

Vietnamese Warriors, Vietnamese Mothers

State Imperatives in the Portrayal of Women

BY ALEXANDER SOUCY

L'auteur examine tout d'abord quelques unes des images contradictoires des femmes du Viet-Nam, images provenant des mouvements de femmes contrôlés par l'État, et il note que la révolution socialiste qui se devait de donner l'égalité aux femmes, n'a encore rien fait.

It has been almost a quarter of a decade since the conflict which stole the name of a country ended. I say this because even today “Vietnam” still denotes a war, or a genre of war-film, for most Westerners. When speaking of the people, “the Vietnamese” similarly stick out in many people’s minds as “the Boat People”—one of the most recent groups of immigrants that have come into the U.S., Canada, Australia, and France. A perusal of university library stacks will similarly produce a crushing number of books about the conflict and the events that surrounded it, and little on the culture of the Vietnamese people.

The Americans, and the French before them, are only “Johnny-come-latelies” to a country where a group of people have been fighting for over two millennia to gain and then retain their independence. China is still seen by most as the real enemy and the real threat to Vietnam. In this sense, armed struggle is a recurrent theme for the Vietnamese, but the nature of the struggles have changed with the French period, when national and ethnic identity could be said to have emerged for the first time in a truly modern sense. However, this sense of nationalism has been projected back, so that now the struggle of the Vietnamese people against foreign aggression has been made into a major feature of Vietnamese history and national identity. It is the corner-stone of their nationalistic rhetoric, and it is a discourse which rides on the backs of most other subjects to a crushing degree. The issue of feminism in Vietnam is one such subject that is made to speak more for the state’s nationalism than for itself.

In the introductory chapter of *Women Writing Culture*, Ruth Behar asks:

What kind of writing is possible for feminist anthropologists now, if to write unconventionally puts a woman in the category of untrained wife, while writing according to the conventions of the academy situates her as a textual conservative? (15)

It is an important question, to be sure. It is, however, a privileged question. There remains some places, such as

Vietnam, where one’s writing is not a form of self-expression; where the academy is an arm of the state and academic work is expected to reflect the policies of the state rather than the personal expression of the writer.

In Vietnam, freedom of speech is not a right, and the imperatives for writing are overt. Policy is handed down by the government, and the academy and the press are expected to conform to these policies in whatever subject they are writing about, be it ethnic minorities or women. The head of the communist party, Le Kha Phieu, was recently reported as saying:

The citizen’s duty requires the journalist to fight without compromise the dark plots and wrongful ideas of the hostile forces to protect the point of view of the party (and) policies and laws of the state. (qtd. in Reuters)

If in developed, democratic countries the press performs the function of watchdog *of* the state, in Vietnam it is expected to be a watchdog *for* the state. There is a certain amount of leeway given, and the media is now tentatively pressing the limits, but if they press too far previous examples show that it results in charges of conspiracy, prison and re-education for the guilty writers and editors. The academy, in its expected function as a mouthpiece for the state, differs little from the press. As Grant Evans states:

[Vietnamese anthropologists] self-consciously place their endeavours within the broader theoretical parameters of a variety of Marxism, and their theoretical and practical concerns are directly related to state policy. (1985: 117)

In July 1998 I attended an international conference on Vietnamese studies held in Hanoi. One of the plenary speeches was presented by General Vo Nguyen Giap who was responsible for the successful resistance of both the French and the Americans. In his speech he spoke of how

The struggle of the Vietnamese people against foreign aggression has been made into a major feature of Vietnamese history and national identity.

