SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE

To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese-American Culture

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- **It serves as a link between SACEI members and those who are interested in the Vietnamese or Vietnamese-American culture.**

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Remembering 45 Years of Exile

PARIS IN MOURNING ON APRIL 30, 1975: TRẦN ĐÌNH THỤC

Introduction

This picture was taken by photographer Trần Đình Thục, then a student at a French University, on April 27, 1975, just three days before Saigon fell. Writer Huy Phượng later used it as the front page photograph for his book "Grieving in April," that was published in 2014.

On the day the book was released, Mr. Thục who was the speaker described how the photograph was taken with all its full details.

…

I did not even know when I took the picture of the students in Paris on an April day of 1975—the day when they urgently decided to demonstrate through the streets of Paris to support the government of South Vietnam and to remember the soldiers who sacrificed their lives during a period of great turmoil—that it would become a historical photograph that marked a painful episode of the Vietnamese history. It was three days early.

Yes, before that period throughout the month of March, televised pictures of people of Đà Nẵng running for their lives, of destructive battles, of the tragic retreat of the highlands, and the resignation of President Thiệu, had covered all the time slots devoted to news on televisions causing students living away from home to have the feeling of living on the edges of a burning fire.

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Remembering 45 Years of Exile...

The Vietnamese students' union in Paris led by its president Trần Văn Bá had decided to do something to boost the fighting spirit and morale of the soldiers at home who were stressed by the war. They, the Vietnamese students in Paris and the neighborhood of Orsay, Antony, and Nanterre decided to organize "A Day for Vietnam."

First, it has to be a demonstration for South Vietnam.

On 27 April, students promised to meet at the students' housing on Bertholet Street. It was the seven-story Hotel Lutece, which the students with affection called Housing Lý Toét. It sat in the middle of the Latin Quarter, the center of many great French universities.

The government of South Vietnam had decided to rent Hotel Lutece on a long term basis to allow Vietnamese students to use it as a residence hall during the first years of their arrival from Vietnam to Paris.

The students agreed to demonstrate with the goal of remembering soldiers who sacrificed themselves at home so that everyone else could continue their training abroad.

Sentences like, "We honor our soldiers who sacrificed for the Freedom of their country," Freedom for South Vietnam Forever," "A Day of Mourning," were written in French in white characters on rolls of black cloth.

Each student wore a white band on his forehead to express his personal sorrow for the fate of the country and to allow easy recognition of each other thereby preventing any mixing up with non-aligned countrymen during the demonstration.

Right at 15:00 hours, the students began their demonstrations through the streets of the 5th district of the university campus. Banners spread out straight and yellow flags with three horizontal red stripes held at each corner led the demonstration of hundreds of students.

In complete silence, without hollering support or opposition, the group began marching from Gay Lussac Boulevard close to the Pantheon, the resting place of French giants like Voltaire, Victor Hugo, Marie Curie, etc… They walked to the Garden of Luxembourg, turned right to Boulevard St Michel, in front of the Sorbonne, the well-known Schools of Letters and Law of Paris. They crossed St Michel Bridge, Boulevard Rivoli, and headed toward the Place of Concorde.

Concorde means in complete agreement: South Vietnamese students—children of the South—truly looking in the direction of home, shared in unison the travails of their country in this time of despair.

On the other side of the street, shouting from the leftist groups mingled with words of support from adult passers-by who yelled "Why not earlier?"

Students continued their march in silence. The newspaper section of the students' union handed to passersby mimeographed leaflets that explained the tragic situation of a poor and small country being oppressed by armies of the large communist bloc.

The demonstration proceeded without consent from the City administration. The situation of the country was so critical that there was no time to ask for permission from the complex bureaucracy. Besides, any request for a permit could be prevented or blocked by the embassy of communist North Vietnam and leftist socialist groups.

Therefore, the demonstration was organized rapidly almost on the spot; in case of disruption, it could cause some

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echoes in the press or initiate positive responses to a peaceful South Vietnam that was invaded contrary to the Paris Agreements signed here in this city.

Although not officially approved, the demonstration was a success in the sense it was never disrupted throughout its route. The local police having seen the young faces of the Vietnamese students who demonstrated in groups, in order, without yelling or causing any damage to the neighborhood had decided to follow them in silence before the authorities got in touch with the representative of the students' union, Trần Văn Bá. After knowing the peaceful reason and the route of the demonstration, they themselves helped support the demonstrators by diverting any traffic disruption that had been caused by the demonstration.

The motto of the French society, "Freedom, Equality, and friendship had thus been upended.

The second act of the demonstration has been planned as followed. Once the demonstrators arrived at the Concorde, they would move to the front gates of the U.S. Embassy that sat at a corner of the Concorde (end of Rivoli Street) to protest the U.S. policy of leading South Vietnam to the disastrous present situation.

