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Resource Note

## **Refugee Scholars and Vietnamese Studies in the United States, 1975-1982**

### **Nguyen Manh Hung**

NGUYEN MANH HUNG is associate professor of government, George Mason University.

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Vietnamese Studies is concerned with understanding Vietnam and her people, both at home and abroad. It thus includes research about:

- 1) The 1975 evacuation and succeeding flows of refugees, the subsequent resettlement in the United States, and the problems surrounding adjustment; and
- 2) The Vietnamese nation-its history, society, civilization, language, and culture as well as government, economy, and foreign policy. This is a broad notion of Vietnamese Studies. The first part of this view refers to a subject area which may eventually become Vietnamese American Studies and part of Asian American Studies. The second part of this view refers to research which is traditionally included within Asian Studies.

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Being refugees rather than immigrants, the overwhelming majority of Vietnamese living in the United States still have strong emotional ties with Vietnam, and think of themselves as Vietnamese rather than as Vietnamese Americans. It is therefore not surprising that refugee scholars because of their emotional ties, intimate knowledge of Vietnam, and unfamiliarity with ethnic studies in the United States have been more attracted to studies of Vietnam than ethnic studies. Between 1975 and 1982, these scholars published over three times as many studies about Vietnam than about refugees in America. Moreover, the former studies tended to be of higher quality.' But among refugee researchers, there is no clear separation between those who study Vietnam and those who study the Vietnamese in the United States. Instead, there are close relations and intensive interactions among both groups, with some researchers engaged simultaneously in both types of studies.

As refugee scholars begin to pay more attention to their place in this country, as they overcome the refugee syndrome, and as they become naturalized, they will view research about Vietnamese Americans as a logical extension of their research on Vietnamese refugees. It is, however, likely that Vietnamese American Studies will be an outgrowth of studies on Vietnam rather than as a product of Asian American Studies.

### **The Decline of Vietnamese Studies in the United States**

Like many other activities, research efforts in the United States are subject to the dictates of supply and demand. Studies of Vietnam greatly expanded and reached its peak in the 1960s as the United States became more deeply involved in the Vietnam War. Following American defeat in Indochina in 1975, Vietnamese Studies in the United States went into decline. Many scholars and academicians lost interest in a field of research which had no market appeal. Most, if not all, Vietnam experts working in the government or in private sectors have been switched or transferred to other jobs.

This does not mean there is no need for studies about Vietnam and the Vietnamese. An important country, Vietnam is the third largest communist nation, and its armed forces, in terms of numbers, ranks among the top four in the world. Vietnam is a key factor affecting peace and security in Southeast Asia. Additionally, the massive exodus of refugees from Vietnam is a special phenomenon of our time and a legitimate research subject.

In order to provide people who are responsible for making policy toward Vietnam and the resettlement of refugees in this country with the necessary data, continuing research is essential.

This research will also contribute to a more sensitive and accurate understanding of the heritage of an ethnic group which is becoming an integral part of American society.

The critical need to sustain knowledge about the Vietnamese is clearly pointed out by the Task Force on National Manpower

### **Targets for Advanced Research on Foreign Areas:**

The United States is gradually withdrawing from Vietnamese studies.

Within two decades we shall return to the pre-Vietnam situation of having little to no professional expertise on this important country. (2)

### **The Role of Vietnamese Scholars and Researchers**

Although Vietnamese Studies is declining, there is potential for significantly expanding research in this field. In addition to an extremely small number of Vietnamese immigrants who were engaged in Vietnamese Studies prior to 1975 and continue to be so, the 1975 exodus brought into the United States a sizable number of writers, journalists, historians, political scientists, economists, sociologists, anthropologists as well as people who have practical knowledge of and experience in Vietnam. This has significantly increased the number of people who can contribute to a revival of Vietnamese Studies in the United States.

Although there are a number of American scholars who are knowledgeable about Vietnam, the recent refugees can make a special contribution to Vietnamese Studies in the United States for a variety of reasons. First, Vietnamese scholars because of their familiarity with the language, culture and history of Vietnam may be able to correct certain errors or misunderstandings which may have been caused by a misinterpretation of facts or statements. For example, Professor Nguyen Ngoc Huy, in a paper delivered at the First Vietnamese Studies Symposium held at George Mason University, 20-21 December 1981, pointed out many errors made by the prominent French jurists, Deloustal and Philastre, in their work on the ancient code of Vietnam.

Second, the refugees are insiders. They have lived and worked in Vietnam and were immersed in Vietnamese culture. Thus the way they perceive and interpret data may not be the same as those who have not had this kind of personal experience.

