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Raising Vietnamese: War and youth in the South in the early 1970s

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This essay considers the importance of looking at writings for children for historical analysis, particularly in times of war, focusing on magazines published for youth in South Vietnam in the early 1970s. Two magazines, Thiếu Nhi *and* Thằng Bờm*, in particular, are studied in terms of their editorial aims and contents, as well as their young readers' submissions in response to contemporary sociocultural issues raised in these magazines. The lively discussions in these magazines were made possible by the relative freedom of expression in South Vietnam, compared to North Vietnam, which was an important reason for the civil war being fought. Yet this freedom also challenged the fabric of Vietnamese society. The strongest concern of these magazines' initiators, editors and writers was that its readers not lose their sense of being Vietnamese in the face of the great wartime flood of American popular culture that captivated many youth. Anxiety that the younger generation would be Americanised and lose their identity struck at the core of what the war was being fought about: i.e. different versions of being Vietnamese in the modern world. This threat of Americanisation to fundamental Vietnamese values was perceived by some intellectuals in the South as more serious than the threat of communism, because at least the communists were Vietnamese.*

Assigned to write about the preferred branch of the armed forces in which to enlist, a student turned in a blank sheet of paper, explaining the lack of an answer to the enraged teacher: 'I hear that in several years there will be peace, so I think by the age of eighteen I will be free from going into the army.'[1] This joke appeared in a Saigon youth magazine in 1972 during the war between North and South Vietnam. Intended to provoke a laugh, this 'joke' derives its humour from an acknowledgement that young people could not only lack a desire to fight in the

Olga Dror is an Associate Professor at Texas A&M University. Correspondence in connection with this paper should be addressed to: olgadror@tamu.edu. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Mr Nhật Tiến, a well-known Vietnamese writer and one of the creators of *Thiếu Nhi* magazine, for his willingness to share his views, opinions, and memories with me and for helping me to better understand Vietnamese writings for youth and the context in which they were published. Drs Keith Taylor and Peter Zinoman provided valuable assistance and comments at different stages of this project. I am also grateful to two anonymous reviewers of this article and to Dr Maurizio Peleggi for their helpful comments on improving the article.

1 'Hòa bình' [Peace], *Thằng Bờm*, 88, Feb. 1972, p. 21.

war, but could also express this. Such a joke would not have been funny, or even possible, in the North. It reveals that, unlike in the North, some Southern young people were raised to express their own thoughts and were not socialised to subordinate themselves to an officially approved point of view.

The twenty-year-struggle between North and South Vietnam (1955–75) was enmeshed in the global struggle between a fraying Sino–Soviet alliance and countries that relied upon the leadership of the United States. Numerous works have appeared about various aspects of the military and socio-political realities of this struggle; but this was also a struggle between different visions that the Vietnamese themselves had about the kind of society they wanted to bequeath to their younger generation. Ironically, youth have been left out of academic analyses of the war. Filling this lacuna will add to our understanding of the divided Vietnamese societies and their separate identities.

By youth, I am referring to children in their late primary and secondary school years. *Thiếu Nhi*, one of the two magazines discussed in this essay, explicitly identifies the age of its audience as nine-to-sixteen years; *Thằng Bờm*, the other magazine, appears to have the same age group in mind. While cultures variously define the ages of children, adolescents, teenagers, and young adults, the nine-to-sixteen year target group of these publications has a definite basis in wartime South Vietnamese society. In general, childhood ended rather earlier and adulthood began rather sooner than is typical in some other cultures. However categorised, the scholarly study of youth, as was the case until recently with women, has tended to be relegated to the margins; and very few scholars have focused exclusively on Vietnamese youth.[2]

Yet youth are important in any society, and their role, even if unacknowledged, increases when a society is under great stress; although living under conditions created by their parents' generation, it is the children who will make the future. In the words of a Cambodian specialist in children literature, Roderick McGills, 'Real children, that is, persons who have not lived long and breathed the air of social action, can no more avoid the politics of experience than adults can.'[3] The British author Jacqueline Rose observes that adults create an identity for 'childhood' as projections of their own self-perceptions, and that they explain the world to their children in terms of the differences and similarities that are important to them.[4] The interconnection between 'adulthood' and 'childhood' is accordingly a critical indication of how adults think about the future, for the future that they want for their children is a dream about the future that they want for themselves. Consequently, bringing

2 Notable exceptions are Thaveeporn Vasavakul, Anne Raffin and Christina Firpo. See, for example, Thaveeporn Vasavakul, 'Schools and politics in South and North Viet Nam: A comparative study of state apparatus, state policy, and state power (1945–1965)', Ph.D. thesis, Cornell University, 1994; Christina Firpo, 'President Ho speaks to the children: *Thieu Sinh* magazine and the New Child in 1945 revolutionary Vietnam', *Southeast Review of Asian Studies*, 27 (2005): 37–48; Anne Raffin, *Youth mobilization in Vichy Indochina and its legacies, 1940 to 1970* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005).

3 Roderick McGillis, *The nimble reader: Literary theory and children's literature* (New York: Twayne, 1996), p. 106.

4 These issues are discussed in terms of Western societies through the lens of children's literature in Jacqueline Rose, *The case of Peter Pan, or, The impossibility of children's fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984); Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children's literature: Criticism and the fictional child* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); *Children's literature: New approaches*, ed. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

children into historical analysis is a way to understand how adults envision the possibilities in their own lives.

One of the most potent vehicles for shaping identities in societies with a high degree of child literacy is through written texts. As noted by an Australian scholar, John Stephens, texts for youth are produced to socialise a target audience whose view of the world is in the process of being formed.[5] It is an obvious observation that writings for youth reveal a high level of didacticism, which tends to align them with the dominant ideology of any particular time and place.[6] Texts taught in classrooms or read by children on their own transmit the most important messages that adults want their children to hear. Consequently, literary quality is often considered secondary to didactic intent. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, one of the most prominent scholars of youth literature, argues that didactic qualities take precedence over literary qualities in this genre.[7]

Peter Hunt, another leading scholar in the area, makes an even stronger observation that children's literature might well be a contradiction in terms because the values and qualities that a culture constitutes to define 'literariness' cannot be sustained by books designed for readers of 'limited experience, knowledge, skill, and sophistication'.[8] He suggests that writing for youth should be called 'texts' rather than literature. I would not go as far as this, for I believe that, at least in South Vietnam, there was a difference between institutionalised writing for classroom use and writing published in children's magazines which had diverse agendas, from entertainment to expressing dissent.

The importance of children's texts in any society is that they contribute to the shaping of new generations by creating reading communities for the future, instilling moral values, and helping to create and maintain a cohesive society. The creation of a cohesive society is especially important in wartime, particularly when a war is fought inside the country against an enemy ostensibly of the same language and nationality. Studying children's texts offers an opportunity to study the concerns of those who produced them.

While in North Vietnam an authoritarian regime established and enforced a unified agenda in all spheres of life, the South had a very diverse palette of views and agendas. In South Vietnam there were government supporters, their communist enemies, oppositionists and dissenters of other persuasions, and apolitical people. The South did not have a strictly enforced policy of uniformity in thought as in the North because, among other reasons, the Southern state's raison d'être was to establish an antipode to the state in the North. A series of Southern governments were confronted by oppositional street demonstrations, insurgencies, military coups, and multi-party electoral exercises. To what extent Southern governments were democratic or to what extent some form of democracy was appropriate to existing

5 John Stephens, *Language and ideology in children's fiction* (London and New York: Longman, 1992), p. 8.

6 Kimberley Reynolds and Paul Yates, 'Too soon: Representations of childhood death in literature for children', in *Children in culture: Approaches to childhood*, ed. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 151.

7 Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children's literature: Criticism and the fictional child*, p. 39.

8 Peter Hunt, *Children's literature* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), p. 3.

conditions can be debated. Nevertheless, despite political persecutions and numerous impediments for those who disagreed with the government and who tried to subvert its goals and policies, the South was far more diverse and allowed many more challenges to authority than was possible in the North.

While persecuting many of those perceived as enemies of the state, the South Vietnamese government did not shut all the doors to expressions of different, often oppositional, views, either in speech or in print. This resulted in a great diversity of publications, including those for youth, that instead of supporting government policies, sometimes openly advocated ending the war without victory. According to a prominent South Vietnamese writer and scholar of literature, Võ Phiên, 'It seemed that people could no longer distinguish the right and wrong of either side of the communists versus nationalists conflict. The question of nurturing a cause or fighting for an ideal had apparently lost all attraction.'[9] Although many Southerners would not have agreed with this observation, it expresses the attitude of some intellectuals affected by war weariness. It was expressed in various ways, both explicitly and subtly, and, as the joke above reveals, it also influenced the youth.

Writing for youth

The Southern government proclaimed itself as the defender of democracy against authoritarian Communist rule. Southern propagandists decried the imposition of communism in North Vietnam as an alien doctrine that destroyed social and cultural traditions.[10] On the other hand, the idea that democracy as practised by Americans was inappropriate to Vietnamese society emerged as an important viewpoint among Southern leaders.[11] The effort to articulate a non-communist vision for the country that was also not a reflection of American influence occupied many educated people. Although for many, ideological differences between the North and the South were abstract, disconnected from daily life concerns, Southerners with political opinions held a great variety of views, and this is clearly reflected in the writings produced for youth. As observed by Judith Graham, the 'tenets and aspirations' of authors who wrote for youth 'were inevitably linked to the extent they felt part of and imbued with the sense of their country'.[12] In South Vietnam, there was relative freedom for individuals to imagine and express their own 'sense of country' without, as in the North, an official version of the country being enforced throughout all aspects of life and society.