But once the students arrived close to the Embassy, French police forces accompanied by with their superiors stopped the demonstrators. They gently said, "We cannot let you get closer than here."

Respecting the rules of law, the students spread sideways in a corner of the Concorde almost opposite of the U.S. Embassy and silently proceeded with the remembering of Vietnamese soldiers who had given their lives for the country and concluding with the signing of nationalist songs before ending their expression of sorrow for the tragic situation of their country.

The singing voices of 300 young people, although numerous, appeared lost in the large environment of the huge Concorde Place: lost like the fate of a poor small abandoned country situated in the opposite half of the earth.

The demonstrators in small groups returned to the School of Political Sciences of Assas University, close to Luxembourg Garden. The large amphitheater of the school with friendly orientations was always open to the children of free South Vietnam.

There, the students of the three universities organized a vigil Night with discussion and singing. Hymns depicting the national struggles of their country were sung to revitalize them during a tragic moment of Vietnamese history.

Then three days later, Saigon was lost.
That was the tragic end: Saigon was lost, the country was lost. Lost was the return date of so many youths who had dreamed about contributing a part of the experience and spirit to their home nation.

Trần Đình Thục

Ngày Quốc Hận: National Day of Indignation

Bill Laurie

"The young dead soldiers do not speak.

Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses:
who has not heard them?

They have a silence that speaks for them at night
and when the clock counts.

They say: We were young. We have died.
Remember us."

-Stanzas from Archibald MacLeish's "The Young Dead Soldiers Do Not Speak"

"Ngay Quoc Han" can be translated as "National Indignation Day." It refers to the 30th of April, 1975, when Hanoi's Wehrmacht conquered the Republic of Viet Nam, usually mistakenly termed "South Viet Nam." It is a day generally unrecognized by the public at large and only honored and memorialized by those who supported an independent Republic of Viet Nam, not to exclude Laos and Cambodia from list of communist victims.

It is more than an abstraction, much more than a simple day. There was a before and after to "Ngay Quoc Hanh." Returning to Viet Nam in '73 as a DOD civilian, following a one year tour with MACV, the dire situation was immediately visible. The aid cutback did not, as some assume, take effect in '75 but by mid-'73. "Scholars" and news people may disagree but RVN forces were well aware of the gradually growing restrictions and decline in combat capabilities. These "experts"(?) could have discovered this had they spent any time with RVN soldiers and people. They did not. It was obscene and became increasingly so as time moved on. Some expressed surprise that Republic of Viet Nam Armed Forces (RVNAF) apparently[collapsed overnight in '75, completely oblivious to a greater question: how did RVNAF keep fighting from mid-'74, bled dry by American aid cutbacks, amplified by sharp rise in petroleum prices. The 25% unemployment and 50% inflation made matters worse. Troops and their families were going hungry. Meanwhile, Hanoi's allies proved more and more reliable and gave Hanoi's communists more weaponry, munitions, supplies, POL than ever before. Consider: an estimated 84,000 VC/NVA attacked in the first wave of the '68 offensive, upwards of 150,00 NVA were committed in '72, while Hanoi sent as many as 350,000 VC/NVA in '75. **Never** had U.S. forces been confronted by such a massive force with devastating artillery and armor.

When the end came I was engulfed by a toxic emotional blend of heart-break and volcanic rage. Had my parents not been living I might not have returned to the U.S.

After 30 April Viet Nam plunged into an abyss of misery, of police state oppression, poverty, of malnutrition, prison camp brutality, and "New Economic Zone" labor camps for non-military. **Nothing** Hanoi promised came about. No press freedom. No freedom of speech. No freedom of religion. Many who had supported communist forces realized it had all been a lie. Hundreds of thousands took to the sea to escape maniacal fascist barbarity. 250,000 are estimated to have perished at sea. Think about that. **250,000**. Scores of female boat people were abducted and raped by Thai pirates. After Hanoi's communist conquest, maternal and infant mortality rates doubled.

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National Day of Indignation...

The bad guys won, providing ample reason for incendiary indignation.

Who were MacLeish's "...young dead soldiers" fighting against this repugnant brutality?

One is Tran Van Bay, an RVN soldier who pushed his US Marine counterpart away from a booby trap blast, absorbing the explosion, dying in the process.

One would be John J. Kedenburg, who gave up his spot on the last lift chopper from a hot LZ to a Montaganrd comrade. Kedenburg was subsequently killed by NVA surrounding his position.

Perhaps Hilliard Wilbanks would like to speak. He was killed proving "close air support," firing his M-16 from the window of his O-1 birddog to draw fire from an NVA element and alert an RVN Ranger unit walking into an ambush.

