriotism and socialism!

Can we accomplish this mission? Definitely. The letter from the Central Executive Committee of the Vietnamese Workers' Party sent to the Assembly has outlined the directions for literary and artistic work in the immediate future. Below, I would like to contribute some additional opinions on this matter:

*1. Study Marxism–Leninism, as well as the policy and political line of the Party, in order to establish a firm stance and the correct ideological and methodological approaches*

The most significant drawback in our current artistic landscape is not a lack of policy or resources, as some brothers and sisters often mention, but rather the limited understanding of Marxism–Leninism among the leadership and artists in our country. Without studying Marxism–Leninism, one cannot grasp the objective laws of nature and human society; it becomes impossible to comprehend the complex states of life

and the transformations of phenomena; one cannot deeply analyse the thoughts and emotions of people; it is challenging to effectively counter the harmful influence of bourgeois art, and consequently, it is impossible to create works that are truly worthy of our era. It is a misconception to believe that merely understanding policies and delving into life is sufficient for effective leadership in the arts and successful artmaking. It is also wrong to think that the more one studies political theory, the more impoverished and dry art and emotion become.

Our efforts in studying Marxism–Leninism from the past until now are just the initial steps. The Party's assistance in this regard has been insufficient. From now on, I am certain that artists will have more favourable conditions to study Marxism–Leninism in a relatively systematic manner. Nonetheless, the process of learning requires significant personal effort and must be a self-conscious task for each person.

The study of the Party's policy and trajectory needs to be more practical. Artists should feel comfortable and proactive in adopting these policies and directions without feeling constrained in independent thinking and emotions. As experience has shown, the best approach is to organise artists to study the Party's policy and trajectory, then send them down to grassroots levels to actively implement and witness the effectiveness of these policies and directions in the lives of our people.

For those brothers and sisters who wish to delve deeply into the societal aspects, researching every facet of activities and struggles, Party and Front organisations, and government agencies must provide practical assistance. This will help artists thoroughly understand the issues, grasp policies, and engage with the realities that they are studying.

*2. Dive deeper into the lives of workers, farmers, soldiers, and the labouring people in general*

The realities of the labour and revolutionary struggle of the masses have always been a source of vitality, a source

of passion that nurtures art and literature. DIVE DEEPER INTO THE MASSES, STAY CLOSELY CONNECTED TO THE LIVES OF THE PEOPLE—this slogan has always rung true for us. To separate from the masses, reality, and life is to lose an abundance of emotions, sentiments, direction and creative capacity. We have made many efforts to delve into life, to delve into the masses of the people. But life does not stand still, the masses never cease to move forward. In the ever-changing, colourful life, how can we stand still—or close the door, so to say—and turn our backs on objective reality?

We must delve deeper into the masses, into life, to understand and feel, enabling the creation of great works and meaningful endeavours. The Party suggests that comrades and friends consistently engage with the workers, farmers, soldiers, and intellectuals who are building and safeguarding the country. Reach out to them, the emerging leaders of society, the new heroes of our era, and depict these endearing individuals accurately, avoiding both undue criticism and undue praise. Portray their valuable careers, aspirations, and dreams, their endeavours and anxieties, their fundamentally positive qualities, along with their flaws and weaknesses.

### *3. Broaden your understanding of techniques to continuously elevate the artistic quality of your work*

Due to the aforementioned objective conditions and narrow-minded and short-sighted leadership within the arts, there have been significant challenges in cultivating artistic skills. Going forward, we will strive to improve in this aspect. It is necessary to organise learning sessions, study art, explore the traditional heritage of the country, and delve into the latest achievements in global arts. This effort aims to genuinely cultivate our artists, especially emerging talents, in their professional knowledge, enabling them to create works with high ideological content and technically proficient form.

Of course, the efforts of the artists themselves is crucial, but it is the Party and the government who have

the responsibility to provide artists with favourable conditions for research. We need to boldly and practically encourage the exploration of healthy artistic trends and forms to enrich the arts of our country. Particularly, there must be stronger efforts to collect, study, and develop forms of art from our various ethnic groups, using them as a foundation to foster a new cultural foundation. At the same time, we must steadfastly oppose any trends and forms of art that are weak, chaotic, and decadent.

### *4. Utilise the socialist realist method in creation and criticism*

Socialist realism is the most effective method for artistic creation. It helps us depict people and events accurately, deeply, and vividly, contrary to the decadent tendencies found in capitalist art. However, the Party respects the artists' right to choose their creative methods. The Party advocates for encouraging all efforts in creativity, exploration, and opposing arbitrary restrictions on various themes, forms, and creative methods. Still, it demands that all artworks must align with the Party's principles, serve the Party line and policies, and not contradict the interests of the country and the people.

Socialist realism is also the most effective method for art criticism. Without a solid grasp of socialist realism, critics cannot accurately evaluate artistic works. There is a need to establish a robust and honest criticism movement from which we can firmly reject biased and destructive criticisms or those with a vulgar nature. Within the community, it is important to promote free thinking and encourage open debate for diverse opinions. Simultaneously, there should be an increased awareness to prevent counter-revolutionaries from exploiting criticism in order to smear the regime and launch indiscriminate attacks.

We hope in the creative community to have sincere critics, discover new talents, encourage new efforts, and correct the deviations and mistakes of works. We hope that among the audience of the arts, a new habit will be



Nguyễn Thanh Châu (1972)

formed to welcome newly created works. In the creative community, we aspire to foster sincere criticism, discover new talents, encourage new efforts, and correct the deviations and mistakes of creative works. We also hope that the audience themselves will inspire a new tradition of welcoming new artworks into the world.

#### *5. Establishing a broad and rigorous cultural front under the leadership of the Party*

As more artists join our ranks, our collective activities within the arts are expanding and becoming increasingly complex, necessitating a change in art organisation to accommodate the new situation.

We must unite the forces of artists and writers into a broad front, adopting a patriotic stance, serving the people, safeguarding the people's democracy, advancing towards socialism, fighting against the American–Diệm regime, achieving peace and reunification, strengthening solidarity and friendship with brother socialist countries, and protecting world peace. On that common ground, every different artistic tendency (except the decadent tendencies of the bourgeoisie) can coexist and develop, and every individuality is respected.

We oppose manifestations of disorganisation, licentiousness, and laxity that lead to the scattering of artistic forces. At the same time, we also oppose manifestations of isolationism and narrow-mindedness.

On the fundamental basis of the *Guiding Principles of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front*, we unite all patriotic and progressive artists in the North and South. Our country is a unified entity, and therefore our creative community cannot be divided. We hope that our artists, from the North to the South, both within the country and abroad, will unite in the fight against the common enemy of the nation, in working towards the construction of a richer national culture, and in the struggle for a peaceful, reunified, independent, democratic, and prosperous Vietnam.

The Party must strengthen its leadership over the

cultural front, primarily in terms of ideology and theory, in order to help artists clearly understand the current direction of our country's art, to combat false and dangerous ideologies, and to correctly address new issues as they arise. Existing shortcomings in the leadership methods of cultural affairs must be actively rectified so as to open up the appropriate avenues for creation and criticism. Specific policies need to be developed to cultivate artists appropriately, assisting them in learning and delving deeper into reality. Attention should be given to creative production and publication, creating an atmosphere of confidence and excitement for the arts that allows great work to flourish.

### **III. SEVERAL ISSUES REGARDING VIETNAMESE ART AT PRESENT**

Dear comrades and friends,

During the preparatory debates for this Assembly, you asked many questions and raised many issues about art and its creative processes. I therefore hope that this year's National Art Assembly will indeed contribute significantly towards answering and resolving some of these issues.

Here, I would like to express my opinions on some specific issues for comrades and friends to pay attention to:

#### *1. Politics and art*

Recently, political and cultural issues have become prominent in public debate. If we are to abide by Marxism–Leninism, in a class society, art should reflect the class struggle with a clear class character and serve a distinct political line. The relationship between politics and art is that politics leads art, and art serves politics. This has been acknowledged by the majority of our fellow artists.

Under the old regime, a painful experience often

tormenting the souls of artists was the feeling of “homelandlessness.” Art was rendered powerless against the brutal oppression of the ruling class; their lives sometimes seemed meaningless. At that time, even if they wanted to retreat to an “ivory tower” or serve so-called “pure art,” artists still felt that the ivory tower and pure art only benefited the ruling class.

Therefore, following the success of the much-welcomed August Revolution, a large number of artists in our country tried their best to use their capabilities to serve the people. Day by day, artist brothers and sisters increasingly see that the path of serving the people is the path to the liberation of art—and the artists themselves. Serving the political line correctly does not diminish the quality of art; on the contrary, it enhances it. For an artist, is there any honour greater than using art to serve a revolutionary path that liberates the people from oppression and exploitation? In the previous years of resistance, many artists responded to the nation’s call, willingly putting down their tools to take up arms on the frontlines or infiltrating behind enemy lines, mobilising the people for resistance. In this arduous struggle, many fellow artists sacrificed heroically for the country, setting an enduring example that will not be forgotten.

Discussing the issue of politics and art, we must first clearly define just what political leadership within the arts means. Political leadership within the arts primarily involves leadership in terms of ideology (including art theories), principles, policies, and organisation, without intervening in specific issues of a specialised nature (such as choosing content, form, etc.). Political leadership within the arts is not about administrative orders, coercing one’s emotions and thoughts, or stifling the exploration of artists. It is also not about rigidly conforming and homogenising creative work, but rather seeking to respect the subjective creativity and initiative of artists; it should not force artists to mechanically repeat political slogans in a dry, awkward, and clumsy manner.

As Lenin said:

There is no question that literature is least of all

subject to mechanical adjustment or levelling, to the rule of the majority over the minority. There is no question, either, that in this field greater scope must undoubtedly be allowed for personal initiative, individual inclination, thought and fantasy, form and content.<sup>2</sup>

The Vietnamese Workers’ Party recognises that some Party cadres have interfered in the choice of content, form, and artist personality. However, the Party cannot agree with some artists—including some Party member artists—who consider themselves free to go against the Party’s direction or Government policies, arrogantly elevating themselves above the organisation, above the collective, and engaging in undisciplined actions.

An art in service of politics is an art in service of the country, the people, the struggle for peace and reunification, and the cause of socialist transformation and socialist construction. The methods of service are diverse; artists must willingly volunteer and be proactive in their creative fields. On this point, Soviet writer Sholokhov was spot on: “Every one of us writes in compliance with the orders of his heart, and our hearts belong to our Party and to our people, whom we serve with our art.”<sup>3</sup>

An art in service of politics is an art in service of the political class, not politics in a general sense or serving any individual engaged in politics. Our art is entirely dedicated to the interests of the nation and the working people while recognising and obeying the leadership of the Vietnamese Workers’ Party. This is a distinctive feature of the Vietnamese artistic movement in our present era, and the Party spirit of art in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

Does this Party spirit contradict with the nature of reality? Does the Party compel artists to distort or conceal the truth to defend itself? Absolutely not. In fact, quite the opposite is true. The Party has no interests other than those of the Fatherland and the people. The Party adheres to no truths other than the truths of Marxism–Leninism and the truths of life. Party spirit demands that artists

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Lenin, “Party Organisation and Party Literature,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 10 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 46.

<sup>3</sup> Unreferenced in the original document, this quote stems from a speech given at the Second All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers by Mikhail Sholokhov, later published in the *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 26 December 1954.



Nguyễn Thanh Châu (1972)

align with the ideological stance of the Party, the working class, and the working people when examining issues because that ideological stance is the most revolutionary and suitable for extracting the objective truths and ideals of humanity. Party spirit is not a monopoly on art within the Party. It is not only communist artists who need Party spirit. Why is that? Because in a class society, there cannot be an art scene without a distinct class tendency. In a divided Vietnam, under the democratic regime led by the working class, an artwork either conforms to the *Guiding Principles of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front* or opposes it; either it aligns with the democratic path towards socialism in the North, or it wishes to stop or move backwards; either it supports the Party leadership or it does not. There is no middle ground, let alone standing on both sides. The viewpoint that art must stand above all political tendencies is an outdated and backward perspective; it is often a tactic to conceal a reactionary political tendency.

To establish the correct relationship between politics and art, and to cultivate Party spirit, it is necessary to struggle on two fronts: on one hand, against narrow-minded and factional views on art; on the other hand, against the misleading rhetoric and distortions propagated by the imperialists, feudalists, or bourgeoisie, who claim that politics suppresses art or that Party spirit cannot coexist with realism and genuine sentiment. The essence of such arguments is to demand that art serves a reactionary political agenda, under the banner of “free art,” or seeks priority for personal interests, selfishness, and negative traits under the banners of “the sincerity of emotion” or “art for art’s sake.”

Politics and art are inextricably linked. Patriotic and progressive artists cannot help but support the correct political line of the Party. However, this does not mean that the Party and its cadres force artists outside the Party to toe the line. Whether to align or not is a matter of personal conscience and a voluntary choice for our artist brothers and sisters outside the Party. The Party does not employ any “dictatorship of the Party” policy towards the

arts or any other field. In fact, the Party strongly opposes any manifestations of narrow-mindedness, factionalism, or bureaucratic attitudes that are often imposed by orders from leaders within the arts. The Party advocates respecting the independence of artistic organisations and the creative freedom of artists. However, the Party acknowledges its responsibility to help artists outside the Party progressively understand the revolutionary path it has outlined, and to recognise this path as the correct one and the Party’s ideals as the most noble.

## *2. Depicting the truth and giving constructive criticism*

The country’s North has been completely liberated and is currently being consolidated, progressing gradually towards socialism. The country is temporarily divided into two regions under two different political systems: the North under the people’s democracy where the people take control of the state under the leadership of the Party; the South under the new colonial and semi-feudal rule of the American–Diệm regime. The system in the North represents freedom and justice. The regime in the South is dictatorial and unjust. This is the fundamental reality in our country today.

The North has its good and bad aspects, even remnants of the dark side of the old society; but the good is primary, our success in the North is primary; mistakes are only local and temporary shadows. We must praise the good and criticise the bad. However, while we should oppose blindly idealising everything, we should also firmly reject undue criticism that creates pessimism and doubt.

Does art have the right to depict the truth? Yes, but the essential question is, which truth to depict, and whose benefit does the depiction serve? There is a truth that, when spoken, is beneficial, but there is also a truth that, when spoken, is harmful (such as national secrets). If it is harmful, then we have no right to speak. The issue of depicting the truth is not an abstract problem for us; it is about describing the truth that benefits the revolution

and the people.

Can art be used for criticising the bad? First of all, we must ask what is considered bad and what is considered good. What is bad for one may be good for another and *vice versa*. Not only do we have the right, but an obligation to criticise that which we consider bad for ourselves, to struggle against what we perceive as bad. It is only through such struggles that the good can flourish. One shortcoming of our art, from the past until now, is that they have described life one-sidedly and praised it in a simplistic, unrealistic way. Recently, after some adjustments, there has been a tendency to emphasise the negatives, while at the same time distorting and blurring reality, either due to an unstable ideological stance, a lack of understanding of socialist realism, or adversarial motives.

The Party demands that artists speak the truth. In this sense, one's art should praise that which is good in social reality, and criticise that which is bad. But how should one go about in criticising the bad? When we criticise the evils of oppressive and exploitative ruling forces, our goal is to completely overthrow them because they are the enemies of our cause. Prior to the August Revolution, there was a tendency towards realist criticism, to expose the egregious rot within the old society, demand better living conditions, and to move towards overthrowing that society. On the contrary, when we criticise the bad aspects and shortcomings that still exist in our society, among the working masses of the country, we need to understand the essence of our society—that is, the inherent goodness of the people. Our criticism aims to rectify, to build, and to eliminate the bad aspects and shortcomings, making our society and our people better and more progressive. This is a fundamental difference between the realist criticism of the old society and the approach in the new society.

On this issue, the attitude and responsibility of artists are crucial. We encourage artists to have freedom of thought and to criticise the negative aspects, but that does not mean the freedom to distort reality, speak

recklessly, or act irresponsibly. It certainly does not imply the freedom to attack the essence of our society, deny or distort the achievements of our regime, or defame our people.

So, what is constructive criticism? Does it mean that artists should appease, soothe, or conceal the negative aspects, adopting an attitude of “close enough is good enough”? Or does it mean that if you talk about the bad, you must simultaneously mention the good to maintain balance? Or should one present the situation initially as bad and later transform it into something good? Not necessarily. Artists need to accurately depict the struggle between good and bad, where the good prevails over the bad because, in our system, the good is stronger than the bad. Artists can highlight certain negative aspects and use the sharp tools of art to vividly depict and expose those negatives without any compromise, making people detest those flaws. However, the work as a totality should radiate a clear and correct attitude towards our system. It involves a supportive, understanding, and trusting attitude towards the regime, one that is free from bias, does not inflate the negatives, does not distort the truth, or confuse observable phenomena with the underlying true nature of something. Pointing out the negative aspects allows people to see where the problems lie and why they are bad. Still, it should also contribute to identifying the causes and directions for resolution, aiming to eliminate those negatives. That is how it becomes beneficial.

So long as the enemy continues to seek ways to sabotage us, within our society, remnants of backwardness will persist despite our severe criticisms. We should never forget our enemies, as their malicious intent is a constant threat. Our current struggle must be directed at them. Artists must be consciously clear about their attitude towards the enemy; this attitude is not only manifested in statements but must permeate the content of each work.

Finally, regarding the portrayal of the good and the bad in our current society, the primary task of artists remains to accurately depict the greatness, heroism, and noble virtues blooming from the new man and his new



Nguyễn Thanh Châu (1972)

life. Failing to fulfil this task means that our art cannot accurately reflect the reality of the times. Some of our works may over-glorify things, appearing superficial and insincere. Others, conversely, cynically exaggerate the negativity, full of malice. We demand that artworks neither overly idealise nor excessively vilify but instead convey the truth of the arduous and profound struggle of our people today.

In the face of the Party's mistakes and shortcomings, as well as the influence of enemy propaganda, there are those in the art communities of the North who find themselves plagued with despair, pessimism, and scepticism—some even doubt themselves, denying their own accomplishments in the creation of resistance art. Lenin reminds us that “despair is typical of those who do not understand the causes of evil, see no way out, and are incapable of struggle.”<sup>4</sup>

Amidst this state of confusion, there have emerged ambiguous views on one's “freedom to create,” with some demanding to break free from organisational apparatus, or attacking Party leadership. Some have mimicked the enemy's propaganda by portraying our artists' wholehearted service to the resistance, firm stance, high moral standards, and allegiance to the Party's revolutionary line as blind obedience.

We need to promptly criticise these erroneous thoughts and attitudes, strengthen unity, and, while boldly pointing out our own mistakes for positive correction, we must resolutely combat liberal ideology and tendencies that exploit the expansion of criticism, causing division, scepticism, and attacks on leadership, ultimately undermining the fundamental principles of the State.

Negative tendencies and serious, even reactionary, viewpoints have become apparent in the *Humanities* periodical and recent issues of *Masterpiece* and *New Land*.<sup>5</sup>

The most harmful aspect of *Humanities* lies in its ability to adopt a façade of Marxism–Leninism whilst distorting its truths. It claims to be under the Party's

leadership while, in reality, it undermines that leadership; it professes to defend the regime but its core purpose is to tarnish the regime. The newspaper's danger also lies in its reliance on legitimate self-criticisms from the Party and then exaggerating them to mislead the public. Starting with the destruction of ideological and artistic aspects, it extends to political sabotage.

*Humanities* is a combination of the following two persuasions:

1. Driven by ulterior motives, it attacks, fabricates, and distorts, turning the newspaper into a tool that spreads poison into the minds of its readers, much like the American–Diệm “psychological warfare departments” attacking the North.
2. Confused by the many questions around society and life while having not yet found a direction to help find answers—but remaining deeply involved in the arts—it becomes influenced by bourgeois ideology. Consequently, they make irresponsible statements and advocate bourgeois views on art and freedom.

The erroneous viewpoints and harmful effects of *Humanities* have been exposed to public opinion through a vibrant and mass-oriented struggle. It is a beneficial and necessary struggle. We need to draw a lesson from this struggle: what constitutes an accurate depiction of truth, constructive criticism, and the responsibility of the critic? In addressing the shortcomings and mistakes of the Party and the state, criticism is necessary, but it should be constructive and carried out with a sense of full responsibility, avoiding slander and sabotage.

Currently, *Humanities* no longer exists, but the ideological tendencies it represented still persist. We must continue the struggle against those harmful ideas. Through the struggle against *Humanities*, our community of artists has made initial consolidations; artist brothers and sisters have united and matured. We need to further strengthen unity within the creative community. This unity must be based on the conscious responsibility of

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Lenin, “L.N. Tolstoy and the Modern Labour Movement,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 16 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 332.

<sup>5</sup> *Humanities* [*Nhân văn*]; *Masterpiece* [*Giai phẩm*]; *New Land* [*Đất mới*].

each individual in building the regime, contributing to achievements, and rectifying shortcomings and mistakes. Unity does not mean compromise or yielding to harmful ideological tendencies. In fact, any compromise in the face of detrimental ideologies will only lead to painful failures. It therefore goes without saying that, during the struggle against unfavourable tendencies, leaders should not disregard listening to public opinions and self-criticising their own mistakes and shortcomings. On the contrary, leaders should be more vigilant, resolute, and cautious in rectifying mistakes and shortcomings so as to continuously progress.

### *3. Creating for immediate service and long-lasting creativity*

In my opinion, the crucial issue lies in the value of the work, not in whether it is timely or long-lasting. Where does the value of a work reside? In the effectiveness of its service. To serve well, an artist must have the correct stance, thinking, and perspectives, and must delve deeply into the lives of the people, intertwining with the struggles of the masses. It does not matter if it is “timely” or “long-lasting” so long as it serves well. Creating for immediate service and long-term service are both appropriate and can be beneficial. Some works need urgent creation for timely service, while others require a longer period for construction. We need both types of work, and both must be correct and beautiful for our people. It is mechanical to “order” an artist to produce an artwork under a deadline. The real issue is whether or not artists are in touch with objective reality in their creative process. An artist’s ability to connect with reality is primarily determined by their subjective effort. The responsible government bodies can only help artists delve into the people’s lives and engage with objective reality to a limited extent. If artists are not able to subjectively engage with objective reality, then pressuring them to create is futile because it will almost certainly result in bad art.

Creating works for immediate service, like revolutionary poems and songs, can be very valuable. Many enduring poems were crafted in specific situations and within a relatively short period, drawing from the author’s accumulated living capital and the inspiration of the moment. On the other hand, some works may take decades to complete. However, it is not necessary for a work to span decades in order to hold value. Balzac wrote quickly, giving himself the moniker “secretary of the times.” Great writers like Gorky and Lu Xun endeavoured daily without tiring. Not every work by these writers are products of prolonged creation.

Artists can compose quickly on current topics, but to do so, they must have a wealth of life experience, a thorough understanding of Party and State policies, mature thinking, and harbour profound emotions. Only with rich life experiences and enthusiasm for serving a noble ideal can one create timely and valuable works.

Timely service does not mean limiting art to disseminating current events like press propaganda. Let us put an end to the habit of forcing artists and writers to turn editorials into poems, or to awkwardly “sing” dry political slogans.

In recent years, many of our artists have endeavoured to create for timely service. Many of our artist brothers and sisters have achieved significant accomplishments and gained valuable experience. Some brothers and sisters may not have succeeded, but through the process of creation, they have honed and refined their talents, preparing for future masterpieces. The efforts of these artist brothers and sisters in creating to meet the urgent demands of the masses and the revolutionary struggle demonstrate their enthusiasm and earnestness towards the country’s destiny and the lives of the people. Such efforts deserve praise and encouragement.

Often, larger artworks require an extended period for preparation and execution; moreover, they need multiple revisions. Many works discuss past events but still meet the demands of the present and resonate with future generations. We eagerly await the emergence



Trương Hiếu (1972)

of major works in Vietnamese art and literature that portray our current era. Unfortunately, such works are currently scarce. The August Revolution, the long war of resistance, land reform, the restoration and development of the economy—these monumental historical events have not been adequately represented in our country's literature and art.

In terms of leadership, it is crucial to emphasise and encourage the improvement of the quality of ideas and artistry in literary and artistic works. Currently, popularisation<sup>6</sup> remains important, but the importance of raising standards should not be underestimated. Without improving quality, popularisation will stagnate, and works will become mediocre, monotonous, and tedious. The audience will lose interest, and then, who is the popularisation for?

If we want to improve the quality, it is essential to prioritise the organisation of creative activities. Firstly, individuals with the capacity for creativity should be liberated from administrative tasks and duties, allowing them to devote their time to creative endeavours. Those assigned administrative and organisational responsibilities for creative individuals should have someone else take over for at least a few months each year, ensuring they too have the opportunity to engage in creative work. Rotate these responsibilities every few years to prevent anyone from being stuck in administrative tasks for an extended period. We must allow artists to delve deeply into reality, gather the necessary materials, and study life meticulously. Simultaneously, it is crucial to create favourable conditions for their creative process, providing material support and mental encouragement, among other things.

Looking at our artist brothers and sisters over the past ten years, many of them feel a sense of “life regret” because they either wasted their creative efforts or failed to produce anything considered valuable. They believe that the fault lies with leadership, which forced them to do other tasks or hastily create works to meet deadlines. Is that true? Not entirely. If we lack valuable artworks, then,

of course, leadership bears some responsibility. But is it true that over the past ten years, we have not produced any valuable works? Certainly not. Our valuable works are rare, mainly because our artist brothers and sisters have not made enough effort to keep up with the times. Some have retreated to ivory towers, idly passing the days, and yet, they blame leadership. Others, in terms of thoughts, emotions, and style, have not kept pace with the strong progress of the people. The *old* within them has been lost but the *new* has not penetrated deeply enough—it has not matured enough—thus there are not enough conditions met in order to rise to significant works. However, through those difficult times, it is certain that our artists, if they truly make an effort, will create valuable works. The emotions accumulated during the resistance, land reform, and economic and cultural renovation and development, will be valuable assets for creating valuable work. How honourable and fortunate it is to have lived over the past ten years—which have been equivalent to several centuries' worth—witnessing and contributing to the most arduous and glorious struggle in the entire history of our nation.

#### *4. Restrictions on creative freedom*

This is a matter that is currently being passionately debated by our artist brothers and sisters. Several months ago, during a dialogue between representatives of the Party Central Committee and some of us engaged in cultural work, many raised this issue.

During the period of colonial and feudal domination, our people had to live under the heavy yoke of slavery, having all thoughts and emotions suppressed. All of you are well aware of the immense suffering and pain experienced by artists when our nation was still shackled by colonial and feudal forces; when our people lacked sufficient food and warm clothing; when the Vietnamese language was treated as a foreign language in schools, and the masses were illiterate, kept ignorant, and devoid of fundamental human rights.

<sup>6</sup> Here, Trường Chinh is referring to widespread accessibility.

The August Revolution broke the chains for the nation, restoring the human rights of the people, and simultaneously liberating artists and the process of artmaking.