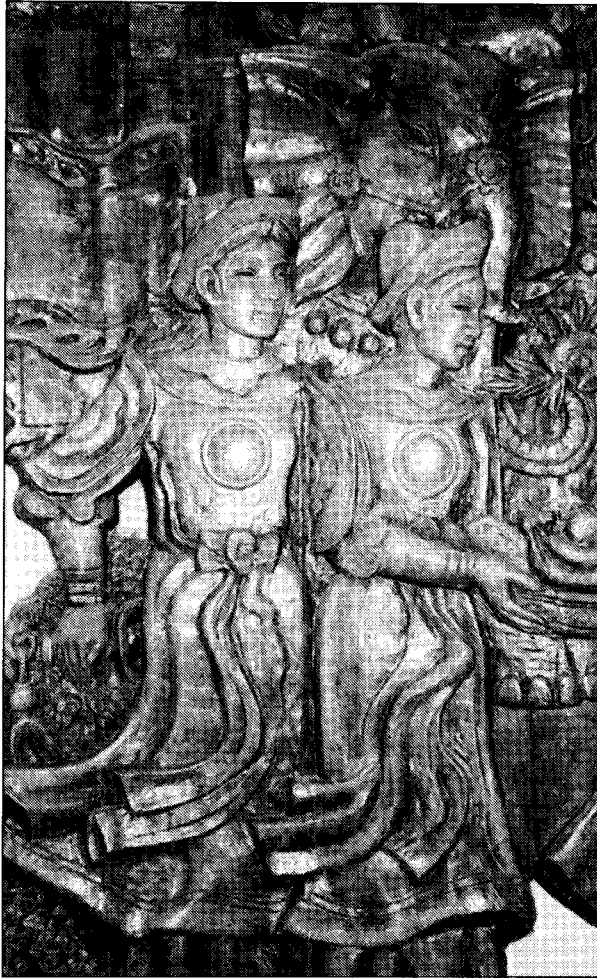


Plate I: *The Two Trung Sisters*,
Museum of Vietnamese Women, Hanoi

the Vietnamese have been patriotic nationalists fighting for the freedom of their fatherland for the last 3000 years, leading one foreign journalist (who wisely remained anonymous) to write:

He may have won the war, but General Vo Nguyen Giap seems to have lost the plot. Now in the 90s, the Vietnamese military hero who vanquished first the French and then the Americans recently told an audience that “caring for the nation and fighting foreign invaders are the duties of every generation” of Vietnamese. Like many of Vietnam’s older generation, he probably finds it difficult to adjust to change. And yet he was called as a keynote speaker at an academic conference on international co-operation. (*The Economist* 31)

The speech was brimming with rhetoric rather than being based on historical accuracy, driving home the theme of how imperialist, capitalist countries have invaded their country and how they have successfully resisted them—attributable by him to cultural and national strength.¹ This theme was repeated by virtually every

paper, whether it dealt with women, the family or food. Charles Keyes, who attended a different panel than I, had a similar impression:

The official scholarly establishment[’s] ... presentations together offered a view of Vietnamese history that has a single story, one that traces Vietnamese identity to a prehistoric culture and sees Vietnamese-ness as having persisted in essentially its original form despite the diversity of peoples living within the boundaries of Vietnam and despite foreign domination. (6)

Feminist scholarship in Vietnam is as much an extension of government policy as every other discipline in its role as authoring social and cultural practices relating to Vietnamese women. All aspects of women’s representation and women’s issues are handled by the Vietnam Women’s Union (vwu). The mandate of the vwu is to achieve gender equality in Vietnam. It monitors gender inequality by keeping an eye on all activities regarding women, and doing studies on health, education, employment, legislation, problems with Vietnamese social structures and problems that have arisen because of the new economic and social climate of openness (Le Thi and Do Thi Binh). It uses this information to influence government policies, and conduct programs designed to improve the lives of disadvantaged women, promote hiring quotas, the legal protection of women, accessibility of divorce, and it campaigns against wife abuse, polygamy, and child marriages. It also publishes books on research concerning women. In short, its activities cover all aspects of public and private life that concern women.

However, while the vwu was set up to promote gender equality, the fact that it is a branch of the government serves to stifle progress rather than promote it.² Although socialism recognizes sexual equality as something that should be striven for, it also recognizes that it is in a process of change. This allows for complacency about how far from achievement it actually is. In fact, many people with whom I spoke believe that gender equality has already been achieved. For some, the mere existence of the Women’s Union proves this equality.