One obstacle to understanding the differences between North and South Vietnam during the wartime years is that propaganda from both sides emphasised the unity of the Vietnamese people and their history and culture. This ignores the two-and-a-half

9 Võ Phiến, *Literature in South Vietnam, 1954–1975,* trans. Võ Đình Mai (Melbourne: Vietnamese Language & Culture Publications, 1992), p. 148; see also Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 324–9. Examples of this are found in nearly all the children's magazines mentioned here.

10 See, for e.g., Nguyễn Phương, *Ánh Sáng của Dân Chủ* [The light of democracy] (Saigon: Xã Hội Ấn Quán, 1957).

11 Philip E. Catton, *Diem's final failure: Prelude to America's war in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), ch. 2.

12 Judith Graham, 'The same or different: Children's books show us the way', in *Children's literature and national identity*, ed. Margaret Meek (Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books, 2001), pp. 105.

centuries (from the mid-sixteenth to beginning of the nineteenth) during which Northerners and Southerners lived in separate countries, often at war with each other, with different economies, material cultures, forms of government, legal systems, educational practices, military organisations, varieties of social hierarchy, village morphologies, languages, and relations with non-Vietnamese/the outside world. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the differences between being Northern or Southern were still sufficiently palpable that the assertion of a unified 'national identity' was purely ideological, and not an objective description of real life. The issues that separated the Hanoi and Saigon governments during the civil war between 1955 and 1975 were not unrelated to the sense of difference that had emerged in the attitudes of Northerners and Southerners toward each other since the sixteenth century.[13]

Prior to the modern era, there was no tradition of youth literature outside of educational texts, designed primarily to teach reading and writing in classical Chinese as well as basic Confucian ideas about filial piety and proper behaviour. By the 1920s and 1930s, literature for the entertainment of children had begun to appear, primarily collections of Vietnamese legends and fairy tales or translations of Western works such as La Fontaine's fables, Charles Perrault's fairy tales, and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's travels*.[14] In February 1935, the first children's magazine, entitled *Cậu Ẩm* (Young fellow Ẩm), appeared in Hanoi and was published for two years. Beginning in the late 1940s in the North, while communists produced traditional didactic writing for children, a more diverse and entertaining children's literature continued to be published in Hanoi until 1954.

In the South, in the late 1950s, in addition to the publication of a new generation of textbooks for classroom use, a literature for the entertainment of children and youth, including adventure stories and picture books, appeared and became popular. The Khai Trí (to open the mind) publishing house in Saigon produced for this market. By the mid-1960s, when American influence was strong, there appeared a lot of what was called 'weed literature' (*cỏ dại*), rooted in foreign sources, which Vietnamese concerned with the pollution of their culture claimed to be the culture of American cowboys and comic-book heroes such as Batman. The term 'weed literature' well expressed a fear of foreign influence — here largely based on Vietnamese perceptions of American popular culture — choking out the sense of being Vietnamese. Tuổi Hoa (Age of flowers), the first publishing house that specialised in children's literature, was established in Saigon, and, in the late 1960s, other similar publishing houses started to appear, such as Thiều Quang (Spring day), Hoa Tiên (Flower fairy), and Mặc Lâm (Carefree forest).

At this time, socially critical and satirical works from the 1930s and 1940s written for youth by Nguyễn Công Hoan and Tô Hoài were republished in the South. Both authors were Northerners and closely connected to the communist movement there. Southerners began to develop their own ways of addressing this genre and audience. Some newspapers and magazines for adults started to include pages particularly

13 Keith W. Taylor, 'Surface orientations in Vietnam: Beyond histories of nation and region', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 57, 4 (Nov. 1998): 949–78.

14 For a survey of literature published for youth in the 1920s and 1930s, see Doãn Quốc Sỹ, 'Một Cái Nhìn Tổng Quát về Văn Chương Thiếu Nhi Việt Nam' [A comprehensive glance at young adults' literature in Vietnam], *Thiếu Nhi*, 126, 1 Jul. 1974, pp. 6–8.

designated for youth in their issues. *Ngôn Luận* (Speech) pioneered this at the end of the 1950s; *Chính Luận* (Political discussion)[15] and *Hoà Bình* (Peace) continued this trend in the 1960s. Võ Phiến claimed that after 1963 the age of the typical reader in the South declined.[16] Writers residing in the South, among whom were Nguyễn Hiền Lê, Nguỳễn Vỹ, Nhật Tiến, Lê Tất Điều, Duyên Anh, Đinh Tiến Luyện, Từ Kế Tường, and Minh Quân, started to write for youth. These people were active in creating youth magazines, which mushroomed in the South at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s during the Second Republic, at a time of relative political stability.

These magazines were not under any central control; they were neither financed by the government nor constituted an aspect of state policy. Rather, they represented a variety of political and literary tendencies. In general, they were not trying to promote a particular agenda, but provide young readers with 'an opportunity for entertainment and simultaneously to help [them] to further develop critical minds and intellectual abilities',[17] or, to give their readers a chance to express their emotions and to encourage their literary development.[18] In a whirlwind of publications appearing and soon disappearing, magazines such as *Bé Mai* (Little Mai), *Bé Thơ* (Little Thơ), *Họa Mi* (Nightingale), *Thằng Còm* (Fellow Còm), and several others came and went. The most visible and long-lived among these magazines were *Tuổi Hoa*, from the Tuổi Hoa publishing house, *Tuổi Ngọc* (Age of pearls), *Ngàn Thông* (Pine forest), *Thiếu Nhi* (Young adults), and *Thằng Bờm* (Fellow Bờm). The first three mainly published literary works by adult writers for children, while the last two concentrated on a dialogue with their readers.

This essay focuses on analysing material and issues published in the Saigon-based *Thiếu Nhi* and *Thằng Bờm* in the early 1970s. Both magazines encouraged young people to contribute letters, essays, and literary pieces that were then published. Material from several other magazines will also be cited to demonstrate that the contents and views in *Thiếu Nhi* and *Thằng Bờm* were not unique. While rather different in their approach and purpose, both magazines served common goals: they wanted to give youth a respite from the horrors of war, as well as to encourage them to grow up being Vietnamese in the tradition of their forefathers. In the 1960s there had been an overwhelming presence of American troops in the country, resulting in an inundation of Western culture. Although the US military presence had dwindled by the early 1970s, American cultural influence remained strong; many Vietnamese believed that its allure for young people — particularly those who imitated its negative aspects — was a real threat to their traditions and would adversely affect society.

Southern writing for young people during the 1950s and 1960s is difficult to summarise because of the paucity of the surviving archive; in addition, changing wartime conditions produced a great variety of emphases. The two publications from the early 1970s discussed in this essay appeared when there was a serious public engagement with youth about foreign cultural influence and about pride in being Vietnamese that emerged with the encouragement of a prominent government official

15 See Nu-Anh Tran, 'South Vietnamese identity, American intervention, and the newspaper *Chính Luận,* 1965–1969', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 1, 1–2 (2006): 169–209.
16 Võ Phiến, *Literature in South Vietnam*, p. 147.
17 Editorial statement, *Bé Thơ*, 5, 8 Jan. 1971, pp. 7, 11.
18 Nguyễn Thị Hà Thanh, 'Lá Thư Tòa Soạn' [Letter from the editor], *Họa Mi*, 14-A, 7 Jan. 1971, p. 1.

discussed below, Mai Thọ Truyền. The South Vietnamese government was at its strongest between 1970 and 1972. The South's military victory over the North during the 1968 Tet Offensive had crippled communist forces and many Southerners rallied behind the Saigon government. A popular land reform was implemented, elections for the upper and lower legislative houses were held, the supreme court began to enforce the principle of judicial review of administrative acts and of legislation, there was more freedom of the press, and there was more lively public discussion of national affairs than at any earlier time. Furthermore, American ground troops were being rapidly redeployed out of the country and their numbers were negligible by 1972, when the South Vietnamese armed forces withstood an all-out northern attack. Although this era of relative hope ended after the Paris Agreement of January 1973, it was a time when the Republic of Vietnam stabilised without the presence of large numbers of American ground troops, and there was a strong effort by intellectuals to visualise the future of their country and prepare their young people for it.

In September 1969, the South Vietnamese government created for the first time a Ministry of Culture and appointed Dr Mai Thọ Truyền (1905–73) as minister.[19] It was soon after his appointment that several new magazines designed for youth appeared. Mai Thọ Truyền was a nationalist, a well-known Buddhist leader, and one of the founders of the largest Buddhist temple in Saigon, Xá Lợi pagoda, which had been at the centre of urban Buddhist politics in the 1960s. He and many other intellectuals were concerned about the extent of Western cultural influence on Vietnamese society and specifically its impact on youth. He considered the war to be a catastrophe for his society and wanted to help young people to orient themselves in a seemingly chaotic and dangerous world. He claimed that there were a lot of 'people who forget our origins, feel ashamed to recognise themselves as Vietnamese', who were 'utterly ignorant about the history of our country, the achievements of our ancestors, the fine customs of our nation that must be cultivated or there will be no future.' Thus, Dr Mai Thọ Truyền urged action: 'To sit moaning in front of the broken pieces is futile. The duty of each of our citizens in the current situation is to exert oneself to the utmost to restore, to build, to rely on our own professions and abilities.' He wanted adults 'to nurture a positive spirit for the future generation, to create a new generation of youth that clearly knows its roots, that takes pride in being Vietnamese and is true to the level of sacrifice equivalent to the duty of a Vietnamese citizen'; according to him, this agenda was not an option — it was a 'necessity'.[20] Even though his Ministry, at least initially, did not have a budget and could do no more than exhort, Dr Mai Thọ Truyền himself endeavoured to both arouse and support those who were willing to take up this task. Such people were not and did not pose as 'parents'; they were editors and writers who aimed to foster discussion among the youth about issues that they considered to be important for the future of the country.