Since then, we, artist brothers and sisters, have had the freedom to express our love for the country, the people, labour, humanity, and life itself. We are able to speak from the bottom of our hearts, expressing our most sacred feelings in our mother tongue and through the beloved art forms of our nation. Our creative works are not meant to entertain invaders and traitors, or a handful of individuals sitting in comfort with ill-gotten gains. Instead, our creative work has become spiritual nourishment and weapons for the millions of our compatriots in their struggle. Our works are not ordered or commissioned by any publisher or patron trying to buy the souls of artists with money. On the contrary, it is the love for the country and the people, the demands of the revolutionary struggle, and the creative labour of the people that enlighten and encourage us to create.

Therefore, our struggle for creative freedom is no longer an ongoing one. We have already achieved creative freedom and have used that freedom to produce many works that were unimaginable before the revolution. The essence of our art is freedom. Even under our system, artists have a noble character in their freedom of expression.

However, our freedom cannot be separated from revolutionary discipline and the leadership of the Party. Marxist–Leninist ideology helps us understand the laws of development of the objective world; the Party’s principles and policies enable us to correctly comprehend society and humanity, engaging in the struggle to transform it. The Party line leads to prosperity and abundance for the nation, the people, and art. We willingly follow the path laid out by the Party, as our own experiences have shown us that it is the only correct path, the true path to artistic freedom.

Then why recently have we, artist brothers and sisters, raised the issue of “creative freedom” so passionately as

we have seen? Firstly, since the establishment of peace, our political and ideological education has been lacking, so within the creative community, many of us have been infected by liberal bourgeois ideas; we want to return to the path of individualism; we are frustrated with what we perceive as restrictive principles and discipline. When the Party engages in self-criticism and those within the *Humanities–Masterpiece* group attempt to attack and sabotage the Party, their reactions become even more apparent. Secondly, in recent years, the leadership in the arts has been bureaucratic and commanding, causing dissatisfaction among our artist brothers and sisters. Some cadres believe that they can dogmatically substitute ready-made formulas, dry slogans, and predetermined models for the thoughts, observations, explorations, and emotions of artists facing life.

The direction to address the issue of artistic freedom in the North has been identified through discussions in recent months. Everyone can clearly see that, on one hand, it is necessary for artists to resist individualism and the influence of bourgeois liberalism; on the other hand, it is essential to overcome the bureaucracy and narrow-mindedness that plague the leadership of arts organisations. Experiences from artists in allied countries can also assist us in this regard. However, our discussions, like the experiences of artists in allied countries, should not lead to conclusions contrary to our established cultural path but rather illuminate and clarify that path even further.

The Vietnamese Workers’ Party advocates for artistic freedom and the expansion of criticism. Throughout history, the Party has consistently called on artists to deeply engage in the lives of the people, particularly the workers, farmers, and soldiers. It encourages artists to reflect the new and dynamic life and people’s experiences truthfully through art. The Party urges artists to convey lofty ideals and profound emotions, educate and inspire the people to resist imperialism and feudalism, and nowadays, also combat capitalism, develop the people’s democracy, advance towards socialism, and promote



Trương Hiếu (1972)

patriotism and proletarian internationalism for the youth and masses of our country. At the same time, it urges the criticising of negative thoughts and emotions, and backward customs left behind by the old regime.

Our artistic freedom is aimed at serving the country and the people who are struggling to strengthen the North, build a new life in the North, achieve peaceful reunification, strengthen solidarity with other socialist countries, and safeguard peace in Southeast Asia and the world. We cannot, however, allow “freedom” to flourish in art that is hostile towards the country, opposes the people, challenges the people’s democracy, resists socialism, or creates ethnic animosities; nor can we accept “freedom” for harmful, obscene, or corrupting artworks that degrade the people.

Based on the aforementioned stance and viewpoints, we advocate for artists’ freedom to choose their themes, forms, content, and creative methods based on their expertise and interests. This is the creative freedom for those genuinely involved in artistic work under our regime. There is no other kind of “freedom”!

Recently, artists have engaged in extensive discussions on the issue of artistic freedom. Alongside valid opinions, some vague perspectives have emerged. Every work of art carries both an ideological and artistic component. A good work should have correct ideological content and be artistically beautiful. If our arts lack these qualities while continuing to bloom as lushly as they are, our flowers could easily turn poisonous. The people do not need such flowers. We support creative freedom, but it is a creative freedom grounded in the Party’s ideology and the Front’s *Guiding Principles*. Such is the kind of flower that blossoms in the people’s garden, not just anywhere. Regarding form and content, artists have the freedom to choose according to their preferences. However, let us not become trapped in the slogan of “SEEK THE NEW” and end up creating incomprehensible, ugly forms that confuse people; let us not turn poetry into something unrecognisable, making it difficult for readers to appreciate!

However, many other opinions misunderstand artistic freedom as a spontaneous, anarchic style without government control, the need for leadership, or the necessity of having a stance or viewpoint; where one can adopt any political ideology of their liking; where one can follow either a declining or non-declining artistic trend, and so on. Of course, we cannot agree with such views.

One should not make the mistake of thinking that artistic freedom means equalising all ideologies, viewpoints, and schools of art; thinking that everything has equal value, blurring the lines between us and the enemy, between right and wrong, good and bad. Not every work of art has the same value, and not everyone has the right to criticise. On the contrary, the Party’s stance is to clearly distinguish between right and wrong, commend good ideas, and oppose bad ones. It encourages every effort to explore and create, reaching for something better and more beautiful, making our art increasingly diverse.

Artistic freedom does not imply abandoning the principles of Marxism–Leninism, nor does it imply that the value of socialist realism is no longer relevant. It does not imply that there is no need for leadership and that every spontaneous tendency should flourish chaotically with little to no oversight. On the contrary, artistic freedom includes the correct leadership of the Party, the struggle for Marxism–Leninism, the Party’s artistic direction, and socialist realism.

Freedom of creation does not imply that there should be private activities that oppose the State, or, as one article put it: that there should be “private” flowers that are more beautiful than the “state-owned” flowers. It also does not imply that there should be numerous private publishers and media outlets following any purpose or principles they wish. Under our system, the State belongs to the people. The purpose of the State is to fully develop human potential. The fact that our government acknowledges the artistic activities of individuals does not mean that we deny the leadership role of the Party and the State. Freedom of creation

certainly does not mean allowing wrong and reactionary ideas to have the “freedom” to wage psychological warfare, causing harmful consequences for the country and the revolutionary cause of the entire people. In the future, along with the campaign for economic reform, private schools, journalists, publishers, theatres, and so on, will be gradually reformed. At present, these cultural organisations are now subject to the leadership of the Party and the State. Under our people’s democratic dictatorship—which is actually a dictatorship of the proletariat—the State does not grant an organisation or individual the right to poison public opinion or to oppose Party and State policy!

In essence, our policy on freedom of creation aims to promote freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and freedom of creation among the people, encouraging exploration and valuable creativity in the fields of philosophy, science, literature, art, and so on. We advocate against granting enemies the right to freedom of expression but, among the people, we encourage debates to distinguish right from wrong and discover the truth. Particularly in the fields of art and science, one cannot allow the majority to dominate the minority, as artistic or scientific truth is not determined by a majority vote.

In the spirit of promoting the positive and creative nature of artists, under the current conditions in our country, the slogan CREATIVE FREEDOM, EXPANDING CRITICISM, as presented in the above context, essentially upholds individual freedom and encourages independent thought, exploration, and creativity. It ensures the broad development of art and literature in various rich forms, in line with the Marxist–Leninist theoretical framework and the Party’s principles and policies. This serves the revolutionary cause of our people effectively.

##### *5. Building a new, socialist culture while promoting the rich traditions of our country*

In recent years, our artist brothers and sisters in Vietnam have made significant efforts to embrace the cultural

heritage of the nation. With determination to delve into the roots and study the existing cultural assets, we have achieved some success, especially in the fields of theatre, music, dance, and fine arts. The 1954 National Literature Assembly was a major victory for vietnamised art. Nowadays, the approach of exploring and promoting the existing heritage has been recognised by our artist brothers and sisters as correct, and the arrogance toward ethnic arts has gradually diminished. Our artists have come to appreciate the value of country’s artistic traditions and have confidence in the abundant potential of our homeland’s art.

On the path of exploring the existing cultural wealth, we have overcome many prejudices and childhood diseases. Not long ago, some people, including artists, still believed that the Vietnamese people did not know how to dance, or that only ethnic minorities in Vietnam were familiar with dance. Similarly, at a conference discussing stage arts in Viet Bac, someone proposed shelving traditional arts like cheo and tuong—confining them to museums. Looking back at such opinions, we cannot help but find them amusing, but for a while, such misconceptions harmed the development of art in our country. Even now, prejudiced and narrow-minded views persist towards the cultural heritage of our people, including classical and contemporary works.

In general, following the August Revolution, within the general population, among many artists, and to some extent within the organisations responsible for culture, there were wrong attitudes that undervalued and overlooked the artistic values left by the old society. Some localities prohibited or admonished the folk singing and entertainment of the people, especially young men and women, deeming them “feudalistic,” “backwards,” or “nostalgic.” When the slogan BUILD A PEOPLE’S ART was introduced, folk art forms—folk poetry, folk tales, folk songs, traditional dances, etc.—began regaining recognition. However, there were still prejudices against all works created by Confucian scholars, considering them as belonging to the feudal era. While utilising

folk cultural heritage, there was a tendency to distort it to fit the current ideology and policies, painting a new political coating on an old storyline because the old content was considered outdated. When criticising classical works, some critics contrasted contemporary Marxism–Leninism against the thoughts of the authors, leading to biased judgments. Starting from a mechanistic and dogmatic class perspective, they reached conclusions based on conjecture. Some critics even attributed political ideas to authors that they did not possess. These tendencies and attitudes are all mistakes and go against the historical materialism of Marxism–Leninism.

In the exploration of the cultural heritage of the nation, the key issue is to determine what to explore and how it can add value to our revolutionary cause today. We must systematically study, introduce, and critique the art and literature left by our ancestors.

Regarding the performing arts, some plays may need to be set aside for research on technique, while others may require some adjustments before being performed publicly. It is important not to be overly conservative but to enhance and respect the historical context of the works while preserving the vietnamised style.

The *Tấm–Điền*<sup>7</sup> play is an attempt; however, it still makes us think that adapting cheo remains a topic that needs to be carefully researched and addressed more thoroughly.

Recently, a lot of attention has been given to some contemporary and pre-August Revolution works of social realism, such as the stories, reports, and chronicles of Ngô Tất Tố, Nam Cao, Nguyễn Hồng, Nguyễn Công Hoan, Tô Hoài, and so on. However, introductions, analyses, and criticisms have not been profound. In addition to the mentioned realistic works, our critics also avoid discussing romantic works, as they are unsure how to evaluate them correctly. There is a tendency to dismiss all romantic works from the past as decadent and escapist.

It is important to clearly understand that our revolutionary art heritage inherits all the artistic values

of previous eras, passed down from generation to generation. We have the responsibility to preserve and develop the cultural heritage of the nation, and only we can perform this task in our country.

We have learnt to appreciate the value of our country’s cultural heritage and have begun to collect and study that heritage. Songs like *Over the Windy Bridge*,<sup>8</sup> and traditional dances like *sap* and *non*,<sup>9</sup> have not only brought joy to our lives but spread to other countries. In recent years, many of our people’s folk songs and dances have been revived. Paintings, sculptures, and ancient architectural works have started to be preserved. The One Pillar Pagoda, which was destroyed by invaders before their retreat, has been quickly reconstructed. Some cheo and tuong performances are being adapted and staged, evoking many new intense emotions. These are activities that need to be continued, with clearer guidelines, plans, and leadership. Much of our cultural heritage has been lost after a millennium of feudal oppression and a century of colonial exploitation. Despite this, I believe that by exploring the surviving cultural treasures of our people, from North to South, from the Kinh majority to the various ethnic minorities, we will find many gems in our cultural heritage.

Classical works are the essence of our country’s culture, created over centuries as the life and language of our people gradually became richer. We cherish Trần Hưng Đạo, Nguyễn Trãi, Đoàn Thị Điểm, Hồ Xuân Hương, Nguyễn Du, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, and so on. Each author, with their genius and limitations of their era, reflects a historical period, marks a step forward in literature, and enriches the thoughts, emotions, and voices of our people.

Regarding our country’s cultural heritage, we do not agree with self-deprecating attitudes, believing that our people are backward, rootless, and lack any noteworthy cultural achievements. However, we also do not agree with the sanctification of the cultural achievements of our country, being afraid to criticise and evaluate them accurately. Both attitudes are biased. Only by placing

<sup>7</sup> *Tấm–Điền* was a hát chèo play that reimagined the popular fairy tale *Tấm Cám* during the onset of the North’s land reform programme. Borrowing major plot elements from *Tấm Cám*—regarded as the Vietnamese Cinderella due to a similar, albeit much darker, storyline—*Tấm–Điền* focused on the heroism and struggles of the peasantry.

<sup>8</sup> *Over the Windy Bridge* [*Qua cầu gió bay*].

<sup>9</sup> *Múa nón* [hat dance] involves performers wearing *non lá*, traditional conical straw hats. The dancers use the hats as props, manipulating them

in various ways to create expressive patterns and movements. The dance is often accompanied by traditional music and seeks to convey the grace and resilience of Vietnamese women—particularly those working in the rice fields.





Nguyễn Thế Vinh (1972)

each old work in its historical context, understanding the relationship between the work, the author, and the era, can we hope to comprehend the old values and find lessons for ourselves today.

However, in our efforts to preserve the cultural heritage of previous generations, we have often overlooked the contemporary foundation. This period holds many notable artistic values. The history of over eighty years of French colonial domination is also the history of our nation's relentless struggle in all aspects for self-liberation. From the invasion of the French empire to the movement for recognition of independence to the establishment of the Indochinese Communist Party, there was an anti-French and anti-collaborationist trend in our art. Patriotic figures who fought for the cause of national liberation, such as Tống Duy Tân, Phan Đình Phùng, Phan Bội Châu, Phan Chu Trinh, and so on, were also poets and writers rich in spirit and full of patriotic fervour. Unfortunately, we have not thoroughly studied, analysed, and learnt from the precious works of those predecessors.

The Tonkin Free School Movement (1907–1908) was, first and foremost, a national and democratic movement, which had a significant impact within the country. However, it has not been systematically studied and evaluated accurately. We should continue to introduce and analyse our country's realist and progressive works from around 1930 to before the August Revolution—particularly during the period of the Indochinese Democratic Front (1936–1939). The realist trend in the arts prior to the Revolution was formed and developed under the direct and indirect influence of the people's struggle, led by the Indochinese Communist Party. This movement was also positively influenced by progressive art from around the world, especially the socialist realism of the Soviet Union and the progressive arts of China and France. Emerging from this realist trend were outstanding works that reached a high level of both ideological and artistic standards, exposing the brutal and decaying nature of the colonial and feudal regime, and

expressing the suffering of the oppressed classes as they yearned for revolution.

We should not superficially dismiss or overlook the trend of romantic literary movements, but rather delve into the analysis of progressive trends in different periods. We must make a diligent effort to understand all patriotic and progressive elements in previous romantic works while maintaining straightforward criticism and merciless struggle against the pessimistic and cowardly tendencies of individualistic decadence, the reactionary trends under the Japanese–French fascists, and the imitation of the declining bourgeois art of Western Europe. It is necessary to accurately assess the hatred towards imperialists and feudal tyrants, the deep suffering of our people who lost their country, the torment of oppressed souls, and the longing for a true and free life. When reprinted or transformed, pre-August Revolution stories, poems, songs, music, drama, and art should be carefully selected (avoiding indiscriminate reprinting) and accompanied by introductions, explanations, and criticisms, highlighting the significance and historical context that gave rise to those works. Only in this way can they contribute to our new cultural era.

The process of adjusting narrow and mechanical attitudes towards the values of national literature not only serves to rectify unjust judgments on many works but also expands the path for contemporary artmaking. It ensures that our new cultural era does not sever ties with national traditions but instead continues and develops those traditions under new historical conditions. That is how we develop the rich traditions of our country while building a new, socialist art. Criticising or adapting old artistic works has significant implications. We need to study the values of cultures from around the world, but more importantly, we must explore and learn from the rich cultural heritage of our own people. It is only by utilising our ancient resources—millennia of the people's creative labour—that we can create a richer cultural landscape for our nation, surpassing the cultural achievements of all previous eras in the history of our

country.

In recent years, there has been attention to exploring these resources, but there are still many shortcomings, and more effort is needed in this regard. However, it is important that we avoid deviations. Leveraging the old cultural capital does not mean closing our eyes, embracing conservatism, restoring harmful customs, or encouraging superstitious beliefs. Recently, in many places, some have revived harmful customs and promoted superstitious beliefs, wasting the people's resources and harming production, allowing landowners to exploit these customs in order to take advantage of the peasants. This is incorrect. On the other hand, exploiting old resources should not lead to neglecting new ideas. Learning from the old to create something new, rather than turning back to the past and forgetting to build the present and future. For a long time, some artists have been adapting old works without creating anything significantly new or different. This is also a trend that needs correction. The vibrant and diverse life of our people, the profound changes in the North, and the persistent and indomitable struggle of the South are inspiring new emotions and suggesting new artistic concepts! We need to explore and learn from the past art of our country to enhance the positive traditions of that cultural era in our artworks today.

#### *6. Strive to study the advanced arts of the world*

To build a new cultural foundation for the nation, it is necessary to develop cultural relations between our country, our socialist allies, and friendly nations worldwide, and to make efforts to study the advanced arts of other countries.

Under the old regime, the cultural life of our people was suppressed. The imperialists only allowed the importation of subjugative, ignorant, depraved, and corrupt cultural products into our country. They considered progressive art “forbidden goods.” This regime continues to exist in the southern part of our

country. The American–Diệm regime prohibits any contact with progressive arts from abroad and promotes a distorted version of American culture, which they praise as the “absolute perfection and beauty” of the so-called “free world.” Further, they entertain the narrow-mindedly nationalist, racist, and hostile attitudes towards the progressive arts of other countries—particularly that of socialist countries.

On the contrary, our policy is two-fold: on one hand, we are determined to study the socialist arts of our brother nations and the progressive arts of other countries; on the other hand, we aim to introduce our own culture to other countries, organising cultural exchanges between our country and countries with which we have diplomatic relations. We believe that such exchanges lead to better mutual understanding, solidarity, and affection among nations, enhancing the richness of each nation's culture, and strengthening the cultural identity of our people. This is not only beneficial for peace and friendship among nations but also contributes to the beauty of the lives of different peoples.

Regarding cultural exchanges with countries within the capitalist sphere, we must be extremely vigilant, ensuring that we do not allow reactionary, obscene, and corrupt art and literature of imperialist ideology to poison our people.

What do we learn from art from abroad? Regarding modern and contemporary literature, we must study socialist and progressive social arts. First and foremost, we must explore the arts of our brother countries, as it represents the art of a new society, of a new era in human society, a creative artistic platform generating new, precious values never before seen in history. The path taken by the arts in the Soviet Union and our allied countries has provided us with a wealth of experience, allowing us to improve quickly and steadily! Regardless of artistic theory and criticism, ideological content, artistic form, or technique, we must make efforts to explore and learn from the arts of socialist societies. Many profound issues have already been deeply discussed and resolved in



Ngô Viễn Chí (1972)

the Soviet Union and our brother countries, so why are we still exploring them now?

Furthermore, we must study the progressive arts of other countries from around the world. Today's international movements for peace, democracy, and national liberation are giving rise to valuable works of art. These works are inspired by powerful, youthful, and abundant sources of inspiration, with diverse forms unique to each nation, including those previously considered "backward" or "savage." We should also learn from the progressive and revolutionary arts of Western countries. In this regard, we should examine the techniques of their various art movements, but ensure that such is done with a critical eye so as not to idolise those techniques or slavishly imitate them. After all, our studying should contribute to the creative development of our country's artistic forms.

Of course, we should also study the classic arts because we have to capture the essence of the art of humanity throughout historical periods. Currently, we are only familiar with a few classical works from Russia, China, France, England, the United States, and Italy. Now, we must explore the classical arts of countries in Africa, Latin America, and other Western European countries. In recent years, the global peace movement has commemorated progressive cultural figures from various nations across eras. We need to actively participate in these commemorations and introduce to our people, especially to our creative community, the artistic geniuses of the world.

If we want to learn from foreign arts, various activities must be carried out, such as exchanging artists and artworks, organising exhibitions, sending research teams abroad, and facilitating student exchanges, among others. However, a crucial task is to train numerous proficient language professionals for research and translation. In our country, the introduction of foreign arts still has many shortcomings—it lacks organisation and clear planning. Literary and artistic organisations need to collaborate with state agencies to translate and introduce

well-known foreign literary and artistic works.

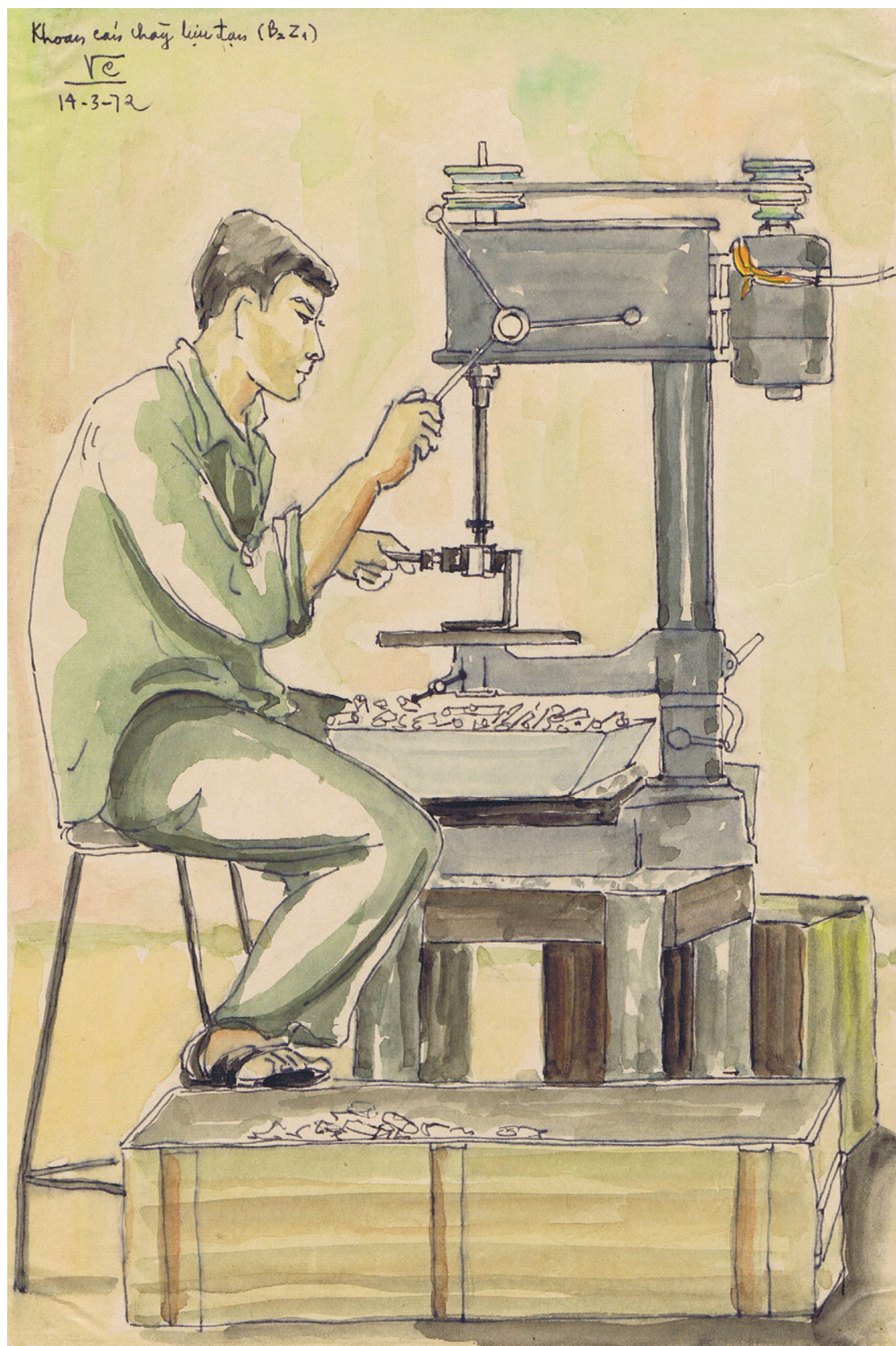
Expanding the study of foreign arts and cultural exchange with other countries, especially our allies, is essential for building a vietnamised culture. Such directly serves the immediate revolutionary tasks of our people, enabling them to better understand the cultural essence of other nations, strengthen friendship and solidarity, and actively strive to successfully build a peaceful, independent, unified, democratic, and prosperous Vietnam, contributing to the global struggle for peace, national independence, democracy, and social progress.

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Dear comrades and friends,

While we are gathered at this important Assembly, the hopes of our people are resting on our art community more than ever before. We hope that under the leadership of the Party, led by President Hô, after this Assembly, our country's arts community will be more united and unanimous, and that our national cultural movement will take a new step forward, marked by renowned literary and artistic works. The artistic forces of our country, armed with the sharp weapons provided by the Assembly, will advance on the cultural and ideological front with even greater victories.

I wish the Assembly success and comrades and friends good health and progress.



Ngô Viễn Chí (1972)

ART MUST CONTRIBUTE TO  
LIBERATING THE SOUTH,  
SAFEGUARDING THE SOCIALIST  
NORTH, BUILDING SOCIALISM, AND  
PROGRESSING TOWARDS  
REUNIFICATION

*Trường Chinh, 1968*<sup>1</sup>

My dearest comrades,

We are currently waging a war of resistance against the United States, saving our nation as a whole. At the same time, we continue the socialist revolution and the construction of socialism in the North. Our country is not large, nor is our population, and we are not yet a developed industrial country. Our economic and defence capabilities are limited. However, our people are united, with a strong patriotic spirit and an indomitable fighting spirit under the wise leadership of our Party headed by the beloved President Hồ. We have been, and are currently, defeating the largest imperialist power in the world: the American empire. Progressive people around the world view our struggle as a common fight. They closely follow each step of our victories, cheering us on.

Our socialist revolution is taking place in an agrarian and underdeveloped country, bypassing the stage of capitalist development. This is something new.

The cause of our war against the United States to save our country is a great one. The cause of building socialism is a great one. Our small nation is undertaking both these great endeavours—something we should all be proud of. Every individual, every artist brother and sister, as well as every Party member, cadre, and citizen of our country, feels a sense of responsibility to our nation, history, and the world.

The Fourth National Art Assembly convenes under

such circumstances, marking a period and milestone in the Vietnamese cultural and artistic movement.

