TEACHING THE WAR: WHAT THE VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT WANTS STUDENTS TO LEARN ABOUT THE AMERICAN-VIETNAM WAR

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II. Abstract:

By studying how the American-Vietnam War is taught in high schools and universities across Vietnam, the official government policies regarding the memory of the War can be uncovered. The Vietnamese Government completely controls the education system; therefore, the government is able to control the information that is taught to future generations regarding the War. What does Vietnam’s Government want its people to remember? And what facts does it want its citizens to forget? Looking at the government-approved “message” that is present in every Vietnamese textbook and history lesson, one is able to find the answers to these questions.

III. Introduction:

The education system that exists in Vietnam today exists as a result of three influences: China’s examination system and Confucian principals, France’s government-monitored education program, and the Soviet Unions’ mono-discipline institutions. The legacies left behind by China, France, and the USSR impact every part of Vietnamese society. In particular, the education system in Vietnam exists as a result of Chinese domination, French colonialism, and Soviet patronage.

The history of education development in Vietnam is linked to the development of the country as a whole (Pham, 1999). From 111 BC to 938 AD Vietnam was “dominated by the Chinese…during this period the Chinese administrators established both and private schools, mainly for their sons, for them to become functionaries of the state administrative machinery (Ibid). Thus, from the very beginning, Vietnam’s education system worked with the government; at no time did there exist a separation between the State’s desires and the goals and functioning of Vietnam’s schools. In 1075, the Ly Dynasty organized the first national examination in Vietnam. It would be almost three hundred years before national examinations become the cornerstone of Vietnamese education; but eventually, education in Vietnam came to completely revolve around the examination system. Under the Chinese, Vietnam’s education system was defined by its
selectivity and that fact that “…it was a structured system with a focus on examinations and formal awards” (Ibid).

The most important force during the emergent years of Vietnam’s education system was neither the examination system nor the close relationship between the government and the schools. Instead, the force that would come to define and shape Vietnam’s education system was Confucianism. Confucian principals were brought from China, ultimately becoming an important influence in Vietnamese society and most importantly, in its education system (Dung, 2008). Confucianism teaches that government authority is dominant, and that a scholar class of civil servants should run the State (Ibid). Thus the relationship between educational achievement, service, and societal expectation was founded in Confucianism. Without Confucianism, the Vietnamese would not put such a heavy emphasis on education nor would there be a relationship between being a good member of society and excelling in school. China both laid the foundation of Vietnam’s modern education system and provided the ideology, Confucianism, which would become a guiding principal in Vietnamese society and views towards educational achievement (Ibid).

The next stage of educational development in Vietnam arrived with the French in 1887. At first, France maintained the “feudal system of Confucian education” (Pham, 1999). Eventually the French made a move to modernize Vietnam’s education system, mandating that Chinese characters not be taught in schools and working to increase the number of the primary schools and secondary schools in the countryside (Ibid). The Vietnamese system was made to mimic the French system and with this goal in mind, the number of vocational schools and universities was increased. “[I]n 1940 the first modern
university was set up in Hanoi…” (Tran, Lam, and Sloper, 1999). Despite these strides, “the educational system of Vietnam in the period of French colonialism was limited, with a total enrolment amounting to only 2.6 per cent of the population of [school aged children]…In common with other colonial regimes, the main objective of the educational system was to train employees for the administrative machinery” (Pham, 1999). As with the Chinese, the French aligned the Vietnamese education system with the government, making sure that the schools and the government’s objectives were one and the same.

The end of French colonial rule ushered in a new chapter of educational reform in Vietnam. After the August Revolution in 1945, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was formed. Following the revolution, President Ho Chi Minh made the following proclamation:

“An ignorant race is a weak one; we must launch the anti-illiteracy campaign to overcome the obstacle of having 95 per cent of the population illiterate. At the same time we have to lay down as a policy, the educational reform and the construction of a people’s democratic education system by keeping to three principals: that education by national, scientific, and popular” (Ibid).

During this time there was a shift away from the traditional French educational system towards a more modern education system, influenced by Ho Chi Minh’s teachings and traditional communist thought. The aim of the new education system was to “serve the patriotic war and national construction” (Ibid).

In July 1950 Vietnam’s Government Council “adopted the resolution on educational reform and for the first time the comprehensive improvement in the quality of the people’s lives was posed as the goal of education, with the guidelines that education belongs to the people, was established by the people, and that the purpose of
education was to produce competent citizens for the future” (Ibid). While many of modernization efforts were developed and nurtured by the Vietnamese, in reality, the new communist government of Vietnam was following in the footsteps of its allies, China and the Soviet Union.