19 *Viet-Nam Bulletin* [a weekly issued by the Embassy of Vietnam, Washington, D.C.], 23 Dec. 1969, p. 1.
20 Letter from Mai Thọ Truyền to Nguyễn Vỹ, 7 Mar. 1970, *Thằng Bờm*, 1, 14 Mar. 1970, p. 5.

Nguyễn Vỹ and *Thằng Bờm*

One of those who responded to Dr Mai's call was a notable poet and journalist named Nguyễn Vỹ (1910–71). With the support of Dr Mai Thọ Truyền, he created *Thằng Bờm*. Besides being a prolific author, Nguyễn Vỹ was also the editor-in-chief of several other publications.

Nguyễn Vỹ was born in South Central Vietnam in Quảng Ngãi province, which in the late 1940s and early 1950s had been a Vietminh stronghold against the French, and for a time in the 1960s was a communist stronghold. He grew up in a very patriotic family: both his father and uncle held staunch anti-French views. After attending a secondary Franco-Vietnamese school in Quy Nhơn from 1924 to 1927, Nguyễn Vỹ dropped out of school to participate in anti-colonial activities. He later moved to Hanoi to study and teach. He was simultaneously involved in journalism and revolutionary activity. According to another Southern intellectual, 'Almost all writers and poets from the wartime group were his friends; among them were even Phạm Văn Đồng and Võ Nguyễn Giáp.'[21] He published his first collection of poetry in 1934, entitled *Tập Thơ Đầu* (First poetry collection), with poems in Vietnamese and French. In 1937, Nguyễn Vỹ founded a newspaper called *Le Cygne* (Swan), published in both Vietnamese and French. In it he published articles criticising French rule and, consequently, the newspaper was banned, and he was imprisoned for six months.

In 1940, the Japanese imprisoned him for writing against their occupation of Vietnam. He was released only when the war was over in 1945, after which he settled in the South and remained in opposition to the French, founding new publications: first, *Tổ Quốc* (Homeland) in Saigon, and, later, *Dân Chủ* (Democracy) in Dalat. Neither survived for long and both were closed down for criticising the government created in Saigon by the French. The times and governments changed, but Nguyễn Vỹ, always a rebel, was relentless in criticising authority. His next publication, *Dân Ta* (Our people), appeared in 1953–54, but was shut down by Ngô Đình Diệm. Even though he was invited to collaborate with the government after 1956, the cooperation did not last. In February 1964, he attempted to revamp *Dân Ta*, but it was closed down again in June of that year. Thereafter, it was repeatedly restarted and closed down until his death in December 1971, when its 105th issue came out.[22]

Encouraged by Mai Thọ Truyền, Nguyễn Vỹ founded *Thằng Bờm* in 1970. It was a financial failure to the extent that there was not enough money to pay employee salaries. Yet, his two wives, who lived in Dalat, unflaggingly supported him. The senior wife worked as a school principal, the other as the director of a maternity hospital. They hardly saw their husband as he refused their requests to come back to live in Dalat, and they were only seldom able to visit him in Saigon. But, in times of need, it was they who supported him with 'loans', which were never repaid.[23]

21 Việt Nhân, 'Thân Thể và Gia Cảnh của Nhà Văn Nguyễn Vỹ' [Writer Nguyễn Vỹ's personality and family background], *Thằng Bờm*, 86, 26 Jan. 1972, p. 4 (rep. from the newspaper *Tin Điển*, 1971, no. 448–9, 451–2). Phạm Văn Đồng and Võ Nguyễn Giáp rose up the ranks of the Communist Party to become members of its Politburo, as prime minister and military commander, respectively.

22 'Tiểu Sử Thi Sĩ Nguyễn Vỹ' [Biography of the poet Nguyễn Vỹ], *Thằng Bờm*, 86, 26 Jan. 1972, pp. 19–20.

23 Việt Nhân, 'Nhà Văn Nguyễn Vỹ'.

In addition to his writing and publishing activities, Nguyễn Vỹ was the head of the Council for Studying Buddhism in Dalat from 1948 through 1950; Chairman of the Council of Representatives in Dalat from 1952 through 1954; and member of the Council of Patriotic Personalities. He also served on the Presidential Award Committee in Literature and Arts in 1967, 1969, and 1970. He was killed on 14 December 1971, in a traffic accident. Many newspapers and South Vietnamese officials eulogised him. Trịnh Quang Bình, an assistant to the Minister of Information, accompanied by the acting director of the Department of Information and Media, came to pay respects at Xá Lợi pagoda where his body lay; they put a wreath and a medal on his coffin.[24] In the words of one of his colleagues, 'Nguyễn Vỹ was not a truly outstanding poet or a truly outstanding journalist or a truly outstanding politician. But, on the other hand, to simultaneously be a journalist, compose poetry, and still be engaged in politics — such a person is worthy of being seen as outstanding.'[25]

His life goal, as described in his obituary, was 'national sovereignty, unity of the South and North under one roof, to stop the war, to re-establish brotherly "normality"'.[26] His roadmap was to build and protect long-lasting social equality.[27] He openly called for the release of political prisoners and the restoration of national sovereignty, which he believed was being jeopardised by the United States. Most importantly, he wanted to retain 'Vietnameseness', that he saw as being threatened as long as the Americans stayed in Vietnam; thus, he was a staunch advocate of the American withdrawal.

While Nguyễn Vỹ had a group of collaborators who were real people, he chose to present the magazine as the work of a fictional group of editors and correspondents under the supervision of the eponymous 'Thằng Bờm', identified as the secretary of the Editorial Board of *Thằng Bờm*. Thằng Bờm was a fictional 15-year-old who also wrote under the pen name Quạt Mo (areca spathe fan).[28] Both his name and pen name derived from a popular folk song, 'Thằng Bờm', about a simple and kind boy with a fan who refuses to exchange it for three oxen and nine buffaloes, but eventually agrees to exchange it for a handful of sticky rice. *Thằng bờm* is a Vietnamese idiom meaning 'a practical-minded idiot'. Naming the magazine after Thằng Bờm served three purposes. First, readers would not be intimidated by the authority of an adult or even of a potentially smarter person of their own age. Second, since Thằng Bờm's intelligence was under question, he could say things that smarter people would perhaps not be allowed to say — what can you expect from such a simpleton? Third, Thằng Bờm actually was not stupid. He was aware that he would not know what to do with the oxen and buffaloes that he was offered in exchange for his fan, but he agreed to trade for something practical, rice that would sustain him in the immediate present.

24 'Nhà Văn Nguyễn Vỹ được Truy Tặng Bội Tinh Tâm Lý Chến Đệ Nhất Hạng' [Writer Nguyễn Vỹ was posthumously honoured], *Thằng Bờm*, 86, 26 Jan. 1972, p. 18.
25 'Nguyễn Vỹ,' *Thằng Bờm*, 86, 26 Jan. 1972, p. 12.
26 'Anh Nguyễn Vỹ đã Mất' [Nguyễn Vỹ passes away], *Thằng Bờm*, 86, 26 Jan. 1972, p. 10.
27 Ibid.
28 *Thằng Bờm*, 1, 14 Mar. 1970, p. 1.

Not to leave Thằng Bờm lonely in his intellectually dubious position, Nguyễn Vỹ created a pair of collaborators for him: a 13-year-old boy named Thằng Ngọng, 'a stupid bloke', and an 11-year-old girl appropriately named Bé Kim (Little needle), an indication of her sharp mind, which balanced the lack of intellect in her two male partners. The three of them allegedly worked under the guidance of an older sister named Diệu Huyền (Marvelous beauty), which was a pen name of Nguyễn Vỹ himself, as possibly were the names of the other characters.

In the introduction to the inaugural issue, Bờm, Kim, and Ngọng addressed their readers to persuade them to see what was going wrong with their generation: 'Adults tell young people that they are the future of the nation and the seed of the state, but then why do adults let young people read all those untruthful dirty stories about the girls of easy virtue, about cowboys, and about hippies', stories filled with violence, daggers, masks, and robberies. The threesome warned that as a result of this baleful influence, their generation's soul was horribly poisoned: 'The characters in these stories are extremely corrupted, many speak rudely', and they begin to act as cowboys and hippies. Bờm, Kim, and Ngọng promised that 'Uncle Nguyễn Vỹ as the head and Diệu Huyền as the editor-in-chief will guide us to come back to the precious beautiful traditions of our Vietnamese nation, along with all the international progress in science in the time of Apollo.'[29]

This bifurcated view of American influence cites cultural decadence alongside scientific achievement as demonstrated by the landing of the Apollo spacecraft on the moon. Presumably, Nguyễn Vỹ preferred the Americans to go to the moon than to come to Vietnam. But the deeper meaning of the reference to Apollo in the context of the story about Thằng Bờm reveals Nguyễn Vỹ's agenda: It is possible to know about Apollo and other scientific achievements of the Americans just as Thằng Bờm was aware of the existence of oxen and buffaloes, but the most urgent and immediate necessity was not to have such achievements, but rather to sustain the ancestral culture symbolised by sticky rice that, among other things, is the staple food that makes one Vietnamese. *Thằng Bờm* first appeared on 14 March 1970, and it continued to appear until February 1972, a couple of months after Nguyễn Vỹ's death. It sporadically reappeared in 1973 and 1974, after which it disappeared for good. The issues that appeared after Nguyễn Vỹ's death continued to demonstrate engagement with his original agenda.