Combining the personal recollections of the refugees with new **92 AMERASIA JOURNAL** data and perspectives can contribute to more balanced research as well as shed new light on certain aspects of the elusive truth about the Vietnam War and its aftermath. The unanimity in which the Vietnamese expatriate press criticized a recent PBS television series on the Vietnam War as misrepresenting and distorting Vietnamese history is glaring evidence of perceptual differences between Vietnamese refugees and their American colleague. (3)

Third, refugee researchers because of their intimate knowledge of the Vietnamese people and their motivations are generally better equipped to solicit cooperation and separate "fact from fiction" about the resettlement process. Finally, with non-Vietnamese scholars engaged in Vietnamese Studies a diminishing breed, those refugees who possess information and research capabilities constitute a potential source of manpower. There are quite a few Vietnamese who feel the need to write or speak out about what they believe is true, even though engaging in

Vietnamese Studies may be financially unrewarding or may deprive them of other career opportunities. Refugee researchers may be more motivated to do research on Vietnam under the present circumstances and less influenced by the taste of the readers or the dictates of the law of supply and demand, but their contribution to Vietnamese Studies in the United States still depends to a large extent on the availability of research opportunities. Having entered America during an economic recession, refugees are faced with

the immediate problems of survival, of trying to secure a minimum standard of living for themselves and their families. Concerned with day-to-day problems in a strange land with little transferable skills, refugees have few hours to spend on research or writing about Vietnam.

Certain occupations do present refugees with research opportunities. Journalists who work for Vietnamese or English language newspapers or magazines and those who work for government or private agencies dealing with Vietnam or with the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees (such as the Office of Refugee Resettlement and various voluntary agencies) can keep abreast of current problems. People who have relatively more time to do research on Vietnam are those with scholarships or working at research centers of various universities such as the Hoover Institution, Harvard Law School East Asian Studies program, or at private research corporations such as:

- Opportunities Systems, Inc., Bureau of Social Science Research,
- *Social Vietnamese Refugee Scholars* **93** Research Institute, and
- Center for Applied Linguistics.

In addition, there are people of means who can afford to write their own memoirs, and people who strive to do research and write about Vietnam with whatever amount of time is left after eking out a living (such as the case of historian Nguyen Khac Ngu).

### **Under these circumstances what have Vietnamese scholars contributed to Vietnamese studies in the United States?**

A quick glance at the vernacular literature on Vietnam shows a rapid growth of Vietnamese language magazines and newspapers.

Current magazines include

- *Tien Phong* (Washington, D.C.),
- *Ngay Nay* (Kansas),
- *Dan Chuu* (Louisiana),
- *Doi, Khang Chien,*
- *Nhan Van,*
- *Phu N u Moi,*
- *Van,* and
- *Viet Nam Hai Ngoai* (California).

Surviving newspapers (mostly weekly and biweekly) include:

- ***Hoa Tinh Don Thoi Bao*** (Washington, D.C.),
- *Dan Chung, Dong Nui,*
- *Dong Phuong,*
- *Nguoi Viet,*
- *Tay Phai,*
- *Tin Viet,*
- *Truong Son,*
- *Bao Viet,* and
- *Viet Nam Tu Do* (California).

Many of these publications are short-lived, even though this press has done much to present facts, opinions and analysis concerning Vietnam, and the resettlement process. The Vietnamese press, however, has not contributed effectively to the promotion of Vietnamese Studies written in English.

A survey of the English language literature shows that most major works on Vietnam and Vietnamese refugees since **1975** (TV documentaries, scholarly books and articles) have been done by Anglo-American writers. Publications on Vietnam by English-writing Vietnamese have been dominated by Vietnamese communist political and military leaders and by former leaders of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces.

The party-controlled Hanoi Foreign Languages Publishing House has put out seven books, while American publishers have printed four.

The United States Army Center of Military History has published fifteen monographs prepared by former Vietnamese military leaders written under American supervision. (4)

### **What have refugees who work independently accomplished?**

In **1975** the Ford Foundation granted a total of thirty-one scholarships to "displaced" Indochinese scholars: fifteen for dissertation writing, training and retraining purposes, and sixteen for research projects. In reply to a November **1981** inquiry, the Ford Foundation admitted that it did not know of the status of the research projects. Bibliographical search and personal contact with a number of grantees give the impression that very few of these projects have been started or completed and even fewer, if any, have been published in the English language.

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The refugees who work in various government and private social agencies have played a substantial role in preparing orientation manuals to familiarize Americans with Vietnamese language, customs, culture, and generalized knowledge about Vietnamese history.

With regards to systematic research into the resettlement process and related issues, Vietnamese so far have been able to play only a secondary role in their capacity as translators, interpreters, research assistants or at most, consultants.