Schools and universities in the Soviet Union acted as extensions of the state (Le, 2008). In the USSR, the government-approved party message was present in every textbook and reinforced by every lecture. Complete government control meant that students were cogs in a machine, feeding the State’s human resource needs rather than pursuing their individual interests. Following the end of the Vietnam-American War in 1975, the Vietnamese government would fully adopt a similar central-planning strategy.

During the Vietnam-American War, the North and South were divided and the North functioned as an independent, communist state. Throughout these formative years, the government in the North tested and discarded numerous philosophies and management styles within the Vietnamese education system. In the North, from 1954-1956, there were two education systems functioning side-by-side: the old French system, a twelve year system, grounded in traditional European teaching methods and a new, constantly changing system, created by Vietnam’s Communist Party. In this era, “complementary education began to develop” and Ho Chi Minh’s anti-illiteracy campaign increased literacy nationally by 20 per cent (Pham, 1999). At least in the North, access to education was beginning to increase and the Vietnamese government was beginning to create, for the first time, a unique Vietnamese education system.

While the Vietnamese people had always valued education, the emphasis began to shift towards formal education in middle of the twentieth century. In the past, “[the]
Vietnamese [respected] the people who [learned] from experience and [learned] from life because…many Vietnamese were too poor to afford formal education and [thus,] few went to university” (Nguyen Thi Coi, 2008). However, Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Party of Vietnam made formal education a priority. Communist ideology taught inside the classrooms reinforced the relationship between being a good citizen and achievement in education, an idea that had roots in Confucianism. Succeeding in school became part of being a good patriot. In this way, the Vietnamese government maintained control of the education system and control of its citizens.

During the American-Vietnam War, the Vietnamese government learned how to modernize and streamline the education system, increasing the number of schools without losing central-control of the education system. However, not all of the modifications made during this time period would turn out to be beneficial to Vietnam (Pham, 1999).

The largest outcome of the Soviet Union’s influence on Vietnam was the implementation of a five-year plan (Le, 2008). The five-year plan was a government policy that looked to isolate the human resource needs in the coming five years and then create a system by which these human resource needs could be filled (Ibid). In essence, the five-year plan meant that the Vietnamese government used its universities to funnel students into in-demand economic fields. Professor Le Minh, a former member of the National Assembly and the former president of Can Tho University, made it clear that the “ultimate failure of the five-year plan was that it was an incredibly complicated system, designed to control and manipulate the economy, [and it was] being implemented by men who were not trained economists, men who were ill-equipped to handle the complexities of an entire country’s economy” (2008). Nguyen Sy Anh Vu, a Hanoi University student,
pointed out that “Le Duan, the former General Secretary of the Party… was the one that implemented central planning. He was not an economist. He was a farmer, with little schooling, but he was in charge of a lot of important decisions for Vietnam” (Nguyen Sy Anh Vu, 2008).

Central planning meant that many students were not free to pursue subjects that interested them. As a result, creativity and innovation were stifled as students were forced into careers that would benefit the State. Furthermore, under central planning, Vietnam’s universities were puppets of the government. Without control of their own curriculum, budgets, or future growth, Vietnam’s universities faltered. Only now, more than twenty years later, can Vietnam’s universities operate more independently; thus allowing them to compete with other universities on the international stage. In the end, central planning crippled both Vietnam’s economy and education system.

In 1975, following the end of the War and the reunification of Vietnam, the systems that were created in the North during the War spread to the South. After 1975, the number of universities, both in the North and the South, “increased vigorously (Tran, Lam, and Sloper, 1999). In 1975, all “colleges and universities in Vietnam were united in one national system” (Ibid). Another large period of educational reform swept through Vietnam from 1975-1981. During these years the schooling period was increased from nine years to twelve and new textbooks and curriculums were issued (Pham, 1999). Additionally, Primary education was universalized. The government worked to set-up one school in every province, with special schools opening up for people living in mountainous areas and for ethnic minorities (Ibid).
During this era of reform, the Communist Party of Vietnam, following the Soviet Unions’ example, took steps to cement the education system’s place as an extension of the national government. Education for the Vietnamese government was “not simply a personal good or social good but also an investment good made by the people for the common benefit of the people” (Tran, Lam, and Sloper, 1999). In order to prepare Vietnam for entrance into the global economy, “the government [gave] high priority to strategic education development” (Pham, 1999). And in order to prepare the people of Vietnam to be good citizens under the new administration, the education system was made an institution through which the government could educate the youth while at the same time reinforce the Party message.

In Vietnam, the Communist Party serves an integral role in society and the running of the country. Vietnam is a developing country “and the government helps [this] development…by overseeing education” (Nguyen Thi Coi, 2008). There are two main components of the current educational system that are controlled by the government: textbooks and curriculums. According to Professor Nguyen Thi Coi¹ of Hanoi Pedagogic University, “the Communist Party serves an important role in writing textbooks and teaching history…and most importantly, the government provides the money for the writing of the textbooks and curriculums” (2008). In particular, textbooks are an important source of information for students. Vice Principal Minh Nga of Trần Phú high school puts it more bluntly, “there is really only one source of information in the classroom—the textbooks” (2008). Therefore, if the government controls the writing of these books, the government controls the flow of information within the classroom.