Nguyễn Hùng Trương, Nhật Tiến, and *Thiếu Nhi*

Overlapping with *Thằng Bờm* for several months and outliving it, a new magazine appeared in August 1971 called *Thiếu Nhi* (Young adults). It lasted until April 1975. The idea of establishing the magazine belonged to Nguyễn Hùng Trương, the financier and director of Khai Trí Open Mind publishing house. The largest publishing house in the South at the time, Khai Trí published thousands of books, including textbooks, monographs, dictionaries and literature, by a wide range of authors. Because of the size and fame of his press, Nguyễn Hùng Trương was also called Ông Khai Trí (Mr Khai Trí).

Nguyễn Hùng Trương (1926–2005) was born in Thủ Đức Gia Định, on the northern edge of Saigon. He studied in Saigon at Petrus Ký, a French Lycée

29 *Thằng Bờm*, 1, 14 Mar. 1970, pp. 4–5.

established by the French colonial authorities in 1928. He biked back home on weekends and returned with enough money to last him for a week. But from an early age he loved to read, and he spent a large portion of that money on books. Most of the books he bought were foreign, and by 1940 he had accumulated a sizable library with many rare and sought-after titles. In 1952, he opened a small bookstore cum reading room called Khai Trí. It was the first bookstore in Vietnam where customers could peruse books without necessarily buying them. This novelty was a huge success, and he expanded his business into a publishing house. The government seized control of Khai Trí in 1976, and he was imprisoned.

Nguyễn Hùng Trương helped intellectuals and artists in times of need. He also deeply loved young people. He suggested to a prominent literary figure named Nhật Tiến to establish a magazine called *Thiếu Nhi*. While Nguyễn Hùng Trương would provide the necessary resources, Nhật Tiến would define the content of the magazine. Nhật Tiến was extremely happy about this and accepted the offer at once. Nhật Tiến was born in the North in 1936 and relocated to the South in 1954. He was not among the Catholics who fled the North, but rather was a youth with an adventurous spirit who sought to expand his horizons. He thought that after two years the general elections mentioned in the Geneva Accords would unite the country and he would go back home. However, the elections never took place. At the same time, it became evident that the communists were consolidating their power and eliminating all traces of dissent. Not being a supporter of the communist cause and wanting to avoid the stifling intellectual atmosphere in the North, Nhật Tiến stayed in the South. Even though he never received a formal college education, he became a writer who won the highest literary prize in the country for one of his novels in 1962. Neil Jamieson characterised Nhật Tiến as 'one of Saigon's finest and most respected writers'.[30] However, to earn a living, Nhật Tiến taught physics and chemistry at several middle schools in Saigon. Thus, as an educator, he encountered the everyday difficulties of young people. He knew many other writers and educators, and they formed a supportive network of collaborators for *Thiếu Nhi*.

Nhật Tiến was troubled by a seeming contradiction. Opposing the war effort of the South meant that the country would fall into the hands of the communists, but to continue to support the war effort meant that one had to reconcile oneself to witnessing the flames of war swallow up the lives of people on both sides. The sense of powerlessness produced by this puzzling dichotomy permeated the mood of intellectual circles in the South during the final years of the war.[31] While Nhật Tiến and his collaborators had complex feelings towards the war, they were sure about one thing — they wanted to help South Vietnamese youth during this difficult time. They created their magazine 'to entertain and to educate'.[32] While *Thằng Bờm* emphasised Vietnamese culture and tradition, *Thiếu Nhi* dedicated more space to foreign historical and cultural personalities, to explanations of natural phenomena, and to teaching crafts; it aimed to raise young Vietnamese with a broader perspective, able to embrace the outside world.

30 Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 243.
31 Personal correspondence, Nhật Tiến, July 2011.
32 'Thư Chủ Niệm Gửi Các Em Thiếu Nhi' [Director's letter to the readers of *Thiếu Nhi*], *Thiếu Nhi*, 1, 15 Aug. 1971, p. 1.

Both publications provided exemplary models for youth with stories about praiseworthy figures from Vietnamese history, information about hygiene and health, and, in the case of *Thằng Bờm*, short stories and poetry. *Thiếu Nhi* was distinctive in its emphasis on promoting a positive attitude toward being part of a wider global human endeavour. It featured items on scientific progress, descriptions of famous faraway places such as the Eiffel Tower and the Egyptian pyramids, translations of Western literature, and biographies of Westerners who were famous for persevering through adversity. Much of the magazine was taken up by such positive encouragement. On the other hand, around ten to fifteen per cent of the contents dealt with contemporary negative phenomena among youth, the most salient and controversial of which were hippies and drugs.

What harms Vietnamese youth: Hippies

Both *Thằng Bờm* and *Thiếu Nhi* tried to save young people from the influences and consequences of the war that filled their country. For *Thằng Bờm*, the number one enemy was American influence. The clearest example of opposition to American culture is a discussion of hippies launched by Nguyễn Vỹ. Hippies became a notorious phenomenon in many South Vietnamese cities, especially Saigon. Many Vietnamese adults, especially intellectuals, saw a huge danger in the growing number of hippies. A famous Vietnamese female writer, Nhã Ca, in her novel *Cô Hippy Lạc Loài* (Miss Hippy alone in a strange land), published in 1971, portrayed a painful image of young hippies in the South.[33] But discussion about hippies that included young people emerged earlier, initiated on the pages of *Thằng Bờm* by Nguyễn Vỵ under the pen name of Diệu Huyền.

In the section of the magazine called 'Thằng Bờm dictionary', Nguyễn Vỹ denounced hippies as offspring of wealthy families with a parasitic lifestyle who were unwilling to participate in society. Nguyễn Vỹ related the word 'hippy' to the expression of being 'hip' or quick to adopt new, even alien, forms of behaviour. He described a rupture between those who chose to follow the newly imported phenomenon and those who chose the beautiful traditions of the past — valuing family ties, maintaining a decent appearance, and even elementary hygiene. Moreover, he stated that hippies as young as thirteen started to smoke, get drunk, take drugs, and indulge in free sex. Nguyễn Vỵ was appalled that Vietnamese youth were following the bad model of American hippies, stressing the importance of young people respecting Vietnamese tradition: 'Why follow [the Americans]? Vietnamese youth should oppose the poisonous hippy movement by all means! Hippies must be eliminated to save the generation of the Youth of the Golden Dragon!'[34]

The range of responses to Nguyễn Vỹ's attack on hippies that were printed in *Thằng Bờm* reveals divisions among educated youth in South Vietnam. One letter was signed by 'A group of hippies from the Nha Trang Western School [Trường Tây] who are in perennial opposition to bum hippies'. This letter angrily questioned the validity of Nguyễn Vỹ's argument: 'As for gambling, liquor, smoking, and

33 Nhã Ca, *Cô Hippy Lạc Loài* [Miss Hippy alone in a strange land] (Saigon: Vàng Son, 1971).
34 Nguyễn Vỹ (under the pen name Diệu Huyền), 'Tự Điển Thằng Bờm: Hippy' [Thằng Bờm dictionary], *Thằng Bờm*, 6, 12 Apr. 1970, p. 15.

obscenities, they have existed for a long time, and did not appear with the hippies.' They were indignant because of Nguyễn Vỹ's suggestion that hippies lacked education and thus did not have any future: 'How do you know that hippies don't have a future? And why do you think that their lives will end in narrow alleys?' To highlight their point they pointed to American students, a large proportion of whom, according to them, were hippies. The authors stressed the political basis for the hippy movement, connecting it to the contemporary situation in Vietnam:

> They fight for peace in Vietnam and are steadfast against the war. That's why hippies have a saying: Make love, not war. We also should find pleasure in our lives! Why do you consider it loathsome? Sharing everything, being free regardless of moral mores, what is so loathsome about this? Society changes every day. Today is not like it was in the past. You think that a guy with long hair and ridiculously clad has completely abandoned traditions?[35]

Three main points, each with its own strong supporters and uncompromising foes, were evident here: open opposition to the war, a struggle to enjoy life, and the confrontation between traditional and Western cultures. The debate circled around the fact that the authors of this response studied in a school based on the French system. The students of a school from the city of Banmêthuét in the Central Highlands, 'a city proud to have very few hippies', according to their letter, accused their Nha Trang peers of losing their Vietnameseness:

> You have not grown up on bread and cow's milk, but on rice, fish sauce, and the care of your Vietnamese parents. Do not be infected by foreign customs, do not copy a truant American and Western lifestyle to wear ridiculous clothes, to behave insincerely, and to hurt the Vietnamese Nation! … Your education is of the sort for colonialists and, besides, utterly stupid. … Why do you still adhere to something that after eighty years of domination our people did not accept? … We hope that you are in a minority.[36]