Therefore, I am excited to express some opinions and contribute alongside comrades to address current issues in cultural work, creation, research, theory, criticism, and organisation. I will address three types of issues: our Party's direction regarding the arts, the current situation and tasks, and some issues within the arts today.

**I. ON OUR PARTY'S DIRECTION REGARDING THE  
ARTS**

In previous Assemblies, we discussed the literary and artistic direction of our Party. However, I believe that in the current situation, it is necessary to delve further into this issue. Moreover, as we have come a long way, it is essential to review the steps we have taken to affirm and draw lessons for future progress.

Comrades are aware that our Party leads the working class and the people of Vietnam in conducting two revolutions in two different strategic phases. The Party's *Political Thesis*, established at its inception, clearly stated the need to carry out a bourgeois civil rights revolution (commonly known as a bourgeois–democratic revolution; later, during the resistance war, we referred to it as the people's national democratic revolution). In 1954, in the North, we transitioned to the socialist revolution, while in the South, the people's national democratic revolution continued.

The people's national democratic revolution has a strategic task: to overthrow imperialism and feudalism, achieve national independence, establish a people's democracy, and realise the slogan LAND TO THE TILLERS. In the socialist revolution, we adopt a common approach, transforming socialist society in agriculture, handicrafts, capitalist industries, and small businesses, building socialism, and gradually industrialising socialist society.

The Party applies Marxist–Leninist principles to the

<sup>1</sup> Speech delivered at the Fourth National Art Assembly, 22 January 1968.

specific conditions of our country, analysing Vietnamese society, identifying revolutionary subjects, revolutionary forces, revolutionary motives, and the leadership role in the revolution. Through analysing the economic, political, and social situation in our country during a specific period, the revolutionary tasks, strategies, policies, and methods are formulated. During the early establishment and in the resistance war, facing imperialist and feudal oppression, exploitation of the people, and different classes, the Party advocated for the people's national democratic revolution to counter imperialism and feudalism, ensuring complete independence for the country, establishing a people's democracy, and allowing those who work the land to own it. After defeating the French invaders, the North, which had been under imperialist and feudal oppression, symbolically marked the victory over imperialism and feudalism. However, the revolution did not end there but rather transitioned to socialist revolution. The Party's ultimate goal is to achieve socialism and communism, eliminating all forms of oppression and exploitation. In the socialist revolution, it is necessary to transform the relations of production, meaning the transformation of the economy, building new relations of production, developing the productive forces, and constructing a socialist society, as outlined in the common path set during the Third National Party Congress.

During the period of the people's national democratic revolution, when the Party seized power, we constructed a new-democracy art, or in other words, an art that was vietnamised and democratic. At that time, we had not yet established a socialist art as we have in the North today because there were no political, economic, or social prerequisites to build a socialist cultural foundation. From the Party's inception in the North until 1954, and from its establishment to the present day in the South, the mission of the arts has been to construct a new-democracy cultural foundation, that is, a people's national democratic art. When the North completed the people's national democratic revolution and transitioned to the

socialist revolution, the Party set the task of building an art that was socialist in content and vietnamised in form, or simply, building a socialist and vietnamesed culture. If we assume that because we are Marxist–Leninist artists, or because our art is led by a Marxist–Leninist Party, the art of people's national democratic revolution period was already socialist, then we fall into dogmatism. Why? Because this perspective implies that there is no necessity for a dictatorship of the proletariat—that a socialist art can be built without the need to engage in socialist revolution. Such would be to put art above politics and economics, to put the plough before the ox.

Of course, from the inception of the Party—even before the August Revolution—some fellow artist brothers and sisters could and did employ socialist realism, that is, the method of art-making for communists, for Marxist–Leninists. Those works fell into the category of democracy and socialism; they were the democratic and socialist *elements* within the national cultural framework, as Lenin once stated, as, at that time, we did not yet have a socialist cultural foundation. Following the August Revolution, we were able to establish a people's government led by the working class. However, the Revolution was still a people's national democratic one, tasked primarily with two responsibilities: opposing imperialism and opposing feudalism. During that period, some of us attempted to apply socialist realism, but the art we created was a new-democracy art, a people's national democratic art. It was only from 1954 onward, in the North, when the revolution entered the socialist phase, that we truly began to construct a socialist art. It was not a coincidence that the Third National Party Congress set the task of building and developing the arts of the North with socialist content and vietnamised form. Why, from 1946, after gaining power, during the resistance war, and up to the Art Assembly in Phu Tho, did our Party advocate for building a new-democracy art?

The revolutionary periods and tasks are inextricably linked to the arts because the arts must serve the Party's politics, serve the implementation of the revolutionary



Ngô Viễn Chí (1972)



Ngô Viễn Chí (1972)

line, and contribute to fulfilling the revolutionary tasks of each stage. During the period of the people's national democratic revolution, starting from the August Revolution, we built a new-democracy economy and implemented a new-democracy regime. Simultaneously, we built a new-democracy art characterised by the principles of vietnamisation, scientification, and massification. Since 1954, under the Party's leadership, the people in the North are carrying out the socialist revolution, carrying out socialist reforms, and building socialism. In the South, under the leadership of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, the people's national democratic revolution continues, while the entire nation struggles towards the goal of reunification. As such, in the North, we are building a socialist art, while in the South they continue to build a national democratic art. However, the arts in both regions are revolutionary. Depending on the demands of the revolution, the art of each region takes on its own distinct identity. We should not make the mistake of thinking that participating in the construction of a socialist art in the North is more revolutionary, correct, or worthwhile than that of a national democratic art in the South.

According to general assessments mentioned above, how has our Party led the field of arts throughout different periods? I do not want to discuss this major issue here, so please allow me to briefly outline a few points:

From the establishment of the Party to the period of the Democratic Front, there has been revolutionary poetry, literature, and music created by proletarian intellectuals, imbued with the spirit of patriotism and proletarian internationalism. This is art created by communists. For example, there are short stories and plays written by President Hồ in France, such as *The Shipwreck Diary* and *The Bamboo Dragon*.<sup>2</sup> Also, there was the poetry of the communists in prison.

Between 1933 and 1935, there were two debates in which comrade Hải Triều took a Marxist stance in the struggle against idealist views. These debates were on

“materialism or idealism” and “art for art's sake or art for life's sake.” Comrade Hải Triều's contributions are worth remembering. Of course, with today's knowledge, if we review those articles, we might find them somewhat rudimentary. However, given the intellectual level and social context of Vietnam at that time, in the battles of ideas, articles like those by comrade Hải Triều were outstanding. To a certain extent, these articles clarified the Party's class standpoint in literature and art. Through those two debates, Marxism–Leninism triumphed over reactionary views.

In the period of the Democratic Front, there was a movement for democratic art (or, to be more precise, national democratic art). During that time, in all three regions, there were publications and newspapers featuring works of this nature. For the first time in our country, Marxist art and literature were widely disseminated among the people through Party newspapers and those of the Democratic Front, as well as through books published by communists collaborating with other patriotic and democratic thinkers.

In 1943, in the midst of the Second World War, our Party put forth *The Outline of Vietnamese Culture* with the slogan of VIETNAMISATION, SCIENTIFICATION, MASSIFICATION. It clearly identified the struggle for a new-democracy culture as part of the national democratic revolution at that time, outlining tasks to oppose the oppressive culture of the French colonialists, Japanese fascists, and reactionary Trotskyists in the “New Culture” group; criticise the weaknesses of groups like *Tri Tân* and *Thanh Nghi*; and establish the National Salvation Cultural Association and the national salvation cultural movement.

The August Revolution marked the initial liberation of the nation. It was the decisive step of the national democratic revolution of the people. The resistance against the French continued this revolutionary process. At that time, with the government in place, we began to build a new art, but we also needed to emphasise our fight against the French and struggle for independence. In

<sup>2</sup> *Shipwreck Diary* [Nhật ký chìm tàu]; *Bamboo Dragon* [Con rồng tre].

this regard, we followed President Hồ's slogan of FIGHT FOREIGN INVADERS, STARVATION, AND ILLITERACY. After we seized power, the national salvation cultural movement became more influential, developed stronger conditions, and had a broader reach. It became a broad front that included not only communists but also patriots, intellectuals, anti-colonialists, and those who supported the fight against hunger and illiteracy.

During the national resistance against the French, our Party convened the Second National Art Assembly in Phu Tho in 1948. It was during this Assembly that we further developed *The Outline of Vietnamese Culture*, outlining our principles and cultural philosophy—our new-democracy culture. The tasks set were to mobilise the entire nation to defeat the invading French while simultaneously building a new-democracy culture in Vietnam. Our new-democracy culture flourished significantly during the resistance and land reform. Not only did we vigorously promote campaigns against illiteracy and cultural backwardness, but we also eradicated many negative aspects, prejudices, and remnants of the colonial and feudal regimes, all deeply rooted in the people.

From 1954, the North entered the period of socialist revolution. Therefore, at the Second National Art Assembly, for the first time, our Party affirmed the need to strive for a rich vietnamised art under the banner of patriotism and socialism. However, the issue of building a socialist culture was still in its infancy. This also demonstrated that the socialist revolution had only just begun.

At the Third National Art Assembly, we implemented the resolution of the Party's Third National Congress:

Develop a new art with socialist content and vietnamised form, deeply imbued with Party spirit and popular characteristics. Master the methods of socialist realism, strive to create more works that truthfully reflect the new life, the new man, and contribute to educating and motivating the people in the struggle for socialist revolution and the cause of national unification!<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Văn kiện Đại hội*, vol. 1 (Hanoi: Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng Lao động Việt Nam, 1960), 187.

<sup>4</sup> *Văn kiện của Đảng và Nhà nước về văn hóa, văn nghệ* (Hanoi: Sự thật, 1970), 82.

<sup>5</sup> Hồ Chí Minh, "To the Artists on the Occasion of the 1951 Painting Exhibition (December 10, 1951)," in *Selected Writings* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977), 133.

<sup>6</sup> *Văn kiện Đại hội*, 187.

The letter from the Party Central Committee to the Third National Art Assembly affirmed that "the art of the North is currently a socialist art and, although still young, it has demonstrated vitality and great promise."<sup>4</sup>

It has been more than five years since the Third National Art Assembly. For the past three years, we have been struggling in the resistance against the United States, and our country's arts have entered a new period of development.

How has our Party led the arts through the revolutionary stages since its establishment? Here, I won't evaluate the current art and literature in the two regions. The Alliance of Arts and Literature Associations' Executive Committee has already taken care of that. Rather, I want to emphasise one point: during that time, our Party made no ideological mistakes or deviations while leading the Vietnamese art movement. Of course, there were many shortcomings, but our path in the field of arts remains correct.

Our path is correct because we adhere to Marxism–Leninism and understand how it can be accurately applied to the specific conditions of our country. This path is part of the overall Marxist–Leninist ideology of our Party, based on the following fundamental principles:

*1. Art is a sharp weapon of the working class and the Party in the struggle to fulfil its revolutionary mission*

There cannot be a generic culture or a generic art. Our art has distinct class and Party characteristics. Our art must adhere to the political line and organisational principles of the Party, serving the interests of the working class and our people. President Hồ said: "Literature and art are also a fighting front. You are fighters on this front."<sup>5</sup> The resolution of the Party's Third National Congress states: "Newspapers, publications, media, broadcasts, cinema, and other cultural activities must truly become increasingly sharp weapons of the working class on the ideological and political front."<sup>6</sup>

Affirming the above points means that we reject the perspective of "art for art's sake" and affirm the view



Ngô Viễn Chí (1972)

that art serves the people, the working class, and the entire revolutionary cause of the Party. At this point, I believe is also necessary to reiterate some opinions about Party spirit in the arts that I have mentioned at the Third National Art Assembly:

Firstly, artists must acknowledge that art conforms to politics, adheres to the Party line and policies. Artists must be loyal to the ideals of communism and tirelessly struggle for the victory of communism. They must love the Fatherland, love socialism, and strive for the cause of building a peaceful, unified, independent, democratic, and prosperous Vietnam.

Secondly, through their artistic activities, artists must consistently strive to enhance the Party's leadership, strengthen the people's trust in the Party, and safeguard the purity of Marxism–Leninism, especially in the fields of art and literature. They must resist the influence of revisionism, dogmatism, factionalism, and bourgeois nationalism.

Thirdly, artists must always maintain an offensive position against the reactionary and decadent ideologies of imperialists and feudalists, opposing bourgeois and petty bourgeois ideologies.

And finally, communist creatives, as well as all other Party members, must obey the Party's organisation, taking full responsibility before the Party and the people for their entire work.

## *2. Our art must truly be a people's art*

The Party advocates, on one hand, the elevation of Party and class spirit in art, in works, and in the artists themselves. On the other hand, it encourages the vigorous development of the mass cultural and artistic movement.

During the war of resistance against the French, we criticised and addressed various issues related to art and propaganda, the relationship between artists and the masses, and so on. Since then, the mass cultural and artistic movement has been steadily growing. The Alliance of Arts and Literature Associations' Executive

Committee's latest report acknowledges that the valuable and reinvigorating works produced in recent years are mostly from our younger brothers and sisters. This is a very good phenomenon that aligns with the developmental laws of our country's national art movement. Our shortcoming is the inadequate attention and care given to this young force, and insufficient focus on the mass cultural and artistic movement.

Speaking of our creative foundation as truly being a people's art means discussing the people's essence in art. In this regard, we must remember Lenin's words:

Art belongs to the people. Its roots should be deeply implanted in the very thick of the labouring masses. It should be understood and loved by these masses. It must unite and elevate their feelings, thoughts and will. It must stir to activity and develop the art instincts within them.<sup>7</sup>

President Hồ also stated that “the masses are creators; the workers and peasants are creators. Not only do they create material wealth for the society, but also creative work.”<sup>8</sup> Under the leadership of the Party, we recognise the pursuit of art as being closely tied to the interests and aspirations of the masses.

To achieve this, we need to strengthen the relationship between our professional artists and those engaged in non-professional creative work. Professional arts must serve as the core, while the arts of the masses must form the foundation. Neglecting the masses means not preparing a foundation upon which to build the edifice of arts. President Hồ noted that “if we raise [cultural standards] from ‘the vacuum,’ there would be neither high nor low level. That means: we must popularise first, that is, we must have a foundation, then from this popularisation, this foundation, we shall raise standards.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, popularisation and elevation must go hand in hand. Focusing on building something high and beautiful without paying attention to preparing a solid foundation is not practical. To have something good, there must be a core force to continuously elevate and

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Lenin, as quoted in Klara Zetkin, “My Recollections of Lenin,” in *On Culture and Cultural Revolution* (Rockville: Wildside Press, 2008), 233.

<sup>8</sup> Hồ Chí Minh, “Speech at the Congress of Cultural Workers,” in *Selected Works*, vol. 4 (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), 326.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 326–327.

build upon: the team of professional artists serves as this core.

Our artistic team has grown quite rapidly, but there are still many shortcomings in terms of politics and ideology, as well as in art and technique. We must clearly recognise this. Therefore, on one hand, current artist brothers and sisters need to put effort into studying and self-improvement. On the other hand, they must consistently supplement their collectives with young forces, with new talents, even those that are not yet fully mature and seasoned. These talents emerge from the mass art movement, from the collective efforts of workers, peasants, and the People's Army—the vast majority of the working masses.

*3. Our art must be vietnamised; our art is the art of many ethnic groups in our country*

Ethnicity is the essence, distinctive feature, and soul of a nation. The arts and crafts of each ethnic group must be a vivid reflection and expression of the nation's soul. The issue of ethnicity in the arts should not be understood merely as a matter of form, such as language, writing, lifestyles, and clothing. Instead, one must delve into the characteristics of each ethnic group, and their unique styles. Given that our country has many ethnic groups, the vietnamisation of our arts exhibits a rich and diverse spectrum, with each ethnic group having its distinct qualities, yet sharing common features throughout the nation. Therefore, every policy of the Party must focus on ensuring that all ethnic groups, whether in the majority or minority, living in Vietnam, enjoy equal rights and responsibilities, fully leveraging their capabilities in the common revolutionary cause. In this sense, we must pay even more attention to the distinctive artistic features of each ethnic group in our country. Our Party advocates the development of a new cultural and artistic foundation with socialist content and vietnamesed form, in order to promote the distinctive features of ethnic groups coexisting in Vietnam, particularly those

participating in the common cause of building socialism. The spirit and ideology of the arts must embody a socialist spirit and ideology. We should not sacrifice that which is unique for the sake of commonality, but we also must avoid overlooking that which is shared in favour of individuality. Developing the characteristics of ethnic groups in Vietnam must ensure the unifying nature of socialist arts in Vietnam. By emphasising the ethnic character of our arts, we also mean resisting all tendencies toward the forced inclusion of foreign elements, self-deprecation, and the slavish imitation of foreign art, as well as opposing narrow-minded nationalism and biases between ethnic majorities and minorities.

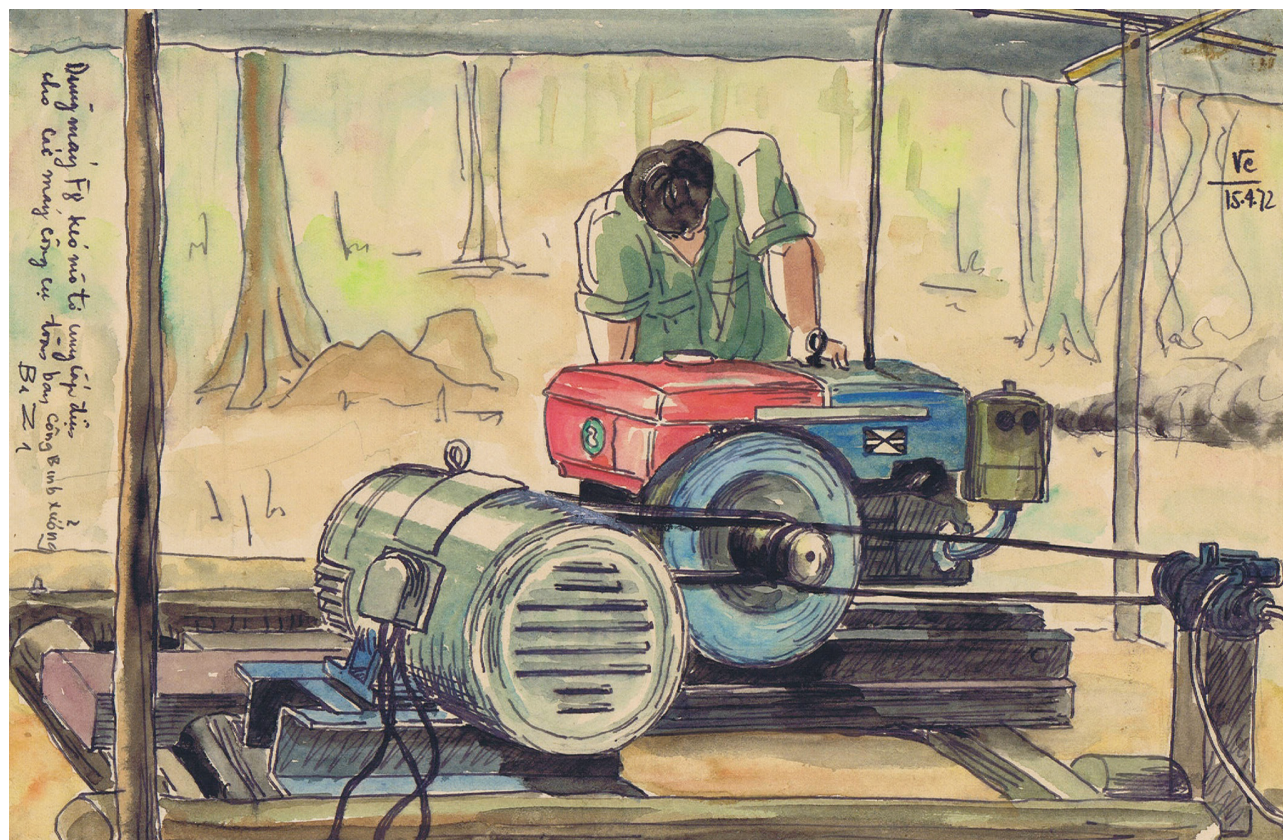
*4. Art beautifully reflects objective reality and contributes to the transformation of that reality according to certain ideals*

First and foremost, we must remember the Marxist viewpoint that Marxism not only explains the world but also transforms it. In his famous work *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, Lenin puts forward his theory of reflection, scientifically analysing complex phenomena in both natural and social sciences. Lenin critically assessed the works of the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy deeply, as well as other complex phenomena of art and literature, clearly specifying the responsibility of artists to their times.

Art reflects objective reality through the worldview of the artist. Artistic reflection is not merely about mirroring but about transforming society, transforming human beings, elevating humanity, and transforming the world.

To speak of one's worldview is to speak of one's class character and Party spirit. It involves discussing the artist's correct cognitive methods for perceiving objective reality and understanding the laws of development within the depicted phenomena—these are the laws of social development and thought.

We reject bourgeois objective idealism, Lukács' notion



Ngô Viễn Chí (1972)

of “reality dictates,” and other elements of revisionism. The arguments from those conventional materialists only see one side, the decisive aspect of objective reality, neglecting or negating the subjective factor, negating the worldview of the author, and not recognising the impact of consciousness and ideas on reality. Simultaneously, we also reject subjective idealism, which considers the artist’s subjectivity as all-determining, leading to a detachment from life, self-imprisonment in an ivory tower, or detachment from society and the demands of the revolution and class struggle, confining oneself to narrow, mundane personal thoughts. We further reject the method of mechanically recording reality, like a camera (this is not to say that I am dismissive of the art of photography; each art form has its own means of expression. What I oppose is a mechanical, rudimentary, naturalistic recording).

Our Party advocates that artists must be closely tied to life, immersing themselves in the daily lives of the people, especially the working class, peasants, and soldiers. Simultaneously, they should cultivate a Marxist–Leninist worldview, study seriously the Party’s principles and policies, and strive to contribute to the implementation of these principles and policies on the cultural front through artistic endeavours.

Closely connected with life and serving the revolution, our art needs to affirm the new, emphasise the advantages of the new, and actively participate in the struggle for the new. Under the colonial and feudal regimes, the revolutionary mission of art was to criticise and negate that order, that society, the rotten and oppressive regime, while also outlining the path to liberation for the working class and labouring masses, affirming the inevitable victory of the revolution. From the August Revolution until 1954, under the Party’s leadership, our art fought for the goal of defeating imperialism, colonialism, and feudalism, liberating the nation, achieving independence, democracy, and people’s welfare, realising the slogan *LAND TO THE TILLERS*. Since 1954, in the North, as we entered the period of socialist revolution, our art

had to affirm the inevitability of socialist revolution, of transforming and building socialism, serving and promoting the progress of this cause. A letter from the Party Central Committee sent to the Third National Art Assembly stated:

Our socialist art reflects the new and struggles for the victory of the new. It not only expresses the new life and new people but also actively contributes to promoting the development of the new life, participating in moulding and educating the new people. A work of art must shed new light on the perception, thoughts, and feelings of society, inspiring the people to enthusiastically advance, energetically strive to fulfil the State’s plans, and fight for the victories of socialism and reunification.

To portray the new, to reflect the new life and new man, artists need to immerse themselves in reality, and unite with the fighting and producing masses.

Affirming the new does not imply praising one-sidedly, as this is contrary to the Marxist–Leninist theory of reflection. As President Hồ said “in the transitional period, besides the good achievements, there are still lingering ills of the old society, such as corruption, waste, laziness, bureaucracy, child abuse, domestic violence, etc.”<sup>10</sup> Art must rigorously criticise these negative habits so as to make our society healthier. The Party demands that our art have a high level of truthfulness, which means praising the good and criticising the bad within society and within work. However, it is essential to recognise the fundamental difference between the criticism of art in the old society and the criticism of art in our new society. The essence of our society is good, and the people, especially the working masses, are considered good. Criticising the remaining bad and outdated aspects in our society and among our working people is meant to eliminate the bad, the outdated, and the backward, making our society and our people better and more progressive. It is about building a new, socialist people. In other words, criticism is also aimed at affirming the new and asserting the superiority of socialism. We are opposed to exaggerated

<sup>10</sup> Hồ Chí Minh, “Bài nói chuyện tại Đại hội văn nghệ toàn quốc lần thứ III,” in *Toàn Tập*, vol. 13 (Hanoi: Sự thật, 2011), 504.

glorifications, as well as overly negative distortions, which only fuel pessimism and distrust in our regime. Rather, we should focus on the existing good—namely, our achievements and victories. Therefore, the primary task of our art should be to depict and construct positive examples, to depict and mould the new man.

##### *5. The goal of our art is to educate the new man*

Art is a form of social consciousness. The value of an artwork lies in both its ideological content and artistic form. Both aspects are important, but it is crucial to recognise which aspect is more important, considering that the ultimate purpose of art is to educate the public and cultivate a new man.

President Hồ stated that,

The masses are awaiting artworks that befit the glorious era we are living in, works that truly praise the new man, and new events that not only serve as examples for us today, but also to educate our children and grandchildren in the future.<sup>11</sup>

Art is not like festival games. We should not reduce the function of art to the level of entertainment or amusement for the masses. On this issue, not forget Lenin's warning:

[Not to be] oblivious of the fact that our workers and peasants bear no resemblance to the Roman lumpenproletariat. They are not maintained at state expense but on the contrary they themselves maintain the state by their labour. They "made" the revolution and upheld its cause, shedding torrents of their blood and bearing untold sacrifice. Indeed, our workers and peasants deserve something better than spectacles. They are entitled to real great art.<sup>12</sup>

Genuine art must have a profound educational effect on the thoughts and emotions of workers, the general public, and the millions—no, tens of millions—workers, peasants, and labouring masses. With this understanding, we must conclude that for an artist to create a work with profound educational content, they

must cultivate themselves in various aspects. Their soul must be elevated, and their character must be virtuous.

##### *6. Critically absorbing the quintessence of national art as well as the beautiful accomplishments of world arts, past and present*

A distinctive and developmental characteristic of culture in general and art in particular is its inheritability. Regarding inheritability, I would like to reiterate two of Lenin's views. Firstly, that "proletarian culture must be the logical development of the store of knowledge mankind has accumulated under the yoke of capitalist, landowner and bureaucratic society,"<sup>13</sup> and secondly, that

The elements of democratic and socialist culture are present, if only in rudimentary form, in every national culture, since in every nation there are toiling and exploited masses, whose conditions of life inevitably give rise to the ideology of democracy and socialism. But every nation also possesses a bourgeois culture (and most nations a reactionary and clerical culture as well) in the form, not merely of "elements," but of the dominant culture.<sup>14</sup>

We should keep in mind that Lenin's national perspective is associated with the emergence of capitalism.

These viewpoints reveal to us that, first, our new art must inherit the good traditions of our people and the world; second, there is no purely national culture or art; the class content must be recognised and acknowledged; and, therefore, inheritance must be selective and critical. We reject the reactionary elements while selectively absorbing and elevating the progressive elements. Absorbing must involve criticism as even the democratic and socialist elements in the national culture under the old regime were not entirely good; they also had limitations.

