

Personal Life: A Perspective

By Ton That Thien

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Thien was reluctant to speak about his personal life. In his view, there are two parts in a man's life: a social one and an individual one. The social part -- what he does as a member of the community, and how he reacts to the community.—is what others should know about. The individual part – how he is, what he does with himself, to himself – is of no concern to others. Thien considers that, as an individual, he is not different from others. Like them, he is a product of Vietnam's geography and history, and possesses more or less the same qualities and weaknesses. But he admits that some individuals are luckier than others, and this explains why some do better than others in life.

Thien considers himself very lucky to be born to a well off family and thus in a position of having a comfortable life and a very good education, which helped him rise in life. He considers himself particularly lucky to have a father who understood the importance of education, in particular a modern education, and had the means of sending him to the best schools, and teachers who were competent and dedicated; to reach adulthood at a time and a place where certain qualities – professional competence, dedication, and loyalty – are needed and serving under respectable and high caliber leaders who appreciated those qualities. Thus, Thien considers himself a very privileged man.

But Thien also very strongly feels that privileges carry obligations. Privileges are bestowed on a man only so that he uses them for doing good, in the service of the community. Privileges can be justified only on that basis. Otherwise, there is no reason why some individuals are more privileged than others. Thien believes that this principle forms the basis of Confucian as well as Western ethics. And this makes him at home with both Confucianism and Western modernism, Asian traditions as well as Western modernity. Together, they provide the spiritual, material, and political conditions for the advancement of the Vietnamese people.

In his personal life Thien followed also the Confucianist-Western modernism which he adopted in his public life. Thus, in founding a family, he married a girl with clear Confucian background, Le Van (Lovely Cloud), who had as great grandfather the well known Confucian scholar, Nguyen Trong Hiep, who was also a true Confucian mandarin. Assigned negotiator with France after French troops had occupied the Imperial capital of Hue in 1883, he managed to persuade the French not to abolish the Nguyen monarchy and annex Vietnam, but to accept a protectorate instead. Her grandmother was the daughter of a well known poetess, Cao Thi Nguyet Anh, herself daughter of a Confucian scholar, Cao Xuan Duc, well known as a great Minister of Education, a contemporary of Nguyen Trong Hiep.

But, unlike many girls of her generation, Le Van not only went to college, but also was allowed to go to France for further study. Another “modern” side to this marriage: neither Thien nor Le Van sought prior permission from their parents before their engagement.

Another infringement of traditions was that they got married in Paris in a simple ceremony with a small attendance instead of an elaborate and lavish wedding party involving a large gathering presided by the parents surrounded by all members of the two families. And when a daughter was born to them, they usurped their parents' traditional prerogative by naming her themselves, Thuy Lan (Sweet Orchid).