The derision directed toward French education in general and those who attended such schools was not unusual. Students of Lycée Marie Curie in Saigon felt offended by the characterisation of their education as 'stupid', for they worked hard and objected to the view that their schooling was simply a pursuit of the path of colonials. They were unwilling to equate French colonialism to the French nation:

> We think that when a war is over, we should completely eliminate prior resentment and instead look to the beautiful future … How then to think about a thousand years of Chinese domination? Who invented *quốc ngữ*? What nationality was A. de Rhodes?[37] Was he also a colonialist? Then why be grateful to a "colonialist"?'[38]

35 'Một Bức Thư của Nhóm Hippy Học Trường Tây Nha Trang' [Letter by a group of hippies from the Western School in Nha Trang], *Thằng Bờm*, 20, 7 Jul. 1970, p. 9.
36 'Hội Trường Thằng Bờm [Thằng Bờm's meeting room], *Thằng Bờm*, 26, 8 Aug. 1970, p. 19.
37 Alexander de Rhodes (1591–1660) was the French Jesuit who compiled the first Vietnamese-Western language dictionary (Vietnamese-French-Portuguese) using a Latinised writing system for Vietnamese, *quốc ngữ*, which completely replaced the traditional character-based writing system in the early twentieth century.
38 Hội Trường Thằng Bờm', *Thằng Bờm*, 29, 25 Sept. 1970, pp. 20–21.

The Lycée Marie Curie students further objected to labelling Chinese and French contributions to their country's culture and traditions as 'colonialist' or as 'domination'. They affirmed that they did not support French colonialism, but they also insisted upon an unbiased evaluation of French schools: 'Besides, our spirit has never been dominated by anyone because we are smart enough to be able to distinguish between left and right [i.e. right and wrong].' They questioned why the word 'domination' was so carelessly used because they saw themselves as people of an independent Vietnam. They claimed that they stood for the honour of the Vietnamese nation as well as for their own personal honour. They proudly explained: 'That is why we boycotted classes, sitting for hours in the burning sun in the courtyard to protest each time against the mistakes of our French teachers when they damaged the honour of the Vietnamese nation, which is the same as our own honour.' Moreover, the students objected to the idea that Western education was the path to becoming a hippy: 'In Vietnam there are more than 100,000 hippies and more than 20,000 students in French schools. Even if we assume that all 20,000 are hippies (according to your theory) then we should ask ourselves from what schools do the other 80,000 come?'[39]

But not all students of Western schools saw eye-to-eye with the Nha Trang letter writers. A group of students from another Western school, Lycée Yersin in Dalat, maintained the Nha Trang students' right to freedom of speech, but found their position unacceptable. They targetted the Nha Trang students' low regard for the poorer stratum of society in contrast with a seemingly high regard for American culture. Defending themselves from Nguyễn Vỹ's assumption that hippies almost exclusively came from rich and powerful families, the Nha Trang students had attacked young people of poorer backgrounds whom Nguyễn Vỹ considered less likely to join the hippies. First, they had stated that no Vietnamese was so poor that they could not afford 'leisure and debauchery'. Second, they opposed the view of hippies from the wealthier class as turning into thugs: 'That is not necessarily so. Those who become thugs are likely poor low-class kids trying to be cool and to fit in by imitating the hippy lifestyle, not kids from good families, no way!'[40]

The Lycée Yersin's students blasted the Nha Trang students for what they called snootiness. They exclaimed in indignation: 'It is abhorrent to brag that one is from a wealthy family, from the family of an official, and to express disdain towards the poor.' They were disgusted by the Nha Trang students' following 'the depraved turbulent American way of life, imitating the Beatles, the Yankees, to "make love not war"'. They denounced this kind of behaviour particularly because of the circumstances: 'The country is in the midst of a devastating war, our nation is deeply afflicted, death and grief are everywhere, so a group of rich kids from a Western school call to "make love" and "to love freedom" and then scorn the poor, calling them "bums" — there is nothing to brag about that!'[41]

Responding to the Nha Trang hippies, the author of another letter, a student named Khương Tùng from Saigon, wrote:

39 Ibid.
40 'Một Bức Thư của Nhóm Hippy Học Trường Tây Nha Trang' [Letter by a group of hippies from the Western School in Nha Trang], *Thằng Bờm*, 20, 7 Jul. 1970, p. 9.
41 'Hội Trường Thằng Bờm,' *Thằng Bờm*, 22, 1 Aug. 1970, p. 19.

> This group went astray, which places blame on society, for society, now boiling and torn to pieces, taught this group their flaws. If there was no foreign influence in Giao Chỉ [Vietnam], why would we become hippies? … If this society were not full of deceit, why would there be such dreadful social phenomena? If there were none of these people with golden or red hair in the country, why would there be late night gatherings and entertainments, the selling of drugs, ringleaders of gangs, and black markets? If the people in this society were not so heartless as to trample on each other, from where would this tragic plight and corruption come?[42]

Khương Tùng's letter is not a defence of the Nha Trang students and hippies. It does not exonerate them. Rather it is a wake-up call for a society that, in the author's opinion, has wrecked, commercialised, and dehumanised itself and its young people for the sake of politics. The reference to Giao Chỉ, an appellation for Vietnamese territory under Chinese rule, suggests that the author saw the American presence in Vietnam as having similarities with that earlier foreign occupation.

If Nguyễn Vỹ's goal had been to unite Vietnamese youth against what he considered to be a destructive phenomenon plaguing Vietnamese society as a result of American intervention, he did not achieve it. On the contrary, the hippie debate further divided young people. Thus, Nguyễn Vỹ decided to curb the discussion and attempted a reconciliatory step to mitigate the contradictions that had arisen and to directly identify the enemy:

> I want to remind you that we are resolutely against the Hippy Movement, because hippies are a depraved phenomenon of corrupted American gangs, a phenomenon completely opposed to the Vietnamese national spirit; certainly we are not against French schools or American schools in purely educational aspects.[43]

The discussion in *Thằng Bờm* was followed by pieces about hippies in other venues. A typical example is found in *Dậy* (Rise), which identified itself as a magazine for 'fighting youth'.[44] A strongly anti-American and anti-war publication, it took the baton from *Thằng Bờm*. An anonymous author addressed the young people of Saigon and other cities of South Vietnam, whom the author pities as, in the author's view, they are lonely and full of fantasies:

> I beg forgiveness for what I will say about hippies below. These words are but the result of indignation caused by the betrayal of our country by a group of spoiled-rotten young people while at the same time the people of our country continue to experience endless pain. Even more deplorable is the fact that they receive protection and encouragement in every way from the lackeys and foremen of war contractors.

Echoing the response of Khương Tùng to the Nha Trang students published in *Thằng Bờm*, the article blames not the youngsters but the adults: 'The fact that grown-ups are

42 'Hội Trường Thằng Bờm,' *Thằng Bờm*, 24, 15 Aug. 1970, pp. 19, 32.
43 'Hội Trường Thằng Bờm,' *Thằng Bờm*, 29, 19 Sept. 1970, p. 20.
44 *Dậy* magazine, established by Đinh Đông Phương, had an extremely difficult and short life. Only six issues were published. It was plagued by financial difficulties and clashes with the authorities, which resulted in some of its issues being confiscated, as reported in its pages. See, for example, *Dậy*, 4, 26 May 1971, p. 1.

servants of the protector-magicians with white faces and blue eyes is indeed wicked.' The article considered it to be an appalling hypocrisy that on the one hand those in power try to instil into young peoples' heads ideas of a Vietnamese nation while at the same time beguiling many young people with 'sweet but poisonous pills, such as Honda motorcycles imported in great quantities from Japan, magazines like *Playboy*, *Men*, and *Bachelor* … records and cassettes with songs and music for the American soldiers' clubs, LSD, hashish, OK Salem [cigarettes].' The author argues that as a result of 'eating these wicked sweets, young city people are poisoned and have become a race of half people, half cowards, half orangutan'. Saigon hippies, according to the author, are a distortion of the world hippy movement, which has beautiful guiding principles, warm songs, is full of love and ardent opposition to war. Saigon hippies, on the other hand, distort these principles, turning them into wickedness and adopting only external, superficial elements. The author expresses a hope that Saigon hippies would come around to become 'influential and politicised members of society, strongly opposed to war.'[45]

Hippies were not always politically controversial. In 1971, *Bé Mai*, a short-lived magazine for 'women of the future', published a story entitled 'Hippies' written by a young woman named Ngọc Mai from Biên Hòa, a Saigon suburb. The narrator, a young girl, relates a story about the visit of two teenagers who dropped by to see her brother Thành. Seeing both of them clad in cowboy pants and tattooed, Mai confused their gender, wrongly identifying the one with long hair as a *cô* (a young woman), and then, in an attempt to rectify her mistake, addressed the other visitor incorrectly as an *anh* (older brother). These two were members of a 'gang of three ghosts'. When Thành's brother comes home, his clothes are torn and he looks like the visitors that Mai had met prior to his arrival. The girl was afraid that her brother was the third in the 'three ghosts gang', but, to her relief, Thành explained his outfit by an incident at a friend's house where a dog had torn his clothes to pieces. Thus, her suspicion of him belonging to the 'three ghosts gang' was unfounded.[46]