¹ See Appendix A, regarding Vietnamese names
Faculties at teaching universities write the primary school, junior high school, and high school textbooks in Vietnam. Before a textbook can be published, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) must approve the content of the book (Nguyen Thi Coi, 2008). Every school in Vietnam, excluding Universities, uses the same set of textbooks; all written by the same group of authors and all are approved by MOET. The authors of the textbooks are under a lot of pressure from the government (Tran Ngoc Diep, 2008). According to many students, “history [in Vietnam] is what they write, not what happens, but what [the textbook authors] write. And there are lots of inaccuracies in the textbooks” (Ibid). Nguyen Hanh, a retired English teacher, pointed out that the inaccuracies in Vietnamese textbook are common knowledge and that “newspapers [have been known to openly] discuss the mistakes in the textbooks.” While history books in Vietnam are not complete fabrications, “the official ‘party’ message is in [every] textbook. This political messaging is not clear to most students, it is under the surface of the text, but most teachers are aware of it” (2008).

Vietnam’s government also manages the curriculums for classes. MOET writes the national curriculums; thus, every school in Vietnam uses the same basic curriculum. In theory, under the guidance of these curriculums, university professors and high school teachers have “freedom over thirty percent of [the time in] their classes,” with the remaining seventy percent being pre-planned through the curriculum (Le, 2008). However, there are two sets of problems with the curriculums. First, it is very difficult to calculate what seventy percent of a time spent in a classroom actually translates too (Ibid). This means that the curriculums often have more information than can be covered in seventy percent of a semester and professors are forced to cut into their “free time” to
cover all of the material. This inability to predict time also means that professors are not free to follow the class discussion or indulge in tangents for fear of running out of time. The second problem with standard texts and curriculums is that they help “bad professors be lazy,” with some professors using the textbooks and curriculums as a crutch instead of coming up with original lessons (Ibid).

Within Vietnam’s education system, lack of innovation and critical thinking skills is a systemic problem. Because teachers and professors are taught in university to create lesson plans and write lectures based on the MOET curriculum and textbooks, most rely heavily on these materials. Meanwhile, because a huge government bureaucracy is in charge of writing the textbooks and curriculums in Vietnam, these materials are stripped of interest, leaving only the most basic facts behind.

History teaching in Vietnam is in the midst of a dangerous cycle. According to one Hanoi University student, Tran Ngoc Diep, “…what they are teaching never changes. In the classroom [teachers] teach history using route memorization because that’s what they were taught. And because no one likes history, no one wants to become a history teacher” (2008). It is unfortunate that the reforms that followed the American-Vietnam War did not take into account individual needs. In their rush to reinforce the Party message in school, members of the Communist Party of Vietnam created a system inimical to original thought.

Right now many Vietnamese students describe the classroom experience as “impersonal” (Huynh, 2008). Large classes, coupled with lecture-based curriculum, and boring textbooks have created a system that has led to apathetic students. It is not that Vietnamese university students don’t want to learn; instead, the university system is not
conducive to curiosity or innovation, leading to boredom and poor retention in even the best and most driven students. In a 2001 survey, ninety-seven per cent of teachers reported using textbook in every class. (See Figure 1). At the same time only twenty-nine percent of teachers reported ever using class discussion as a teaching method within their classroom (Ibid). In 1990, only sixty per cent of students said that textbooks had a positive effect on their achievement; while less than twenty five percent of students interviewed said that class size had a positive effect on their achievement (See Figure 2). It is clear from these statistics that the average Vietnamese student’s educational needs are not being satisfied under the current system (See Figure 3).

The current system needs a complete overhaul. In 1975 it was enough that the government wanted to increase the number of schools and provide textbooks for all students. However, the time has come when the nation of Vietnam needs a new system and a new philosophical approach towards education. Vietnam emerged from its victory in the American-Vietnam War with a new national philosophy: Communism. The new education system that had been created in the midst of War was repurposed. Now, high school, universities, and even primary schools around the country are meant to serve as indoctrinating institutions. The Party message is present in every textbook and reinforced in lectures. In their desperation to solidify their base, Communist Party leaders created a system where the government controlled the message and students learned facts by heart, only to forget them the next day.