We might ask a Major Phiep if his voice is heard in the "still houses." Major Phiep died trying to drag his U.S. counterpart up a muddy canal bank and out of an ambush kill zone.

Why limited ourselves only to military people? Vuu My Linh's voice should be heard in the "still houses." She was a 14 year-old boat person, abducted by Thai pirates and never seen again. It is not wise to contemplate what was her unspeakable demise. It is unlikely she was taken to cook, clean, do laundry.

http://www.vietnamexodus.info/vne/forgetmenot/missing/vuu_my_linh.htm

In view of all this other names can be applied to this tragic day. Perhaps "Day of Revulsion," attesting to U.S. abandonment of Viet Nam, after having poisoned the well with a criminally negligent excuse for a "strategy." Perhaps "Day of Crushing Heartbreak," reflecting the many hard, tough men...and women....who cried rivers of tears when RVN fell. Perhaps "Day of Barbarity," signifying the "night of long knifes" when Hanoi's communist thug policies caused the death of tens of thousands of prison camp and New Economic Zone inmates. Maybe "Day of Nausea" reflecting American ignorance and bland, amoral indifference in accepting this putrid outcome with equanimity.

Whatever the day is called it evokes the deepest of emotions among those trying **to stop Hanoi's wretched, vile war**, a war bringing death to millions, not only in Viet Nam but also in Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia.

"Ngay Quoc Han" occurs a month before Memorial Day, a day in which the United States presumably honors fallen warriors killed defending America and American objectives. If one is to honor such "dead soldiers" one would concede there is no better way to honor these people than to comprehend and honor their objectives, and no more contemptible practice than to ignore the realities, to ignore those who did not burn villages, who were motivated by a sincere desire for an end to Hanoi's repugnant war.

Too many assume "...the war ended" in '75, yet can only hold such views when blinded by intolerable ignorance. As Baruch Spinoza, observed,

"Peace is not an absence of war. It is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, and justice."

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National Day of Indignation...

These conditions emphatically **did not apply** in Viet Nam, and do not today, lending more tragic meaning to "Ngay Quoc Han." MacLeish's admonition remains in effect:

"They say: Our deaths are not ours: they are yours,
they will mean what you make them.

They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for
peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say,
it is you who must say this.

We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.
We were young, they say. We have died; remember us."

On 30 April, or the last Sunday before this date, small groups of Viet Namese and American-born veterans will gather at Viet Nam memorials across the county. No one else will pay attention. After all these years it is readily apparent to many that they will go to their grave with unresolved indignation, a simmering core of anger, of crushing disappointment. Yes, "Ngay Quoc Han" will forever course through our blood, day in, day out. We now know that that few will "give meaning" to "the young dead soldiers."

Vietnam Human Rights Day - May 11

Return to the people,
The right to freedom and human rights,
The right to see, to speak, and to hear
The right to choose truth and freedom
The right to remove a dictatorship.

Return to the soldiers,
The right to live a heroic life
The right to be proud and honored
The right to protect the people of Vietnam
The right to protect our country of Vietnam.

Return to the people
The right to decide
The people know what they need
To let freedom ring and
bring true bliss

Return to the people
The rights that belong to them
The people know what they need
For the peace
Of the country of Vietnam

https://youtu.be/v_AWLIQIh94

From Sigh, Gone to the Suburbs, A Vietnamese-American's Struggle to Assimilate

Phuc Tran

Phuc Tran escaped Saigon with his family shortly before it fell in 1975, when he was just a baby. In a new memoir, the rest of his story is intensely preoccupied with the project of assimilation.Credit...Jeff Roberts Imaging

By E. Alex Jung

April 21, 2020

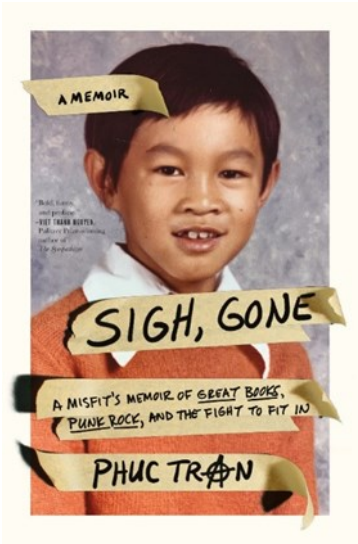
SIGH, GONE

A Misfit's Memoir of Great Books, Punk Rock, and the Fight to Fit In

By Phuc Tran

A thoroughly Asian-American tension runs through Phuc Tran's memoir, "Sigh, Gone": No matter how many works of the Western canon Tran reads, ollies he pops or punk rock concerts he attends, a white boy could always cut him down with a racist slur.