The tone of this story is much less negative toward hippies than the letters and essays in the other two publications. Rather then presenting hippies as a destructive force undermining the basis of Vietnamese culture and society, the story shows confusion on the verge of amusement from mistaken genders caused by appearance, which nevertheless definitely broke with tradition. A reader responded to this story in another issue of the magazine with another tale entitled 'Hippy ả la mode'. A girl's family is divided over hippies. Her father and younger brother are in favour of hippies while she and her mother are not. The girl is often berated by her male relatives for wearing traditional Vietnamese dress (*áo dài*) instead of something modern and fashionable that would be much more appropriate for the age of the Apollo moon landings. But the girl feels avenged one day when her brother comes back from school in a hippy costume and dances to the song 'I am a soldier of love'. She complains to her mother, and her brother gets whipped. She concludes with a poem she

45 hm [sic], 'Nói Với Người Anh Em Hippy Saigon' [Talking with Saigon hippies], *Dậy*, 5, 27 May 1971, p. 16.
46 Ngọc Mai, 'Hippies', *Bé Mai*, 10, [n.d.] 1971, pp. 2–3, 7.

recited to him during his beating, with the words: 'My younger brother, a cool hippy, was whipped: A deserving end to the hippy's life.'[47]

This story reveals that families as well as society generally were divided over how to respond to novel lifestyles, and women tended to remain guardians of tradition. 'Hippiness' in this story is portrayed as something silly and superficial that pokes fun at tradition and is eventually humiliated. Vietnameseness wins, even if through the discipline of a heavy-handed mother.

What harms Vietnamese youth: Drugs

Interestingly enough, *Thiếu Nhi* did not publish anything about hippies. According to Nhật Tiến, even though people working at *Thiếu Nhi* were well aware of the hippies who fell under the influence of Western music, in his opinion they were not harmful for society and usually did not do drugs.[48] Drugs were the main concern for the editors of *Thiếu Nhi*, so much so that they declared drugs the number one enemy of Vietnamese youth.[49] Indeed, drug use among urban youth dramatically rose at the end of the 1960s.[50]

Thiếu Nhi did not have the anti-American or anti-foreign political agenda of Nguyễn Vỹ and *Thằng Bờm*. As Nhật Tiến put it: 'We never considered Americans as aggressors.'[51] Providing education and entertainment for young people, the magazine tried to stay away from political issues. However, the creators of the magazine considered drug addiction as a fact that they should address to save the youth. In 1973, *Thiếu Nhi* launched a campaign against drugs. It was the first, and perhaps the last, such campaign in youth magazines. Nguyễn Hùng Trương in a letter to the readers discussed the damage of drugs to mental and physical health. He also gave a short historical survey of the spread of drug use. There he mentioned the role of the French in spreading drugs in Vietnam after they had established their colonial domination, 'to weaken our people in order to rule easily.'[52] However, Nguyễn Hùng Trương connected the spread of drugs in contemporary Vietnam to neither the French nor the Americans. The magazine discussed the influence of drugs under three categories: First, personal, with mental and physical illness and early death; second, familial, with uselessness as a member of one's family due to being irresponsible and wasting family resources; and third, national and social, with the loss of social position and the inflicting of damage on other people, turning into a useless and dangerous member of society and sliding into the world of crime.[53]

Thiếu Nhi developed a systematic anti-drug campaign by publishing materials each week elucidating the harmfulness of drugs and launching a literary competition

47 Nguyễn Thụy, 'Hippy à la mode', *Bé Mai*, 14, [n.d.] 1971, p. 7.
48 Personal correspondence, Nhật Tiến, July 2011.
49 'Tuần Báo Thiếu Nhi Với Chiến Dịch Bài Trừ Ma Túy' [*Thiếu Nhi* weekly's campaign for the elimination of drugs], *Thiếu Nhi*, 111, 12 Oct. 1973, p. 2.
50 *Le Monde,* 'Selection Hebdomadaire', May 1970, pp. 14–20, quoted in Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 331.
51 Personal correspondence, Nhật Tiến, July 2011.
52 Nguyễn Hùng Trương, 'Thư Chủ Nhiệm Gửi các Em Thiếu Nhi' [Director's Letter to the readers of *Thiếu Nhi*], *Thiếu Nhi*, 111, 12 Oct. 1973, p. 1.
53 Bách Khoa, 'Tìm Hiểu Sự Độc Mại của Ma Túy' [Understanding the harm of drugs], *Thiếu Nhi*, 112, 19 Oct. 1973, pp. 2, 16.

called *Chống Ma Tuý* (Against drugs). Readers were invited to submit poems in 'six-eight verse', a distinctively Vietnamese form of poetry, or in the form of *ca dao* (folk songs). The responses from readers were warm and positive, displaying interest in and concern about the drug problem. One of the readers wrote a letter thanking the magazine for organising the campaign and suggesting that the idea of composing poems was very helpful as poetry easily enters into the minds of young people and they would be reciting it.[54] Several poems written by readers addressed the drug issue. Three of them presented different ways of understanding the damage caused by drugs.

One poem juxtaposes the value of family and teachers in early life. The author, in the best tradition of filial piety, views them as his foundation, his source of support and stability that would help him to stay away from drugs and to continue his productive life as a student. He advises other students to do the same:

> Feel grateful to your father and appreciate your mother, pay respect to your teachers;
> Do not listen to bad friends who would condemn you
> To the quarters of cannabis;
> You should run fast and far from them, otherwise you will be destroyed.[55]

Another poem appealed to what the author saw as the best 'built-in' Vietnamese qualities of wisdom, independence, and strength of will:

> Wise people select their friends to spend time with,
> Select games of value, select places to hang out;
> If you see bad people, don't ape them:
> Wine, card games, smoking, injections [of drugs] wave your hand to say no,
> Because Vietnamese people should be proud,
> Quick-minded and clear-headed, second in their strength to no one,
> Students are the future,
> People and the country are waiting to take a part in shouldering the burden.[56]

A third poem appealed to aesthetics by portraying the destruction of a young girl's physical beauty. It compares the appearance of beautiful pomelo buds with that of a young female drug addict. Blossoming pomelo buds appealed in their nascent beauty, but a young girl, who was also supposed to bloom, had completely lost her appeal from using drugs.

> Emaciated face, cheeks deeply sunken in,
> Color and scent withered up, why this fate?
> Cannabis is in your way,
> The spring of your life is very beautiful — just reverse [what you are doing to yourself].[57]

54 T.C., 'Gia Đình Thiếu Nhi Với Chiến Dịch Bài Trừ Ma Túy' [Thiếu Nhi family in the campaign for the elimination of drugs], *Thiếu Nhi*, 112, 19 Oct. 1973, p. 17.
55 Thiện Tánh, 'Lời Khuyên Học Trò' [Advice for students], *Thiếu Nhi*, 112, 19 Oct. 1973, p. 2.
56 Ngàn Thuyên, 'Sống Mạnh Sống Hùng' [To live strong, to live brave], *Thiếu Nhi*, 112, 19 Oct. 1973, p. 2.
57 Sơn Khê, 'Gửi Ai' [To you], *Thiếu Nhi*, 112, 19 Oct. 1973, p. 2.

All three poems praised assets and innate qualities that were thought to be available to all Vietnamese and affirmed that discarding them for the call of drugs was equivalent to throwing one's self away.

What promised to be a useful and engaging enterprise came to an abrupt end shortly after the second anti-drug issue came out, however. When I asked Nhật Tiến about the reason for this, he explained that, even before beginning the campaign, he and his colleagues had heard whispers softly admonishing: '*Thieu Nhi* is courageous to start an anti-drug campaign!' After the first publication, the leaders of *Thiếu Nhi* were, for the first time, summoned to the Ministry of Propaganda on an unrelated issue, and, for the first time, an issue of *Thiếu Nhi* was censored. According to Nhật Tiến, the Ministry found a picture of a tattoo offensive. Even though the editorial board did not have any concrete evidence, they decided that this episode was connected to their anti-drug campaign as many powerful people were implicated in the distribution of drugs. As a result, the board abandoned the campaign.[58]

Raising Vietnamese

Turning from negative phenomena deserving condemnation, much of the positive encouragement in youth magazines aimed to instil a love of ancestors and of family as the way to gain pride in being Vietnamese. Shortly after its appearance in 1971, *Thiếu Nhi* founded the '*Thiếu Nhi* family'.[59] The magazine organised activities such as games, lectures, and outings for readers who joined 'the family'. These activities were aimed at keeping these young people off the streets and expand their education. The same purpose was served by establishing a section in the magazine called *Bài Luận Hay Nhất Lớp* (The most interesting essays). Teachers from different schools submitted their students' best essays along with their comments to give readers examples of good writing. One aim was to encourage the idea that mastering the language and writing it well was an essential marker of being Vietnamese.

Thiếu Nhi's readers were provided with an excellent example of a writer in the Vietnamese language: Phùng Khắc Khoan (1528–1613), a military strategist, diplomat, and scholar. *Thiếu Nhi* highlighted Phùng Khắc Khoan's talent with a popular story about his mission to the Chinese court. The Chinese emperor reminded him in a skilfully constructed sentence that Vietnam still had traces of the Chinese expedition that pacified it in the first century C.E. Phùng Khắc Khoan swiftly responded in an even more skilfully constructed verse that Bạch Đàng River still smelt of blood, referring to a tenth-century battle in which Chinese invaders were defeated by the Vietnamese. This response supposedly made the Emperor fearful of Phùng Khắc Khoan's ability[60] to wield language like a weapon.