A few such as Le Xuan Khoa, Tran Minh Tung, and Ha Ton Vinh have published articles, most in the now defunct *Journal of Refugee Resettlement*. (5)

Theoretically, refugees working in universities or research centers should be in the best position to conduct research and write on Vietnam. In reality, such opportunities are available only to those who teach subjects directly related to Vietnam or who are engaged in Vietnamese Studies. And these people are a very rare breed.

There is no Vietnamese professor known to be currently teaching any course on Vietnamese government and politics. A very small number of Vietnamese teach courses on Vietnamese language, culture and civilization on a part-time basis. An exception to this is Ho Hue Tam Tai, assistant professor of Vietnamese history at Harvard University. Therefore, the desire and capability to do research on Vietnam have not been matched by the availability of research opportunities. Consequently there are few research-generated publications.

A majority of the published books since 1975 consist of dictionaries, phrase books, and introduction to Vietnamese language and culture, many of them written by Vietnamese who had established themselves in the United States before the 1975 evacuation. In the field of literature, there are two books on Vietnamese poetry:

- ***A Thousand Years of Vietnamese Poetry*** (New York, 1975) by Nguyen Ngoc Bich, Burton Raffel and W. S. Merwin, and
- ***The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry: An Anthology*** (New Haven, 1979) by Huynh Sanh Thong,

Phan Thien Chau has written a bibliography, ***Vietnamese Communism: A Research Bibliography*** (Westport, 1975) while Nguyen Tien Hung has authored ***Economic Development of Socialist Vietnam, 1955-1975*** (New York, 1977).

Of the four authors only two can be considered ***bona fide*** refugee scholars -- i.e., those who settled in the United States after April 1975. Vietnamese who work in academia have not produced better works on Vietnamese history or politics than those of their American colleagues (Huynh Kim Khanh wrote a respectable book on Vietnamese communism, ***Vietnamese Refugee Scholars 95*** but he was based in Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), partly because they do not have a chance to teach about Vietnam and therefore cannot devote research time to the subject.

Few Vietnamese authors have had their articles published in scholarly journals. One can name:

- Nguyen The Anh,
- Bui Diem,
- Cao Anh Dung,
- Pham Cao Duong,

- Nguyen Manh Hung,
- Nguyen Dang Liem,
- Nguyen Thanh Liem,
- Ta Van Tai,
- Ton That Thien and
- Tang Thi Thanh Trai. (6)

Of these authors, only six left Vietnam after March-April 1975.

Among personal recollections or reminiscences of Vietnam, one can take note of the memoirs by Generals Nguyen Cao Ky and Tran Van Don, and the accounts by Huynh Quang Nhuong, Nhat Tien, and Nguyen Van Vu on the condition of being refugees.(7)

There are a few political essays by Le Ba Kong and Pham Kim Vinh, all of them published privately by the authors.

The limited number of publications do not reflect the true potential of refugee scholars to contribute to Vietnamese Studies in the United States. There are some fairly good books, written in Vietnamese, such as Tran Huynh Chau's reminiscence of prison conditions in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, **NhungNum Cai Tuo o Bac Viet** (California, 1982), and Vu Thuy Hoang's account of the Vietnamese boat people, **Rong Vang Vuot Bien** (Virginia, 1982). I know of one or two serious research projects in their final stages of completion, but they are also written in Vietnamese. (8)

Some research has been written in English but either has not been published or is being printed (such as the works of Drs. Ta Van Tai and Nguyen Ngoc Huy at the Harvard Law School and Dr. Nguyen Van Canh at the Hoover Institution)(9).

Beyond the restricted research opportunities, what other specific factors have limited the contribution of refugee scholars to Vietnamese Studies in the United States?

### **Problems and Recommendations**

Although not a problem for everyone, inability to communicate in English is a serious problem for quite a few scholars. In the long run, this problem can be overcome, but in the short run, it has prevented the dissemination of much data, analyses, and valuable research efforts to the American public. Unfamiliarity with American standards of research presents another problem. In order for books to be printed by major publishers (which, in turn, assures wide circulation) and for articles to be accepted by scholarly journals, they first have to

**96 AMERASIA JOURNAL** meets certain standards of research and writing.

There are many Vietnamese researchers, but few who have mastered the research tools, techniques, and the writing skills necessary for publication in the United States or who have the knowledge of the system and the connections to get a hearing at major academic conferences.

Then there is the problem of data collection. Very few researchers, except those acceptable to Hanoi, can resort to "field research" to study the situation in Vietnam. Moreover, attempts to interview Hanoi's political leaders or diplomats, even for research purposes and in an objective and scientific manner, can be misunderstood and subjected to criticism from the refugee community.