Kirsten Enders argues that despite the work of the vwu, the situation of women in Vietnam has actually deteriorated in the last decade. This has been blamed by the state, (through the academy and the media), on the effects of opening the country to a market economy with the advent of *doi moi*—the Renovation—which commenced in 1987. Whereas previously gender inequality had been blamed on “backward” feudal tendencies in the population, the blame has now been switched to modernity and a conservative appeal to tradition as the solution to increasing disparities. According to Enders the vwu has therefore started to implement policies that have reinforced traditional images of women as the caretaker

of the family, thereby thrusting the economic burden on their shoulders.

What interests me is how a feminist "critique" is managed by the hegemonic structure that it is supposed to be critiquing. The answer that I propose here is that feminism in Vietnam, rather than challenging the hegemonic masculine structure, tends to become only a vehicle for carrying broader policy issues; it has become a Trojan horse of nationalism.³

Several agendas inform state-directed research and representation of women in Vietnam. These agendas are transparently displayed at the Museum of Vietnamese Women in Hanoi, which, as a specific kind of text, is informed by social scientific research on, and largely by women. The mandate of the museum as seen in the pamphlet that is handed out at the gate is clear about its representational and reproductive aspects:

The museum is a research center about women, a place to preserve key documents, exhibits and displays on the role of women in Vietnamese history and culture. It is also the center of information and cultural activities helping large masses of women to understand the fine traditions of Vietnamese women, to grasp necessary knowledge of the society and family-life. (Museum of Vietnamese Women)

The museum, following general trends in Vietnamese scholarship, foregrounds a narrative of glorification of Vietnamese past as heroic and virtuous; as a model for the present generation to follow. They represent what Evans calls "lobotomized histories," referring to the state-sanctioned narrative which so often clash with people's remembered pasts (189). As in the Laotian case that Evans describes, in Vietnam the contradictions have led most people to increasingly regard the state and its officials as illegitimate and corrupt.

One concern of state representations of women is to accent the favourable treatment of women in Vietnam using the position of women in China as the negative point of comparison. This essentially nationalistic use of China as an imagined other is pervasive in many other contexts, not just when discussing the issue of women.⁴ Where it is admitted that in the past women in Vietnam have had a low position, it is usually blamed on the Chinese influence: Confucianism and feudalism, with French colonial rule seen as merely reinforcing the more conservative aspects of the system that they found upon arrival for the sake of expediency. This negative period in the history of Vietnamese women is first compared with the pre-Chinese "matriarchal society" (an imagined history), and then with the situation of women today, showing that the Socialist state has righted the wrongs perpetuated by the previous regimes.⁵ This is, of course, typical of progressivist socialist scholarship as well as the rhetoric of post-socialism.⁶

In the Vietnamese Women's Museum, these policies are evident immediately upon entry into the first of the three exhibition halls. The observer is presented at the outset with an artistic image of the mother of the Vietnamese race, Au Co, followed by a display of the supposedly matriarchal Dong Son culture, which is claimed to be the original Vietnamese culture. There is then a bas-relief of the Two Trung Sisters who led an insurrection against the Chinese rulers of Vietnam [Plate 1]; an overused trope that is meant to give evidence that Vietnamese culture, stripped of its Sinitic influences, accords women with a great deal of power.⁷ Then there is a display that highlights female deities worshipped by the Vietnamese; further evidence of women's high status.⁸ All of these displays are aimed at showing how Vietnamese women, before the 1000 year period of Chinese rule, held a high and respected position in society. The point of this agenda is to align the liberation of women with Vietnamese nationalism, thus denying the possibility of a split between the nationalist and feminist agenda.

The second major agenda aims at the encouragement of Vietnamese women to increase economic production and encourage them to be patriotic and obedient to the government. Women are presented as heroines both in the defence of the nation as well as in their productive efforts as sources of labour and as mothers. The role of women in the wars of resistance is a constant theme. In the Vietnamese Women's Museum there are many displays that hold up individual examples of female patriotism. For example, there is a carrying pole that was used by a Vietnamese woman to bludgeon a French soldier to death; a sword carried by a female revolutionary; a picture of a woman standing in front of an American tank with arms outstretched in denial of passage [Plate 2]; odds and ends used by women who helped cart things up in the mountains in preparation for the great battle of Dien Bien Phu; crafts done by women imprisoned by the Americans; a display for the women who lived and fought in the Cu Chi



Plate 2: *Woman Defiant*, Museum of Vietnamese Women, Hanoi



Plate 3: Women's Labour, Museum of Vietnamese Women, Hanoi

tunnels, which stretched for hundreds of kilometres and were used to fight and hide from the Americans. These displays take up half of the first floor.