In studying how history textbooks and curriculums are written today, it is possible to fully understand the aims and motivations of the government. In particular, in examining the teaching methods and the information that is taught about the American-
Vietnam War, the period of history that defined and put in power the Communist Party of Vietnam, it is possible to discern the intentions behind the national narrative. Who does the Vietnamese government want to be seen as heroes? Who does the government vilify? These questions and more can be answered by exploring the texts and reading between the lines of what is being taught in history classes throughout Vietnam.

IV. Methodology:

Three approaches were used to gather information on how the American-Vietnam War is taught in high schools and universities in Vietnam: an analysis of texts, including textbooks and curriculums; interviews with high school and university teachers, students, policy makers and curriculum writers; and the observation of a high school history class.

Though the American-Vietnam War is first introduced in primary schools in Vietnam and is also discussed in junior high school, I chose to narrow my focus to look at how the War is taught in high schools and universities. I made this decision for three reasons. First, high school students explore the topic on a deeper level than their younger counterparts. In addition, I wanted to conduct as many of my interviews in English as possible, and this was only possible when working with older students. Furthermore, limiting the scope of my study allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the high school and university systems in Vietnam, which in turn provided me with a better foundation for my research.

High school students in Vietnam all use the same history textbooks. These textbooks are written by a large group of nationally acclaimed authors. All schools in Vietnam also follow the same basic curriculum. The Ministry of Education approves both textbooks and curriculums and teachers are taught in public universities across Vietnam.
to rely heavily on textbooks for information inside their classrooms. In fact, all homework and lessons are derived from these books.

In high school, the American-Vietnam War is discussed in grades nine and twelve. I had the history books for these two grades translated into English at Hanoi University. Furthermore, I had the curriculums for these two grades translated into English. These texts provided me with the bulk of my information about how the War is taught in schools.

In order to understand how the Vietnamese people view history, the teaching history, and the American-Vietnam War, I conducted a number of interviews. On the high school level I interviewed faculty and students at the Trần Phú High School. Students at the high school were able to speak with me in English and for the faculty interviews either Ms. Thanh or Vice Principal Minh Nga acted as a translator. I also interviewed a class of twenty-five high school students and interviewed three students individually; all students interviewed were in grade 11 and all spoke very good English. Outside of Trần Phú High School I interviewed a retired English teacher and an employee at a local education-based nonprofit.

At the university level I interviewed over a dozen professors and students. I also had the opportunity to meet two textbook authors at Hanoi Pedagogic University. During my first visit, Ms. Thanh acted as my translator. After this first visit, the University provided me with a translator, Hoang Hai Ha, a student getting her masters in history at the University. Before conducting any interviews, oral permission was obtained. If the subject did not speak English, a translator would ask for and receive oral permission.
When interviewing minors at the high school, permission was obtained first from the Vice Principal and then from the students themselves.

Ultimately, these interviews provided me with fundamental information regarding the state of education in Vietnam: how the War is taught and perceived in schools; and how much the government controls the message within Vietnamese classrooms. While the textbooks and curriculums showed me what was actually being taught in classrooms, speaking with students, administrators, authors, historians, and teachers gave me a glimpse into the psyche of the Vietnamese people and showed me how education and politics in Vietnam are one and the same.

At Trần Phú High School, I had the opportunity to observe a history class. The class lasted for one period, which was forty-five minutes long. While I did not ask for a translator, one was provided for me. My translator was an older student, Nguyen Tuan Linh, whom I later interviewed. Observing a class was the final step in my research. Having gained an understanding into how history is taught in Vietnam, watching a class in action allowed me to perceive the true relationship between students and teachers and see how students view the teaching of history.

V. Results and Discussion:

Professor Phan Ngoc Lien, an eminent historian and author of high school history textbooks, once said: “History is history, you cannot change facts. What happened will be reflected in the textbooks. But, [textbook authors] do have a point of view as historians. [They] want to look at history objectively but…understand that [they] are always viewing the past as Vietnamese people” (2008).
The Vietnamese peoples’ ideals and their government’s desires cannot be fully removed from the teaching of history. The vestiges of the French education system and Soviet’s mono-discipline university program were still a part of Vietnam’s education system even after the War (Le, 2008). These systems were based on a centralized authority mandating what was to be taught to students at every level. The Vietnamese government used this system to their advantage, requiring students at the high school and university level to take required courses, such as the History of Vietnam and Ho Chi Minh’s Thoughts. The government also created an entire department, The Ministry of Education and Training, to oversee the writing of textbooks and curriculums. These curriculums and textbooks reinforced the Party message and the government-approved account of the War. The Việt Cộng guerilla army in the South became the Giải phóng quân, the Liberation Army (Trinh Dinh, 2008). Other changes were made to the narrative of the War that cast the Communists as heroes and denigrated the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Today, insight into how the Vietnamese government wants the War to be remembered can be found in the curriculums, textbooks, and government policies that relate to the teaching of the American-Vietnam War.