Many other Vietnamese personalities that the magazine introduced to its readers were not military men or those who demonstrated exceptional physical prowess, but rather those whose strength lay in their intellectual abilities, which they used to serve their country, often against foreigners. The gallery of these personalities included Vũ Huyến, a chess master, who according to oral tradition helped his country in a time of

58 Personal correspondence, Nhật Tiến, July 2011.
59 'Gia Đình Thiếu Nhi' [Thiếu Nhi family], *Thiếu Nhi* 9, 10 Oct. 1971, p. 32.
60 Yếu Phu Sư Tồm, 'Trạng Bùng. Phùng Khắc Khoan', *Thiếu Nhi*, 35, 23 Apr. 1972, pp. 12–13.

conflict with China,[61] and Nguyễn Trãi, a famous scholar and poet whose intellectual genius helped Lê Lợi to expel Chinese occupiers in the fifteenth century.[62] However, in accordance with its goal of giving its readers a broad education and expanding their horizons, *Thiếu Nhi* seemed to have more extensive coverage of foreign, mainly Western, intellectuals and other prominent historical figures.

Thằng Bờm emphasised discussion of all things Vietnamese in general and of ancestors in particular. *Thằng Bờm* was often relatively blatant, or more didactic, in revealing its purpose in introducing a particular personality. The first article in the inaugural issue of *Thằng Bờm* is about Trần Quốc Toản (1267–85), a prince who was shunned from participating in the war against the invading Mongols in the thirteenth century because of his youth. He then gathered his own army and fought valiantly. He became a major commander in the Vietnamese army and was killed in battle at the age of sixteen. However, this example was not meant to urge young people to emulate Trần Quốc Toản by gathering their own armies. In the tradition of Aesop's and La Fontaine's fables, Bé Kim, the author of the article and one of the 'organisers' of the magazine, directly announced the moral of the story for its readers: 'Would it be easy to find a little gentleman of a boy with such courage and fortitude as Trần Quốc Toản? Aren't Vietnamese youngsters proud [to have such an ancestor]?'[63] The author implies that there is no need to borrow anything from other cultures when yours is definitely superior to them.

Thằng Bờm continued this tradition of instilling in its young readers pride in their ancestors. It provided examples of admirable personalities in struggles against foreigners, for example Nguyễn Thông (1827–84), a writer and poet who was also a government official when the French invaded Vietnam. In order to save his country from the French, he had, according to *Thằng Bờm*, proposed four measures: to employ capable people to manage state affairs; to reform the army; to reduce land taxes and end the waste of money spent on royal mausoleums; and, finally, to be tolerant of people who opposed the king's failed policies. However, court officials slandered Nguyễn Thông because they 'hated courageous people'. Nguyễn Thông was imprisoned and beaten 'until he vomited blood'.[64] According to the article, Nguyễn Thông 'gave an indomitable example for all young men during a time of war'.[65] This example covertly criticised the government by applauding one who criticised the authorities.

The magazine also featured Vietnamese spiritual beings. *Thằng Bờm* contained a story about Princess Liễu Hạnh, a prominent female spirit whose cult originated in the sixteenth century and spread widely in the North. Crediting Liễu Hạnh with providing assistance against foreigners in previous centuries, the article affirmed that her cult had struck roots in the South also, and that she still helped the nation.[66]

61 Đặng Hoàng, 'Vũ Huyến (Trạng Cờ)' [Vũ Huyến, chessmaster], *Thiếu Nhi*, 21, 2 Jan. 1972, p. 10.
62 Nhật Tiến, 'Ngọn Cờ Núi Lam' [Banner of Lam Mountain], *Thiếu Nhi*, 14, 14 Nov. 1971, pp. 10–15.
63 Kim Chích Chòe (one of the three fictional correspondents), 'Trần Quốc Toán: Anh Hùng 16 Tuổi!' [Trần Quốc Toán: Sixteen-year-old hero!], *Thằng Bờm*, 1, 14 Mar. 1970, pp. 8–9.
64 Bờm (one of the three fictional correspondents), 'Nguyễn Thông', *Thằng Bờm*, 29, 19 Sept. 1970, pp. 3–4.
65 Ibid.
66 Kim Chích Chòe, 'Liễu Hạnh Công Chúa' [Princess Liễu Hạnh], *Thằng Bờm*, 35, 31 Oct. 1970, p. 32. The article was also reprinted several times in other issues of *Thằng Bờm*: 33, 17 Oct. 1970, pp. 15; 34, 24 Oct. 1970, p. 4; 35, 31 Oct. 1970, pp. 4, 32.

It is clear that *Thằng Bờm* saw the destructive effect of foreign influence, not communist North Vietnam, as the main threat to Vietnam and to Vietnameseness, announcing: 'Our Thằng Bờm family will not accept any rootless foreign movement; on the contrary, we will establish the noble spirit of the Hùng kings' race.'[67] The Hùng kings were the legendary founders of Vietnamese history in antiquity. *Thằng Bờm* readers responded to this with poems embracing this idea. In one of the poems, a girl wakes up one morning and finds her mother in a troubled mood. At first puzzled, she finally understands her mother's sadness:

> I hear the soul that loves and misses
> The Beloved North,
> Hanoi with its 36 Streets,[68]
> I think of its dazzling beauty.[69]

The girl sees that for her mother the North is not an enemy but a home, and she dreams of the end of the war in order to accompany her mother there. Another reader echoes this sentiment:

> I want to light a lamp
> To see beloved faces:
> Here is mother, here is father, here are my siblings, here is suffering Vietnam.

For this writer, 'Vietnam' is a family, indivisible despite all its difficulties. The author then expresses hope:

> I want people to not feel resentment towards each other,
> To hold hands, to sit around a lamp and look at each other,
> To look into each other's beloved Vietnamese faces.[70]

These lines show the desire for a sense of connection among Vietnamese, one that would brush aside their wartime hostilities.

In *Thiếu Nhi*, hardly any adult wrote directly about the war, and, accordingly, most of the readers who wrote in did not touch on the subject either. But occasionally similar sentiments toward the North as those in the pages of *Thằng Bờm* were expressed in *Thiếu Nhi*:

> Mother says that my native place is in the North,
> If there is peace, I would like to visit,
> But the teacher says it's still very far,
> Because our country remains at war.
> The geography teacher explains:
> Bến Hải River and Hiền Lương Bridge[71]

67 Nguyễn Vỹ, 'Dù Trong Xã Hội Loạn Ly Bê Bối Ngày Nay, Thằng Bờm Vẫn Luôn Luôn Giữ' [Thằng Bờm still keeps goodness and shuns the shameful], *Thằng Bờm*, 68, 16 July 1971, p. 2.
68 The 36 streets of Hanoi's Old Quarter, developed in accord with craftsmen's guilds in the thirteenth century, are considered to be the heart and soul of the city.
69 Thiên Bảo, "Bé Mơ" [I dream], *Thằng Bờm*, 77, 22 Oct. 1971, p. 35.
70 Thi Thi, 'Ước Vọng' [Aspiration], *Thằng Bờm*, 78, 29 Oct. 1971, p. 14.
71 These served to mark the border between North and South Vietnam from 1954 to 1975.

Cut Vietnam into two parts,
But we still are the same flesh and blood.
The teacher teaches us to love our homeland,
Even if divided, to still love the North,
Because there are a lot of relatives there.[72]

Such poems and stories are relatively rare in *Thiếu Nhi* and penned by readers without any prompting from the adult editors. The magazine provided an outlet for readers to share their feelings about the war, to let other readers know that if they had similar feelings, they were not alone. But the adults did not open such a discussion themselves, for political reasons or because they wanted to distract their readers from the realities of the war. In general, the magazine tried to uphold a very positive view of life, which was reflected in many of the writings submitted by its readers:

Going to school in the morning,
I study assiduously,
Childhood is as precious as jade,
I like my friends and love my teacher.

The picture in this poem becomes increasingly idyllic as the day proceeds with a siesta, afternoon playtime, and homework. But the climax of the day comes in the evening:

In the evening in perfect concord
The entire family gets together,
Brimful of love,
Oceans of joy.[73]

This poem highlights another feature of what was considered to be a salient traditional characteristic of Vietnamese — family, family ties, and filial piety. The effects of war and of a foreign army on Vietnamese soil loomed as a large threat over the traditional idea of family. Many wartime writers and magazines turned to this problem.[74] Both *Thiếu Nhi* and *Thằng Bờm* invested much effort on emphasising this issue. *Thiếu Nhi* admonished its readers: 'In your still young age, you perhaps don't understand your father and mother. … You have many blessings, the greatest blessing is to have parents.' Nguyễn Hùng Trương stressed that parents

> are hurt when they see their child not making progress in [his/her] studies. Parents also feel unhappy and hopeless when they know that their child loiters about, indulges in playing, harming [his/her] entire future. You often reproach your parents for being too strict. … But do you know that it's parents who worry about and take care of you? Their experience is very important to you. Don't think that your parents are fogeyish and underdeveloped.[75]

72 Lạc Thủy, 'Ước Mơ Thanh Binh' [Wishing for peace], *Thiếu Nhi*, 51, 13 Aug. 1972, p. 18.
73 Hoàng Nhất Hằng, 'Một Ngày của Em' [My day], *Thiếu Nhi*, 7, 26 Sept. 1971, p. 19.
74 Notable among these were the writers Nguyễn Thụy Long and Duyên Anh, as well as Nguyễn Vỹ and Nhật Tiến and magazines including *Tuổi Hoa* and *Tuổi Ngọc*.
75 Nguyễn Hùng Trương, 'Thư Chủ Nhiệm Gửi Các Em Thiếu Nhi' [Director's letter to the readers of *Thiếu Nhi*], *Thiếu Nhi*, 66, 26 Nov. 1972, pp. 1–2.