The guideline of the Eighth Congress of the Bolshevik Party in March 1919 states that "it is necessary to open and make accessible to the toilers all the art treasures that were created on the basis of the exploitation of their labour,

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Lenin, *On Culture and Cultural Revolution*, 237.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 128–129.

<sup>14</sup> Vladimir Lenin, *Critical Remarks on the National Question*, 78.



Ngô Viễn Chí (1972)

treasures which hitherto were exclusively at the disposal of the exploiters.”<sup>15</sup> Lenin criticised the Proletkult group for attempting to introduce a purely proletarian culture, denying the leadership of the Party, opposing culture to politics, wanting to wipe out cultural heritage, and denying the nature of inheritance in art and culture.

Our Party adheres to the fundamental principles of Marxism–Leninism, based on the reality of our country, never denying the inheritability of art in the process of building a new culture. In this regard, the Party Central Committee sent a letter to the Second National Art Assembly stating:

The new cultural foundation needs to capture the essence of traditional art, of art prior to the August Revolution, and further develop the good traditions of the previous resistance art. It should oppose disdainful attitudes toward the cultural heritage of the nation and the values of progressive art under the colonial and feudal regimes, as well opposing attitudes that belittle the art of resistance; it also opposes a blind admiration for works of art that are contra the nation and the people, from past and present eras. This new cultural foundation needs to absorb the essence of world art and literature, from ancient times to the present.

In recent years, our efforts to collect and explore our cultural capital have been correct. We are following the correct artistic path of the Party and Marxism–Leninism. We must value and cherish the cultural heritage of our nation, but at the same time, we must engage in critical work and selection.

#### *7. Understand the fundamentals of the socialist realist method of artistic creation and criticism*

A precise methodology of socialist realism within artistic creation and criticism is something that has not yet been fully resolved among our artist brothers and sisters. Even in socialist countries, there are still debates, and divergences on this issue are not uncommon. Our Party has affirmed that our new culture and art should adopt

socialist realism as the most effective method of artistic creation.

I also addressed this issue in my speech at the Third National Art Assembly. Now, it is necessary to elaborate on a few points as follows:

If we view the process of artmaking as an application of Marxist–Leninist principles, then socialist realism becomes the preferred method for artist brothers and sisters who align with the Marxist worldview and are committed to advancing socialism. There is no better method than this to help artists correctly perceive objective reality and successfully express that reality in their works. If we consider the method as a way of doing things, such as thinking, reflecting reality, and constructing imagery, then there can be multiple approaches or techniques.

Speaking of a methodology with distinctive qualities involves understanding how it perceives the objective reality; consequently, one should delve into its philosophical basis and overall worldview. There is socialist realism, romanticism (both positive and negative), symbolism, modernism, abstractionism (which is the most insane and stagnant product of the current bourgeoisie, of a dying capitalism), and so on. We, who create under Marxism–Leninism, must recognise that among all these methods, only the method of socialist realism is the best in reflecting reality, in order to create art according to the standards and requirements outlined above.

As a result, we cannot agree with the so-called “realism without borders,” which some artists in France often mention as their creation. In fact, realism without borders indeed blurs the boundaries between the proletarian worldview and the bourgeois worldview, advocating an ideological coexistence.

We also cannot agree with the proposition that all schools of art—all *isms*—can coexist side by side, competing with each other in the cultural society of a specific socialist country. Because, in reality, such a proposition will make socialist art lose its socialist essence and become a chaotic mess. With such a proposition,

<sup>15</sup> Truong Chinh is referencing Point 10 of *In the Sphere of Education* in the 1919 Lenin Programme—see *The Programme and Rules of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)*, edited by the Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the USSR (Moscow: International Press, 1932), 20.

can socialist realism truly coexist with modernism and abstractionism in art? Can the thoughts and artistic methods of the proletariat peacefully coexist with that of the bourgeoisie?

*8. With socialism and communism, we are building the most beautiful and noble art and culture for humanity*

Marxism–Leninism advocates for the abolition of oppressive regimes and the liberation of labour, so as to create the conditions required to realise the long-held dream that Marx articulated: “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” In society, everyone is encouraged to participate in artmaking as well as the appreciation of arts and culture. Art is no longer the exclusive domain of the exploiting class, the wealthy, those who own the means of production, or a few specialists; it becomes the common property of all working people, something that the masses can participate in creating and enjoying. Under socialism and communism, the phenomenon of overconcentrating artistic talents among a few and suffocating those talents within the general population no longer exists. Under communism, art will be unprecedentedly sublime, as all petty, despicable, and cruel distinctions between people will be eradicated by the elimination of the oppressive system.

Communism does not promote inequality or suppress talent. It also does not trivialise art; on the contrary, as Marx said, it does not make everyone a Raphael, but it does allow everyone to develop their talents to the fullest.

The above are the principles that I refer to as the foundation for the artistic direction of our Party. To understand the artistic direction of our Party, one must grasp and apply these principles in their work.

## **II. SITUATION AND TASKS OF ARTISTS**

After the Second World War, facing the strong devel-

opment of the national liberation movements and the struggles of the working class worldwide, confronting the formation of socialist systems in dozens of countries, and witnessing the collapse of colonial systems under the powerful blows of the national liberation movements, the imperialists were terrified. They tried every possible means to salvage their dire situation.

On the economic front, they made extensive use of inventions within the fields of science and technology, actively pursuing scientific and technological revolution. Previously, imperialists were very apprehensive about adopting new technologies. However, now they are compelled to apply modern science and technology to increase productivity, to dominate and surpass even the socialist countries like the Soviet Union, in order to control resources, markets, and maintain influence over a variety of regions. The application of modern technology often leads to a reduction in the workforce since automated machines require less human labour. This, naturally, results in resistance from the workers. This phenomenon was observed before the Second World War. Now, despite worker opposition, under new conditions, they are still forced to apply modern technology. On the other hand, they use new measures to deceive and suppress workers and the working class, primarily through promoting what they call “people’s capitalism.”

What is people’s capitalism? Essentially, it allows workers to buy shares, or some workers can pool their money to buy shares in capitalist companies, turning proletarians into shareholders. It attempts to blur the class distinction between the exploiting capitalist class and the proletariat. That boundary, however, cannot be removed. Workers, by buying a small number of shares at the lowest cost, end up receiving only meagre dividends. They are still exploited through rationalising production with modern techniques, which makes the situation even worse and more perilous. Additionally, people’s capitalism uses a distribution method through instalment payments for various conveniences, ranging



Ngô Viễn Chí (1972)

from clothing to furniture, beds, cars, refrigerators, radios, and televisions. By buying a car on instalments, for example, individuals pay a small amount monthly, and when the debt is fully paid, the car is at the end of its life and sold as scrap. This method ensures that workers or employees have relatively convenient living conditions, but they remain lifelong debtors to the bourgeoisie, moving from one company to another. It is a terrible constraint because it creates a desire for comforts among workers and salaried individuals, making them fearful of engaging in struggles, afraid of unemployment, afraid of losing their jobs, and afraid of not having a salary to pay off debts to continue enjoying these purchased conveniences. That's what people's capitalism is.

Accompanying people's capitalism domestically, imperialist powers also engage in neocolonialism abroad, not overtly but by using economic, military, and political means, establishing control through advisors, providing assistance, and manipulating leaders in the countries they dominate. The United States is currently implementing neocolonialism in this manner, and other countries like England and France are following a similar path. In the colonised countries where they are compelled to declare political independence for the people, imperialists seek to maintain their interests through neocolonialism in a more subtle form.

In politics, during the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the capitalist class used numerous theories to deceive and lull the working class into thinking that the capitalist order is permanent and unshakeable, that their fate is to be forever proletarians, wage slaves. All these theories have failed miserably. The revisionist ideology of the Second International democratic socialists also lost credibility among the working class because those in power were exposed as puppets of the imperialists and fascists. Therefore, after the Second World War, imperialism was no longer able to cling to that zombie, being forced to embrace a new guise: modern revisionism. Imperialists work hard to promote revisionism, believing that, under the guise

of Marxism–Leninism, they will be able to deceive the working class and labouring masses of the world.

People's capitalism, neocolonialism, and modern revisionism are the tactics that imperialists cling to during their death throes to protect their interests, deceive the working class, and realise their longstanding aspirations: class compromise, class peace, and a fear of atomic bombs. They use revisionist elements as propaganda tools to create psychological confusion, make people feel helpless, reluctant to struggle, resentful and fearful of any war, whether revolutionary or counter-revolutionary. Revisionist art propagates bourgeois pacifism, seeking psychological comfort. In turn, bourgeois art gives birth to monstrosities, products of the new decadent trend, namely, the modernists. These monstrosities are not art but anti-art and anti-human. A bleak illusion that traps the youth (and not just them) on a path called living fast, living recklessly, living entirely for pleasure, living decadently and devoid of ideals.

Mickiewicz, a nineteenth-century Polish national poet, composed a highly renowned poem titled *Ode to Youth*, dedicated to the youth. The poem called on the Polish and European youth to awaken. Now, there should be a similar poem to awaken the souls of the lost youth around the world. Wake them up so that they are not afraid of imperialists, do not succumb to bourgeois pacifism, and have the momentum to advance while the imperialists are retreating, desperately clinging to modern revisionism like a drowning man clings to a piece of driftwood. Wake them up to make them see through the masks of people's capitalism, neocolonialism, and tear the banner of modern revisionism, striking directly at the leading imperialist power, the United States, as the people of Vietnam are doing. Wake them up so that they don't seek comfort, live day to day, or compromise. This is a significant theme.

The conscience of our time, the *zeitgeist*, has a content; it is not the spirit of a ruling class, but the spirit of the working class. This revolutionary spirit of the working class is the essence of our Party—the working class of our

country—as it leads the entire nation in the fight against the American imperialists, raising the banner of human conscience, the banner of total revolution, the banner of righteousness, and the banner of unwavering struggle. I believe that this is a thought-provoking issue for each of us. Of course, we fight against the United States because, first and foremost, we care for our own nation, but not only that, we have to care more broadly for the destiny of the world, the destiny of humanity. We believe that the people of the world are not fighting the United States everywhere as they are in Vietnam, but on the issue of Vietnam, the anti-American and anti-imperialist movement is quite extensive. The world's people have formed a united front in support of Vietnam against American aggression. Whether we like it or not, it has been implemented in daily life. You can see, comrades, how many people and governments from around the world have spoken out in support of our people's fight against the United States.

History has events that no one can oppose. Previously, the Communist International, led by Comrade Dimitrov, called for a global people's front, an international democratic front against fascist aggression. That policy, which was correct, came to life and was implemented. Now, a global people's front against American imperialism has also come to life, and it has been implemented. It is not necessary to convene a World Congress simply to pass a common platform and vote on common resolutions in order to form a front. Discussing specific matters and coordinating actions on local issues is also a front. There are practical fronts and fronts based on agreements in various conference documents. We advocate establishing fronts in both ways, and practical fronts have been implemented to some extent.

Our struggle against the American imperialist invaders is a just struggle aimed at liberating the South, safeguarding the socialist North, and moving towards reunification. However, on a global scale, it is a positive action that significantly contributes to the defence of world peace, supports the liberation movements of other

nations, and protects the socialist camp to which our country belongs. Therefore, our current war of resistance against the United States, our nation-saving war, has both national and international purposes and significance. We are aware of the purpose and significance of our war of resistance against the United States, and that is why we take great pride in it.

On this point, I would like to mention the Vietnamese people's struggle against the Yuan invaders in the thirteenth-century.

At that time, the Yuan invaders had conquered a significant portion of Russia, extended their conquest into Central Europe, occupied parts of the Middle East, and were advancing towards India. Turning their attention southward, they destroyed the Southern Song dynasty, conquering the central plains of China. Having secured the vast human and material resources of central China, the feudal Mongols believed they were on the verge of global dominance. Thinking nothing of the Vietnamese people, they planned to send an army to invade Vietnam, establishing it as a bridge—stepping on the backs of the Vietnamese people—to advance into Southeast Asia and close their giant grip on India. The strategies of the feudalist Yuan were formidable, and their seemingly unstoppable forces advanced at a speed akin to splitting bamboo. When it came to the so-called “Xiongnu,” everybody was terrified. However, astonishingly, on all three occasions they attempted to invade our country during the Trần dynasty, under the leadership of our forefathers, they were defeated and forced to retreat. Each time they extended their claws into Vietnam to execute their strategic plan of global dominance, their claws were broken. They did not have the courage to return after that. Following their defeats in Vietnam, they gradually faced defeats elsewhere, as various nations rose up against them, compelling them to retreat. Wherever they went, they were eventually forced to withdraw. The triumph of the Trần dynasty was magnificent and had a profound impact on our destiny and the world. It resulted in the failure of the invaders and dealt an extraordinary blow to



Ngô Viễn Chí (1972)

the greatest aggressors of that era, the Xiongnu. It was truly magnificent! Therefore, I still wish to see a historical novel depicting the triumph of the Trần dynasty, praising the great traditions of our nation, similar to Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which celebrates the heroic deeds of the Russian people in defeating Napoleon in the early nineteenth-century.

Inheriting and promoting that great tradition of our nation, we successfully carried out the August Revolution. What is the August Revolution? It is the first revolution in a colonial country led by the people, with the working class taking the lead, that defeated the cunning colonialists of the French empire.

Indeed, Vietnam was originally a small colonial country. Relying on our own strength and taking advantage of the time when the Soviet Union defeated the fascist Hitler and triumphed over the Japanese empire, our people rose up and conducted the August Revolution, seizing power. The world is gradually coming to recognise this fact. We are Vietnamese, and we must clearly see the greatness of the leadership of the Party, of President Hồ, in the victory of the August Revolution.

Next, we had to carry out nearly nine years of resistance against the French colonialists, culminating in the victory at Dien Bien Phu. This was another great event. Just as the victory at Bach Dang at the end of the thirteenth-century determined a major event related to the interests of our nation and the people of the world, the victory at Dien Bien Phu signalled to the world that the system of colonialism had begun crumbling. It was the victory of a people's war in a small country defeating a great imperial power under the new historical conditions. It signified that even a small nation, when united, determined, and engaged in people's war with the correct political and military strategies, and receiving the solidarity and support from brothers and friends worldwide, can completely defeat arrogant colonial powers like the French empire. It enhanced the confidence and pride of our nation, the confidence of oppressed nations, and stimulated and inspired them to rise up in struggle for

independence and freedom. Following it, the old colonial system gradually disintegrated.

The August Revolution and the resistance against the French, with the glorious victory at Dien Bien Phu, hold great significance and influence the entire world. Are these not significant topics for our creative work? Should we not be proud of these victories? I often hear our friends from Africa, Asia, and Latin America—especially our African friends—say: “The victory at Dien Bien Phu is the collective victory of not just your comrades but ours too; your initiation of the August Revolution and victory at Dien Bien Phu, comrades, has paved the way for oppressed peoples to advance.” They speak sincerely. It is our great legacy, under the leadership of the Party, headed by President Hồ. We are indeed very proud, but what works have we created that highlight those great events and the people who realised them?

Today, the American empire is the common enemy of humanity, an international *gendarmérie*. It is waging special wars, proxy wars, and preparing for a Third World War. It is the number one enemy of peace, democracy, and the independence of nations, and of the whole socialist camp. It is the new fascists of the post-World War II era. All its machinations and actions in the South clearly reveal its new fascist nature. History has entrusted our nation, our people, with the mission of resisting it. This mission—this duty—is paramount. President Hồ, in his appeal on 17 July last year, was very succinct and sincere in his words. It is a call from history. At present, we are following that call. The people of the world admire the righteousness and courage in that call. We are proud of this. Just as in the thirteenth-century when our ancestors fought against the Yuan invaders, we are fighting the American invaders, meaning we are fighting the common enemy of nations. If we defeat the American imperialists, our victory will not only affect our descendants for generations to come but will also influence the entire world. Currently, we have not yet driven the United States out of the South, but in successfully pinning them there, we create favourable conditions for oppressed nations to

rise up against them, to gain freedom and independence.

Therefore, our mission of resisting the United States and saving the country is monumental and immensely significant, but we will only be able to see the true scope of our accomplishments in the future. Our nation is undertaking such a great task. Should we hesitate or be reluctant to immerse ourselves in the struggle to contribute to this grand cause, worrying that our descendants may criticise us later? No! We must immerse ourselves in life, flowing alongside the masses, join or directly serve in the fight, without fear of hardship or sacrifice. Without this commitment, we cannot evoke the intense emotions needed to create writings about our soldiers and people. Without this commitment, we cannot excel in creating both short and substantial works now, nor will we be able to compose larger works in the future. Putting aside trivial concerns like tired feet, bound hands, or clouded minds, we must rise to fulfil our glorious mission—for our nation, for the world, and for humanity. The struggle of our people is not just about resisting the United States and saving the country; it also encompasses the socialist revolution. What is the socialist revolution? Our Party Central Committee often states that it involves three revolutions: a revolution in the relations of production, a revolution in science and technology, and a revolution in thought and culture. These three revolutions are intersectional, mutually influential, and mutually reinforcing. However, the socialist revolution we are currently undertaking is a socialist revolution in the conditions of the war against the United States. The North must advance towards socialism according to the objective laws of development. The combined task of the great rear, the North, and of the great frontline, the South, is to counter the United States' destructive war. Therefore, this socialist revolution is of critical importance; it creates the conditions required for us to support the great frontline, strengthens our economic and defence capabilities, builds and consolidates the rear, ensures the livelihoods of our people in the great rear, and simultaneously provides the conditions required for

us to fulfil our international obligations effectively.

Our Party is simultaneously tasked with two strategic missions: one is to resist the United States and save the country, and the other is to carry out the socialist revolution and build socialism. Both are spearheads, both are crucial. Artist brothers and sisters can choose any spearhead. Depicting the countryside, the cooperatives, is all good. That is also a spearhead. We should not underestimate these activities because within them, many issues need to be vividly, skilfully, and effectively described to serve the socialist revolution. However, do not separate the issues of developing production—the transformation of production relations, the issue of the socialist revolution—from the issue of resisting the United States and saving the country, because we both produce and fight, and in reality, these two activities are inseparable. Nowadays, any commune or factory engaged in production must also defend its production, fulfil the duty of resisting the United States and saving the country. Sometimes, enemy aircrafts have not yet attacked a particular commune, but that commune still has to send people to the frontlines to fight the enemy, still has to build local guerrilla forces, still has to fulfil the obligation of providing food to support the army and the people, and still has to protect order and security to ensure peace in the rear.

Therefore, it is necessary to assign tasks according to abilities. Comrades who can perform well in both areas should do so, as both are strategic missions set by the Party for the entire army and the entire people. If there are works about a factory or a plant implementing the new motto of dispersal and evacuation to protect production, addressing the difficulties faced, and how Party committees, cell units, trade unions, and youth unions overcome them, they would be highly valued. The people now and our future generations will find it very inspiring. That is the source of pride. Of course, there are some things that, if depicted or written about now, would reveal secrets, but when those issues no longer need to be kept secret, we can add more—even republish them with



Ngô Viễn Chí (1972)

supplements. Such is not a problem. Writing about these aspects is also great as it praises the spirit of determination, resolve, and commitment to fulfilling the tasks of the working class and our people. If there are stories about continuing the transformation of production relations and implementing the technological revolution in the countryside, we also welcome that. A novel addressing the struggle against counter-revolutionaries, spies, saboteurs, and traitors to protect order, security, and reinforce the rear is also essential. Going to places like Vinh Linh and strategically important battlefields is valuable, but it's not the only thing worthy of attention. Literature and arts should have diverse themes, with the main focus on depicting heroic revolutionary ideals. Heroism is not only found in the resistance against the United States and saving the country but also in production. There, many vivid and expressive aspects can be depicted. We can also create works about intellectuals under socialism, like *The Frontline Calls*.<sup>16</sup>

In summary, in the current reality of our country, nothing can be as truly great as the two strategic tasks set by the Party: resisting the United States and saving the country, and building socialism. These two tasks cannot be separated. Whether it's about a teacher in the highlands, or a police officer in the lowlands or on an island, a fisherman at sea, or an ordinary worker or farmer, we cannot separate these two tasks. So, there is nothing to wonder about; if we do not yet feel strong emotions about the theme of resisting the United States and saving the country, why not create for another topic? What are these other topics? They are those of labour in production and building socialism. However, these other topics are also inseparable from the cause of resisting the United States and saving the country.

And here, I propose that we depict what needs to be depicted. Art has countless ways to express itself, but there must be a clear ideological theme. Speak straightforwardly. There is no need for exaggeration. The same goes for writing and stories. Do not use symbolism that could hold opposing meanings, and do

not let a fancy sentence, masquerading as progressive, hide backward thoughts. That is not good. If criticism is needed, then criticise directly. We have many good and beautiful things, but there are also some bad things that need criticism, and when we speak, let it be direct, no need for ambiguity. Fortunately, there does not seem to be many creatives within our art and literature that resort to two-faced symbolism. If there are any, it's really just a few, and our general artist brothers and sisters are sincere and constructive.

Our people's cause is a great one. Our artists should be proud to live and work in this moment. Therefore, facing the enormous task of the Vietnamese revolution, we must clearly recognise our responsibility to the people of our country, those on our side, and the people of the world. We must immerse ourselves in life, intertwining with the masses to create, research, and criticise. Our people are expecting from us, our army is expecting from us, soldiers from both regions are expecting from us. Thinking like this, we can elevate our sense of responsibility and our enthusiasm to create, and we are ready to discard trivialities, avoid digressions, and focus wholeheartedly on serving the people while they are striving to fulfil this great task entrusted by history.

### III. SOME LITERARY AND ARTISTIC ISSUES OF OUR TIME

I do not have the ambition to solve every problem; rather, the issues I discuss here are just my thoughts, contributing towards the collective understanding with my comrades.

#### 1. How to appropriately express the revolutionary war

The question at hand is: Is it possible to depict and describe the loss, sacrifices, and difficulties in war? Does portraying these aspects limit the heroic nature of the revolutionary war? In the revolutionary war, are there tragedies, or is it only an epic of heroism?

<sup>16</sup> *The Frontline Calls* [*Tiền tuyến gọi*] was a play, written in 1967 by Trần Quán Anh and performed by the Hanoi Theatre Troupe. The play tells the story of Khiêm and Huy, two faculty members at Hanoi Medical University engaged in researching methods to counteract traumatic shock. When the United States begins Operation Rolling Thunder, its bombing campaign of the North, Khiêm is sent to Zone 4. Huy, however, chooses to stay at the university, expressing the belief that experiments are only successful in a controlled laboratory environment and rejecting opportunities for

practical fieldwork due to concerns that his research might be negatively impacted. On the other hand, Khiêm demonstrates a different approach. He recognises the importance of integrating scientific research with the realities of the battlefield. As a result, it is Khiêm's report that winds up being selected for presentation at a renowned conference on traumatic shock prevention. Notably, Anh was not a professional playwright but an andrology professor at Hanoi Medical University and Viet Duc Hospital. Anh was often present on the battlefield, and in one

instance, spent nearly a year underground treating wounded soldiers.

Firstly, it is necessary to consider a few statements that are both theoretical and closely related to the reality of Vietnam:

In this day and age, war is inherently linked to imperialism. We wage a liberation war to resist the invasion caused by imperialists. Our war is a revolutionary and just war; the war waged by the imperialists and their lackeys is a counter-revolutionary and unjust war. This must be clear in the thoughts of the creators as well as in works depicting the war. In war, there are losses, sacrifices, difficulties, and hardships; that is natural. However, these are the fault of the enemy. There may be cases due to our own negligence, incompetence, or subjectivity, but ultimately, everything is the fault of the enemy. Therefore, it is necessary to recognise that the source of these difficulties and losses is the enemy. If the enemy did not launch an invasive war, shoot and murder our people, destroy our bridges, roads, and homes, then such difficulties and losses would not exist. This must also be clear. If we cannot articulate the source of these phenomena, the essence of these occurrences, and condemn the enemy who is responsible, creating a deep-seated hatred towards them, then it is neither correct nor beneficial.

The prominent feature of the people's war in Vietnam, led by our Party, is the extraordinary courage, intelligence, and creativity of our troops and people. That is the main point. Describing the losses, sacrifices, difficulties, and hardships serves to highlight these characteristics, to generate hatred towards the enemy, and to firmly eliminate the enemy, not to spread pessimism and disappointment. As our Party Central Committee previously stated during the war of resistance against the French, revealing the atrocities of the enemy is meant to instil hatred towards them, but caution is necessary; otherwise, it may backfire. If not described appropriately, people might become afraid of the enemy. If portraying difficulties and losses leads to a result of pessimism, fear of the enemy, and resentment towards the revolutionary war, then that is incorrect; it is the method of revisionism,

not ours; it plays into the hands of the American psychological warfare agencies. Describing a mother who sheds no tears when informed of her child's sacrifice is unrealistic and may be an exaggeration. Perhaps such is dogmatic. On the contrary, if the depiction excessively focuses on or over-describes the emotional pain of a mother whose child has sacrificed themselves for the country, it may result in the audience only seeing tragedy and despair, with nothing that can be done to compensate for the suffering, giving in to defeatism.

How does revisionist art typically describe war? Firstly, it does not differentiate between revolutionary war and counter-revolutionary war; it only sees war in a general sense, hence stating that "bullets from either side cause death." Secondly, it depicts war as nothing but death and tragedy. Thirdly, it attributes all losses and destruction to both sides, implying equal consequences. Its visuals lead us to rationalise in this way. That is a mistake; we should not fall into that trap. Describing war in this manner results in people thinking that we should avoid war altogether, including revolutionary war, because "war in general is inhumane." Such an aversion to war will lead to compromise and surrender to the warmongering imperialists who initiate the conflict, ultimately leading to an unprincipled peaceful coexistence with them.

Our country's art must emphasise the significance of the revolutionary war, the just war, and the people's war, instilling deep-seated hatred towards the American imperialists and their lackeys. It should foster unwavering faith in the Party line, the people's war, the war of resistance against the United States, and national salvation. Depicting the losses, sacrifices, difficulties, and hardships should emphasise the heroic nature of the uncompromising struggle against the enemy. The primary focus should be on portraying the heroes among our people. "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom," as President Hồ famously said. This is the underlying theme in every work discussing the people's war against the invading American imperialists and their lackeys. The courageous spirit of the army, the people's



Ngô Viễn Chí (1972)

militia, the youth vanguard, and the Vietnamese mothers and wives needs to be commended. Their sacrifices are truly exceptional because they stem from a deep love for the country, a devotion that transcends personal interests and familial ties. The sacrifices of these individuals are grounded in reason—being aware of one's obligations to fight for the country and the people, to save the country and the people, and to love the country and the people. Such sacrifices are not irrational adventures; it's not a callous or stoic acceptance of such sacrifices as some might think. No, it is because they prioritise the spirit of patriotism and their duty—a level of enlightenment that allows them to overcome pain and loss within their families with courage and tenacity.