Tran is in second grade when a schoolyard bully taunts him on the playground, making slanty-eyed gestures before yelling an epithet. Tran doesn't know exactly what the word means, but he understands its intent: It is a naming. And it's a moment when Tran becomes fixed within the white gaze as someone not from here, but permanently *from there*.



"Sigh, Gone" is Tran's first book, a recollection of his childhood growing up in Carlisle, Pa., after his family's escape from Saigon right before the fall in 1975, when he was a baby. What ensues is a story intensely preoccupied with the project of assimilation, which he attempts with varying degrees of success: from changing his name to Peter for a day, to finding a skateboarding crew, to — at last! — discovering a love for literature after reading Clifton Fadiman's paean to world classics, "The Lifetime Reading Plan." For Tran, immersion in the Western canon holds "the promise of acceptance and connection and prestige," a near-religious belief he never questions. Even now, in this retelling, he names each chapter after a Great Book ("The Scarlet Letter," "Pygmalion," "The Metamorphosis") detailing his own travails and life lessons alongside theirs.

The dichotomy he thus sets up — between what he perceives as his true, American self and his Vietnamese face — is never quite resolved. A high school teacher takes him to see a production of Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest," a gesture that makes him feel "known and seen, not for being Vietnamese but for my passions and ideas." He arrives home from this buoying, thunderous experience only to quietly tuck it away when he sees his parents. "What did my family really know about literature or theater?" he thinks. "Ironically, the arts were connecting me to strangers, and yet they widened the already yawning gulf between me and my family."

He never manages to close the gap. His description of his parents doesn't leave the realm of teenage caricature — his father is violent, abusive and domineering;

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Struggle to Assimilate...

his mother quiet and submissive. We assume there is inherited trauma, but we don't know its contours. There are flashes of tenderness and heartache, but over all his parents are voids that obliterate all light and perception. The result is a coming-of-age that is solipsistic in its understanding of its own pain. Even now that Tran is a 40-something husband and father of two, a Latin teacher and tattoo-shop owner in Portland, Maine, his memories are not told with the wisdom of age, but with the arrested development of adolescence. His parents still seem impossibly foreign, trapped in the amber of how white people must see them.

As a result, a mix of resentment and light condescension toward Vietnameseness hangs over the book. Tran phonetically writes out his father's mispronunciations in English. When his family members speak in Vietnamese, he calls it "Vietnamesing," as in, "She Vietnamesed feebly." (Sometimes they "English.") He introduces the book by describing his hatred for a fresh-off-the-boat Vietnamese transfer student named Hoang Nguyen, whom he sees as "a fun-house mirror's rippling reflection of me." But we never meet Hoang again, or know what happens to him. It's not clear Tran ever inquired. "Sigh, Gone" does not question its central premise that assimilation should be the desired goal for self-making and self-preservation.

Even the white, miscreant members of his skateboarding cohort are drawn with broad strokes; we don't really know what connects them beyond hooliganism and pack loyalty. Part of what made "Minding the Gap" such an affecting skateboarding documentary was the filmmaker Bing Liu's ability to connect his own experience of domestic violence with those of his subjects. "Sigh, Gone" lacks this curiosity about the world beyond Tran's immediate one — whether political or familial or communal — to give the book enough sinew and connective tissue. (Even the way he writes about punk has a superficial flair. Little about the book itself is actually punk, formally or thematically, besides the anarchist "A" on the cover.)

"Sigh, Gone" gestures at interesting ideas without fully engaging in them. Tran recalls an exchange in the supermarket when an old man accosts him and his parents to ask if they are Vietnamese, only to tell them that he fought there in the late '60s and that it's a "beautiful country." It's an odd exchange, underpinned with menace. Tran recognizes in that moment that his family represents a symbol of patriotic duty for the veteran. The thorny sociopolitical burden he bears — a specifically Vietnamese-American play on W. E. B. Du Bois's 1897 question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" — is ultimately left unexplored.

By the end of the book, Tran is riding a high: He'll attend Bard in the fall, and has been selected as a speaker for his high school graduation. Just weeks before the ceremony, though, another student calls him the slur again, dragging him back into the mud. "I was exhausted, frustrated and angry that I had spent so much of my time in Carlisle trying to be seen, understood and accepted, and I just wanted to forget it all," he writes. "I knew that my real feelings wouldn't fulfill the expected, celebratory tone of a graduation speech," so he writes "a speech about souvenirs" instead. He didn't write the speech he wanted, and the book still feels stuck in that same mentality — of waiting for approval that isn't someone else's to give.

E. Alex Jung is a senior writer at Vulture.
SIGH, GONE
A Misfit's Memoir of Great Books, Punk Rock, and the Fight to Fit In
By Phuc Tran
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