Many readers expressed their love and admiration for their parents, especially for their mothers. Some readers wrote poetry about mundane routines to demonstrate their appreciation:

> This morning I woke up at seven o'clock,
> After washing my face I wait for my sticky rice,
> My mother already got up a long time ago,
> Sitting near the stove there is a pot with perfectly cooked sticky rice.
> Seeing the light of my eyes, quiet and gentle,
> Mother fondly asks me if I am hungry,
> But to wait a moment for roasted beans
> Mixed with salted sesame, wonderfully tasty;
> My heart feels the warmth and sweetness of my mother's love.[76]

While there were frequent, if sporadic, references to filial piety in *Thiếu Nhi*, it was a central and constant theme in *Thằng Bờm*, which organised numerous literary competitions for its readers soliciting pieces on the topic. Almost every issue published poems or a short story by readers about their feelings towards their families. Some of them transcended the boundaries of the family and equated mothers to Vietnam itself.

> Mother is the Pacific Ocean with a fine smell;
> Mother is the Vietnamese homeland: North, Centre, and South;
> She covers her child warmly and shelters the child safe and secure
> The embrace of Mother's arms is priceless.[77]

Reasserting Vietnamese traditional family values was not something peculiar to these two magazines. Other magazines also promulgated filial piety. One of them rather surprisingly referred to a Southern hero named Lê Văn Khôi to emphasise filial piety.

Lê Văn Khôi had a strong association with the South and was popular there. His adoptive father, Lê Văn Duyệt (1763–1832), a Southerner, was prominent in the wars that resulted in the unification of the country under the leadership of another Southerner, Prince Nguyễn Ánh. In 1802, Nguyễn Ánh became Emperor Gia Long at Hue. Lê Văn Duyệt subsequently became viceroy of the South and enjoyed autonomy in ruling from Saigon. After Gia Long's death, his son and successor, Minh Mạng (r. 1820–41), aimed to assert central authority over the South. In response to this, Lê Văn Khôi led the South in rebellion to gain independence from the imperial court at Hue.[78]

The figure of Lê Văn Khôi could have served Southern political interests to highlight regional differences, the struggle between the two parts of the country, or the history of Southern autonomy and even independence. However, when he was featured in one children's magazine, these opportunities to convey a political message were neglected. One story that was chosen instead emphasised Lê Văn Khôi's filial

76 Tiểu Thử, 'Lòng Mẹ' [Mother's heart], *Thiếu Nhi*, 77, 18 Feb. 1973, p. 5.
77 Nguyễn Thị Linh, 'Mẹ' [Mother], *Thằng Bờm*, 44, 8 Jan. 1971, p. 27.
78 See Nguyễn Phan Quang, *Lê Văn Khôi và sự Biến Thành Phiên An, 1833–1835* [Le Van Khoi and the establishment of Phien An Citadel] (Ho Chi Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học, 2002).

piety and his personal strength. According to this story, Lê Văn Khôi's adoptive father, Lê Văn Duyệt, had a cage with tigers in his house. To entertain a Siamese envoy who came for a visit, Lê Văn Duyệt decided to stage a fight between his adopted son and a tiger kept hungry for a number of days to augment its ferocity. Lê Văn Khôi proved himself equal to the task and killed the beast. The elated envoy was about to start clapping his hands in approval but Lê Văn Duyệt reacted very differently, sternly rebuking his son for killing the tiger. The nonplussed envoy could not understand why Lê Văn Khôi was allowed to catch the tiger alive, but not to kill it. Despite his son's remorse and his guest's surprise, Lê Văn Duyệt's indignation only increased and he ordered another fight with another tiger, twice as big as the first one. This time, Lê Văn Khôi subdued the tiger and put him back into the cage to the full satisfaction of everyone.[79]

While the episode recounted here for children demonstrated Lê Văn Khôi's outstanding courage and physical prowess, it clearly centred on Lê Văn Khôi's reaction to his father's discontent despite the jeopardy to his own life, presenting a pattern of emulation for children's behaviour towards their parents. Lê Văn Khôi's example in this story is somewhat akin to that of the legendary Chinese emperor Shun, considered a paragon of the Confucian virtue of filial piety, who, despite being treated with hostility by his evil parents, remained adamantly kind to them and lovingly fulfilled his duties to them.

Not surprisingly, writing submitted by children also reflected this idea. For example, in a poem entitled '*Tình Mẹ*' (Motherly Feeling), Huỳnh Nhắn Sĩ wrote:

> Ten plus years of my mother's miserable life,
> To remain awake till late, to rise up early, the colour of her hair has faded,
> To raise a bunch of small kids,
> Mother has persevered in poverty.[80]

In response to a literary competition in another magazine, *Bé Mai*, a reader highly praised a father's love:

> Father's love towers like Mt San [a famous high peak in China],
> It blazes like a torch for a child to follow the road.[81]

Conclusion

This brief excursion into youth magazines in wartime South Vietnam reveals a very complex example of a society under the double duress of civil war and the presence of an allied foreign army. The Vietnamese communist enemy threatened the existing social order, but the threat posed by the American ally was perceived as even more immediate and serious, for it placed into question the sense of national identity that had become so important to modern Vietnamese after surviving decades of colonial rule. The magazines examined here expose a raw nerve in Southern

79 'Võ Tòng Việt Nam Lê Văn Khôi' [Le Van Khoi, the Vietnamese Wu Song], *Thằng Còm*, 6, 5 Feb. 1971, p. 21.
80 Huỳnh Nhắn Sĩ, 'Tình Mẹ' [Motherly feelings], *Họa Mi*, 7-A, 18 Nov. 1970, p. 23.
81 Trang Việt, 'Tình Cha' [Father's love], *Bé Mai*, 6, 1971, p. 32.

Vietnamese thinking about the future of their country, expressing as they did the deep longings of adults over the future of their children in a time of violence and sociocultural turmoil.

Unlike in the North, there was no state strategy to shape the younger generation to be tools of political authority. While to some extent this may be viewed as a weakness, if not a handicap, in wartime, it nevertheless shows an important value of Southern society that many considered worth fighting to preserve: freedom from the totalitarian agenda of the communists in the North. Southerners did not discipline their youth to maximise state power. They fought for individuals to be free of projects to remake society into a mass and so they gave to their youth freedom from coercive state control over thought and life choices. In any case, the great diversity of public opinion in the South and the extent to which the government was absorbed in the military struggle rendered implausible any campaign to enforce uniformity of thought and action among the young.

Beyond this, what most concerned Southerners about the future of their youth was that they continue to be Vietnamese; the most immediate threat to this was perceived to be the American cultural influence that flooded out from the nearly ubiquitous US military bases in the country and the large numbers of American civilians working in the cities. The heated debates about hippies show a sharp reaction against the phenomenon of Vietnamese youth imitating the lifestyle of American hippies. The issue of drugs was peripheral to this, because it was not explicitly a challenge to being Vietnamese to the extent that the appeal of being a hippie was. And this points to the fundamental problem of ensuring that youth grew up to be Vietnamese and not some kind of denationalised extension of a foreign culture.

Because American influence was a result of the war, Southerners who worried about youth tended to be sympathetic toward an anti-war stance. They wanted to live in peace, but they especially wanted a peaceful country in which children could grow up to be Vietnamese. Magazines offered different views about how to raise children, from simply providing education and entertainment to criticising the war and the American influence on Vietnam. None tried to mobilise the young for war. But all promoted traditional family values as the bulwark of national identity. Identifying foreigners and foreign influence as the main enemy, as *Thằng Bờm* did, or avoiding the reasons and causes of the war, as did *Thiếu Nhi* and some other journals, left unexamined the fact that, Americans aside, the war was between Vietnamese about different versions of being Vietnamese in the modern world. This void was obliquely addressed by the intense concern about Vietnamese youth failing to be Vietnamese, for if the future generation should lose its sense of being Vietnamese then the reason for fighting the war was lost. Consequently, it was more important for youth to be Vietnamese than for them to be mobilised on the battlefields.

It may superficially appear that these magazines failed to exhort youth to contribute to the national cause and instead encouraged them to simply passively wait for the end of the war, but behind this impression was a deeper agenda related to the problem of being Vietnamese that was at stake in the war. While communism threatened the social and family values of Southerners, Vietnamese communists were still Vietnamese. On the other hand, the anti-communist American allies could never be Vietnamese and the threat of American culture seducing Vietnamese youth

away from their ancestral attachments was perceived as a more serious problem than Vietnamese communism. Southerners who wrote for the magazines examined here did not want their youth to grow up to be communists, but even more they did not want their youth to grow up to be Americans. This is why the dominant emphasis in virtually all writing for youth, when it was not for pure entertainment, was on the family and the importance of filial piety, for this was understood as the anchor of being Vietnamese in the turbulent modern world.