In war, when describing heroes, can their weaknesses and moments of wavering be portrayed? Should the acts of maliciousness and betrayal be depicted? The portrayal of both the good and bad aspects of reality is necessary. The more intense the battle, the more it reveals the strengths and weaknesses of both our side and the enemy. However, on our side, the emphasis should be on the strengths, on the heroism. We should vividly portray that aspect; otherwise, we would deny reality, and people would not understand why we won, why the enemy lost, why we achieved the final victory.

## *2. Express revolutionary heroism*

The question is: can revolutionary heroism be expressed at its highest form only in combat? When depicting heroes, can their negative aspects be conveyed? Our heroism is a collective heroism, so when describing a hero, how should their narrative be constructed so as to avoid falling into individualistic heroism? Lenin said: "Heroism is a necessary historical phenomenon in social development, in the struggle against class and national oppression, in the struggle for the conquest of nature. Heroism is inherent in the working people who are engaged in the struggle to meet the mature needs of social development." How should we understand Lenin's

perspective on this?

Heroism is indeed a necessary historical phenomenon in the development of society, as Lenin stated, not only in combat but in all human social activities, in class and national struggles, in productive labour, and in the struggle between humans and nature. In science, technology, culture, education, healthcare, and all these fields, there exists revolutionary heroism and revolutionary heroes. Revolutionary heroism is a widespread expression of extraordinary circumstances that demand the utmost effort from individuals, especially in the most intense struggles, requiring the highest revolutionary courage. Therefore, it is natural to see many heroic events and individuals in war. However, it should not be thought that heroism is confined to the military front, nor that the highest heroism is only found in military matters.

In Comrade Lê Thanh Nghị's report at the 1967 National Patriotic Emulation Congress, five criteria for heroes were outlined. It was during this congress that heroes from both the military and labour fronts, as well as other aspects, were recognised.

Our art and literature, while not yet profound, have reflected quite a lot about revolutionary heroism in combat, in productive labour, and in various aspects of culture, education, and healthcare. However, it must be acknowledged that we may have overcompensated in terms of depicting heroism in combat, while in other aspects, there is a noticeable lack.

We reject the idea of non-conflicting art, of balancing the good and bad in each character. In a work describing a hero, there can still be negative and antagonist characters or elements, but the focus must be on the hero and the positive characters or elements. The main content of the work should be centred on describing heroic individuals, their heroic actions, and the ideals that led them to those heroic deeds. Of course, heroes have families, lovers, friendships, and so on, and authors can and should explore these aspects. Heroes can be portrayed as entirely virtuous and perfect. But one can also be portrayed in a manner where despite one's greatness and positive

attributes being predominant, there are moments when there are minor and specific flaws and shortcomings that one, through the course of their career, overcomes, thus rising to become a hero.

Heroes are also human beings, and as such, have shortcomings and engage in an internal struggle between right and wrong within themselves. Artists can depict these flaws, but they must depict the struggle between the right and wrong ideas, concluding with the victory of the right idea.

We oppose the portrayal of heroes that focuses only on ordinary, trivial aspects, thinking that doing so emphasises the hero's normalcy. In the end, viewers do not see a hero anymore but only an insignificant, ordinary person. We have had successful works of literature depicting real heroes, such as *Living Like Him* and *The Mother Holding a Gun*,<sup>17</sup> but there are also some works that are not well-executed. Perhaps the authors hastily wrote down a hero's story that they heard from someone else, with limited technique, or tried to fit into predefined criteria, limiting the creative value of the work. We seek to describe heroes, not superheroes. Further, not everything a hero does belongs in a hero's story; only the most characteristic traits should be chosen.

Revolution is the cause of the masses; therefore, art must focus on describing collective heroism. However, in describing collective heroism, we should not deny the role of individuals in history. It is still necessary to describe the individual hero, and the issue lies in how to highlight the relationship between the individual hero and the collective hero. It is essential to depict how the collective nurtures, educates, and supports the hero to establish their heroic career—and *vice versa*: to depict why the masses, understanding the hero's qualities, follow the hero, how the hero becomes a leader, influences the collective, and how the hero's qualities contribute to the progress of the movement. All these aspects must be addressed. *Hero Núp*<sup>18</sup> has succeeded in that regard.

We acknowledge that humans make history, and we do not deny the role of great individuals in history. But

how does a great individual create greatness? Firstly, they stand on the forefront of the vanguard class, the class that represents the most advanced productive forces, the most revolutionary class in society; in today's era, that is the working class. Secondly, the hero understands the laws of social development and the specific conditions of their country and the society in which they are active. They therefore recognise what needs to be done in order to change these conditions in line with the objective laws of said society so as to liberate the people and bring happiness and freedom to the masses. In our current era, heroes and great individuals of the working class need to have a Party, be loyal to the Party, accept the Party's leadership, and live and operate within the collective, obeying the organisation and discipline of the Party.

To successfully portray revolutionary heroism, the author must not only understand the characters by being close to them but also strive to elevate their thoughts and perceptions to match those of the heroic characters being described. If there is too great a gap between the thoughts and emotions of the heroic character and the author or artist, the author or artist will not empathise, will not discover the new, beautiful, and exemplary aspects of their heroic character, resulting in an inferior work.

### *3. Safeguarding traditions and developing national art is crucial*

Our Party's position and policy on this issue is unequivocal. However, in recent years, in some theatres and performing arts groups, some creatives have not been in agreement on the issue of preserving traditions and developing a national art—particularly the traditional performing arts of the people, such as cheo, tuong, reformed theatre, and so on. The question is: How can we safeguard and develop the existing resources?

One characteristic of our national performing arts, as well as those of many other ethnic groups, is that the singing and movements have been stylised over various periods. These melodies and movements have been

<sup>17</sup> *Living Like Him* [Sống như Anh]; *The Mother Holding a Gun* [Người mẹ cầm súng].

<sup>18</sup> Trường Chinh is referring to Nguyễn Ngọc's 1955 novel *The Country Stands Up* [Đất nước đứng lên]. The novel recounts the true story of Đinh Núp, a heroic figure from the Ba Na ethnic group, who mobilised and led armed insurrections by the Ba Na and Rade minorities against the French colonialists.



Võ Xưởng (1972)

performed for a long time, and through this long process, they have undergone some changes. However, these changes are usually selective and elevate the performance, typically being made so as to better depict the emotions and actions of characters.

These melodies and movements—such as those in cheo and tuong, for example—are very diverse. Cheo belongs to the working people. It is a rich folk performing art that not only reflected many themes of the people, but was often created by the people. However, no matter how rich or diverse, these performances are not enough to express new thoughts and emotions suitable for the demands of our current industrialised society. Cheo, like tuong, is inherently tied to the agricultural economy, originating from feudal times. Therefore, for tuong, cheo, and the other traditional arts of ethnic groups, relevancy can be maintained through selective absorption, criticism, adaptation, and development—processes that are already established and necessary within the art.

However, adaptation and development must be based on a deep understanding of the existing cultural heritage of the nation. It cannot be arbitrary, haphazard, messy, or lose the originality of traditional performing arts. In our country, there are not only conservative tendencies opposing adaptation, wanting to preserve the old traditions almost intact, but also a phenomenon where some fail to fully grasp the essence of ethnic art and inadvertently create careless adaptations. Being conservative is certainly wrong, but careless adaptation is even worse. Therefore, we oppose conservatism and, at the same time, oppose careless and arbitrary adaptations. If we adapt, we must do it well. We must preserve the essence of ethnic art. If adaptations are made without understanding the essence, it will result in failure. However, as for the act of adaption, we should not criticise or reject it. Rather, experienced comrades who understand the essence of ethnic art should help those who seek to make adaptations, or they themselves should participate in the adaptation process.

Of course, in the process of adapting and developing traditional performing arts to express modern themes, attention must be paid to the capabilities of each genre—adaptions should not be forced. For example, if tuong has the ability to depict historical themes from feudal times, then we should primarily use it for that purpose. That said, we should not oppose the adaptation of tuong to depict certain modern themes.

Experimentation must accompany research. Encouraging artist brothers and sisters to experiment is essential, and they should support each other, listen to each other, and avoid dismissing each other. The most taboo act is to hide behind personal artistic views. If individualism interferes, and impartiality is lost, artistic issues cannot be correctly addressed!

#### *4. Create typical characterisations and depict real people and real stories*

Anyone involved in creating or appreciating art should recognise that art is about typical characterisation. However, due to some comrades struggling with this, I would like to contribute some opinions. Allow me to pose a question: How can we create vivid and compelling characterisations?

We already have historical novels, chronicles, diaries, documentaries, and so on, as literary genres that depict real people and events. In artistic creation, artists often select models from real life on which to build typical characters.

Art is about creativity, the selective representation of typical elements, and the generalisation of life. If we agree with this perspective, we will recognise that it is impossible to reproduce real people and events verbatim. Instead, artistic creation requires the imaginative, general, and elevated contributions of the artist. It is a matter of fiction—as artist brothers and sisters often say. The issue then is how to fictionalise and how to create fictional characters that are both vivid and highly realistic.

In *What Is to Be Done*, Lenin states that one must

dream, but dreams must be based on reality and a correct understanding of that reality; otherwise, dreams will turn into illusions, into fantasy. Art is an elevated generalisation of life. Lenin also noted that in every generalisation, even the simplest one, in a primitive idea, there is still fictionalisation. Therefore, writing about real people and real events also requires fiction on some level. A described narrative is a structured and coherent account of a heroic tale, one that emphasises authenticity and a humble approach in portraying real individuals and events. Even if it is the same narrative retold, artists infuse their passion with it, elevating the work, and creating with focus and generalisation, which is a higher level of creation. And that is fiction. It is not necessary for an artist to depict a narrative exactly how it was relayed to them. However, fiction in writing about real people and real events does not mean arbitrarily fabricating according to the subjective will of the writer, especially fabricating illogical stories.

If we agree with this perception, then writing about real people and real events at a high level can become an artistic work, like in the case of *Living Like Him* or *The Mother Holding a Gun*. At a lower level, it might be reports, articles, or valuable historical documents. Of course, when dealing with artists, we expect them to create artworks. Without doubt, we will have better works this way. There should be no argument that the functions of art and journalism are different; that writing about real people and real events is the task of journalists, while artistic creation belongs to artists. Such a distinction should not be made. Artists themselves should write about real people and real events but at a higher level.

Our reality is very diverse. It can be said that the biographies and careers of our national heroes and soldiers are, in essence, fascinating stories—living novels. Therefore, coming to them, living with them, understanding them, and creating works about them is the task of our artistic comrades, and it is also the task of our journalists. Daily life now changes rapidly. Without

using concise and lightweight forms to clearly reflect the current people's life of production and struggle, both now and in the future, they will suffer greatly. Regarding artistic creation, it remains at the artist's discretion whether real-life stories about real people and real events should be retold, or whether they should be used as models to create typical characters, with an elevated generalisation. Artistic creation (such as writing stories) should always rely on real people and real events used as models. Obviously, the typical characters we create will not be identical to X or Y model individuals. However, by studying X and Y, as well as many other individuals, generalising the content, and making it more complete, it appears realistic. Without fiction, without creativity, there is no art, but without relying on real people and real events, how can one create fictional, imaginative characters?

There is one thing that needs to be emphasised here: some of our artist brothers and sisters believe that depicting historical or revolutionary topics is easier and more convenient than writing about the people's current life of production and struggle. I am not opposed to writing about history; on the contrary, I still dream of having good historical novels about Trần Hưng Đạo, Lê Lợi, Quang Trung, and so on. However, how should one approach historical writing? Leo Tolstoy, for example, wrote *War and Peace* fifty years after the events, but he researched a lot of historical documents in the National Library and the state archives; he visited historical sites where major battles took place during the period when the Russian people expelled Napoleon's army. I think if we want to depict historical events, we should do it in a similar way. Analyse history from the standpoint of historical materialism and not arbitrarily attribute today's imagination to the past. Therefore, if depicting historical stories is to avoid depicting the present, that is not correct.

Currently, we do not have enough conditions, have not collected enough historical materials for the topics we want to depict; therefore, we can depict current



Võ Xưởng (1972)

issues, about resisting the United States, saving the country, and building socialism. When depicting these topics, one must immerse oneself in current life, current struggles, and study real people and real events to build good examples for one's work. Furthermore, to write well about the present, one must understand the past; conversely, to write well about the past, one must also understand the life and people of today.

### *5. Art criticism*

In recent years, our art criticism has made progress but still remains insufficient, despite the Party Central Committee having spoken extensively on the issue. Based on the current situation, I would like to express some additional opinions.

Firstly, I would like to address a debate within the creative community in our country's northern region, namely the question of whether praise or criticism should be the primary focus in artistic criticism. In my opinion, in the work of criticism, praise should be given for what is good and criticism for what is bad. To praise is to enhance the merits, while to criticise is to rectify the shortcomings. The ratio of praise to criticism depends on the artwork: if describing something good, praise more; if describing something bad, criticise more. Criticism should not be primarily tasked with commendation and admiration because doing so would fall into idealism, subjectivism, or modern revisionism. Why? Because praising that which is good and criticising that which is flawed is the true socialist realist criticism.

In the North, the struggle between two paths is still ongoing. An artwork that reflects the socialist revolution and the cause of building socialism in the North must naturally fight for the socialist path, opposing the capitalist path. Throughout our country, there is a nationwide war of resistance against the United States and a people's war to save the country. An artwork reflecting the anti-American and nation-saving cause must resist all actions of aggression and betrayal by the United States and its

puppets, praising the spirit of the people's steadfastness in the fight and their determination to win. Worldwide, there is a struggle of the people of various countries against the imperialist warmongers and invaders led by the United States at the forefront. A progressive artwork at this time must align itself with the forces fighting for peace, national independence, democracy, and socialism, opposing the reactionary and warmongering forces.

Our art critics at this time need to examine whether a work accurately reflects the revolutionary and progressive trends, locally and internationally, and whether the dominant ideas and sentiments of the work align with the demands of the struggle of our people and the world's people. In addition, they must condemn the reactionary works of the imperialists and their lackeys who continue to poison the thoughts and sentiments of our people in the South and many more worldwide. In such circumstances, it cannot be said that the primary function of the art critic is praise or commendation.

Our society in the North is improving every day. We are continuing to eliminate the exploitative regime and implement the principles of socialism. Our artworks generally portray the North as healthy. However, it must be acknowledged that most of these works are shallow, if not backward, in comparison to the reality of the production and struggle of our people. In particular, there are occasionally some works that sow poisonous seeds.

Some artist brothers and sisters appear to be mistaken or confused in their belief that art criticism is primarily about praise and commendation. Regarding political and ideological education in the North, on one hand, we must set an example of good people and good deeds for the masses to follow. On the other hand, we must focus on criticising shortcomings, mistakes, and negative aspects in social life. However, praising good people and good deeds should be the main focus. Artworks are a profound tool for educating thoughts and emotions. Therefore, in the artworks of the North in general, authors can depict what is good and beautiful as the main focus. This is also

a reflection of the objective reality of Northern society in our country. However, in the work of art criticism, if praise is prioritised, we will sow a subjective and complacent mindset in artistic creation. The tasks of ideological education and artistic creation should not be confused with the task of criticism.

In the broad sense of the term, anyone has the right to criticise or comment on the merits and flaws of a work; each person has the right to express what they like or dislike when appreciating art. However, an art critic cannot just play the role of a regular art appreciator; they must fulfil the obligations of a critic, which means struggling to defend the artistic direction of the Party, contributing towards artmaking, art research, and enhancing the quality of artworks as a whole, elevating the thoughts, awareness, and aesthetic level of the masses. If those who engage in criticism only express their opinions about a work they like, they limit themselves and fail to fulfil the complete duties of a critic. Some people call this “critical appreciation”—adding the word “appreciation” doesn’t mean anything! In reality, it’s just one’s sensorial pleasure, not the informed criticism of a true critic.

Critics need to clearly recognise that criticism is a specific guidance method of the Party in the field of art; criticism is a weapon to defend the Party’s artistic direction, a form of educating thoughts, emotions, and enhancing the aesthetics of the masses. By analysing the good, the positive, and the beautiful, as well as analysing the flaws, the negative, and the weaknesses of an artwork, critics help the masses develop correct thoughts and emotions, encouraging them to follow that which is good and beautiful whilst avoiding the flaws and negativity depicted in the works. This contributes to the effectiveness of artworks in nurturing a new revolutionary generation.

Criticism must be massified. A work, once born, is no longer the sole property of the artist; it becomes the common property of society, a social phenomenon that impacts the masses, evoking either positive or negative reactions among them. Therefore, it is necessary to

mobilise the masses to participate in art criticism, selecting, generalising, and supplementing their critiques before returning them to them—having them analyse or motivate their own critiques and opinions, and thus elevating their opinions. This helps the masses have a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the work and take more correct actions. Therefore, our criticism work needs to establish a good relationship between the work, the artist, the critic, and the mass critics. Both critic and artist must rely on the opinions of the masses. This task is challenging, but it must be done because if one relies solely on self-reflection without considering the opinions of the masses, mistakes and shortcomings are likely to occur. No matter how skilled a critic is, there will be limitations in evaluating the works of others, and no matter how skilled an artist is, they cannot accurately assess their own work.

For critics to do their job well, they must listen to the criticism of the masses, just as artists who want to create well and serve the people need to listen to the criticism of the masses. Therefore, after a work is published or finalised (especially one of importance), it is necessary to organise for multiple people to express their opinions on the work: speaking in a group, a research institution, a club, or expressing opinions in newspapers and on the radio. Only critics who actively participate in the mass criticism movement are able to pen good critiques.

So, what of the relationship between the work and the author? The artwork cannot defend itself because it cannot speak, or more precisely, it speaks in its own way. It cannot argue back against criticisms. Therefore, during the critique of a work, it is advisable to organise an opportunity for the artist to introduce their work, present their perspective, and defend their work if they disagree with others’ opinions. Not every work needs to be critiqued in this way, as it requires a lot of effort, and we may not have the capacity for it. However, for important works or those with deviations, errors in ideology, or policy issues, before publishing, the publisher or organisation must have a research department to



Võ Xưởng (1973)

make preliminary assessments and then invite the artist or author to hear initial feedback. If the artist or author agrees, they are invited to make revisions. These proposed corrections will typically concern ideological content but may also involve form. If the author refuses, or agrees but does not make corrections, they are responsible to the audience. Public criticisms will be carried out after the work is publicised. However, if the work has many flaws or serious mistakes that the artist or author refuses to correct, the publisher or journalists have the right not to publish or publicise it. To achieve this, the publishing house or newspaper must include competent and unbiased staff, and leadership must be strong; otherwise, it will hinder the artistic movement. For works already published or publicised, it is advisable to select important works for critique and invite the author to express their opinions in those criticism sessions. Critics who want to review the work of someone should meet with them first, listen to the artist's presentation of their perspective, and discuss with the artist. What comes after that in terms of how the critique is written is the right of the critic. This is the relationship between the work, the artist, the critic, and the mass critic.

Currently, among the artist brothers and sisters involved in criticism and creative work, there are often misunderstandings leading to gaps and a loss of solidarity. One of the causes of these gaps and loss of solidarity is the lack of consensus on the issue of art criticism. Therefore, those involved in artmaking as well as art criticism must agree on their views on this issue, maintaining a strong sense of responsibility to the Party and the people, serving them unconditionally in their work, without individualism, bias, or factionalism. Only then can a solid foundation be established to enhance solidarity and mutual support for progress.

For effective art criticism, we require competent critics. Critics need to have a firm stance, broad knowledge, revolutionary ethics, public-mindedness and selfless dedication, and a deep understanding of the tools of literary criticism—a sharp weapon of the Party

on the cultural and artistic front. To strengthen the art criticism movement, the Party and the Alliance of Arts and Literature Associations need to focus on nurturing a team of critics, providing them with guidance and implementing appropriate policies.

In conclusion, to strengthen the art criticism movement, enhance its quality and combativeness, it is crucial to understand the mission and function of criticism, and to organise effective criticism and training for those involved in this field. I hope that in the coming years, our art criticism work will be strengthened and improved, contributing positively to the education of revolutionary heroism, socialist consciousness, patriotism, proletarian internationalism, and cultivate a people who love their country and socialism, heroes in labour and in the struggles of the Hồ Chí Minh era.

#### *6. The freedom of artists and artistic creation*

It is not the first time that I have spoken about this issue, but it continues to be a pressing matter in the awareness and activities of some comrades, so I will again emphasise it

President Hồ said that “it is clear that our people are oppressed, and art has thus lost its freedom. If art is to be free, it must participate in the revolution.”<sup>19</sup> This is a fundamental point. Individuals are not separate from society or the nation. Many of our brothers and sisters have lived under the oppression of French colonialism—surely you remember the pain of a people who lost their country. A genuine artist is one with a patriotic soul, someone who deeply understands that suffering. What we wanted to create to serve our people, our nation, was prohibited, and artists could have faced imprisonment. We had to find various ways to deceive the ruling class to express what we desired, but not every method was always successful. I am not referring to fields like cinema or theatre but rather to the writers (including script writers and playwrights). Writing literature, composing poetry, only requires a pen and a bit of paper. However, once

<sup>19</sup> Hồ, *Toàn Tập*, 504

written, who publishes the work? In a class-based society, the means of communication are mainly controlled by the ruling class. In fact, in such a society, writers are merely employees. Or, as Marx said:

A writer is a productive labourer not in so far as he produces ideas, but in so far as he enriches the publisher who publishes his works, or if he is a wage-labourer for a capitalist.<sup>20</sup>

The August Revolution restored independence and freedom to our people, restoring the right to wield the pen, and the right for each artist and writer to compose and criticise. Liberated, the majority of artists stood firmly on the side of the revolution, genuinely wanting to serve the people and the country. When the war of resistance against the French colonialists broke out, comrades did not hesitate; with their backpacks on their shoulders, they joined the resistance in the fight. Some comrades sacrificed their lives while on duty, such as the painter Tô Ngọc Vân, writer Nam Cao, and others. Since 1954, after peace was restored, the North was completely liberated, entering the period of socialist revolution. Brothers and sisters eagerly took on new tasks, building a socialist art. Due to a lack of vigilance and an insufficient level of awareness to keep up with the new developments of the revolution, at one point, some brothers and sisters fell victim to the deception of the *Humanities–Masterpiece* group. The key figures of the *Humanities–Masterpiece* group were reactionaries masquerading as advocates for artistic “freedom.” In reality, what did they want? They aimed to eliminate the independence and autonomy, the sacred rights of each Vietnamese person, and use art to serve imperialist forces. However, this moment of confusion among our brothers and sisters quickly passed. The overwhelming majority of our brothers and sisters voluntarily and consciously continued to follow the line of the Vietnamese Workers’ Party, under the leadership of our beloved President Hồ. From then until now, as recognised by the Party Central Committee, countless new works have been created, artistic sectors

have developed strongly, and a growing number of young artists with qualifications and professions have emerged. The older generation of artists also continues to contribute, with Comrade Tú Mỡ still composing poetry, Comrade Nguyễn Công Hoan still writing novels, and Uncle Nguyễn Phan Chánh, now over seventy years old, still painting. Has this not affirmed the superior nature of the socialist regime in the North for the arts? Clearly, only the independence and freedom of the nation, only socialism, can truly provide freedom to artists, creating a rich and lasting artistic life for all people.

Freedom is a social issue. Artists who recognise the inevitability of the laws of social development, who struggle for that development, are the ones with freedom. In a society where class struggle still exists, complete freedom cannot be achieved. The concept of a world of “absolute freedom” propagated by the bourgeoisie, just like the American empire’s “free world” watchword, are blatant lies. The increasing number of arrests, simultaneous closures of newspapers in Saigon, violent repression and imprisonment of progressive artists and intellectuals, racial discrimination, political assassinations, and other incidents in the United States, have exposed the deceitful nature of those arguments. Lenin said:

There can be no real and effective “freedom” in a society based on the power of money, in a society in which the masses of working people live in poverty and the handful of rich live like parasites ... The freedom of the bourgeois writer, artist or actress is simply masked (or hypocritically masked) dependence on the money-bag, on corruption, on prostitution.<sup>21</sup>

Along with the Peaceful Evolution theory, as well as economic and political policies, the imperialists employ every deceitful trick at their disposal to lure and divide the ranks of socialist artists in various countries. These devious plots, not without causing some harm, lead some artists from certain countries to abandon the political mission of their class, of their nation, blur class boundaries, propagate bourgeois individualism, and

<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus-Value* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 158.

<sup>21</sup> Vladimir Lenin, “Party Organisation and Party Literature,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 10 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 49.



Nguyễn Thế Vinh (1973)

oppose their own homeland. In the upcoming intense struggle, especially in peacetime conditions, our own experiences as well as the experiences within our ranks need to be highly valued. The American imperialists and their lackeys are cunning; they have a lot of money and resources and will use countless tactics to infiltrate our cultural front. Therefore, we must be extremely vigilant, especially towards our younger comrades who lack life experiences. We must remain armed with Marxist–Leninist theory and with the policies of the Party and State, and always link our lives to the revolution and the masses. We need to organise systematic research efforts to understand the tendencies of the enemy and various factions, as well as the contemporary trends in the places under the control of the American–puppets. In doing so, we need to distinguish between positive and negative aspects, focusing on the common enemy, American imperialism, and expose the forms and tactics of American neocolonialism in the cultural front.

In our society, there are still remnants of the old regime. Criticising negative aspects of life, addressing and resolving social issues is a task of the arts. The Party Central Committee and President Hồ have repeatedly reminded artist brothers and sisters of this important task. In many speeches—including this one—I have expressed my views on this crucial matter. Here, I am only highlighting one aspect related to the issue of creative freedom. Some comrades find it difficult to write about the negative aspects of life, leading them to think that “our system is restrictive.” In reality, some individuals, including high-ranking officials of the Party and the State, do dislike criticism—especially when it pertains to work that they are responsible for. There are also those who, due to a lack of understanding of the nature and requirements of art, make incorrect assessments and inappropriate demands on artistic works. Their opinions have influenced some artists and critics. I acknowledge that this issue needs to be addressed, but it is not the most important. What is most important is that comrades must have courage. An artist is a soldier, and soldiers must have courage.

<sup>22</sup> Hồ Chí Minh, *Bàn về văn hóa và văn nghệ* (Hanoi: Văn hóa–nghệ thuật, 1964).

