

Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam 1948–1964

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Singapore: NUS Press, 2012. 243 pp. ISBN: 978-9971-69-554-5

This book, which was originally published in French in 2001, offers an insight into the phenomenon of the ‘new hero’ created by the state in Vietnam since 1948. It is an account of how the Communist Party of Vietnam strove to create new political and revolutionary elite from the towns and villages of the country to serve as the model for the nation in the time of the war against external aggression.

In Chapter 1, ‘Heroism in Vietnam’, the author examines the role of the Vietnamese heroic figure throughout its history. Vietnam inherited many Chinese cultural traditions. One was the Confucian hierarchical principles, which included the principle of submission such as the submission of the inferior to his superior, which would ensure the cohesion of the social whole. In this social hierarchy, all men were not born equal, and this meant that they also had different duties. As explained by the author in this chapter, a leader’s greatest responsibility was to be a model of virtue to his people. The hero was a sort of barometer of patriotic virtue, and was connected to his nation by a filial link. He represented a certain social order, but not the heart of the system. In Vietnam the hero was created by the ‘fatherland’ and was the best possible servant to his nation, the inferior to a superior being (p. 13). On what the new hero is all about in Vietnam, the author cited Truong Chinh, a well-respected leader of the Communist Party of Vietnam. According to Truong Chinh,

‘the hero is oriented towards the party, dedicated to serving the people. He does not oppress the people and takes part in the liberation of the masses. Most heroes are workers and peasants. For the good of the masses, the hero is a dedicated volunteer, exemplary in production and labour. The hero follows the political line of the Vanguard Party and the government... (p. 28).

The author goes on to explain the criteria of the new man in Vietnam in the political, technical and social aspects. He is loyal to the party, has combative or *productivist* qualities, and comes from and remains in close contact with

the masses. As this was the period of the revolution in Vietnam, and with the Vietnamese remaining strongly attached to their culture and tradition, heroism became a product of a mixture and adaptation of the past idea of Confucian principles and the new conditions in the country. The state needed heroes to carry out the spirit of the revolution as enjoined by the Party. It was against this background that the Vietnamese state proceeded to create the 'new hero'.

In Chapter 2 the author explains the goals of this programme, known as 'patriotic emulation', aimed at creating the new hero or the new man. He is the product of an 'emulation process' which connects him to the institutional apparatus of communism. The goals of this patriotic emulation programme, according to Ho Chi Minh and as cited by the author were 'to fight famine and poverty, to fight ignorance and to fight foreign invaders. The way to do this is to rely upon the people's forces.' To introduce the programme to the people, the government carried out intensive activities in the patriotic emulation campaign. In the first campaign, in the spring of 1948, one of the activities was mobilization. But it did not receive much attention from the population and not many turned out to support this programme's activities. So the state had to devise a strategy to attract the masses to support the Viet Minh. It was called the 'patriotic emulation competition', which involved competition with patriotic feeling in everything one does in order to achieve good results (p. 44). The goals of this campaign were fourfold: political, economic, cultural and military. The political goal was to establish and strengthen the party and establish political authority. Economically it would mean creating weapons, increasing rice production and reserves, reorganizing cooperatives and sabotaging the enemy's economy. Culturally, it was to eradicate illiteracy and advocate new life. Militarily, the campaign hoped to develop the people's war, create the foundation for a guerrilla war and contribute to the Resistance Fund (p. 44).

A national emulation committee created to oversee the programme was made up of government representatives, delegates of the National Assembly and members of the leadership committees of all mass organizations. Emulation committees were set up at lower levels such as the zone, province, district and commune levels. However, the programme was not very successful at lower levels (district and commune) so in the end the main task of the emulation policy was given to the provinces.

The patriotic emulation activities also included 'collective operations' (cleaning and draining canals, clearing lands etc.—somewhat similar to the *gotong royong* activities in Malay villages). The young were also involved—children were sent to villages to recite poems and sing songs about emulation. The task for the provincial cadres consisted of studying data to create programmes adapted to local conditions. They were also responsible for making records of the division of land, modes of production and standard

references of the population and their physical ability. Each emulation season lasted three to six months, at the end of which participants were given an 'emulation certificate' with a simple inscription 'I take part in emulation'. These certificates would be displayed at home so that cadres could freely control their participation (p. 47). But one must add that Vietnamese take pride in participating in such programmes and activities to serve the nation. These certificates and attestations adorned many Vietnamese homes even long after the war ended. The author also describes how emulation campaigns were carried out in Nge Tinh province, the birthplace of Ho Chi Minh, which had been a 'defensive shield from the south for centuries'.