Though it might seem like semantics, one of the most important issues facing the teaching of the American-Vietnam War is what the conflict should be called. In 2004, Professor Phan Ngoc Lien went to a conference for historians. At the conference, historians and speakers referred to the War as the “Second Indochina War,” and called the earlier war with the French the “First Indochina War.” According to Lien, “the Vietnamese people [do] not share these views. [The Vietnamese people] actually call these wars ‘Resistance Wars.’” (2008). While scholars in Vietnam call the War the
“Vietnam War,” the War is looked upon by most as Cuộc Kháng Chiến, the Second Resistance War (Trinh Tung, 2008). Furthermore, the Vietnamese people “also do not [call it] a civil war. Vietnam was a battlefield during the Cold War, a clash between the East and the West…and a clash between socialism and capitalism…not a War between two [groups of Vietnamese people]” (Luong, 2008)

By teaching students that American-Vietnam War was a “resistance war,” Vietnamese teachers, and through them, the Vietnamese Government, are sending two messages. The first message is that the Vietnamese had no choice but to fight. Using the word “resistance” implies that an outside force needed to be rebuffed. Many students that I spoke to said that the Vietnamese had no choice but to take up arms in defense of their country (Nguyen Sy Anh Vu, 2008). Textbook authors like to “highlight [that it] was not a War caused by Vietnamese people; it was a Resistance War” (Phan, 2008). Furthermore, by classifying both the First Indochina War and the American-Vietnam War as “Resistance Wars,” teachers are sending the message that these two conflicts are related. Therefore, in students’ minds, the actions of the Americans and the French are equally unjust, and the motivation of these two countries must be one and the same: domination of Vietnam.

The idea that the Vietnam War was “part of America’s global strategy” and that the invasion of Vietnam represented a colonial expansion on the part of the United States is a concept never discussed in American classrooms (Phan, 2008). However, Vietnamese students are taught that the actions of the United States in the 1960s were neo-colonialist in nature. While in large part Americans do not view themselves as colonialists, nor do
American historians describe their country’s actions in terms of colonial rule, the truth is that in Vietnam, America is seen as a colonial power, akin to the Chinese and French.

Professor Trinh Dinh Tung, a history textbook author and the Dean of the history department at Hanoi Pedagogic University, notes that, “from the Vietnamese perspective, we think of the War as starting earlier than the late 1950s. For in 1953, America was already prepared to replace the French” (2008). The concept that the United States was “replacing the French” is a central pillar of how the American-Vietnam War is taught in schools. In grade 12 students are taught that,

“Right after signing the Geneva agreement on Indochina in 1954, American troops took the place of the French colonialists, set up the government of Ngo Dinh Diem in the South of Vietnam, executed the scheme to partition Vietnam, turned the South into a new [type of] colony and a military base of the United States in Indochina and Southeast Asia” (Textbook, 2007).

The colonial aspirations of America are not the only motivation given for the American-Vietnam War. Vietnamese textbooks and history lessons also discuss the role that the domino theory played in the origins of the War.

The domino theory was developed during the Eisenhower presidency. According to this theory, countries that bordered communist countries or countries with traditional ties to communist countries were susceptible to becoming communist themselves. President Eisenhower articulated this theory in a 1954 press conference:

“Finally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the 'falling domino' principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences” (1954).
According to one Vietnamese student, Dao Quynh Chi, “The U.S. came to Vietnam as part of its global strategy, as part of the Domino Theory. America did not want Vietnam to be influenced by communism, [or] by the Soviet Union” (2008). According to the popular Vietnamese account, America wanted a colony, a military base, and the riches of the Mekong Delta. At the same time, America was motivated to attack Vietnam in order to stave off the spread of communism. While it is impossible to say for sure that America’s motives went beyond a fear of communism and did extend to global domination, it is clear is that the Vietnamese government wants its students to think of America as a colossus, a former colonizer and a country with ambitions that extend to every corner of the globe.

Despite America’s negative portrayal in Vietnamese textbooks, Vietnamese students “are not taught that America is [the] enemy” (Nguyen Sy Anh Vu, 2008). Instead, teachers “emphasize that the War was a loss on both sides” (Luong, 2008). The Vietnamese government wants to emphasize that what happened in the past should stay in the past (Nguyen Thi Coi, 2008). Textbook authors make a point to “distinguish between Americans as friends [and] Americans that were soldiers” (Ibid). The Vietnamese government does not want to vilify the Americans perhaps because America has become a powerful ally.