Criticism and self-criticism are laws of development in socialist society. It is not that “our system restricts” comrades, but rather that the comrades themselves lack courage. Nowhere else encourages criticism as much as our system, our society. Audiences and the Party Central Committee expect profound critical works addressing existing social vices such as bureaucracy, demandingness, conservatism, corruption, waste, etc. Many other social issues also need to be raised and resolved, including issues related to marriage and love. No one has the right to suppress the pens or brushes of comrades, as long as comrades have strong life experiences, and a deep understanding and correct viewpoint of the issues they want to depict. You, comrades, have complete freedom in artistic creation. Each comrade has the right to find a suitable living environment, choose topics they like, and develop their own style and personality. Art requires diversity and creativity. However, it also needs to be said that comrades must respect the freedom of others, the masses’ right to enjoy art, their right to demand, and their right to criticise mistakes or misrepresentations you may have made. In our society, the issue of freedom is also a matter of mutual respect—just as when a work of art is born, it is no longer solely owned by the artist. If we only focus on personal rights, thoughts will become distorted, and actions will become misguided. No society respects individual freedom as much as socialist society. It is, however, unrealistic to live in a society and demand absolute individual freedom. On that note, I want to bring up the issue of socialist law. In every aspect of life, there must be laws ensuring the rights, democracy, and obligations of citizens. In the cultural field, there are still many issues that need to be studied to draft laws. Comrades can contribute many opinions on those laws, such as publishing, creative rights, or the rights of collectors and researchers, and so on,

### *7. Training and nurturing young art forces*

President Hồ stated that “building a socialist art requires socialist writers and artists.”<sup>22</sup> But, where do these socialist

artists come from? They are the old artists who, through their efforts, gradually become socialist artists. On the other hand, they are workers, peasants, and intellectuals engaged in non-professional cultural activities, who, if nurtured, can become socialist artists. Today, in our regime, there is no shortage of workers, farmers, and intellectuals from the working class participating in cultural activities. The issue is that we need to discover them and know how to nurture them.

In nurturing young talents, we need to avoid the tendency to specialise young creatives too quickly—to do so would be to plant a tree in a pot and place it against the wall. If the tree is planted in the soil, it will grow lush, healthy, and robust, but if put into a pot, it will become ornamental, dry, and frail. Allowing young artists with potential to attend a training course in literature, music, or painting is necessary, but after training, they should be sent back to wherever they have come from. Local leaders within their communities should allocate time for them to engage in cultural activities. Discovering talent is already a challenging task, and nurturing them is not easy either. We must avoid deviations, such as being overly cautious, not boldly unleashing their abilities, or praising them to arrogance; when they achieve initial success, avoid overflattering them with commendations, and when they have shortcomings, refrain from excessive criticism that might discourage them, and so on.

The training and nurturing of young forces must be undertaken by Party committees and key comrades, experienced artists, and those involved in cultural work. Training for young artists should primarily focus on their stance, ideology, the Party line in regard to art, and Marxism–Leninism. Simultaneously, young artists need to be trained on how to utilise socialist realism, delve into reality, and immerse themselves in the lives of the masses in order to create effectively. Training should also cover professional skills, techniques, as well as imparting valuable experiences—both successes for emulation and failures as lessons to avoid. This means providing comprehensive training with transparency, not hiding

one's secrets like traditional healers in the past would hide their medicine formulas.

Valuing the training of young forces does not mean we should underestimate our existing forces, the old forces; on the contrary, we must value and care for the old forces because they are the precious assets of the Party and the people. To nurture young forces, there must be the participation of experienced individuals. The most skilled, seasoned, and proficient individuals in this group should serve as the backbone in training the young forces. We should avoid creating false contradictions between the young and the old, between the new and the experienced; Instead, emphasising unity, prioritising the revolutionary cause, and placing responsibility on the older generation of artists for the younger generation is essential considering it is they who will continue their revolutionary work

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Dear comrades,

We are the ones entrusted by the Party to lead on the cultural front. We must recognise the value and crucial role of art in the entire revolutionary cause of our Party and our people. Therefore, we must clearly understand our heavy responsibility in relation to the two strategic tasks of our people: fighting against the United States and saving the country, and building socialism.

We must strengthen and elevate the revolutionary cause of the people through our works. This heavy responsibility requires us to unite, truly love, encourage, and help each other progress to fulfil our mission. At the same time, due to this heavy responsibility, each of us must make efforts to study Marxism–Leninism, the Party's line and policies, delve into the life of the people, learn from the masses and consider them as teachers, cultivate our qualities and morals, and create and serve well on the cultural front.

Our enemies are extremely cruel. The chief imperialist

United States is, like all imperialists in their death throes, trying to cling to any straw to avoid drowning. History has already condemned them. All their madness and cunning are just the reactions of a dying beast. Uncle Hồ has said that we are soldiers on the cultural front. We must be worthy, brave, and have a high sense of responsibility in order to fulfil our tasks today, a time when our entire people are fighting heroically and gloriously. Our stance must be “standing on top of the enemy.”<sup>23</sup> Our work requires us to reflect on life, to improve social life, and to contribute to the advancement of society; to travel the breadth and depth of today’s life, delving into reality; to study, analyse, and explore, so that we can build typical characters, heroes of the era; to nurture the new Vietnamese and impel our people to fulfil the glorious cause of liberating the South, safeguarding the socialist North, building socialism, and advancing towards the reunification.

This National Art Assembly is convened at a time when our entire nation is exerting efforts to resist the United States, save the country, and continue building socialism in the North; it marks a step forward for our art. In this Assembly, we reiterate the line of the Party in regard to the arts, the fundamental principles that form the basis of that line, and their application to solve the perplexities in our viewpoints, strategies, situations, and tasks. We have clearly seen our responsibility and the progressive path we are on.

Comrades, let’s move forward! The Party is counting on you, and the people are expecting artworks worthy of the stature of our nation and the times. Let’s be worthy of our Party and the heroic people of our country. The Central Committee believes that you, comrades, will fulfil the tasks assigned by the Party and the people.

I wish you good health and success.

<sup>23</sup> This phrase [*thế đứng trên đầu thù*], a metaphorical expression meaning to have the upper hand over an enemy, stems from a couplet from Tố Hữu’s poem *Glory to Our Fatherland* [*Quang vinh Tổ quốc chúng ta*]:

Our strength is the strength of youth  
So we are standing on top of the enemy.



Vũ Xưởng (1975)

**CODA: COMMEMORATING THE 40TH  
ANNIVERSARY OF THE ADOPTION OF  
THE OUTLINE OF VIETNAMESE  
CULTURE**

*Trường Chinh, 1983*<sup>1</sup>

Dear Comrades,

Today, the Vietnam Social Sciences Committee is commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the adoption of the Party's *Outline of Vietnamese Culture*.

This provides a good opportunity for us to review the development of the Vietnamese cultural revolution in the recent past, see the large achievements that have been recorded in the fields of art while, at the same time, recognising the existing shortcomings that we must make every effort to correct in order to continue our steady advancement.

Culture remains a very broad field. However, the experience gained by our Party in the past years of the cultural revolution is equally broad. Today, I only wish to discuss two matters:

1. *The Outline of Vietnamese Culture*, and
2. The ideological and cultural revolution during the period of our country's transition toward socialism.

**I. THE OUTLINE OF VIETNAMESE CULTURE**

*The circumstance surrounding the adoption and the historical significance of the Outline*

Our country was a colony of the French colonialists. In 1940, France was defeated, and Hitler's army occupied a large portion of the country. The Japanese fascists seized

this opportunity to step into Indochina. Governor-General Decoux, on behalf of the Pétain government, surrendered to Japan and began a period of "cooperation." This situation subjected our people to a "double burden": the savage oppression and severe exploitation by both the Japanese and French fascists. Faced with annihilation, our people had no choice but to rise in struggle, drive off the enemy, and save the country. National liberation became the urgent task for every stratum of Vietnamese society and the Vietnamese people. It was truly a matter of life and death for our country.

The history of Vietnam entered a stage that, although arduous, was teeming with potential. At the very time when this tragedy weighed heavily upon our people, a favourable opportunity arose for liberating the nation. When two imperialist powers attempt to simultaneously occupy the same country, it is only a matter of time before they begin fighting to destroy each other—two wolves cannot become fat on the same prey! As such, soon we would have the conditions required for our people to stage an uprising and seize political power.

The Eighth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Indochinese Communist Party, held at Pac Bo under the chairmanship of Uncle Hồ, indeed predicted that Japan and France would fight each other to the death, giving way to an unprecedented opportunity for our people to reclaim their independence.

The most urgent task faced at that time was how to mobilise all of our forces in order to save the country and liberate the nation. To accomplish this, we had to unite all our people—everyone who could be united—as well as win over all those who could be won over. It was against this background that the Viet Minh was born, in order to achieve the Party's policy of establishing broad unity. From the workers, peasants, intellectuals, and petty bourgeoisie to the national bourgeoisie and even some small landlords, the entire country rallied under the Party, the Viet Minh, and the banner of national salvation in order to drive off the Japanese and French imperialists.

The Vietnamese intellectuals were unable to carry the

<sup>1</sup> Speech delivered to the Vietnam Social Sciences Committee, 27 December 1983.

shame of having lost the country. They hungered for freedom. In *The Outline*, the Party laid out the path to solving the problem. To liberate the intellectuals, it was necessary to liberate the entire nation from the yoke of Japanese and French fascism and regain our independence and freedom. National liberation meant cultural liberation, which opened the way for our culture to develop independently and along progressive lines. Through *The Outline*, the Party clearly defined the task of our country's intellectuals as participating in the national democratic revolution—particularly the cultural revolution, which was an integral component of the national democratic revolution (that is, the political revolution, the economic revolution, and the cultural revolution)—and establishing a new cultural foundation.

As a result, the Party mobilised the country's intellectuals, attempting to unite them with the masses on the basis of a worker–peasant alliance under the leadership of the Party. It closely linked intellectuals to workers and peasants, thus making the Viet Minh a more established and broader front, especially in the urban areas where the workers and intellectuals were concentrated.

*The Outline* played a crucial role in isolating the enemy, garnering support for the revolution, expanding the anti-Japanese and anti-French National United Front, and mobilising additional patriotic and progressive forces to save the country and its people. It charted the revolutionary path for liberating our minds and art, under the common cause of liberating the nation. Further, *The Outline* resolutely opposed the cultural policies of the Japanese–French fascists. At that time, both of these fascist powers sought to win the allegiance of intellectuals, artists, and writers in our nation in order to maintain their rule. In doing so, they exploited every cultural means at their disposal.

As soon as they arrived in Indochina, the Japanese imperialists began using art and culture as a means to propagandise their Greater East Asia ideology. In fact, they succeeded in preventing some intellectuals from seeing the cruel nature of imperialism, convincing them that the

Japanese were “yellow-skinned” friends who would help the “yellow-skinned” peoples free themselves from the yoke of the Western colonialism. In the case of Vietnam, the Japanese made assurances about reinstating Cường Để in order to establish a government and forge close collaboration with Japan. Under the guise of Japanese–Vietnamese cultural cooperation programmes, the Japanese fascists recruited students to study in Japan, organising tours and art activities to propagandise the so-called “superiority” of *Fusang* culture!

The Institute of Japanese Culture was established. In order to carry out the aforementioned plans, a diverse range of creative activities were organised: exhibits and speeches, the publishing of newspapers and magazines for propaganda purposes, musical performances, plays and films, tours, and so on. Falling into their trap, some Vietnamese artists and writers praised the customs, habits and *bushido*-virtues of Japan, acting as if Japanese culture was casting the light of civilisation and progress upon the countries of Asia. Many of them imitated the Japanese to a sickening degree: they shaved their heads and donned boots; speaking Japanese became “fashionable.” This cultural policy of Japan created an illusion among some intellectuals. A number of them, who served as the lackeys of Japan, became deeply involved in counter-revolutionary activities and deeply involved in opposing their compatriots.

At the time, the cultural policy of the French fascists was equally malicious and dangerous. The French employed every means at their disposal to steer the Vietnamese away from the path to national salvation, as laid out by the Party and the Viet Minh. They worked to restore the outdated and hypocritical moralism of the feudal landowners whilst promoting the licentious and decadent lifestyle of the bourgeoisie. They encouraged superstitious practices and backward customs while importing reactionary art movements under the guise of “the new.” They spent fortunes employing lackeys and organising cultural agencies and mass organisations to fill the heads of our compatriots with their culture—to deceive our



Phạm Lực (1973)

compatriots.

The Information and Propaganda Office, headed by secret agent Cousseau, had the task of spreading Pétain's defeatism—collaborationism among our people. As such, many shameless writers brazenly praised the French fascist slogans of A FRANCO-VIETNAMESE RENAISSANCE and NATIONAL REVOLUTION. The Decoux government hunted down revolutionaries—even those whom they merely suspected of sympathising with the revolution. Under the Decoux government, the Trotskyites established the Han Thuyen publishing house, which printed and disseminated a series of books entitled *New Culture* and a magazine entitled *New Literature Discussion* in an effort to publicly distort Marxism.

The danger posed by this publishing house was that it used the false Marxism of the Trotskyites to attack the genuine Marxism of the Indochinese Communist Party. The Trotskyites, following an inconsistent and simplistic interpretation of materialism, used remnants of various European bourgeois philosophies to oppose the revolutionary movement. Deceptively manipulating quotes from Western and Eastern books alike, they sought to distort historical truths. In some cases, they even went so far as to defend the aggressors, arguing that their acts of aggression somehow align with mankind's laws of development. While our people were making every effort to prepare for an uprising to break the yoke of the invaders, the Trotskyites preached that being conquered by the aggressors would elevate the civilisation level of the conquered nation. According to them, the uprising led by the Trưng sisters failed because Vietnam was under a matriarchy at that time, which they believed could not have triumphed over China or lead to a feudal system (see *The Trưng Sisters' Uprising*<sup>2</sup> by Nguyễn Tế Mỹ—a known Trotskyite!).

At a time when the revolution called for upholding Vietnam's heroic and patriotic tradition, the government was attempting to revive such vestiges of the past. Our Party was slandered as a bourgeois nationalist, reformist party, even as our slogans championed liberation and na-

tional salvation.

To steer the youths and intellectuals away from the harmful influences of the fascist group and their lackeys, and guide them towards national salvation, the Party had to expose these deceptive tactics and counter these reactionary viewpoints.

The antagonisms between the Japanese and French fascists, as well as all of our own people, became increasingly deep, gradually leading to a clear division among Vietnamese intellectuals. Some intellectuals, responding to the Party's appeal, joined the revolutionary activities. However, a small number of intellectuals took the side of the aggressors, choosing instead to serve as their lackeys. Between these two groups of intellectuals was the broad stratum of intellectuals who, although not wishing to cooperate with the Japanese and French, fell into a state of confusion, indecision, pessimism and scepticism as a result of the limitations imposed by their world view. As such, they fled from the vicious and painful reality that unfolded in front of them. Some turned to the past in search of consolation, revisiting the philosophies of the East, like those of Confucius, Mencius, Laozi and Zhuang Zhou, or those of the West, like Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Bacon, Freud, and so on. Some sought consolation in religion, wrote poetry and verses on Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammed, or dreamed in vain and lamented their plight in the style of French romanticism. Some artists and writers turned to surrealism in search of the mystical and metaphysical. Others succumbed to decadent lifestyles, passing their time by producing deranged "artworks." Some scientists completely immersed themselves in "research," believing that they somehow existed external to politics or the current situation. None of these people were capable of grasping the future of the country or their own responsibility in it.

The Party pursued every path it could to enlighten these diverse groups and lead them towards the glorious path of revolution.

On 25 February 1943, given the aforementioned circumstances, a meeting of the Standing Committee of

<sup>2</sup> *The Trưng Sisters' Uprising* [Hai bà Trưng khởi nghĩa].

the Party's Central Committee's came to the conclusion that,

In order to establish a progressive cultural movement—a cultural movement for national salvation, contra the declining fascist culture—the Party must have cadres who specialise in cultural activities. In established cultural centres, such as Hanoi, Saigon, Hue, and so forth, we must establish national salvation cultural organisations and employ both overt and seemingly overt forms of activity so as to unite artists, writers and intellectuals.

It was in response to these urgent requirements that *The Outline* (1943) was adopted.

In summary, the Party has always considered art to be an extremely important front in the revolutionary struggle, a front upon which communists must wave their banner. In the face of the threat of our country's art and culture being put in chains, manipulated, and suppressed, and for the sake of national liberation and the destiny of our country's art, the Party realised that it was necessary to mobilise and attract the intellectuals and those people engaged in cultural activities. Such was necessary in order to ignite a widespread struggle on the cultural front, opposing the subjugative cultural demagoguery of the fascists and colonialists, and overcome wrong and harmful artistic trends so as to reclaim our national independence and move forward to building the new culture of Vietnam. *The Outline* was an effective ideological weapon in the hands of those Vietnamese soldiers on the cultural front.

#### *The basic contents of The Outline*

Dear Comrades,

*The Outline* was not a long thesis. Moreover, it was limited in many respects owing to it being written under difficult and clandestine circumstances. At that time, the Party Central Committee lacked the conditions needed to thoroughly research the various matters related to the Vietnamese cultural revolution. For example, in *The*

*Outline*, the ideological revolution was only very briefly explored, and the matter of moulding a new, socialist Vietnamese man was not even mentioned. However, the cultural revolution did represent the fundamental elements of Vietnamese culture under the light of Marxism–Leninism and under the existing circumstances of the Vietnamese revolution at that time.

To start, the thesis dealt directly with the issue of culture. In this sense, culture is the field that reflects the entirety of social life within the consciousness of man, being broadly expressed in ideology, education and art. Culture has always played a significant role in facilitating or hindering the development of society. Clearly aware of such significance, the Party adopted a policy of uniting artists and those engaged in cultural work, seeking to help them advance into conscious revolutionary soldiers with their designated positions being the arts.

Regarding the relationship between culture, the economy, and politics, *The Outline* noted that “the economic foundation of society, and the economic regime built upon that foundation, completely determines the culture of that society.”

Being a part of the superstructure, culture remains inextricably linked to the base, strongly supporting it. In a society built upon a foundation of private ownership of the means of production, the ruling class, as a result of controlling said means of production, engages in economic exploitation, political suppression and cultural enslavement. Thus, the struggle between the working people and the ruling exploiting class inevitably becomes a poignant struggle in three fields: economics, politics, and culture.

In their cultural endeavours, communists had to unite with the mass of Vietnamese intellectuals. Together, they leveraged the power of art and culture to support economic, political, and cultural tasks—the task of INDEPENDENCE, FREEDOM AND HAPPINESS.

Our country was a colonial and semi-feudal agricultural country. Starting with this socio–political foundation, our people had to carry out two consecutive revo-



Trương Hiếu (1973)

lutions: the people's national democratic revolution (at that time called the new-democracy revolution) and the socialist revolution. Both of these revolutions had to be carried out across three fields: politics, economics and culture.

*The Outline* put forth a fundamental perspective on the cultural revolution, highlighting the inter-connectedness of the political, economic, and cultural revolutions. It argued that a successful political revolution was a prerequisite to establish the conditions needed for successful economic and cultural revolutions. Marxism regards the primary tasks to be the toppling of the ruling class and seizing of political power by the people. Only under these conditions can a new economy and culture be built. Of course, in the course of revolutionary activities, the creation and publication of materials on the cultural revolution, or promoting the masses to seize the economic, cultural and social institutions from the exploitative ruling class, usually occurred prior to or around the same time as the political revolution.

Given our country's situation at the time, our immediate task was to overthrow the Japanese and French fascists and establish a people's democracy. This was the only way to effectively implement the economic and cultural policies laid out by the Party.

In line with this spirit, *The Outline* stated: "The currently proposed paths for cultural revolution will assist in paving the way to a future total revolution."<sup>3</sup> And further, "the Vietnamese national liberation revolution can, only in the most fortunate of circumstances, lead Vietnamese culture towards a democratic standard and foster an entirely independent national character so as to build a new culture."<sup>4</sup> This new culture would not be a socialist culture; instead, socialist culture was the task of the subsequent socialist revolution.

The cultural revolution's tasks, in regard to the two aforementioned revolutions, had both similarities and differences. They were similar in that both revolutions aimed to establish an independent, free culture. The differences lay in the objectives: the people's national demo-

cratic revolution sought to establish a people's democratic culture (or new-democracy culture), while the socialist revolution aimed to establish a socialist culture which, as defined during the Party's Third National Congress of the Party (1960), would be socialist in content and national in form, reflect the Party spirit, and be profoundly massified.

Thus, in terms of culture, the people's national democratic revolution primarily had the objectives of establishing national independence, a people's democracy, and a new-democracy culture (not a socialist culture). For the socialist revolution, on the other hand, the main objectives were establishing national independence, a socialist democracy, and a socialist culture. The new-democracy culture was a stage of transition toward a socialist culture.

Through the basic observations mentioned above, *The Outline* laid out the major principles of a new Vietnamese culture campaign, principles that were consistent with the requirements of the people's national democratic revolution. This was a revolution that had the task of toppling the imperialists, liberating the nation, abolishing feudalism, and achieving the right of ownership for the working people. The culture supporting this revolution had to be a vietnamised, scientific, and massified culture.

Our cultural campaign, therefore, had to be based upon these three principles—or, in other words, it had to be a vietnamised cultural campaign, a scientific cultural campaign, and a massified cultural campaign. These three principles were the objective requirements of the people's national democratic revolution in our country.

- I. VIETNAMISATION meant that we had to "oppose subjugative and colonial influences, foster the independent development of Vietnamese culture."<sup>5</sup>

In the nearly one hundred years that they ruled Vietnam, the French colonialists extensively imported the negative elements of French bourgeois and imperialist culture. They extolled

<sup>3</sup> Trường Chinh, *The Outline of Vietnamese Culture*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

the prosperity and power of France, praised the colonial policy of the French bourgeoisie, and sowed the seeds of respect and admiration for France among Vietnamese intellectuals. Many intellectuals, worshipful of French culture, moved into French communities, spoke French, and humiliated themselves by imitating the French in everything from their eating habits and style of dress to their decadent, hedonistic lifestyle. This worship of the French led to a mentality of national inferiority and contempt for our national culture. In fact, some of our people knew little to nothing of national traditions, our heroic character, or the diligent, creative labour and noble qualities of our nation in its several thousand year long history.

Vietnamisation meant putting culture directly in support of the cause of national liberation in order for intellectuals to become filled with pride and bravery, taking up their obligations in the cause of liberating the people, liberating the Fatherland, and establishing and developing the new Vietnamese culture.

2. SCIENTIFICATION meant that we had to “oppose all things that render culture unscientific and anti-progressive.”<sup>6</sup>

Vietnam is an agricultural country whose development stagnated for many years under the feudal system as well as under the severe influence of feudal thinking. The idealist, mystical and metaphysical viewpoints of feudal and colonial culture have persisted over many years and continue to control the thoughts and actions of many strata of the people. Their backward and conservative nature is still quite evident in the customs and habits of society today, as well as in the day-to-day lifestyles of the people. Instead of abolishing feudal culture, the French colonialists chose to restore, maintain, and develop it, turning it into a tool for implementing their

policy of demagoguery.

Scientification meant creating the conditions required for the new-democracy culture to promptly free itself from this domination as, only by freeing itself, could the new-democracy culture achieve comprehensive development based in science. It therefore used Marxism–Leninism as its compass, guiding each thought and action. It sought to erase all prejudices, backward customs, and superstitions from the minds of the people.

3. MASSIFICATION meant that we had to “oppose positions and actions that regard culture as contrary to the broad masses or distant from the broad masses.”<sup>7</sup>

In a colony in which many remnants of feudalism still linger—as was the case with our country—large numbers of people, especially the workers and peasants, were illiterate and unable to enjoy the essence of the culture of the nation and mankind. Literature, music, art, and the other forms of culture were not used to serve the people; instead, they served only the ruling class. To put it simply: the labouring masses were denied a cultural life.

As such, the new culture had to be one of the masses, a culture that served the people; that taught the masses to read and write; that educated the masses and enabled them to enjoy and participate in the artmaking and gradually acquire the cultural quintessence of the nation and mankind.

These three principles functioned as three interdependent non-mutually exclusive factors. Each was designed to combat one of the “three weaknesses, or rather, three cancers” of the culture at the time, namely: “anti-national, anti-scientific, and anti-popular” characteristics.<sup>8</sup> Only by overcoming these weaknesses, these cancers, was it possible to develop a new, genuine culture of Vietnam.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Trường Chinh, *Important Principles of the New Culture Movement in Vietnam Today*.



Trương Hiếu (1973)

The crux of the issue was this: A culture that was vietnamised but was not scientific or massified could, as a result of the selfish and narrow-minded interests of the nation, quite possibly develop counter to the evolution of history and attempt to cling to the backward customs and practices of the nation without giving special attention to the fervent aspirations of the workers and peasants, who represent the majority of the nation and are its most diligent and patriotic sons and daughters.

A culture that was scientific but not vietnamised or massified could quite possibly serve the science of the enemy, putting its talents and innovations to use serving the interests of the rulers and betraying the interests of the people, opposing national independence and world peace.

A culture that was massified but not vietnamised or scientific could become narrow-minded, having its focus only on the interests of workers and peasants, disregarding the interests of the nation that sought to achieve success in the war of resistance. On the other hand, it could become a follower of the masses rather than an educator tasked with giving them increasing political awareness and knowledge of science and technology for use in their production, fighting and daily lives.

Another matter in the nature of a principle that was frequently stressed in *The Outline* was the leadership role of the Party. With the working class as its foundation and Marxism–Leninism as its philosophy, only the Party could lead the Vietnamese cultural revolution down the correct path and to ultimate victory. The Indochinese Communist Party and the Vietnamese working class never shared their right to lead with any other party or class! Such was a matter of principle.

In regard to the creation of revolutionary cultural mass organisations, the Party recognised the need to establish and develop the National Salvation Cultural Association and accept into it all persons engaged in cultural work, education, and science, including writers and artists. Depending upon circumstances, the National Salvation Cultural Association could be established as

chapters (or even cells) of a specific cultural circle, such as teachers, writers, artists, musicians, and so on. Students were organised separately within the National Salvation Students Association. In actuality, however, from 1943 until the August Revolution, we only attached importance to organising the National Salvation Cultural Association itself; not much was done to organise chapters and cells for each specific cultural sector.

On that basis, and with the general spirit of the aforementioned content, we see that *The Outline* embodied the deeply revolutionary spirit of the Indochinese Communist Party and the Vietnamese working class. The thesis thoroughly supported the National Unified Front policy along with the policy of establishing broad national unity, rallying patriotic and progressive forces, and isolating the enemy so as to overthrow them and achieve the revolutionary tasks.

*The Outline*, significant for its timely presentation of guidelines for the Vietnamese cultural revolution, delineated the cultural revolution's role within the broader Vietnamese revolution. It tasked not only the people with liberating the nation and achieving independence and freedom, but also entrusted the artists, writers, and intellectuals with the sacred mission of liberating and establishing a new Vietnamese culture. This heightened the sense of responsibility among our country's intellectuals to take on their role as soldiers on the cultural front, to actively contribute to national liberation, and the establishment of a new Vietnam—a Vietnam which, starting as a people's democracy, would evolve into the Socialist Republic of today. At the same time, our country's intellectuals played a crucial role in shaping the new Vietnamese man, one who loves their country and socialism, possesses the spirit and ability to build and defend the Fatherland, and seeks to safeguard peace and life on our planet.