In Chapter 3 the author explains how during the period of 1950–64 the state set out to create the emulation fighter. The period 1950–64 was an important period in the history of the Vietnamese revolution. The French had left after the Geneva Agreement of 1954 and the Americans started coming in to take the relay in South Vietnam. In 1950 Moscow and Beijing recognized the government in Hanoi under Ho Chi Minh. Vietnam had to adapt itself to these new situations and circumstances. Ho Chi Minh had to 'navigate' between the demands of the Soviet Union for a more internationalist position of the Vietnamese revolution and the Maoist idea of revolutionary warfare. Ho Chi Minh, as the author remarks, was not keen on the Chinese model, but in the end the Maoist model of re-education dominated. At this juncture, the Vietnamese government needed to do everything they could to strengthen the movement. It had two main missions: strengthen the resistance and implement agrarian reform. When the French left Vietnam in 1954, many of the officers from the north left for the south and the communist government in the north needed new cadres to 'reclaim the occupied zones and rebuild the government apparatus' (p. 57). In the selection of an emulation fighter, class was a key element. The candidate should come from 'the lower ranks of society, classified as landless, poor and middle peasants'. Although emulation fighters were chosen and trained by the party, they did not gain automatic entry into the Party as they had to meet other expectations and qualifications set by the Party to be accepted as members. Although these new heroes did not have any real power or influence within their community, they gained certain prestige in social status and obtained advantages such as higher pay.

The emulation fighter as the new hero again gained the author's attention in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Chapter 4 describes life stories of particular individuals as they were officially presented by those in power. In communist Vietnam, these biographies were written under the supervision of a special committee attached to the Party and followed the key principles of Ho Chi Minh's thought. In subsequent chapters, the author describes how the new hero was integrated into Vietnamese society even after death through rites and ceremonies to

respect those who died while serving the nation. In Vietnam they qualified as 'martyrs'. Within the community of martyrs were patriotic elite made up of exemplary men and women who died for the country's independence and the affirmation of the Communist Party. Awards were also given posthumously. The author provides facts and figures on the number of fighters in provinces or districts and also describes their place and connection to Vietnam's cult rites and traditions, its cultures and resistance against external invaders. In Chapter 6 the author highlights the 'ideologisation' among the population in remote areas, including the minorities who at that time spoke little Vietnamese. Essentially it was to make them understand about the new heroes and the revolution and to embed the revolutionary fervour among those who had not understood or received it. In his conclusion, the author affirms his main aim of this book which was to

show that the development of the exemplary man in Vietnam depended deeply on the new government's need for legitimacy and identity. The question of heroism, through the lives of a few key figures reveals the extent to which the DRV wanted to build a new nation, and in so doing sheds light on the many difficult choices that the government had to make in those uncertain times (p. 213).

Tréglodé's book is based on his doctoral thesis, and contains a large amount of detail which may not appeal to a layman: many details of names in Vietnamese, translation of Vietnamese titles and sources in Vietnamese. While these are useful for researchers and specialists, a general reader would find them a bit tedious. The history of Vietnam has been one of revolution, resistance against invaders and mounting an enormous effort to construct national unity. In carrying out this revolution and forging national pride and unity, the Communist Party of Vietnam had to face many obstacles and therefore had to look for various strategies to achieve their objectives. The 'patriotic emulation' programme was one of those, though it was little known to the outside world. Some have dismissed it as a propaganda effort or a hero-creating project of the communist government, but in Vietnam it was a reality that touched many lives. This book is extremely informative and useful in bringing to light the contribution of these men and women in the history of the Vietnamese revolution. It also provides a useful addition to the literature on an important trait of the Vietnamese: their ability and willingness to adapt external or imported ideologies to suit to their national traditions and culture.