

A book non-Vietnamese speaking Americans
of Vietnamese descent should read:

WHENCE - WHITHER - VIETNAM? A New Assessment of Vietnam's Predicament

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It is a well known fact that most, if not all, young Americans of Vietnamese descent, born or grown up in America, have experienced animated debates with their parents on the subjects of anti-communism, preservation of Vietnamese “fine customs” and “traditional values”, and what kind of government system would be best for Vietnam.

Quite often, the debates turned into angry altercations. Usually, the children did not share the visceral, unconditional, anti-communism of their parents, paid little attention to their per-

sistent exhortations to do everything possible to overthrow the present Hanoi regime, and failed to understand their repeated calls for the preservation of Vietnam’s “fine customs” and “traditional values” in a modern American environment. As regards the best system of government for Vietnam, it is the parents’ fear of too much democracy and their unbending insistence on the exclusion of communists, against the rejection of such a view by their children.

It is natural that the children should seek to understand the reasons which had led their par-

ents to hold such strange views. On the other hand, they acutely realized that they knew little, if anything, about their country of origin, and felt the need to remedy this situation. But in this, they were greatly handicapped by their inability to read Vietnamese. They naturally had to read books on Vietnam written in English.

Here, there was another great handicap: most, if not all, the books on Vietnam in English were written by American journalists, academics, or politicians, and they were essentially military and political analyses of the war, with focus on America. Furthermore, American writers, in their majority, were sympathetic to the communist side, and put the blame on what went wrong on the anti-communist – their parents' – side. Obviously, truth and balance of views did not obtain. The Vietnamese side of the story was not told. Yet, the failure in Vietnam was also a failure of Vietnam, and the Vietnamese wanted to know where and why Vietnam had failed, and not only before 1975, but more particularly since then, under communist unfettered rule.

To ensure balance and reliability, one would need a book dealing with the Vietnamese side of the story, based on serious researches, exploring the subject in depth, and explaining Vietnam's failure in terms of Vietnamese endogenous factors, especially bringing into play the whole gamut of Vietnam's historical, political, social, cultural and psychological backgrounds, and covering the whole span of Vietnam's history, past and present; in other words, a study broader in scope, more searching, using a new approach.

The natural thing for non-Vietnamese speaking young Americans to do would be to turn to books written in English by Vietnamese. But there was no book written in English by a Vietnamese dealing with the above kinds of problems, and in the novel manner described.

The situation was thus blocked.

But no more.

*Non-Vietnamese speaking young Americans now have at their disposal a book written by a Vietnamese, but available in English, though in translation, which deals precisely with the kind of questions which have agitated their minds over the years. The book is *Whence... Whither... Vietnam?* It is by no accident that the book carries the sub-title: A NEW Assessment of Vietnam's*

Predicament.

Whence... Whither... Vietnam? is the English translation of *To Quoc An Nan (Remorseful/repentant Fatherland)*, a book in Vietnamese written by Nguyen Gia Kieng, and translated into English by Nguyen Ngoc Phach.

Kieng is an engineer graduated from the French prestigious Ecole Centrale, now living in Paris. Nguyen Ngoc Phach is a journalist as well as professor (of languages) and translator now settled in Australia.

The book seeks to answer the question: why Communism has conquered Vietnam with such great ease, and why Vietnam has consistently failed to become a free society and achieve economic development, and the Vietnamese had to constantly suffer oppression and poverty. It uncovers the connections between Vietnam's cultural heritage and its sorry state. It shows that the weight of Vietnam's heritage is very heavy and inhibitive, and that an effective reconstruction of Vietnam must begin with a full reassessment of its cultural values leading to changes of certain of them to allow Vietnamese society to modernize itself in order to move forward and achieve freedom and prosperity.

In the process of elaborating on his main thesis, Kieng has been led to discuss the major problems of Vietnam – lack of freedom and democracy as well as economic development —, against the cultural background of Vietnamese society, and the various options available in the world, past and present. After studying the cases of the various countries which have achieved spectacular success, as well as those which have failed, he came to the very firm conclusion that freedom and democracy are the preconditions, and not the consequences, of economic development, and that pluralistic democracy is the system of government the Vietnamese should adopt if they want to achieve modernization to move forward and get the freedom and prosperity to which they are entitled as hardworking and intelligent people. This should be done democratically, through national reconciliation, and non-violence.

Those who are interested in development, especially in the economic development, or rather lack of economic development, of Vietnam, will find the book very enlightening, espe-

cially when they read the pages in which Kieng discusses at length the inhibitive effects of Confucianist culture on Vietnamese society throughout its history.

Non-Vietnamese speaking Americans of Vietnamese descent will derive four major benefits from this book.

1/ They will gain valuable insight in their search for answers to the questions which have weighted heavily on their minds, as pointed out above.

2/ They will acquire an extensive knowledge of Vietnam's history, politics, society, economy, culture, at very little cost in terms of time and effort, the book being the result of extensive researches and meditations by Nguyen Gia Kieng, and reading it will spare them the trouble of searching for relevant material in libraries.

3/ The readers who are particularly interested in the problems of political and social changes, and economic development, will find a frame, as well as the concepts and terminology for thinking about those problems.

4/ The last benefit derivable from this book is a really unexpected one: it can be used as a perfect textbook for the study of Vietnamese or English. Taken together, *Whence... Whither... Vietnam?* and the Vietnamese original *To Quoc An Nan* would make an ideal bilingual textbook: those learning English can use the WWV as a reader and TQAN as control book, and those learning Vietnamese can use TQAN as reader and WWV as control book. This would be a very good arrangement, as the translation is very accurate, and the English used is of very high quality.

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1.- Canh Nam Publishing House, 2607 Military Road, Arlington, Va. 22207, USA.

Also available through Internet, from Amazon. Price: \$ US 35.

2.- Nguyen Gia Kieng, To Quoc An Nan, 2004, available at major bookstores in Westminster, Ca, USA; or at: Nguyen Gia Kieng, 11 Mail Le Corbusier, 77185, Lognes, France. Price: \$ US 35.

SÁCH MỚI:

- Giòng Máu Lạnh, tập truyện của Phan Long Yên
- Bí Ẩn Của Cái Chết, khảo luận của Thịnh Quang
- Tiếng Dương Cầm, truyện dài của Phương Lan
- Anh Mới Biết Yêu Lần Đầu, tập truyện của Phạm Thị Quang Ninh và Phương Lan
- Dấu Chân II của Ngự Thuyết
- Chiều Vương Ý Thơ Thơ của Hoàng Huy Khánh