In retrospect, regarding the contents of *The Outline*, perhaps it should have more accurately been called *The Outline of the Vietnamese Ideological and Cultural Revolution*.

*The impact and influence of the Outline over the past years*

Dear Comrades,

Forty years have passed since the adoption of *The Outline*. Under the leadership of the Party, headed by President Hồ, our people have overcome countless difficulties and recorded great achievements in all fields, be they political, military, economic, or culture. Our Party has creatively applied Marxism–Leninism to correctly resolve many complex issues raised by the revolution, especially at each historical turning point.

It is necessary to emphasise the pivotal role played by President Hồ in our country's culture, literature and art. Despite being the exceptional political activist, father, and great leader of the Vietnamese revolution, President Hồ was also a writer, poet, and journalist, one whose life was deeply connected to the cause of the Vietnamese revolution, the global revolution at large, and specifically, the Vietnamese cultural revolution. His works remain a priceless trove of ideology and culture—essential study material for Vietnamese revolutionaries and cultural workers alike, who should apply this knowledge in their creative work.

It is my hope that, in our study of theory and ideology, we soon establish a section dedicated to researching every facet of President Hồ Chí Minh, including his life and contributions to the ideological and cultural revolution.

Prior to the August Revolution, *The Outline* had roused, mobilised, and directed many people working in the fields of culture, art, and literature onto the path of the revolution. In 1945, with the success of the August Revolution, political power was put back into the hands of the people, providing us with the unprecedented opportunity of rebuilding our country in every respect, including culturally. However, this period also saw very complex political developments. The reactionary forces were actively working to oppose and undermine the revolution. The Nhất Linh–Khái Hưng factions had embraced the enemy Chiang Kai-shek while the Trotsky-

ites Trương Tửu and Nguyễn Đức Quỳnh (of the Han Thuyen group) publicly affirmed their rejection of the Party's cultural path. Realising that they no longer played any significant political or even cultural role, some bourgeois intellectuals expressed their dissatisfaction and refused to endorse *The Outline*. Due to their limited awareness and an insufficient grasp of the thesis, many artists and writers who had previously been sympathetic to the revolution now became hesitant and wavering.

Despite being preoccupied with resolving numerous challenging domestic and foreign, military and economic issues, our Party, from the very outset, prioritised fostering unity among Vietnamese artists, writers, and intellectuals, seeking to promote cultural activities in the process. One week after delivering the declaration of independence, President Hồ signed the decree establishing the Popular Learning campaign. In just over a year, two million previously illiterate persons learned to read and write.

The National Salvation Cultural Association intensified its efforts. Party cadres consistently wrote articles criticising reactionary views on art and culture. The publication of political books and newspapers reached an unprecedented rate, and the Party's propaganda and educational activities were robust and highly effective. A large number of intellectuals put their faith in President Hồ and the Indochinese Communist Party. We will never forget Uncle Hồ's heartfelt words to cultural workers at the opening ceremony of the art exhibition on 7 October 1945:

Today, before we begin the reconstruction of our country, we must endure yet another period of painful and arduous struggle. The cultural circle must join with the other circles of our compatriots in making this passage. It is hoped that you are trying—and please always try—to join your compatriots in bringing the country to its glorious fulfilment.<sup>9</sup>

In November 1946, the First National Cultural Assembly was held in Hanoi. President Hồ, representing the government, delivered the opening address. He emphasised

<sup>9</sup> Hồ Chí Minh, *Văn hóa nghệ thuật cũng là một mặt trận* (Hanoi: Văn hoá, 1981), 344–345.



Ngô Viễn Chí (1974)

sised that the new culture's primary task was to reflect the joy of compatriots and the struggles of the nation, integrating the valuable aspects of ancient and modern culture in order to establish a new, vietnamised, scientific, and massified culture. He asserted that culture must guide the nation towards independence, self-reliance, and sovereignty.

When the nationwide war of resistance began, President Hồ's vision was realised. Almost all intellectuals who followed the Party now followed the Viet Minh into the liberated zone to participate in the war of resistance, continuing to struggle resolutely and completely rejecting the enemy's attempts to lure them back into the cities. The greatest challenge for intellectuals was not their material life during the war of resistance, but the unclear viewpoints, backward beliefs, and mistaken prejudices that they continued to carry and enslave themselves with. Without helping writers and artists liberate themselves from the influences of the old culture and ideas, the cultural tasks of the war of resistance could not have been successfully executed.

In July 1948, the Second National Cultural Assembly was convened. President Hồ wrote a letter to the assembly reminding cultural workers of the need to organise tightly and work among the masses to shoulder a significant part of the burden of the great war of resistance for national salvation.

On that occasion, I presented a report titled *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* in order to discuss more deeply the fundamental viewpoints advanced by the Party in *The Outline*. The report highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of Vietnamese culture and urged the attendees to adopt a scientific attitude when abolishing the backward, outdated aspects and incorporating the good and progressive aspects of the culture inherited from ancient times and foreign countries. The report further clarified the nature and tasks of the new-democracy culture while contributing ideas toward resolving a number of specific issues, such as the relationship between art and propaganda, the characteristics of socialist realism, the need for

artistic criticism, and so on.

Following the Second Cultural Assembly, the First National Arts Assembly was held, and the Vietnam Arts and Culture Association was established. Intellectuals, after carefully studying the Party's cultural line, recognised the need to revolutionise their thinking and begin conducting massified activities.

Consequently, literary and art troupes began to accompany soldiers into battle, into the areas under enemy control. Strong literary and art activities were carried out in each field: musical concerts, plays, painting exhibitions, the publishing of books and magazines, especially dazibao. Among the people, a fervent cultural movement arose. Illiteracy was eradicated among almost all of the compatriots in the liberated zone. All of our soldiers learned to read and write and, as a result, matured rapidly in politics and military affairs, and encouraged the people to join the revolution. The New Life campaign was promoted. Uncle Hồ's books *Change Your Way of Working* and *The New Life* had a significant and practical impact, changing the thinking and methods of cadres while eradicating bad customs among the people, particularly those in the countryside.

In February 1951, the Second National Party Congress was held amid significant international and domestic changes. As our people's resistance gained momentum, President Hồ's *Political Report* reviewed the totality of our Party's leadership of the revolution, affirming the Party's line and outlining the main tasks of the Vietnamese revolution at that time.

In the *Report on the Vietnamese Revolution*, I outlined the Party's entire strategy for executing the people's national democratic revolution and progressing towards the socialist revolution in Vietnam. In the section concerning the people's democratic culture, the report reiterated the need for a vietnamised, scientific, and massified culture; at the same time, it presented the specifics of the cultural and educational policy of our Party during that revolution—that is, organising and mobilising each cultural force and carrying out literary, artistic, scientific

and technical developments. For the first time, the main points of the new democratic ethics were put forward: understanding the obligations and rights of the citizen; serving the people and being responsible to them; knowing how to love and hate correctly (loving the country and the people, hating the imperialists and traitors; loving labour and science, hating parasites and exploiters); carrying the spirit of proletarian internationalism, and so on.

Along with our other increasingly large military victories, the cultural groups made notable contributions to the glorious victory of Dien Bien Phu and the liberation of half of the country.

Following the Geneva Convention, we entered a new stage of the revolution: building socialism in the North while endeavouring to liberate the South. The North advanced towards the socialist revolution while the South continued to carry out the people's national democratic revolution in order to liberate itself from the neocolonialism of the American imperialists and bring about the peaceful reunification of the country.

With the completion of land reform in the North, we permanently abolished the feudal system and implemented the slogan LAND TO THE TILLERS. Economic transformation and construction were carried out at the same time as cultural transformation and development. Schools, all the way from primary schools to colleges, were expanded. Education was reoriented toward developing the young generation into workers who could truly be the masters of the country, loving the country and socialism, educated in culture, science and technology, and in good health.

Scientific and technological development was strongly promoted, closely linked to production and national defence. Scientific research facilities were gradually established within the State Science Commission as well as within colleges. The press, information, propaganda, and publishing agencies became effective weapons of the working class and labouring people on the ideological and cultural front. The public health infrastructure, as

well as physical education and sports, were widely developed.

Literature and art gained increasing importance within the socialist revolution, with the three National Art Assemblies held in 1957, 1962, and 1968 receiving special attention from President Hô and the Party Central Committee.

The Second National Arts Assembly was held in February 1957, at a time when the *Humanities-Masterpiece* group was distorting and attacking the line of the Party—not only in the field of art and culture, but in economics and politics too! We were unsurprised that the enemy seized every change in situation and task as an opportunity to attack our Party. The Assembly examined the letter from the Party Central Committee, which highlighted the shortcomings of the organisations guiding the arts, and outlined the principles of socialist art. President Hô addressed the Assembly, reminding attendees to foster the correct thinking, develop their artistic skills, become one with the masses, and stay in touch with reality.

During the Assembly, I delivered a report on behalf of the Party Central Committee titled *Strive for a Rich National Culture, Under the Banner of Patriotism and Socialism*. This report addressed numerous new issues that had emerged since the adoption of *The Outline*. In addition to discussing those matters that, at the time, required further exploration—such as the relationship between politics and art, criticism within the arts, the notion of creative freedom, upholding the fine traditions of the nation, etc.—the report exposed the dangerous tendencies of the *Humanities-Masterpiece* group, who sought to separate art from politics, opposed the Party's leadership, discredited our regime, and more. Here, we distinguished between reactionaries and those artists who—due to their wavering on various social issues, had not set a path for themselves and thus fell under the influence of bourgeois thinking—spoke irresponsibly about art and freedom.

In September 1960, the Third National Party Con-



Phạm Đỗ Đồng (1974)

gress convened and outlined the guidelines and tasks required to advance the North towards socialism and achieve national reunification. In terms of the cultural revolution, the Party stressed the importance of teaching Marxism–Leninism and established the need to “develop a new art that would be socialist in content and national in form, reflect the Party spirit, and be profoundly massified.”<sup>10</sup>

In November 1962, in line with the spirit of the resolution of the Third National Party Congress, the Third National Arts Assembly took place. The Party Central Committee sent a letter to the Congress, and President Hồ attended and met with the artists present. The Party Central Committee emphasised: “In view of all the achievements that have been made, the art of the North is currently a socialist art and, although still young, it has demonstrated vitality and great promise.” President Hồ tasked artists with producing “works worthy of our glorious age.” In my speech to the Congress, I stressed the need to increase the display of Party consciousness and immerse oneself deeply in the new life in order to better serve the people and the revolution (this idea was expressed in the title of the speech).

In January 1968, the Fourth National Arts Assembly was held. A letter from the Party Central Committee commended the creative accomplishments of both the North and South in the arts over the previous years. However, it also noted a significant shortcoming among the artists at the time: “the thoughts and emotions of many artists and writers are not aligned with the thoughts of the Party or the emotions of the masses.”

In my address to the Assembly, I reviewed the Party’s line on art and presented the basic viewpoints concerning the militancy, massification, and vietnamisation of the arts; the task of art in moulding the new man; the selective integration of the best aspects of nation’s traditional culture as well as global culture; the socialist realist method; and the bright prospects of our country’s culture, literature, and art.

The Party’s cultural activities led to significant

achievements in the arts, education, science, healthcare, physical culture, sports, the formation of a new lifestyle, and the training of units of socialist intellectuals. These contributions greatly aided our two strategic tasks: building socialism in the North and struggling to liberate the South and reunify the country.

Following the 1954 Geneva Conference, South Vietnam became a neo-colony and military base for the American imperialists. Our compatriots in the South were subjected to the savage rule of the United States and their puppets.

The enemy utilised all ideological and cultural sectors, such as philosophy, literature, art, education, and religion, as well as all forms of media, including the press, radio, and television, as tools of psychological warfare to deceive the people, oppose socialism in the North, and oppose the liberation of the South and the reunification of the country.

The cultural activities of the United States and their puppets in the South generally developed in three distinct periods:

1. Initially, the American imperialists used all forms of culture to create the façade of them being nationalists. They combined remnants of theology and humanism to form an absurd and reactionary philosophy called spiritual humanism. They encouraged the development of religions, with particular favour given to the Catholic Church. They restored and widely promoted all sorts of superstitious beliefs to deceive and enslave the people. They praised the thinking of the East, from Confucius and Mencius to Laozi, Zhuang Zhou, and Buddha. The most conservative aspects of feudal and bourgeois ethics were extolled. The press, literature, art, and radio were used to mount a widespread campaign to oppose the Soviet Union, distort communism, undermine the war of resistance, and discredit socialism in the North.

<sup>10</sup> *Văn kiện Đảng toàn tập*, vol. 21 (Hanoi: Chính trị quốc gia, 2002), 930

2. The fall of Ngô Đình Diệm in 1963 dealt a heavy blow to their façade of nationalism, creating an atmosphere of panic and despair among those who had blindly followed the United States and their puppets. Many youths and intellectuals, having lost their confidence, either turned to the North and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, or simply descended into anxiety, pessimism, and despair.

The nihilism of Buddhism and the tedious, negativity of existentialist philosophy flooded culture, literature, and art, serving as a sedative for those who were weak and soft. The enemy used every means available to encourage this culture as it undermined the confidence of youths and intellectuals, extinguishing their patriotism and love for their people, and neutralising the people's hatred for the aggressors and their determination to resist them.

3. The American imperialists sent troops to wage a bounded war in the South. Their cultural policy was aimed at making a renewed effort to corrupt the spirit and emotions of the Vietnamese youths by introducing the American lifestyle, a cruel, hedonistic, and decadent lifestyle. American products and money poured into the South. Dancehalls, dens, restaurants, "nightclubs," and brothels proliferated like mushrooms. All of these were designed to lead youths into an immoral life, one without ideals, without a Fatherland, a life in which they were ready to take up arms and shoot their own compatriots for the sake of their hedonistic lifestyle!

The enemy's cultural activities had severe effects on the psyche and cultural lives of many of the youth and people. The following few figures offer sufficient proof of the enemy's evil methods and the extensive harm caused by their culture.

In 1973, there were 450,000 television sets in South

Vietnam. In Saigon, there were 45 daily newspapers, 30 magazines, and 150 publishing houses. In the space of twenty years, the South imported 7,500 films from the United States, Hong Kong, and some Western European countries, most of which were anti-communist and pornographic. To encourage the various religions, the Asian Culture Agency planned to train 20,000 priests and nuns in the United States.

The regular maintenance of one million puppet troops, 120,000 policemen, and 300,000 public servants, along with their relatives, resulted in six or seven million people relying on wages paid by the United States.

Following the liberation of the South, the neocolonialist regime had left behind some three million unemployed persons; over one million disabled persons; 800,000 orphans; 600,000 prostitutes; and over one million youth and teenagers addicted to heroin and other drugs.<sup>11</sup>

In response to the danger posed by the enemy's cultural policy, our people in the enemy-controlled zones fought against the neocolonialist culture to protect our national culture and human dignity.

Along with spreading the influence of revolutionary culture into the occupied zone, our Party was very concerned with various movements and legitimate organisations of the masses on the cultural front, such as the Council for the Spiritual Protection of Youths and Teenagers, the National Culture Defence Force, and the Association for the Protection of the Dignity and Rights of Women, as well as the movement demanding "Vietnamese-language instruction in colleges" and the movement demanding "autonomy for colleges," and so on.

Particular attention should be given to the work of the Alliance of Arts and Literature Associations of Vietnam and other cultural activities that we carried out under the Party's leadership and in line with its stance on art, literature, and culture. In the liberated zones of the South, art and literature played a significant role in educating and motivating cadres, troops, and people to resist the United States and their puppets. Simultaneously, they had a

<sup>11</sup> *Ba mươi lăm năm chiến đấu và xây dựng* (Hanoi: Sự thật, 1980), 338.



Phạm Đỗ Đồng (1974)

positive impact within the occupied cities.

The heroic struggle of the armies and people of both the South and the North culminated in the great victory of the general offensive and uprising in the spring of 1975. This led to the total liberation of the South and the reunification of the country, ushering the entire nation into the period of transition to socialism.

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Dear Comrades,

Over the past forty years, *The Outline* has been a part of our lives. It has helped to bring about profound revolutionary changes within our country. Today, a new, socialist culture—one that is full of vitality—is solidifying the changes that have occurred within the thoughts, emotions, intellect, and ethics of our people.

In this new stage, we have become even more aware of the special importance of the ideological and cultural revolution as a component of the nationwide socialist revolution.

## **II. THE IDEOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL REVOLUTION DURING THE PERIOD OF OUR COUNTRY'S TRANSITION TOWARDS SOCIALISM**

*The ideological and cultural revolution is an integral part of the socialist revolution*

Dear Comrades,

Following the great victory in the spring of 1975, our country embraced independence and unity. The entire country has now entered the period of transition towards socialism.

The Party has discerned that the end of the people's national democratic revolution, led by the working class, marked the start of the socialist revolution. Thus, it also marked the start of the period of transition towards so-

cialism—a period of arduous and harsh struggle to resolve the question of “who will win over whom” that exists between socialism and capitalism.

In reality, the development of our country's revolution has been more complex than this. The North was liberated in 1954; therefore, it began the socialist revolution and the transition towards socialism twenty years before the South. It was only in 1975, when the South was fully liberated, that it could begin the transition towards socialism—the period which the North was still in. It was also only then these two regions of the country were united, not only in terms of territory, but in terms of revolutionary tasks: mutually carrying out the socialist revolution and the transition towards socialism, and mutually carrying out socialist transformation and construction. Transitioning to socialism, without going through the stage of capitalist development as in the case of our country, involves a process of deep and thorough revolutionary change in every facet of social life. Here, we gain an even deeper appreciation of Lenin's words: “The more backward the country which, owing to the zigzags of history, has proved to be the one to start the socialist revolution, the more difficult is it for that country to pass from the old capitalist relations to socialist relations.”<sup>12</sup>

Owing to the historical circumstances described above, our country's socialist revolution is a process of creating “the new” from the bottom up: from relations of production to the forces of production, from base to the superstructure, and so on. The general line for the period of transition towards socialism that was adopted at the Fourth National Party Congress, and further developed at the Fifth National Party Congress, fully affirms this view.

The required tasks, as described in the general line, are: building a state on the basis of the dictatorship of the proletariat, instituting the system of socialist collective ownership, developing large-scale socialist production, fostering the new culture, and moulding the new, socialist people. These elements are integral to a new society, and without any one of them, socialism cannot be real-

<sup>12</sup> Vladimir Lenin, “Extraordinary Seventh Congress of the R.C.P.(B.),” in *Collected Works*, vol. 27 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 89.

ised.

To achieve these tasks, it is essential to steadfastly uphold the dictatorship, of the proletariat, affirm the working people's collective ownership rights, and simultaneously carry out the three revolutions: the production relations revolution, the scientific and technological revolution, and the ideological and cultural revolution—the science and technology revolution being the most crucial.

These three revolutions are intimately linked and mutually influential. The production relations revolution aims to pave the way for the advancement of productive forces, facilitating the scientific and technological revolution, and effectively implementing the ideological and cultural revolution. The scientific and technological revolution not only lays the material and technical foundations of socialism but also seeks to reinforce and refine socialist production relations and spur the ideological and cultural revolution. The ideological and cultural revolution strongly supports the production relations revolution and the scientific and technological revolution. Simultaneously, the accomplishments of the other two revolutions positively contribute to advancing the ideological and cultural revolution, thereby establishing the new culture and moulding the new, socialist people.

Consequently, the totality of socialism, as well as each of its components, can only materialise through the collective outcomes of the three aforementioned revolutions.

Through the creative application of Marxism–Leninism, the Party has delineated the line on the Vietnamese revolution in general and the line on the Vietnamese ideological and cultural revolution in particular. We perceive the ideological and cultural revolution as an essential component of the comprehensive socialist revolution within our country. As such, we cannot wait until we have established strong socialist relations of production and highly developed material and technical bases to carry out the ideological and cultural revolution; instead, this revolution must be carried out concurrently and, under the dictatorship of the proletariat, it is even feasible,

within certain limits, to first establish the new culture and mould the new socialist people.

Ideology and culture exert their dynamism in every revolution. However, they exert even greater dynamism within the socialist revolution, particularly against the backdrop of a backward economy that is circumventing the capitalist stage of development and progressing directly towards socialism. Socialist ideology and culture are not merely the outcomes but the driving forces behind the emergence of the system of socialist collective ownership, the system of large-scale socialist production, the abolition of the exploitation of man by man, and the eradication of poverty and backwardness.

#### *The advantages and difficulties of the ideological and cultural revolution in our country*

Today, we are carrying out the ideological and cultural revolution under highly favourable conditions. The country is independent, united, and collectively advancing towards socialism. The Party's general line and its line on the ideological and cultural revolution are both accurate and creative. The Party Central Committee consistently focuses on leading ideological and cultural work. We possess a dedicated unit of people engaged in theoretical, ideological, and cultural work who have faithfully followed the Party for several decades. We have fine and enduring national cultural traditions. We have selectively integrated achievements of the progressive socialist culture of the Soviet Union and other brotherly socialist countries.

As a consequence, we have registered accomplishments within the field of ideology and culture over the past few years that are truly worthy of pride.

In education, we have established a comprehensive national education system that covers all grades, from the lowest to the highest, a framework that has assisted in training many new and competent workers. The education sector has provided our country's economy and national defence system with cadres proficient in science



Phạm Đỗ Đồng (1974)

and technology, management and professional work, as well as youths who are well-educated and healthy, thereby fulfilling the requirements necessary for building and defending the Fatherland.

Education is starting to transform in line with the educational reform guidelines set forth at the Fourth National Party Congress. Currently, the number of children attending child care centres and kindergartens has reached three million, and there are nearly fourteen million general school students, and nearly 200,000 college students.

In the South, we swiftly transformed the American-puppet education system and incorporated it into the sphere of socialism. We have established the foundations of the revolutionary education system, standardised instructional programs nationwide, opened more schools for the children of the working people, expanded preschool, primary school, and college-level education, and advanced supplementary education. It is important to mention that we have been and continue to take proactive steps to effectively transform thugs, prostitutes, vagrants, and so forth into labourers.

The accomplishments that have been achieved in education are a legitimate source of pride for our system. They mirror efforts to fully realise the goal of educating the new, socialist people, training labourers who exercise collective ownership and embody patriotism and love for socialism.

In culture and art, we have consistently conducted numerous spirited activities that have positively impacted the cultural lives of the people. In the field of artistic creativity, several valuable artworks have emerged over the past few years—works that have contributed to shaping the new way of thinking, the new emotions. A number of works have been awarded international prizes. Undoubtedly, progress has been made in transforming the culture and establishing the new culture in line with the principles of socialism.

Professional art activities, the mass literature and art movement, information services, motivational activities,

exhibitions, the publication of books, newspapers, and so forth have significantly contributed to propagating the lines and policies of the Party and the State, teaching the fine traditions of the nation and effectively resisting backward customs and habits and the decadent, reactionary, slave culture. Culture and art have positively contributed to the establishment of the new culture and the moulding of the new, socialist people within our country.

In science and technology, numerous significant changes have transpired, particularly since the adoption of Political Bureau Resolution Number 37 on the science and technology policy. We have successfully applied scientific achievements and technological advancements in production, everyday life, and national defence activities and have started to achieve notable returns, such as the establishment of the four-level rice seed system based on achievements recorded in the development of new rice varieties. In industry, science and technology have made strides in the development of new materials, the production of spare parts, the enhancement of production procedures, and the improvement of technology.

In conjunction with the natural and technical sciences, the social sciences have focused their efforts on the urgent issues of political, economic, and social life, thereby providing the scientific foundation for the Party's lines and policies and enhancing the people's knowledge.

So far, we have established a network of research and management agencies in the natural sciences, technical sciences, and social sciences, comprising over one hundred research institutes and thousands of other research organisations in various colleges, districts, and localities. The units of scientific and technical cadres are progressively evolving. To date, we have trained more than 3,000 cadres with post-graduate education, over 180,000 cadres with college-level education, nearly 70,000 cadres with secondary education, more than 470,000 cadres with vocational primary school education, and over half a million technical workers.

Undoubtedly, science and technology have made significant contributions towards socialist industrialisation

within our country; they have permeated virtually every aspect of economic and social life and stimulated the development of production.

Regarding public health, we have established a comprehensive network for disease prevention and medical treatment that spans from the central level down to the hamlets. This network is gradually addressing the health-care and medical needs of the people. The most notable successes of our country's public health system include effectively preventing and controlling epidemics and social diseases and the high degree of success in treating a number of illnesses—a success that has gained international recognition. We promptly organised and unified the public health sector and initiated a mass movement for disease prevention hygiene under the slogan **STATE AND PEOPLE WORK TOGETHER, CENTRAL LEVEL AND LOCALITY WORK TOGETHER**. On the other hand, we have consistently followed the approach of integrating modern medicine with the traditional medicine of the nation to safeguard the people's health and provide timely treatment for their illnesses. In the South, our noteworthy achievement has been our successful efforts against several social diseases and ills, such as syphilis, leprosy, prostitution, heroin addiction, and addiction to other drugs—issues stemming from the detrimental impact of the American–puppet regime. These efforts have resulted in the rejuvenation of hundreds of thousands of lives.

Regarding sports and physical culture, we have consolidated these two areas into a unified, nationwide movement, extensively promoting physical culture and sport activities in schools, agencies, and organisations, in the cities, countryside, and even in the remote jungle regions. Through these efforts, we have actively contributed to enhancing the health of the people, instilling the virtues of the new, socialist people, and fulfilling the demands associated with building and safeguarding the Fatherland.

The aforementioned accomplishments have created favourable conditions for carrying out the ideological

and cultural revolution in our country during this transitional period.

However, the revolution is also encountering certain difficulties:

1. Currently, our country's economy is predominantly characterised by small-scale production. The consequences of this pattern in the cultural aspects of our society are notably severe. Its negative and constraining elements are deeply imprinted in our mindsets and in the ideology of small-scale producers, becoming common habits and a lifestyle typical of the petty bourgeoisie. Many ethical perspectives remain bound within the rigid framework of feudal culture and education, contributing to a disdain for manual labour, class-based societal views, gender-based disparities favouring men over women, and so on. Having originated from a colonial and semi-feudal background, small-scale producers display various shortcomings, presenting significant limitations in their thinking processes, organisational capacities, and abilities to manage the economy and society. The mindset of the small-scale producer tends to be subjective, biased, simplistic, and superficial. Decentralisation, fragmentation, liberalism, lack of organisational skills, and a lack of discipline are evident traits among small-scale producers. Their inclination towards partialism, departmentalism, and localism continue to impede the Party's policies and the State's laws.

Today, as we carry out socialist transformation and socialist construction within our country on a broad scale, these negative aspects of the small-scale producer are very evident.

2. Following the complete liberation of the South, we were forced to inherit the legacy of social ills and remnants of neocolonialist culture left behind by the American imperialists. Notably,



Nguyễn Thanh Châu (1975)

there was a new strategy by the American imperialists to collaborate with the Chinese expansionists and hegemonists in an attempt to oppose and undermine the Vietnamese revolution, particularly within the realm of ideology and culture.