The second half of the first floor is dedicated to showing women's role in the economy, glorified as labourers working for national development. It cannot be stressed enough that in the museum as in social scientific texts, women are portrayed as heroines of the revolution and the economic development of Vietnam. An example of this type of representation can be seen in this passage from the Vietnamese-published *Ten Years of Progress: Vietnamese Women from 1985 to 1995*:

Over the past 50 years, Vietnamese women have made extremely great contributions to the struggle for national liberation and construction. No history book could fully record the great services and sacrifices made by the majority of Vietnamese mothers and daughters. The recent conferment of the "Ba Me Anh Hung" (Hero Mother) title on nearly 20,000 women has, to some extent, told of the nation's acknowledgement of the women's great services as well as the nation's respect for them. They have not only fought heroically but also worked tirelessly, overcoming poverty and backwardness to build the country. (Nguyen Thi Bich 11-12)

Women are represented in a way that encourages an increase in labour output, and it is done in such a way that implicates a particular vision of a gender order, (and not necessarily an emancipatory one). The economic contribution of women is of central concern to the state, as can be seen from the Politburo's resolution of July 12, 1992 which states:

The Vietnamese women have great potential and have become an important driving force of the renewal cause and the socio-economic development. Women are labourers, citizens, mothers and the first teachers of people...." (Vuong Thi Hanh 80)

The rhetoric, it seems, has not progressed much since 1975. What has changed from earlier proclamations is that the struggle now is economic rather than military. However, the similarities with the earlier Three Responsibilities campaign (*Ba Dam Dang*), which the VWU implemented during the American conflict are notable. It consisted of 1) responsibility in production; 2) responsibility in caring for the family; and 3) responsibility in serving the state and being ready to fight against the aggressors. Both the recent rhetoric and the campaign for the Three Responsibilities draw on traditional, Confucian ideas of mothers and care-givers of the family, while insisting on their contributions of labour.

This representation of women is intrinsically contradictory, for it depicts women as being labourers and freedom fighters, purportedly showing how women are equal to men, while maintaining the primacy of the traditional roles and responsibilities. Anthias and Yuval-Davis have noted that contradiction is not an unusual feature of state representations of women, and that "notions of what are specifically women's needs or duties often reassert themselves in very traditional ways even in revolutionary societies" (11). In the Vietnamese Women's Museum women are shown as workers, but the most eye-catching display shows a woman in a kitchen, preparing food for her family [Plate 3]. The occupations that women are represented as engaged in are mostly in the unskilled labour sector: labour that has little or no social prestige and small financial reward. Only minor displays are dedicated to the exceptional professionals. For instance, there is a small display that shows female doctors, but the display relates to gynecology and obstetrics, somehow locating even the exceptions back in an area that is traditionally women's domain.

This disunity in the representation of women by the state and the academy in Vietnam arises because there is more than one agenda directing them. Anthias and Yuval-Davis have written about ways in which women relate to national processes and state practices. The three that are most pertinent to Vietnam are: "as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectives"; "as signifiers of ethnic/national differences—as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories," and; "as participants in national economic, political and military struggles" (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 7). Contradiction in

the images that are presented of women can be expected given the different rhetorical loads they are made to bear.

Despite the rhetoric of gender equality already existing and the tremendous role of women in Vietnam's history, women remain aware of their disempowered position relative to men. Women can achieve positions of power in business and the government, but it is rare. Most women opt for traditionally available forms of labour. Most wives are expected to cook and care for the family, even if they have a full-time day job.