While Americans waver between being friends or foes in the Vietnam’s national psyche, the bravery of the Vietnamese people during the War is never questioned. The Vietnamese government’s purpose, in regards to teaching history, is “[to educate] its people and make them proud of the Vietnamese tradition and proud of their history. The government wants the students to love their country and love what their ancestors did in
the past” (Trinh Tung, 2008). And while every country tends to glorify their nation’s past, the Vietnamese government seems particularly dedicated to the task of immortalizing fallen heroes and singing the praises of the country’s people. Perhaps this tendency on the part of the government is a natural consequence of communism? After all, Communism is a philosophy based on raising up the common man and woman. By recasting the War as a victory built on the backs of peasants, the communist leadership is Vietnam cementing their place in the hearts of the Vietnamese and integrated themselves into the grand tradition of Vietnam’s past.

History textbooks state that during the War, “[the] Vietnamese people clearly expressed the power of the rich traditional nation: hardworking, creative, good at fighting…brave, and gaining great achievement in…producing products” (Textbook, 2007). It is clear from this passage that the War was about more than resisting the United States. The American-Vietnam War was also about a quieter revolution that was taking place in the North as men and women fought and died on the battlefields. This revolution was about the spread of socialism and the economic development of Vietnam. If every nation seeks to create their own narrative, than the narrative of Vietnam is that during the American Resistance War, soldiers fought bravely on the battlefields; and, at the same time at home, the country was being rebuilt by brave men and women who were inspired by the ideals of communism (Ibid).

Another myth that surrounds the War in Vietnam is that it was a “Total War,” or that every man, woman, and child was fighting loyally for the Communist’s cause. Professor Phan Ngoc Lien met an American textbook author in 1996 at a conference in Tokyo. During a discussion with the professor, the American man tried to present his
country’s point of view. In his eyes, the War was not so much a War between the Vietnamese people and American people but rather was a War between two governments. Professor Phan Ngoc Lien disagreed because, according to him, “in Vietnam, the government and the people are the same” (2008). This concept that the desires of the people and the intentions of the government were completely in tune during the War is false. The clearest example of this is President Diem’s army in the South. This army was compromised of Vietnamese men who volunteered to fight against the communist forces. However, this reality is all but ignored in textbooks where, according to Professor Trinh Dinh Tung, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam is “barely acknowledged to exists in modern textbooks” (2008). The Vietnamese government is clearly dedicated to not blaming the South; instead, textbooks present the country as unified against one external oppressor, The United States. Professor Nguyen Thi Coi explains that “the South is not blamed in the textbooks because [historians] know that the American leaders wanted the War. Vietnamese students are taught to be proud of all Vietnamese people, not just the Hanoians or Northerners. It was a victory for the whole country” (2008).

Every country needs heroes to embody the greatness of the past and act as a moral compass for future generations. While some men do great things and are remembered accordingly, the truth is that heroes are often man-made. During the over thirty years that Vietnam struggles to gain independence, heroes and the stories that immortalized their acts of bravery kept hope alive. General Võ Nguyên Giáp was a hero during the First Indochina War and later commanded the People’s Army of Vietnam during the American-Vietnam War. After gaining independence, the government appropriated
Giáp’s story. He was used as an example of a true Vietnamese hero: brave, family oriented, pro-communism, and most importantly, rising from humble beginnings (Nguyen Thi Coi, 2008). The dominant message of the government during the War and after was that, “[anybody] could become the hero…[even if] a person was only a farmer” (Ibid).

Two problems arose from the government’s approach to teaching the War. By stressing the rural roots and lack of education of many of the nation’s heroes, Vietnamese history teachers were being put in the difficult situation of having to praise men without formal education while at the same time encouraging students to achieve academic excellence. Furthermore, the Vietnamese government closed itself off to constructive criticism when it chose to present the actions of party leadership and soldiers during the War as above fault.

The average Vietnamese high school student wants to attend university. And while the competitive entrance exam and lack of resources, including qualified teachers and classroom space, makes this dream impossible, many students still recklessly pursue entrance into a Vietnamese university (Observation at Trần Phú High Schoo, 2008). Moreover, high school teachers encourage student to work hard in order to gain entrance into a university. Yet, at the same time that Vietnamese teachers and parents are working to engrain the importance of education into their students, sons, and daughters’ heads, people without formal education are being presented as heroes in Vietnamese history classrooms. While some leaders, like Ho Chi Minh, did have formal education, others, like Lê Duẩn, did not. Teaching students about leaders who lacked formal education would not be a problem if these men were being glorified for heroics on the battlefield or
loyalty to the party. However, that is not the case. Lê Duẩn, in particular, rose through party ranks, eventually becoming General Secretary of the Party (Le, 2006). As leader of the Communist Party, Lê Duẩn “implemented central planning” even though he had no background in economics (Nguyen Sy Anh Vu, 2008). In some ways, by teaching children that men without education and training can make incredibly important decisions for the nation, the Vietnamese government is undermining their own efforts to encourage students to pursue higher education.