In their relentless counter-propaganda efforts against us, they utilise high-powered loudspeakers and various forms of mass media. They have sought every means to import their neocolonialist cultural products into our country in a futile effort to taint the psyche and cultural lives of our people, hoping to revive remnants of the neocolonialist culture we are striving to eradicate. In just the first six months of 1981, over 500,000 packages and postal items were sent from capitalist countries to Vietnam, many of which contained reactionary, decadent books, newspapers, films, music tapes, and letters. In 1981, in Ho Chi Minh City alone, we discovered and confiscated more than 10,330,000 reactionary, decadent cultural materials sent from the United States, France, Canada, Australia, and the like.

Clearly, the enemy is persistently working around the clock to oppose and undermine us in the fields of ideology and culture. This reality has necessitated that our country's ideological and cultural revolution take on the ongoing task of sweeping away the remnants and influences of the reactionary, decadent culture of neocolonialism that continues to impact our nation.

3. After enduring thirty years of war, during which our country's economy suffered extensive destruction, our people are encountering very many difficulties in their daily lives. This is also one of the causes of the negative phenomena within the cultural life of our society. The economy's small-scale production provides very fertile ground for the cultural remnants of the

old society, including the neocolonialist culture, to take root and attempt to re-establish themselves. The resolution of the Fourth Party Plenum observed:

A segment of society, one that even includes some labourers, manual workers, youths, cadres and Party members, has exhibited signs of serious moral and lifestyle corruption: laziness; messy, careless work; corruption; profiteering; smuggling; earning a living illegally; pursuing money and living an extravagant, debauched lifestyles.

The reactionary, decadent culture of imperialism and neocolonialism has yet to be fully eradicated from the South; moreover, its influence has also spread to the North in very serious ways. Backward customs from the old society have resurfaced in many places, and, generally speaking, the socialist style of life has yet to be universally established within our society.

In cultural, literary, and artistic activities, there is the evident tendency towards "commercialisation"—pursuing profit by catering to base tastes, a tendency that leads to the hole of bourgeois art. Weak leadership and management on the cultural front are exerting negative influences on the thought patterns, lifestyles, and psychology of society.

Marx said that "the communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; no wonder that its development involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas."<sup>13</sup> Our country's ideological and cultural revolution, in its new stage, has the task of liquidating the entire "stockpile" of destructive cultural and ideological remnants left by the old society!

Therefore, making a complete rupture with traditional ideologies and eliminating every cultural influence and vestige of the old society is a task that demands our utmost attention. This imperative cannot be dismissed

lightly merely because we are bypassing the stage of capitalist development.

In the realm of ideology and culture, a decisive struggle is being waged between socialism and capitalism, between our ideals and those of the enemy. This struggle has become even more decisive by the fact that the Chinese expansionists and hegemonists, in collaboration with the American imperialists and other reactionary powers, are waging an intense, wide-ranging war of sabotage against us. The struggle between socialism and capitalism in the ideological and cultural sphere must culminate in the triumph of the Party line, just as it should on the political and economic fronts.

It is necessary to steadfastly adhere to the guideline of coordinating transformation with construction in the ideological and cultural revolution within our nation. Historical experience has demonstrated that whenever and wherever transformation and construction are separated, weaknesses, issues, and numerous negative phenomena emerge within the field of ideology and culture.

The process of coordinating transformation and construction entails carrying out transformation for the purpose of expediting construction and conducting construction to accelerate transformation. Transformation must encompass construction, and although the primary emphasis should be on construction within this process, transformation cannot be treated lightly.

In the ideological and cultural revolution, the relationship between construction and confrontation must be upheld across all domains—ideology, culture, and the moulding of the new man. In the past, as defined by *The Outline*, culture encompassed ideology, wherein the cultural revolution inherently involved an ideological revolution. Today, the Party calls this revolution the ideological and cultural revolution, underscoring the crucial role of ideology in the broader cultural revolution.

*The Outline* made no explicit mention of moulding the new man. However, to speak of culture is to speak of humanity. The Party now, for a more comprehensive approach, emphasises the establishment of the new culture

and the moulding of the new man, wherein the moulding of the new man is regarded as a particularly crucial task within the framework of the ideological and cultural revolution.

General Secretary Lê Duẩn said:

The socialist revolution in ideology and culture must be designed to create a rich spiritual and cultural life for all, a life that aligns with the highest goal of socialism, meeting not only the material needs, but also the evolving cultural needs of society. Every cultural value must become an asset of the people, with the people being the creators of each cultural value. Our objective is to build a highly cultured society.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, the ongoing ideological and cultural revolution within our country must concurrently address all three dimensions: establishing new thinking, establishing the new culture, and moulding the new man.

*The main tasks of the ideological and cultural revolution in our country*

#### I. ESTABLISHING THE NEW THINKING

Marxism–Leninism is the most progressive, scientific ideology of our times. The Party has always creatively applied Marxism–Leninism to formulate its lines and policies on the Vietnamese revolution. This, being the fundamental and most notable ideological achievement of the Party, has paved the way for every triumph across various domains.

In the context of establishing new thinking, the primary imperative is to propagandise and teach Marxism–Leninism, as well as the Party line and policies. Only by doing such can Marxism–Leninism come to dominate the political and psychological lives of our people, and the Party line and policies be thoroughly understood by cadres, Party members, and the masses. Deviations in thinking and errors in the work of our cadres and Party members have, since the beginning, usually been the result of a failure to fully grasp Marxism–Leninism and a deep understanding of the Party line and policies.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (New York: International Publishers, 2007), 29.

<sup>14</sup> Lê Duẩn, *Xây dựng nền văn hóa mới, con người mới xã hội chủ nghĩa* (Hanoi: Văn hóa, 1977), 150.



Nguyễn Thanh Châu (1975)

Importance must be placed on educating cadres, Party members, and the masses and deepening their knowledge of the transitional period and the struggle between socialism and capitalism. This involves instilling an understanding of the socialist transformation of non-socialist segments of the economy, including capitalist agriculture, industry and commerce, small industry, handicrafts, and vendors. Initiating a mass movement is essential to successfully completing socialist transformation in the initial stage of the transition period, establishing socialist production relations, and constructing the material and technical foundations of socialism. Achieving these objectives requires instilling in cadres, Party members, and the masses a sense of patriotism and love for socialism, as well as fostering the thinking and consciousness of collective ownership, the ethos and discipline of socialist labour, and so on.

At the same time, we must vigorously resist every attempt at ideological and cultural sabotage by the imperialists and by the Chinese expansionists and hegemonists; resist the bad influences of neocolonialist thinking and culture; resist bourgeois and petty bourgeois thinking; eradicate the influences of feudal thinking and the corrupt customs of the old society; resist liberalism, disorganisation and backwardness among small-scale producers; and resist exploitation, guesswork, parasitism, misappropriation, corruption and the other negative phenomena within society.

Ideological work must seek to establish a comprehensive understanding of the specifics of socialist industrialisation during our country's transitional phase. It is necessary to criticise and correct incorrect viewpoints and ideas that overlook socialist transformation, underestimating the need to strengthen and improve the socialist relations of production.

The crux of our ideological work should be directed towards distribution and circulation—this is the front on which we are encountering many of our most pressing and acute issues. This front is also where many difficulties and negative phenomena are occurring in the

decisive struggle between socialism and capitalism. We must resist the tendency to operate solely on the basis of the market mechanisms and diligently correct the practice of allowing the market and prices to fluctuate spontaneously without State control. We must reinforce the management of the market, gradually stabilising prices, and elevating the standard of living for the people.

Ideological work must be closely linked with economic work, as the former lacks content when it is detached from the realms of the economy and daily life.

A correct economic mechanism and correct economic policy is needed to establish a solid foundation for creating effective ideological work. Mistakes in economic work inevitably destroy the foundation needed to carry out effective ideological work and thus can lead to incorrect thinking, confusion, or pessimism. In recent times, mistakes and an unclear understanding of these “three interests” and the “three-part plan” have led to negative consequences in the economy and significant confusion within the ideological sphere.

Regarding our ideological work, the most urgent issue today is the need to genuinely strengthen a unity of will and action throughout the Party and unity in state management. Simultaneously, we must harness the creativity and innovation of every installation, locality, district, and worker. We must continue to resist bureaucratic centralism, red tape bureaucracy, subsidisation, conservatism, and sluggishness. At the same time, we must equally resist liberalism, decentralisation, disorganisation, and localism, which damages the interests of the whole.

On the ideological front, it is essential to ensure that all persons have a clear understanding of the reactionary nature and cunning schemes of the Chinese expansionists and hegemonists concerning Vietnam and the three countries of Indochina. We must correct the vague understanding of the hostile nature of the Beijing reactionaries, the American imperialists, and other reactionaries, and correct the lack of vigilance against their clever schemes and tactics.

Today, various new reactionary ideologies are gaining

traction globally. These include, for example, phenomenology, humanism, existentialism, convergence theory, consumerism, neo-scholasticism, neopositivism, post-positivism, and so on.

Within the international communist movement, revisionism, “Eurocommunism,” Maoism, and so forth have emerged.

With the aim of safeguarding the purity of Marxism–Leninism, the social sciences in Vietnam must research, analyse, and criticise these various manifestations of opportunism—attacking and condemning these currents of reactionary thinking, not only within Vietnam but also on the global stage.

Ideological work involves recognising and reforming the world whilst embodying the revolutionary spirit of the proletariat. Success in this endeavour relies on avoiding subjectivity, impulsiveness, and coercive tactics. However, superficiality and creating in a “form for form’s sake” manner are indicative of rightist tendencies and negligent management, undermining our efforts. The ideological front is a field of extremely important Party work; at the same time, it is a battlefield on which class enemies and reactionary powers continue to launch fierce attacks against us.

In this new stage, the Party must give ideological work a more fitting position. It is my hope that you will build upon your strengths, rectify your shortcomings, and carry out your work proficiently, upholding your role as committed soldiers on the ideological and cultural front—as was the constant desire of President Hồ Chí Minh.

## 2. ESTABLISHING THE NEW CULTURE

*The Outline* simply summarised the task of establishing a new-democracy culture (that is, a people’s democratic culture) and moving forward to establish and develop a socialist culture in the future.

What, then, is the new, socialist culture?

The Fifth National Party Congress noted that the new culture is one that is “socialist in content and na-

tional in form, reflects the Party spirit, is profoundly massified, and imbued with patriotism and proletarian internationalism.”

In this new stage, it becomes clear that the socialist culture encompasses many profound elements, established on the foundation of Marxism–Leninism and the spirit of socialist collective ownership. It amalgamates and advances the most beautiful facets of Vietnam’s national traditions and culture, selectively incorporating modern achievements of culture, science, and humanity in general. This cultural synthesis represents a harmonious blend of the best attributes and distinctive styles of our brother ethnicities within the great Vietnamese family.

With Marxism–Leninism and the Party line serving as the compass of this culture, those who work in the arts not only recognise the necessity of Party leadership but feel a deep connection to the Party on a profound level. This awareness permeates their thoughts, actions, and creations, resulting in a socialist culture that embodies a remarkably high level of Party spirit.

The people, as collective masters, not only take pride in their inner principles but actively contribute to their cultivation. They are not simply the recipients of culture; they are the architects of culture. It is for this reason that the Party emphasises that culture must be profoundly massified.

In regard to building socialism in general and a socialist culture in particular, we must make every effort to develop education and carry out nationwide educational reforms. This ensures that the national education system aligns with the political and cultural directives of the Party, providing the youth and the people with the knowledge required to build a peaceful, independent, united, and socialist Vietnam. Our education system must be comprehensive—simply, it must educate the entire people, while also reaching new heights by identifying and nurturing persons who show talent. The primary task of educational reform is to provide high-quality education in order to cultivate socialist collective masters and workers with socialist consciousness and ethics. This includes



Vũ Xưởng (1975)

having a general school education, technical skills, high productivity, good health, and an appreciation for beauty.

In addition to accomplishing the goals of the ideological and cultural revolution for the establishment of a new culture and the moulding of a new socialist people, sectors such as education, science and technology, public health, physical culture, and sports must form closer ties with production and daily life. They should support the attainment of socio-economic objectives and national defence requirements, giving due emphasis to the demands for product quality and economic efficiency.

It is important to initiate profound and all-encompassing revolutionary changes in the aforementioned sectors to showcase the superior nature of the socialist system, creating a source of genuine pride for our people.

Socialism should serve as a catalyst, reviving the precious heritage of our nation while creating the conditions for integrating the latest advancements of our times in order to build modern systems of education, science and technology, public health, physical culture, and sports that reflect the national identity of socialist Vietnam.

The ideological and cultural revolution must create the conditions for the emergence and development of the art. Art must become a source of joy and beauty, constantly enhancing the soul, thinking, and emotions of the people, as well as contributing to the success of socialist construction and the firm defence of the socialist Vietnamese Fatherland.

Therefore, in regard to the new art, I am in complete agreeance with Phạm Văn Đồng, Chairman of the Council of Ministers, who, in his letter to the Third Assembly of Vietnamese Writers, urged writers to “delve deeply into socialist life, learning, exploring, and being creative; develop a clear vision, capable of seeing the brightest lights and darkest shadows, the past and the future, Vietnam and the world.”

In expressing the significant ideas and profound sentiments of our nation and era, our new art must embrace socialist realism as the guiding method. It should

continuously explore profound art forms that attract interest while avoiding falling into traps like formalism or abstract art.

Our Party greatly commends the cultural activities that are taking place today. However, besides the efforts being made to discover and create new and progressive art, it is regrettable that certain deviations and negative tendencies are surfacing. Regrettably, in some instances, the intensity of the struggle between socialism and capitalism on the cultural front has relaxed. Corrupt customs and superstitions are spreading, negatively influencing many young men and women. We must realise our responsibility and strengthen the management of cultural life.

Integrating culture into the daily lives of the people is a crucial task within the ideological and cultural revolution. Positive steps must be taken to quickly develop cultural life at installations, which remain places where many shortages and difficulties are being encountered. Effort is needed to better organise cultural life in the municipalities, cities and industrial zones, as well as in the countryside, particularly those areas inhabited predominantly by the ethnic minorities. We must implement the slogan *STATE AND PEOPLE WORK TOGETHER* in our efforts to organise the cultural life of our people at this time.

Our country's socialist culture requires the establishment of a new lifestyle—a socialist lifestyle. Based on the principle of “one for all, all for one,” this new lifestyle establishes a close link between rights and responsibilities and obligations. It demands that each person recognise that personal interests lie within common interests. Working diligently, building socialism, defending the Fatherland, respecting the law, maintaining order and security, and so forth are not simply the responsibilities of each person, but obligations that must be fulfilled in a conscientious manner.

An attitude of mutual love and respect is a beautiful expression that evidences a highly developed culture, and therefore must be embedded within the new lifestyle of

our society. The right of every person to be the master of society is guaranteed; at the same time, each person has the responsibility to fully respect the right of every other person to be the master of society. Such is the essence of respect for human dignity within our society.

Among the working people, everyone treats everyone else in an equal and loving manner, respecting one another and maintaining social order. Each person genuinely wishes the best for their peers, offering care and assistance in times of hardship and sharing in each other's misfortunes. These sentiments are genuine and indispensable. Here, there are no contemptuous, rude, or insulting attitudes or words. Here, the elderly are cared for, children are nourished and loved, and women are respected and supported. These are tangible expressions of a civilised lifestyle.

This new culture must also be evident in our public life. The places at which cultural activities are conducted must truly be the civilised faces of society: Theatres, cinemas, museums, clubs, parks, historic sites, and places of scenic beauty are shared assets of the country, assets which each person has the right to enjoy in accordance with the universal regulations and the responsibility to maintain and preserve. We visit these public places to cultivate our knowledge, elevate our thinking, satisfy our positive tastes, and connect with the noble cultural values of our nation and humanity. A cultured attitude involves respecting the heritage passed down by our ancestors, admiring talent, and appreciating art.

Regrettably, some individuals exhibit vulgar attitudes, behaviours, and speech in public places. They disrupt order, ignore rules, and make rude, arrogant, and absurd comments. Such behaviour is in no way representative of the new lifestyle that we aspire to today.

LEARN, LEARN MORE, LEARN FOREVER—this slogan encompasses one of the beautiful qualities of our society's new lifestyle. Reading books and newspapers every day as well as visiting libraries and clubs must gradually become a habit and desire of each worker. One must feel uneasy when one lacks access to these kinds of spiritual

sustenance. Wasting time in cafes and bars is not consistent with our style of life. As the creators of a new society, we must consistently cultivate our talents, expand our knowledge, and improve our physical well-being. Only in this way can we overcome the challenges we face in building socialism and defending the Fatherland.

We must wage a determined struggle to eradicate the corrupt practices of the old society as well as the superstitious beliefs that are resurging and spreading in many places. This is an arduous and complicated struggle, one that has the aim of sweeping away the corrupt practices of the feudal system and the decadent practices of the bourgeoisie. The process of establishing the new lifestyle must be a process of transforming old customs and habits and establishing new ones.

In order to successfully establish new customs and habits, we must excel in disseminating cultural and scientific knowledge regarding day-to-day life and public and personal hygiene. At the same time, we must disseminate knowledge of aesthetics to the broad masses and cultivate their appreciation and understanding of beauty.

The new lifestyle cannot achieve total victory over the old if small-scale production continues to occupy the dominant position within our social lives. We must expedite the process of socialist industrialisation and the development of large-scale socialist production. On this basis, we can enhance the material and cultural lives of the people and lay the material and cultural foundations required for the swift establishment and stabilisation of the new lifestyle.

### 3. ESTABLISHING THE NEW MAN

"To build socialism, we must first have socialists." These words, spoken by President Hồ, clearly indicate the importance of moulding the new man at this time.

So, what are the main characteristics of a new Vietnamese people?

The resolution of the Fourth National Party Congress emphasised:



Võ Xưởng (1978)

- We must mould a new man who possesses the correct thinking, beautiful sentiments, profound knowledge, and good physical health, so that he can successfully carry out the glorious mission of being the socialist, collective master of society.
- The new man must make every effort to build socialism and defend the socialist Fatherland; he must possess the knowledge of science and technology required to successfully carry out these two strategic tasks.
- The new man is a worker who possesses revolutionary awareness, revolutionary enthusiasm, loyalty, honesty, thriftiness; he is respectful and protective of public property; he emulates others in their work; he is technically skilled, disciplined, creative, and highly productive.
- The new man possesses fervent socialist patriotism, perfectly combining this patriotism with a pure spirit of proletarian internationalism.
- The new man carries a deep love for the working people; he unites and cooperates with others, assisting them in work, struggle, and the building of the new life.
- The new man is well-developed, living a harmonious, rich, and pure collective as well as personal life.

Simply, the most distinguishing characteristics of the new, socialist Vietnamese man are: “exercising collective ownership, and working in the spirit of socialist patriotism and proletarian internationalism.”<sup>15</sup> These are the characteristics of the new man, suited to the new society that we are building; the standards of thinking and emotion, intellect and talent, quality and human effort that the people must endeavour to meet in order to elevate Vietnamese society today and tomorrow. However, “the new man does not come into being in a spontaneous manner, rather, he is cultivated through a process of positive action and initiative.”<sup>16</sup> As mentioned above, the Par-

ty has emphasised the need to mould the new man now, rather than waiting for large-scale socialist production to reach a high level of development.

The emergence of the new Vietnamese is a continuing process within our country—one shining example being our revered Uncle Hồ, a great figure among our people. He ushered our country into a brilliant era of development, one unprecedented in the nation’s history, and elevating us to the standards of our time. The example set by Uncle Hồ was not that of a superman but the most typical man. He touched every Vietnamese soul. He was concerned for, cared for, and helped every worker. It is precisely this influence that has sparked the emergence of wave after wave of new Vietnamese, leading to our nation’s great victories.

The new man must gradually take shape and mature through revolutionary struggle, practical activities, and creative labour. The transformation from the old people to the new must be a prompt and integral part of the process of transforming society and nature. In this sense, the process of moulding the new man is inseparable from the process of carrying out the three revolutions.

Among the three revolutions, the ideological and cultural revolution has the specific task of moulding the new man because new thinking and new culture guide human actions. However, the ideological and cultural revolution must be closely tied to the production relations revolution and the scientific and technological revolution. These two revolutions create the material prerequisites for succinctly moulding the new man.

Here, the decisive role played by the dictatorship of the proletariat in moulding the new man must be emphasised. Historical experience has taught us that when the dictatorship of the proletariat or its components are weak, or when the Party’s leadership, the State’s management role, the workers’ collective ownership rights, and the union of workers and farmers are violated, not only does the socialist system risk degenerating, but many complex developments occur in one’s thoughts and actions.

<sup>15</sup> This quote is drawn from the Resolution of the Fourth National Party Congress—see “Nghị quyết Đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ IV,” in *Văn kiện Đảng toàn tập*, vol. 37 (Hanoi: Chính trị quốc gia, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



Võ Xưởng (1980)

Thus, to strengthen the dictatorship of the proletariat, we must strengthen the socialist legal system, draft Party policies and state laws, and educate cadres and the people about these policies and laws to ensure their strict adherence.

The Party, clearly recognising this need, is committed to consolidating and strengthening the dictatorship of the proletariat and formulating lines, policies and laws. We emphasise the role of collective ownership and consider awareness of the right of collective ownership on the part of the working class and labouring people to be an essential part of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In moulding the new, socialist people, we must consider personal interests and continuously improve living conditions. It is important to remember that excessive deprivation in one's material life can lead to corruption. On the other hand, through ideological work and appropriate educational measures designed to mould the new man, society can methodically instil the ethics and spirit of the new man. These two factors must be combined as one if we wish to effectively mould the new man.

It is necessary to teach ideology to the new man so that he develops a deep awareness of his social interests and understands that the individual interests and happiness of man under socialism are not only dependent upon the results of the individual's labour, but primarily upon raising the labour productivity of society as a whole, upon the advancement of the national economy.

Therefore, the task of ideological work is to expand one's understanding beyond the interests of their family, business, cooperative, worksite, forestry site, or agency. This broadened perspective should encompass the interests of society as a whole, which inherently includes their personal interests. One must understand that the fundamental and long-term interests of one's family are not in contradiction with those of society as a whole. However, ultimately, the interests of the individual must be subordinate to those of society.

All Vietnamese people are tasked with building socialism; safeguarding the socialist Fatherland at home

while supporting the global struggles for peace, national independence, democracy, and social progress.

Today, as the Reagan administration continues to exhibit the belligerence and aggression typical of American imperialism, the peace, independence, and freedom of all nations are under threat. We, the new Vietnamese people, must do everything we can to work together with the people of the Soviet Union, the people of those countries within the socialist community, and the peace-loving people of the world so as to decisively crush each new warmongering scheme of the American imperialists, safeguard and strengthen peace on our planet, eliminate the threat of a new world war, and protect mankind from the tragedy of nuclear warfare.

We believe that the global revolutionary movement is continuing to develop and that peace—the fruit born of the struggle waged by the people of the world for decades—will be firmly maintained!

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Dear Comrades,

In commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the adoption of the Party's *Outline*, those who work in the fields of theory, ideology and culture must display initiative and creativity, firmly adhere to the principles of Marxism–Leninism, fully understand the lines and policies of the Party, immerse themselves in the realities of everyday life and generalise that which they have experienced. Having restudied *The Outline* and witnessed its positive impact over time, we can see the revolutionary, scientific and consistent nature of the Party's cultural line even more clearly.

Life never stands still. Thus, there is a need for—correctly oriented—further development of *The Outline*, under the current circumstances of the socialist revolution in our country. At the same time, a struggle must be carried out to safeguard the Party's cultural line by promptly criticising manifestations of pessimism, hesi-

tancy, and departures from Marxism–Leninism and the Party leadership, alienation from the masses, and expressions of bourgeois liberalism in theory, criticism and artistic creativity. Life and the revolution demand that we tighten our ranks, build on our strengths, and correct the deviations and mistakes in our thinking—such is the only way to become staunch soldiers on the ideological and cultural front.

On the occasion of the approaching new year, I wish you health, happiness and many large achievements in your creative work. Carry forth the invincible banner of Marxism–Leninism!

Long live the glorious Communist Party of Vietnam!

The great President Hồ Chí Minh lives forever in our work!



Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm (1980)





**BUILDING A PEOPLE'S ART** is a ground-breaking work that brings together, for the first time, a curated selection of writings by Vietnam's foremost wartime cultural theorists, Trường Chinh and Tố Hữu. These texts, which include sharp critiques of existing cultural practices, visionary calls for cultural revolution, and principles of art-making, are foundational to the establishment of Vietnamese socialist realism. The majority of these works, pivotal in shaping Vietnam's cultural and artistic landscape during and after the war, have been translated into English for the very first time, offering readers a rare glimpse into the ideological underpinnings of Vietnam's revolutionary art.

**BUILDING A PEOPLE'S ART: Selected Works of Trường Chinh and Tố Hữu** is scaffolded by a critical introduction by professor and researcher Ruehl Muller, unpacking the key principles of Vietnamisation, Scientification, and Massification: concepts that were central to the cultural and political strategies of the time. Muller's introduction situates the translated texts within the broader context of Vietnam's colonial history and its complex socio-political struggles, providing readers with a deeper understanding of the forces that shaped the nation's artistic expressions. What makes this important book particularly striking is its visual component: nearly one-hundred never before seen artworks created by twenty-five Vietnamese artists from the era are included, offering a tangible portrayal of the techniques and styles that emerged during the war. These artworks not only complement the theoretical writings but also serve as a powerful visual documentation of a tumultuous and transformative period.



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"**BUILDING A PEOPLE'S ART** captures the complexity of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Vietnamese history through the writings of two major figures, Trường Chinh and Tố Hữu. Muller skillfully situates these ideological and cultural leaders within the confluence of European, Chinese, and Vietnamese traditions in which they lived. This book is invaluable to those seeking a deeper understanding of Vietnam's history and present."

—**DR. LINH D. VU**

Associate Professor, School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, and Centre for Asian Studies, Arizona State University

"Ruehl Muller's **BUILDING A PEOPLE'S ART** is a remarkably rich contribution to the understanding of Vietnamese cultural history in the modern era, but far more than that. Through his translations of many texts by the key cultural theorists of revolutionary Vietnam, Trường Chinh and Tố Hữu, wonderfully framed by his elegant introduction, Muller presents a clear and passionate explication of the complex dialectic between classical Marxist theory, grounded in the historical conditions of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, and the material realities of Vietnam in the era of its struggle for national liberation, as well as the dialectical relationship between the past and ever-developing present in Vietnam's efforts to build a modern, socialist economy and society. Muller's account illuminates the global challenges of adapting Marxist methods of analysis to the specifics of each and every struggle, rather than treating Marxism as a template or blueprint to be mechanically applied. This is a work of theory and analysis which deserves to be read by historians and revolutionary activists everywhere."

—**DR. KEN HAMMOND**

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