Problems with investigating the recent past are compounded by the lack or losses of data and Vietnamese language documents related to the non-communist regimes during the 1950-1975 period. These factors limit the capacity of Vietnamese refugee researchers to compete with their American colleagues.

Joint cooperative studies between Vietnamese and American researchers may be a solution to overcome most of these problems, especially the first two categories (language and publication standards), as has been the case with studies by Bich, Raffel, and Merwin; Long and Kendall; and Liem and Henkin.

(10) Such cooperative efforts must allow Vietnamese researchers to play a significant role in interpreting and analyzing data so that their perspective will be reflected in the research and publication findings. Translation of major works from Vietnamese to English should also be encouraged.

Difficulty in data collection through field research and interviews cannot be easily overcome at this moment. Still, refugee researchers can make a significant contribution to Vietnamese Studies by mounting a major campaign to collect, restore, and preserve data and documents related to life under the former Republic of Vietnam (many of which have been destroyed by the communist authorities).

Old data and documents must be collected and new data such as memoirs and oral histories must be gathered. A newsletter is needed to provide a communication link between refugee researchers and American scholars who are interested in Vietnamese Studies. Group studies, conferences, seminars and symposiums should be organized, in the Vietnamese language if need be, to provide opportunities for researchers to present their findings, to exchange ideas and information, and to facilitate cooperation in major research projects.

All of this will require money. Whatever their substantive knowledge of the subject may be, Vietnamese refugees are poorly equipped to prepare attractive proposals to compete for a highly limited number of foundation grants to do research in the field.

Grantsmanship is totally new to Vietnamese scholars. Unless there is a serious effort to seek out and utilize capable Vietnamese researchers, such as earmarking a certain percentage of research funds for refugee scholars and/or for joint research between Vietnamese and American scholars, refugee researchers will not be fully able to contribute to Vietnamese Studies in the United States.

At present, Vietnamese Studies is a highly politicized field. It is pervaded by misperception and mutual distrust between American scholars and their protégés on one hand and Vietnamese refugee researchers on the other. Some American scholars tend to think of Vietnamese who did not join the anti-war movement in the 1960s as too biased, while refugee researchers tend to suspect those Americans who are now dominating the field of Vietnamese Studies as being unfairly critical of South Vietnam and at times, self-serving to the point of being apologetic or overly sympathetic toward the present government of Vietnam. Refugee scholars tend to hold views which challenge some of the assumptions of the intellectual establishment in the field about the Vietnam War. Undoubtedly this conflicting perspective will add to the list of difficulties confronting those refugees who are seeking research opportunities and who plan to publish on Vietnam, especially on its recent past. But this is exactly why Vietnamese refugees with research capabilities can contribute to the search for the evasive truth about Vietnam.