If the men that made the policies during the American-Vietnam War are presented as unfaultable, than the programs that they implemented are equally invulnerable to criticism. Bad government policies are not discussed in high school classes. According to Dao Quynh Chi, “if the teacher did mention a bad policy, she would say ‘it is not important. Do not focus on this.’ [Chi] only learned about the flaws in the government at University, where my foreign teachers told me about them” (2008). The perfect example of a policy that negatively impacted the Vietnamese people and the war-effort was the government’s early attempt at land reform.

When land reform was first employed in 1954, the goal was a redistribution of land that would lead to a more equal distribution of wealth and resources and would increase food production, something that was necessary for the war-effort. The idea for land reform came from the USSR but “[when the Vietnamese] applied the same form of land reform in Vietnam as they use in Russia, the implementation did not work…and land reform failed” (Ibid). In almost 200 pages of text, authors of the history textbooks only mention the mistakes made in implementing land reform once. In grade 9 students are informed that in 1956, the government “set out guidelines to resolve mistakes in the
reform of agricultural land…As a result, the consequences of failure had been overcome, [and] the farming community was strengthened” (Textbook, 2008). The whitewashing of mistakes that characterizes textbooks in Vietnam is detrimental to Vietnamese students. When studying the land reform debacle of 1954 with the help of high school textbooks, students are never told about the original errors in judgment. Instead, all they are told is that the problem was fixed. Eventually, students’ comprehension suffers. Students are not given the opportunity to challenge or discuss historical events. The ultimate result of endlessly lecturing students about their perfect government and impervious heroes is that students “don’t see any value in learning history” (Nguyen Hanh, 2008). According to high school history teacher Luong Thi Thai,

“The Ministry uses standard curriculum and tells teachers ‘how to teach.’ The timeline is very condensed. All there is time for is highlighting some main points, that’s it, no analysis...[Students] can only repeat what the teacher says without [proper] context. Teachers [don’t get the opportunity] to transfer their interest to the students. Therefore, students don’t leave class thinking, “I want to learn more about history” (2008).

The reasons given for not discussing the government’s mistakes vary. Some, like Professor Trinh Dinh Tung, say that the Vietnamese government’s role is to inspire students and make them proud of their history and their country’s traditions (2008). Others say that the decisions made by leaders in the past have “led to the to the [creation of the] history of Vietnam, led to its independence, led to the success of Vietnam...And therefore, [the Vietnamese] don’t blame the government of say that Ho Chi Minh made mistakes” (Luong, 2008). The final reason given for these omissions is that “students from high school are not mature enough to handle or answer these questions” (Ibid). Whatever the case may be, the Vietnamese government and textbook authors are doing
students a disservice by leaving out the faults and flaws of national heroes and the government’s leaders.

The most important message that is present in every history lesson, regardless of the topic, is that what happened in the past needs to be kept in the past. Ms. Luong Thi Thai, following the Ministry of Education and Training curriculum, teaches her high school students “that Vietnam has to deal with many foreign forces: Chinese, Japanese, French and American…[the Vietnamese] lost a lot of blood, a lot of human lives, all in order to protect Vietnam,” but that this is all in the past and the Vietnamese should not continue to hate or fight against any of Vietnam’s former enemies (Luong, 2008). Teachers and authors point to Ho Chi Minh, the Great Leader and protector of Vietnam, as someone who wanted “an alliance between the U.S. and Vietnam” (Phan, 2008). Uncle Ho saw a relationship between America and Vietnam as essential “to Vietnam’s success” (Ibid).

Now, as Vietnam develops and forges close relationships with many foreign nations, the Vietnamese have become adept at pushing past wrongs into the background. The government wants “to present the War as something in the past, as history” (Dao, 2008). Indeed, it is essential for the government to do so. The Vietnamese government and its people cannot afford to hold grudges. An example of this willingness to forget the past in an effort to create new economic opportunities can be found in Ha Long prison. When Dao Quynh Chi use to tour the prison when she was a child, she would see torture machines left over from the French colonial rule. However, the French did not like “seeing these things, so the Vietnamese had them removed. They were removed in order
to reduce the pain of the War. Not for the Vietnamese, who have moved on, but for the foreign visitor” (Ibid).

VI. Conclusion

When I set out to begin my research, I began with a very simple question: How is the Vietnam War being taught in high schools and universities in Vietnam? From this one question I hoped to gain perspective into the larger issue of how the Vietnamese government wants the memory of the War to be handled. Government approved textbooks and curriculums provided me with insight. And because high schools across the country use the same textbooks and lesson plans, speaking to students, teachers, and administrators allowed me to understand the undertones of classroom dynamics and see trends that were present nation-wide. What was being emphasized? Was anything being left out? And what does the missing material, if any, say about the Vietnamese Government’s desired message regarding the legacy of the War? As I examined the text and the subtext of Vietnam’s history lessons, these questions created the framework for my research. In the end, I came away with the sense that Vietnam is still learning how to deal with the painful and all too recent memories that surround the American-Vietnam War.