At first glance, the construction of Vietnamese women by the state seems almost totally at odds with how Vietnamese women represent themselves. Women are represented as being revolutionaries, soldiers, and labourers, not weak and gentle, which is the most common image in the media and is prominent in the minds of most Vietnamese. However, there are multiple images of women being presented by the state (including the VWU) and the academy, and they are created for different ends. The image of women as being strong and fighting for the country in many ways is not directed at women but to the outside. It is a nationalistic statement rather than a feminist statement. The representation that is directed more towards women instructs them to labour hard in the field or factory and return home to care for their family by cooking, cleaning, and doing all of the other chores that are romanticized as being a display of love and caring. The representation of women by the VWU does not stray very far from the traditional, Confucian, Four Virtues of Women, enjoining them to follow a gendered division of labour, a prescribed mode of physical appearance, a self-censorship which conforms to notions of "appropriate speech" for women, and the creation of a habitus of inequality described as "proper behaviour."

Alexander Soucy is currently doing his doctoral thesis on gender and religion in Hanoi, in the Department of Anthropology, the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, at The Australian National University. He has published a number of essays, including "Masculinities and Buddhist symbolism in Vietnam," in Katherine Biber, Tom Sear and Dave Trudinger (Eds.) Playing the Man: New Approaches to Masculinity (Sydney: Pluto Press 1999), and "The Dynamics of Change in an Exiled Pagoda: Vietnamese Buddhism in Montreal," Canberra Anthropology 19(2) (1996).

¹In this postmodern era it is recognized that a historical truth does not really exist and that it is always subjective. Thus, I am alluding more to the scope and the intentionality of the Vietnamese state's manipulation of remembrance rather than making a statement of the validity of other histories in comparison with the current Vietnamese version.

²Stephanie Fahey makes the point that recently the VWU has been "coopted by international organizations for the administration of aid and have lost much of their [sic]

lobbying role" (226).

³Similar processes have also taken place in China, as Margery Wolf (1985) and Tani Barlow (1989) have both noted.

⁴There have been a number of scholars who have mentioned Vietnam's intricate relationship with China. It has perhaps been dealt with best by K. W. Taylor (1983) in the period in which China occupied Vietnam, and by Woodside (1971, 1988) in the post-Chinese period and again (1976) in the modern period. It has also been mentioned by Evans (1985), and P. Taylor (1999) in relation to the Vietnamese academy and in the mind of an everyday southern Vietnamese respectively. The list could go on endlessly.

⁵As an example of this kind of rhetoric, Hoang Xuan Sinh (1987) writes: "Against the dark background of culture and science unnaturally imposed by the French colonists, Vietnamese women were also fettered by feudalism ... More than forty years have elapsed since the August 1945 Revolution. While carrying out national construction and a war of resistance first against the French colonialists and later against the American imperialists, the Vietnamese people have built up a national education system in which, for the first time in our history, women whom Confucian patriarchs considered unworthy of an education are free to attend school and university" (7). I should also note that the education of girls is on a decline, and attitudes of many parents are that girls need not have a higher education (Nguyen Van Chinh).

⁶Post-socialism is used by Evans (1998) to refer to the so-called socialist governments who have retained their power and continue to use the label and rhetoric of socialism for legitimacy, but no longer implement clearly socialist policies. The contrariness of "free-market socialism" is readily seen by visitors to Vietnam as well as to the Vietnamese themselves.

⁷For examples of the use of the Two Trung Sisters motif, see: VWU 1989: 7; Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1978: 6-20.

⁸An article written by Ngo Duc Thinh (1996) about "the cult of the female spirits" is a good example of this kind of assertion.

References

- Anthias, Floya and Nira Yuval-Davis. *Woman-Nation-State*. London: Macmillan Press, 1989.
- Barlow, Tani. E. "Introduction." *I, Myself Am a Woman: Selected Writings of Ding Ling*. Eds. Tani E. Barlow and Gary Borge. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.
- Behar, Ruth and Deborah A. Gordon, eds. *Women Writing Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- The Economist*. "Uncle Ho's Legacy." July 25, 1995: 31.
- Enders, Kirsten. "Images of Womanhood in Rural Vietnam and the Role of the Vietnam Women's Union: A Microscopic Perspective." Unpublished paper, 1998.