## NOTES

1. The author's research on publications by Vietnamese in the United States indicated that out of a total of sixty-five works published during this period, only fourteen dealt directly or indirectly with Vietnamese refugees.
2. Quoted by Richard Smith Beal, Director of the Office of Planning and Evaluation and Special Assistant to the U.S. President, at the 23rd Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, Cincinnati, Ohio, 25 March 1982.
3. See Nguyen Manh Hung, "The Many Faces of Truth: Vietnamese Expatriates vs. the American Media," paper delivered at the 23rd Annual Meeting of the Southeast Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, 12-14 January 1982.
4.
  - Nguyen Duy Hinh, ***Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire*** (Washington, D.C., 1980);
  - ***Lam Son 7 1 9*** (Washington, D.C., 1979);
  - Nguyen Duy Hinh and Tran Dinh Tho, ***The South Vietnamese Society*** (Washington, D.C., 1979);
  - Dong Van Khuyen, ***The Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces*** (Washington, D.C., 1980);
  - ***The Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces Logistics*** (Washington, D.C., 1980);
  - Hoang Ngoc Lung, ***IntelZigence*** (Washington, D.C., 1982);
  - ***The General Offensive of 1968-1969*** (Washington, D.C., 1981);
  - ***Strategy and Tactics*** (Washington, D.C., 1979);
  - Tran Dinh Tho, ***The Cambodian Incursion*** (Washington, D.C., 1979);
  - ***Pacification*** (Washington, D.C., 1980);
  - Ngo Quang Truong, ***The Eastern Offensive of 1972*** (Washington, D.C., 1979);
  - ***Territorial Forces*** (Washington, D.C., 1981);
  - ***The RVNAF and United States Operation and Coordination*** (Washington, D.C., 1981);
  - ***Leadership*** (Washington, D.C., 1981);
  - Cao Van Vien and Dong Van Khuyen, ***Reflections on the Vietnam War*** (Washington, D.C., 1980).
5.
  - Le Xuan Khoa, ***et. al.***, "Southeast Asian Social and Cultural Customs: Similarities and Differences, Part I," ***Journal of Refugee Resettlement***, 1 (January 1981), 20-39;
  - "Southeast Asian Social and Cultural Customs: Similarities and Differences, Part 11," ***Journal of Refugee Resettlement***, 1 (March 1981), 27-47;
  - Le Xuan Khoa and John Van Deusen, "Social and Cultural Customs: Their Contribution," ***Journal of Refugee Resettlement***, 1 (March 1981), 48-51;
  - Tran Minh Tung, "The Indochinese Refugees as Patients," ***Journal of Refugee Resettlement***, 1 (January 1981), 53-60;
  - Ha Ton Vinh, "Indochinese Mutual Assistance Associations," ***Journal of Refugees Resettlement***, 1 (January 1981), 61-66;
6.
  - Nguyen The Anh, "Secret Societies: Some Reflections on the Court of Hue and the Government of Cochinchina on the Eve of Tu Duc's Death," ***Asian Affairs***, 65 (June 1978), 179-185;
  - Bui Diem, "A New Kind of War in Southeast Asia," ***Asian Affairs***, 6 (May-June 1979), 273-281;
  - Cao Anh Dung, "Development Planning in Vietnam: A Problem of Postwar Transition," ***Asia Quarterly***, no. 4 (1978), 263-276;
  - "Investment and Trade Opportunities in the New Vietnam," ***Asia Quarterly***, no. 2 (1979), 115-127;
  - Pham Cao Duong, "Vietnamese Refugees in California after Three Years," ***Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies Review***, 1 (Spring 1978), 14-16;
  - Nguyen Manh Hung, "The Sino-Vietnamese Conflict; Power Play among Communist Neighbors," ***Asian Survey***, 19 (November 1979), 1037-1052;
  - "Vietnamese Refugees Impressions of U.S. Politics-A Partial Finding," ***Virginia Social Science Journal***, 14 (November 1979), 58-66;
  - Nguyen Dang Liem, "Vietnamese-American Cross Cultural Communication," ***Bilingual Resources***, 3 (1980), 9-15;
  - Nguyen Thanh Liem and Alan B. Henkins, "Vietnamese Refugees in the United States: Adaptation and Transitional Status," ***Journal of Ethnic Studies***, 9 (Winter 1982), 101-116;
  - Ta Van Tai, "The Status of Women in Traditional Vietnam: A Comparison of the Code of the Le Dynasty with the Chinese Code," ***Journal of Asian History***, 15 (1981), 97-145;
  - "Traditional Vietnam's Originality in Civil Law: The Contributions of the Code of the Le Dynasty," ***The American Journal of Comparative Law***, 30 (Summer 1982), 523-553,
  - "The Right of Asylum for Indochinese Refugees," ***Asian Thought and Society***, 7 (November 1982), 280-302;
  - Ton That Thien, "New Confrontations in Southeast Asia," ***Asian Affairs***, 6 (November-December 1978), 88-96;
  - Tang Thi Thanh Trai, "The Foreign Investment Code of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam," ***International Lawyers***, 12 (Spring 1979), 329-344.

7.

- Nguyen Cao Ky, *Twenty Years and Twenty Days* (New York, 1976);
- **-3** *How We Lost the Vietnam War* (New York, 1979) (formerly titled *Twenty Years and Twenty Days*);
- Tran Van Don, *Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam* (California, 1978);
- Huynh Quang Nhuong, *The Land I Lost* (New York, 1982);
- Nhat Tien, Duong Phuc, and Vu Thanh Thuy, *Pirates on the Gulf of **Siam**: Report from the Vietnamese Boat People Living in the Refugee Camp of Songkla, Thailand* (California, 1981);
- Nguyen Van Vu and Bob Pittman, *At Home in America* (Tennessee, 1979).

8. Research by Nguyen Khac Ngu on contemporary Vietnamese art and by Vu Thuy Hoang on homeland bonds of Vietnamese expatriates.

9. Drs. Ta Van Tai and Nguyen Ngoc Huy have completed their works of the Le Dynasty for the East Asian Studies Program of Harvard Law School. Their works are expected to be published in the near future. Dr. Nguyen Van Canh's study was published by Hoover Institution under the title: *Vietnam under **Communism**, 1975-1982* (California, 1983).

10. See Nguyen Ngoc Bich, *A Thousand Years of Vietnamese Poetry* and footnote **6**.