The history of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the history of the American-Vietnam War are intertwined. The War cemented the Party’s dominance in Vietnam and created many of the heroes that the Party has since used for their cause. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the Communist Party of Vietnam has a stake in what is taught to future generations about this tumultuous time period. For the actions and inactions of the country’s leaders during that time has become more than history, the decisions made
during that time period shaped modern day Vietnam. The narrative of the Vietnam-American War is integral to the lore of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

All countries create their own national narrative. History is history and cannot be changed, but the truth is that people are in charge of deciding what will be remembered and what will be forgotten. The modern day and past Communist leaders of Vietnam have helped shape their country’s narrative following the American-Vietnam War. When studying how the War is taught, scholars can see what traits Vietnam’s leaders value by examining the heroes of the War. It is also clear to see that, though Vietnam has not forgotten the past and the destruction that America brought to its shores, the Vietnamese Government is desperate to forgive America’s past actions for the sake of a beneficial partnership.

Finally, the pride that the Vietnamese Government wants to instill in its people is clear. And while a cynic might say that the government is merely trying to instill a form of patriotism in the Vietnamese people that will ultimately blind them to their government’s misdeeds, I believe that the purpose of history is to make us proud of the human race’s accomplishments. The Vietnamese Government has every right to want to inspire its people. While I hope that in the future, fewer facts will be left out of lessons and that the textbooks will be rid of their bias and dishonesty, I also understand the need for a positive national narrative.

VII. Recommendations and Reflections:

Starting with a simple question was the key to my ISP’s success. Good research, especially research conducted over only a one-month period, should aim for depth, not breadth. In examining how the American-Vietnam War is taught in Vietnamese schools, I
uncovered more and more questions, and discovered more and more answers, each week. At the end of the day, I could study the Vietnamese Government’s attitude regarding the legacy of the War forever, but I do not have forever.

In conducting research in Vietnam, something that worked in my favor is that I was working primarily with people who could speak English. The lack of a language-barrier, or at least the minimization of a language barrier, meant that I could casually interview my subjects without the formality and tedium of a translator. Furthermore, because I was researching Vietnamese education system, I had an opportunity to give back to the community. I arranged with Vice Principal Minh Nga of Trần Phú High School to teach English lessons five days a week for a month. Because of my willingness to teach English and help her and her students, Vice Principal Minh Nga was much more willing to help me. Through my classes, I was introduced and became close to many students. Thus, teaching English was also beneficial to me as it provided me with new subjects to interview! Therein, my advice when doing research in Vietnam is never underestimate how helpful it is to have English-speaking subjects and, if possible, try and volunteer within your community. It is a great way to meet new people and pay your subjects back for helping you.

While it is inevitable that my research could have been expanded, I am very happy with the end result. If I had more time I would have liked to explore how the American-Vietnam War is first introduced to students in primary school and I would have liked to interview more Vietnamese historians and Ministry of Education and Training officials. When conducting an ISP it is important to have the scope of your project well in hand before you begin. Know where and when you want to stop and know
your limits. My final advice would be to enjoy the experience. Not every interview is
going to be helpful and not every statistic you find will make its way into your paper.
Ultimately, you should be researching a topic that interests you and therefore, have an
internal drive to find the answers and to learn more about your topic. If you are not
passionate about your subject, than your ISP period with be a bore and you will not get as
much out of the experience as you should. Follow your passion, pursue it with reckless
abandon, don’t worry too much about the end result, and you will emerge from your ISP
with newfound knowledge and insight into the how the world works and who you are.
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IX. Works Consulted:


Appendix A: Notes

1. As in Vietnamese written representations, family names are ordered before given names, and given names if by themselves are prefixed with the address of “Mr.” or “Ms.” For instance, in the name “Nguyen Thi Coi” Nguyen is the family name and future textual references to the person would be made with “Ms. Nguyen.” Full names are used to avoid confusion.

2. Nguyen is a common family name in Vietnam. None of the interviewees are related.
Appendix B: Figures

Figure I

Use of Textbooks and Teaching Aids
(percentage of teachers using each item)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Used Every Lesson</th>
<th>Used Some Lessons</th>
<th>Rarely Used</th>
<th>Never Used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Textbooks</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s Guide</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference Books</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equipment for Teacher’s Use</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equipment for Students Use</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ministry of Education. The Quality of Education in Vietnam Table. 2000. 16.

Figure II

Factors Producing High School Achievement
Percentage of Studies Showing a Positive Effect on Achievement

Figure III

Consolidated Index of the Education and Human Resource Environment in Asia