- Evans, Grant. "Vietnamese Communist Anthropology." *Canberra Anthropology* 3 (1,2) (1985):116-147.
- Evans, Grant. *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998.
- Fahey, Stephanie. "Vietnam's Women in the Renovation Era." *Gender and Power in Affluent Asia*. Eds. Krishna Sen and Maila Stivens. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Hoang Xuan Sinh. "Participation of Women and Their Emancipation Through the Development of Education and Science in Vietnam." *Proceedings of the South-east Asian Seminar on Women and Science in Developing Countries*. January 8-10, Hanoi, Vietnam, 1987. 7-9.
- Keyes, Charles F. "The First International Vietnamese Studies Conference, Perspective #1: Scholarship as Politics." *seaspan* 12 (1) (Autumn 1998): 6-7.
- Le Thi and Do Thi Binh, eds. *Ten Years of Progress: Vietnamese Women From 1985 to 1995*. Hanoi: Phunu Publishing House, 1997.
- Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet. *La Femme au Viet Nam*. Hanoi: Editions en Langue Etrangeres, 1978.
- Ngo Duc Thinh. "The Cult of the Female Spirits and the Mother Goddesses 'Mau'." *Vietnamese Studies* 121 (3) (1996): 83-96.
- Nguyen Thi Bich. "Assessment of the Progress Made by Vietnamese Women from 1985 to 1995." *Ten Years of Progress Vietnamese Women from 1985 to 1995*. Eds. Le Thi and Do Thi Binh. Hanoi: Phu Nu Publishing House, 1997. 11-15.
- Nguyen Van Chinh. *Social Change in Rural Vietnam: Children's Work and Seasonal Migration*. Canberra: Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1997.
- Reuters News Agency. "Vietnam Party Leader Warns Press to Toe the Line." November 28, 1998.
- Taylor, Keith Weller. *The Birth of Vietnam*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1983.
- Taylor, Philip. "In the Lady's Realm: A Vietnamese Pilgrimage." Unpublished manuscript, 1999.
- Vietnam Women's Union and the Centre for Women Studies. *Vietnamese Women in the Eighties*. Hanoi. 1989.
- Vuong Thi Hanh. "The Activities of the Women's Unions for the Equality and Development of Women." *Ten Years of Progress Vietnamese Women from 1985 to 1995*. Eds. Le Thi and Do Thi Binh. Hanoi: Phu Nu Publishing House, 1997. 76-91.
- Wolf, Margery. *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985.
- Woodside, Alexander. *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Nguyen and Ch'ing Civil Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971.
- Woodside, Alexander. *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976.
- Woodside, Alexander. "Vietnamese History: Confucianism, Colonialism and the Struggle for Independence." *The Vietnam Forum* 11 (Winter-Spring 1988): 21-48.

Inanna Publications and Education Inc.

is proud to announce the publication of

Our Words, Our Revolutions: Di/Verse Voices of Black Women, Women of Colour, and First Nations Women in Canada

Ed. G. Sophie Harding

"A variety of genres are represented here – from life-writing to poetry to short autofiction. Students will buy, read, and enjoy this compelling collection, which presents the voices of women who have not been visible in more ways than one. There is a repeated theme in these works: 'see me for who I am' – a theme that begs readers to see better – to look and see."

—Marlene Kadar, Professor, Women's

Studies and Humanities, Faculty of Arts, York University, Toronto, Ontario

Forthcoming April 2000! Order your copy today!

\$17.95 + \$1.25 GST = \$19.20. Please add \$2.50 for postage and handling in Canada; \$2.75 for the U.S.; \$9.00 overseas.

Please send cheque or money order to Inanna Publications and Education Inc., 212 Founders College,
York University, 4700 Keele Street, North York, ON, M3J 1P3.

Tel: (416) 736-5356. Fax: (416) 736-5765. Email: cwscf@yorku.ca <http://www.yorku.ca/org/cwscf/home.html>

